Understanding Communities in Student Newsrooms

Elizabeth R. Smith, Kirstie Hettinga, Jean Norman and Lisa Lyon Payne

Abstract

The concept of Communities of Practice can help educators understand how individuals learn a shared practice in a social environment, such as a student newsroom. This study used focus groups (N=62) of student journalists to explore learning in student newsrooms through CoPs. In addition to significant overlap among the four pillars (Practice, Community, Meaning, and Identity), the findings reveal that all four pillars overlap on two outcomes for students: 1) Student journalists confront criticism and conflict from audiences, and 2) student journalists develop a deep sense of responsibility to their community. The findings suggest that teaching student journalists through the Communities of Practice lens can create abilities and understandings that are key in professional journalism and related industries.

Introduction

Curricular models for college journalism programs vary greatly, from small programs with limited faculty support attached to communication programs and departments to independent journalism schools within a university. Debate persists about whether journalism can be learned from a college curriculum, with some arguing that journalism is best learned by doing (Conboy, 2013). In the college setting, that doing occurs in student newsrooms. Student newsrooms are equally wide ranging: from financially independent, exclusively student-led newsrooms to small newsrooms led by faculty advisers who may be at least partially dependent on university funding. Yet there is a lack of scholarly discussion regarding the learning that happens in the student newsroom.

Communities of Practice are a theoretical framework that describe how members of a group share knowledge and learn (Wenger, 1998). As learning happens, group members transform their understanding of themselves and their shared practice. The Community of Practice examines social learning through four concepts: Community, Practice, Meaning, and Identity. Newsrooms have been accepted as Communities of Practice (Weiss & Domingo, 2010; Filak, 2014; Lynch, 2015). Yet, this theory has not been applied in any depth to student newsrooms. Through the four pillars, a diverse range of student newsrooms can be studied. The shared experiences through these CoPs can help professionals, educators, and researchers understand how student journalists are being trained to become professionals entering the field.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Student Journalism, College Journalism, Student Newsroom, Journalism Curriculum

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How is learning facilitated in a student newsroom within the four pillars of Communities of Practice?

RQ2. How do the four pillars relate to each other in student newsrooms?

Through this lens, the study finds that the practice of college journalism develops two unique skills: the ability to process criticism constructively, and to develop a deep sense of place in the community. This study also finds that the pillars of Community and Practice share significant overlap while Meaning and Identity share significant overlap.

Literature Review

Communities of Practice (CoP) are broadly defined as a way to share knowledge about a specific practice from person to person and within a group (Wenger, 1998). While Wenger argued that learning cannot be forced, he also maintained that social systems can be created intentionally to foster, enhance, and support learning. The study of social learning focuses on how knowing and learning result from membership in communities. CoPs are rooted theoretically within the tradition and approach of understanding known as social learning theory (Wenger, 1998).

The four pillars are understood in the way a learner talks about his or her experiences. Meaning is defined as learners' changing ability to articulate the value they find in their experience; or "learning as experience" (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). Practice is the way learners discuss shared resources that sustain the community; or "learning as doing" (p. 5). Community is the way learners talk about the components of the group and how proficiency in that community is defined; or "learning as belonging" (p. 5). Identity is how learners articulate how the learning has changed them, personally and within the CoP; or as "learning as becoming" (p. 5).

Student Newsrooms and Identity: In the Communities of Practice literature, a sense of identity within the group in addition to the shared practice is key to learning within the community. Journalists' desire to be free of government control precludes the professionalizing acts of other fields, such as medicine, law, or even barbering, where a current license bestows the right to call oneself by that occupation (Conboy, 2013). The initiation into journalism practice has

ranged from "sitting with Nellie," a British phrase used to describe on-the-job training with an experienced staffer (Conboy, 2013, p. 20), to broader socialization within the newsroom as newcomers mimic senior staffers, notice what has been changed in articles, and learn (Sigelman, 1999).

A broader view incorporates occupational ideology of journalists (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2007). This ideology includes public service, with journalists serving as collectors and disseminators of information; objectivity, or being impartial, fair and credible; autonomy, or remaining free and independent in their work; immediacy; and ethics, which provides legitimacy (Deuze, 2005). The elements are both institutional and individual, providing "'essential shared values' that give journalists a group identity" (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 380). Boudana (2011) defines criticism of a journalist's work as an inherent aspect of the journalistic process in a democracy and asserts that "the capacity to respond to criticism creates professionalism" (p. 396). Journalists' ability to respond to criticism (or negative comments) can often indicate a greater degree of professionalism (Wolfgang, 2018).

Beyond these concepts of the practice of journalism, Ahva (2017) described journalism as a social practice. In a study of youth-oriented online publications, Ahva identified "participation with journalism" and "participation for journalism" as ways that volunteers in semi-professional media communities practice journalism. By becoming members, they gained the group identity of journalist ("participation with journalism") and some of them built skills to turn journalism into a career ("participation for journalism") (Ahva, 2017).

For this study, the practice of journalism is participating in journalism: walking into the student newsroom and doing the work that goes into producing the student news product under the mentorship of more experienced students and, perhaps, a faculty adviser. For some, this is a first step toward becoming a professional. For others, it is a brief moment in their education or a means to acquire transferable skills. When students join the journalistic Community of Practice that is a student newsroom, they engage in the practice of journalism, learning as they go.

Experiential Learning and Student Newsrooms: The value of experiential learning was championed by philosopher and educator John Dewey in the early 20th century. Dewey (1916) asserted that learning

is both an active and passive intellectual activity, yet experience allows relationships to become perceptible and theory to be grasped. Modern journalism scholars suggest college newsrooms offer unique spaces for experiential opportunities unavailable elsewhere in higher education curricula, and that learning occurs by careful observation of surrounding participants' experiences (DiBiase, 2017).

Different from "training," which connotes very specific transfer of knowledge and procedures, DiBiase (2017) purported that a deeper, more meaningful learning is a natural occurrence in college newsrooms. The production of college media offers opportunity for transferable knowledge ranging from heightened senses of identity and belonging to appreciation for creative expressions. It constitutes the kind of learning that serves as the "seedbeds for more vital forms of journalism" (DiBiase, 2017, p. 21).

Experiential learning has been defined as a situation where "the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied" (Keeton & Tate, 1978, p. 2). More specifically, it refers to learning where the student is actively participating in the practice, or learning by doing. Much experiential learning literature can be found in the medical field—for example in studies addressing clinical rotations. However, "experiential learning activities include cooperative education placements, practicum experiences, and classroom-based hands-on laboratory activities" (Cantor, 1997, p. 3). Clearly, working for the student news organization is included in these experiential learning activities. As students make decisions related to coverage or ethics, or act as leaders to their peers, their engagement peaks. They are learning by doing, and they are learning from each other.

Method

Because there is limited research on Communities of Practice within student journalism newsrooms, a qualitative approach is appropriate to explore the cultural and social constructs of learning within the student newsroom community. Qualitative research is well suited for understanding how certain communities experience social phenomena (Creswell, 2009). Focus groups explored the subject matter in a social environment, allowing participants to think out loud and learn from others in the group as they explore the issues (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). This study used focus groups in two settings: within specific college newsrooms and at conferences where student journalists selected the focus groups from a variety of programmatic choices. This provided both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups to examine the research questions from different perspectives.

Eleven focus groups with a total of 62 participants (N=62) were conducted within the student newsrooms of four Western universities and at two national student journalism conventions, which attract students from a wide range of community colleges, private and public four-year universities. Students in these programs represented a wide variety of student journalism including print and digital newspapers, magazines and broadcast programs. Yearbooks were not represented in this sample. Two of these student newsrooms have a co-curricular model, where students receive course credit for participating in news production, whereas the other two are independent of the academic department with students receiving pay for their participation. Students at the conference also came from newsrooms adhering to both models. All focus groups lasted about 60 minutes.

In newsrooms where more than one focus group occurred, editors were in one group and staffers without supervisory responsibilities were in another. This allowed the students to speak freely about subordinates and supervisors. The focus groups at the conventions included both editors and staffers but not from the same newsrooms. The questions and discussion addressed the four dimensions of Communities of Practice: Meaning, Practice, Community, and Identity. The moderators used a question guide (see Appendix) but asked follow-up questions when appropriate and allowed the participants to make their own observations about the topic.

The researchers coded the data from the focus groups in two ways: open coding and directed coding using the four dimensions of Community of Practice. Many of the themes that emerged from coding by dimensions were also found in open coding. These were synthesized to identify themes that crossed the four dimensions as well as additional themes that will be analyzed in a future paper. The researchers worked in pairs during the coding to validate the work.

Results

Practice: For a student entering the newsroom, Practice becomes one of the most obvious sources of learning and engagement. Practice relies heavily on the community and its more experienced members for modeling of good practices, instruction within

the newsroom setting, "sitting with Nellie" (Conboy, 2013, p. 20), and learning through the editing process, reflection, feedback, and peer review. Participants talked fondly of editors who taught them through modeling, tutoring, and editing. This was a typical comment: "My news editor told me, 'Make sure you have two live sources at least. Get all sides of the story.' And then she would always tell us who to contact for stories."

Not all learning described in the focus groups, however, consisted of careful mentoring. Some participants described learning by doing, or trial-and-error, as a scary but valuable learning experience. One student noted, "I was kind of thrown into everything and it was probably the best instruction I could have had." Another said some initial instruction was followed by an attempt to dive in. "I just kind of hit the ground running and see, like, if I could figure it out on my own."

By its nature, the editing process is one-on-one. Some participants mentioned "side by sides," which involve a less-experienced student watching more experienced students edit the story, photo, or page and describe why the edits are being made. Just as often, young reporters learn from seeing how their stories are changed or through comments in tools like Google docs or more sophisticated and customized content management systems.

Part of the Practice of a student newsroom is the process of decision making, and this concept had a strong overlap with Community because students described a strongly collaborative system within a hierarchical structure. Content editors are free to pursue articles they find interesting, but if there is a disagreement over what runs, the managing editor or editor-in-chief makes the decision. Higher level editors seem to have a high level of trust in the work lower level editors were providing. One student commented, "Usually it's not just one person making a decision. It oftentimes is at least a couple of us figuring out what we should be doing and why we should be doing it and how to best accomplish that."

Community: Consistent with Communities of Practice literature, the concept of Community proved to be the key dimension in Community of Practice for study participants. It underscores Practice through inclusivity, coaching, and collaboration. It establishes some lines of hierarchy, so decisions can be made, and provides what some students described as a "safe place" to learn. Participants noted the Community found in the newsroom as an important factor in what keeps students, especially new students, engaged: "If we didn't have such a supportive system, I don't think our learning process would be the same and would work as well as it does." Another said, "But you're getting it [collaboration] from the experienced students who know how to give that critique and they how to give it well. I mean, we all understand, and it's not something anybody feels like they're being attacked personally." Community created a comfortable learning environment.

Community can be a critical factor when a student newsroom comes under fire for controversial content or stories that reflect negatively on a subsection of the community. One student talked about how the support of the newsroom, from all levels, helped improve her journalism work: "They taught me how to investigate and just kind of be that brave, bold, 'I don't care, I'm gonna write the truth anyway' kind of person. Which is really scary when you're a freshman."

Inclusivity was also described as an important aspect of Community. Students expressed an appreciation for an environment where they could work through conflict and appreciate individual differences. One student noted,

> [name of newspaper] is so special; it's just like community that we all have between us. I mean it's like never a place where we're dreading to go. It's actually where I'm trying to go first in my day, and I can't wait until I can get to the newsroom.

The word "observation" arose repeatedly. According to participants, senior leaders model traits observed by the younger staff: attention to detail, tenacity, dedication, appreciation for different opinions/perspectives. One participant offered an example of this:

> [Student] is really about Letters to the Editor — she like encourages it and she'll never be upset about it or defensive. She'll reply back super professionally, and I think we handled that really well with the last one we published in the paper.

Also in regard to Community, the word "team" was mentioned several times. The synergy that comes from an intensive interaction and the improvements students see in the product gratified them.

Practice-Community Overlap: Practice and Commu-

nity demonstrated considerable overlap among participants. The decision-making process, the editing process, and mentorship bridged both Communities of Practice pillars.

Decision making: Students describe a collaborative and scaffolded system of decision making, usually regarding editorial content. Section editors generally have authority to decide what their reporters will cover, and all editors have a say in editorial decisions. However, editors defer to top editors for final decisions. One student described the structure:

> … [T]he editor-in-chief holds all final power. … but she's pretty hands off with your section. She was last year's news editor, so she helps me a lot and sometimes [she'll] be like, 'You know what, completely switch these pages. This does not deserve, this should be on the right.' … It's not like she's bossing me around. She's always like, "What do you think? Let's switch these." But she's pretty hands off for the most part.

Writers described section editors who allowed them to come up with their own ideas in a similarly collaborative way.

Editing process: Students describe an editing process that relies on a variety of digital editing tools, multiple editors, and drafts. Some find this helpful. Some find it confusing. When reporters object to editing, problems can follow. However, most students commented that the editing process was critical to their learning. One student commented,

> I get to see a lot of writing and as well get my writing critiqued by lot of people. So, taking into those accounts like the edits that even other people will make like copy editing pages and seeing edits that already came through be like, "Oh these are the ones that I can make with my writing as well."

When students resist the editing process, it becomes a problem. One respondent noted, "We've only ever had to turn away writers when they are really like egregiously protesting our editing system."

Mentorship: Another concept that overlapped Practice and Community was mentorship. Students discussed watching more experienced journalists and trying to mimic them. Sometimes it is a formal job shadow, but often it is less formal. Some students also read both student journalism and professional work

and mimic techniques they see used there. One student said,

> I guess I'd try to emulate my writing after people who are in like those editor positions so I try to like look through the articles and see how they constructed and how they write and try to like tailor my writing to not fit into their style but fit into like what works for them.

The day-to-day Practice within the Community provides the environment in which less-experienced student journalists learn from their more experienced peers.

Identity: A gradual alignment of personal ideals and traditional journalistic values became evident expressions of Identity as a pillar of change within oneself, or "learning as becoming." In the process of observing their newsroom peers, students' own identities began to take shape as writers, professionals, and journalists, and they began to recognize a sense of responsibility as journalists to their community.

As students became more experienced, they expressed a clearer, stronger affinity for the writing skills that accompany the profession. While a small minority indicated distaste for writing, many discussed a love of writing as something that initially drew them to newsrooms and then grew as their experiences developed. One student noted the reward of sharing a written story with a greater readership: "I have just always enjoyed writing and journalism. I thought it might be a good experience, and I always just liked taking a story — like actually writing a story — and communicating it to an audience."

Editors, in particular, indicated a heightened sense of obligation to their communities, suggesting that the student newsroom was more than an individual learning opportunity, but that it was a responsibility with an enduring impact on a greater group. A sharpened sense of professionalism emerged from this learning "in the field," ranging from a sense of duty to conceiving one's role as a "job" rather than an activity or assignment. One student said,

> I realized the professional mode I need to be at. I think once you go out and you're doing interviews and all that out in the field, you start to feel like, "OK, this is important — that it's going to be published in the paper. And my name goes on this where people can look this up years from now."

While writing drew many respondents into the

newsroom, many students came to see themselves as journalists, or future journalists, through their experiences. As students grew into leadership roles, this element of Identity became more evident. One student said, "I would say that now as I've progressed through [the publication] and gone from writer to assistant news editor to news editor, that I see myself more and more as becoming a journalist."

The Identity dimension revealed that as they began to consider themselves journalists, they were better equipped to chart their professional courses, which sometimes included a reconsideration or evolution of their career paths. The authors also observed overlap with this stage and the creation of Meaning, resulting in a clearly articulated affirmation for and love of the craft.

Meaning: As a final stage in a Community of Practice, students demonstrated that they were capable of more fully recognizing and making Meaning the longer they were active in the community. While not mutually exclusive from the other pillars of a Community of Practice, Meaning was the most elevated level. This was particularly evident in the newsrooms where the authors conducted separate focus groups between "staffers" (reporters, photojournalists) and "editors" who were more likely to be more experienced members of the Community of Practice. While students who were newer to the community indicated they had had meaningful experiences, the more advanced students demonstrated Meaning-making more intentionally by drawing upon their practice and experience in the community.

The authors saw that students learned the power of journalism as they participated in student news organizations, which corresponded with a fuller realization of the role of journalism both at their institutions and beyond. This realization of their place in the larger community overlaps with themes in Community and Practice, whereas the construction of Meaning also contributed to a sense of Identity for some students. As they recognized their place within the community and their contributions to journalism, some indicated a greater sense of self and pride in their chosen pursuits. The students talked about their role as journalists in larger terms:

There is not really a wall between you and the community. … it's your job kind of to be in the community. And so by being involved, by going out to places and talking to people and just

really kind of focusing on the relational aspects of journalism, that's kind of the real heart of it, that at the end of the day you're reporting on people and you are doing the best that you can to report everything truthfully because you have people that you are working with.

This higher-level thinking showed students exploring aspects of journalism ethics, such as balancing the responsibilities of publication and harming victims by identifying them. It also related to recognition of journalists' responsibility in serving as a watchdog, as well as the journalists' need to be transparent with their readers. One student cited a line from the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics: "I think for me, journalism helps to give voice to the voiceless."

Students discussed various lessons they had learned on the job: delegating, thinking visually, taking criticism, making decisions, writing, and dealing with sources. While there is significant overlap with Practice, the authors identified these instances as Meaning when the students pointed to the Practice as teaching them and helping them create this Meaning. Students also expressed pride in their product, noting that they work hard to ensure their work is worthy of that pride. One student described observing revelation among more junior staffers:

I know it's exciting when we sit down and my reporters come and they're like, "Oh my gosh, this person like messaged me on Facebook about my article" or "This person commented on my article," or "You got a letter to the editor about your article." And they see people are reacting to my pieces and they get excited about it and it gives them more pride into the work they're doing and that makes them, it makes you feel important and go, "I am a journalist and I represent this paper."

This comment and others from the Meaning dimension further overlap with Identity. Within Meaning, several students achieved self-actualization and affirmed journalism in their life. As one student staffer said, "I didn't really expect to fall in love with the process of journalism as much as I did, but I found that I loved everything about it."

Discussion

This research set out to document how Communities of Practice operate in student newsrooms and understand how learning is facilitated in a newsroom through the four pillars. In response to the research

question, there was strong evidence of Communities of Practice, and participants were vociferous in their acknowledgement of the learning that happens in student newsrooms. What is perhaps more interesting for educators and researchers were the intersections of the four pillars of Communities of Practice. Rarely were the pillars independent. Instead, as seen in Figure 1, meaningful learning was achieved when these areas overlapped. For example, students professed to learn through trial and error (Practice), but when they blended this practice with Community, the authors saw and experienced mentorship. Similarly, while students identified as journalists, pride in their product led to a blending of Identity and Meaning.

The data provide additional insight into the role student journalism plays in the lives of those who engage in it. These journalistic Communities of Practice, the data show, build two skills that are key in professional environments of all industries: the ability to accept, process, and improve through constructive criticism, and development of a deep sense of responsibility to their community. These phenomena relate not only to the four dimensions in Communities of Practice but also to each other, and they form a kind of synthesis wherein Community, Practice, Identity, and Meaning blend into a higher form of learning. Specifically, the processing of criticism, which the authors suspect is not the only factor, seems to contribute to an increasing awareness of the place and significance of student journalists in their communities.

Students in all newsrooms discussed how they were affected by criticism from peers during the editing process. Some internalized it, whereas others saw it as inevitable yet still something to learn and improve from. Most struggled with this challenge at first, describing it as difficult and even "crippling." Students expressed sensitivity and reluctance to making themselves vulnerable by sharing their writing. Over time, they understood that criticism, however difficult, was a necessary component of their growth and develop-

Figure 1
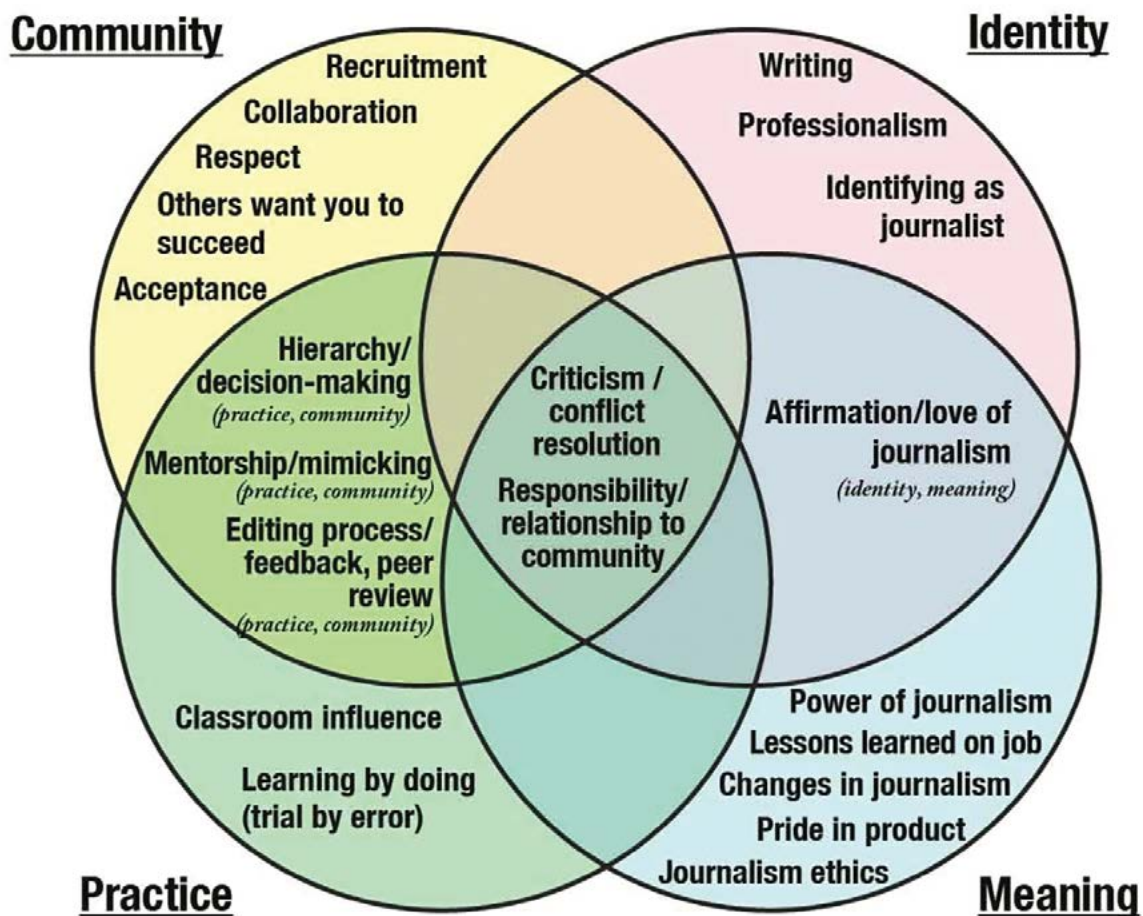
ment as writers and journalists. In particular, knowing that learning is an ongoing process and that others in the newsroom also experienced criticism helped them to use the feedback constructively.

Criticism is embedded in the practice of journalism (Boudana, 2011). In student newsrooms, as in professional newsrooms, newcomers learn through an internal feedback loop that includes constructive criticism. Participants described an editing process that occurs both in person, in the side-by-side editing, and through various online content management systems they use that allow for comments. This made some of the less experienced members of newsrooms self-conscious and sometimes confused when editors provided feedback with which they did not necessarily agree. Others found the process productive. One said, "Everyone that reads the article and makes comments, I think that's how I learned the most."

The Community atmosphere makes this feedback loop work. Students described editors who cared about them and their work and wanted to help them improve: "We have people who want us to improve and support us making those mistakes and improving them and building on them."

Community also makes students accountable to their peers and contributes to high standards. One student put it this way: "There are people in our newsroom who are like, 'If this is bad, then this reflects on me, and so nobody can mess up or else it's gonna reflect on me.'"

As students' work improved through this feedback loop, participants started identifying more strongly with journalism and finding deeper meaning in their work. They also started taking the lessons of constructive criticism into other parts of their lives. This was evident in how they accepted criticism from external sources. All of the groups had stories of receiving external criticism. They had learned to evaluate the criticism based on their own journalistic values. When a critique made a good point, they tried to learn from it. For example, one student noted:

> We might be initially defensive and we're looking into why they're sending this to us and stuff, but we really want to take those things and fix them and grow and do better. So, we use that as a tool for us.

The feedback loop that started for these student journalists as newcomers expanded as they gained experience and identified as student journalists. It was reconfigured to process external feedback, learning from criticism that was productive and dismissing criticism that was unfair or did not align with their journalistic principles. Ultimately, these student journalists developed a healthy attitude toward human error through the experience of dealing with criticism in their newsrooms. "I don't feel offended or anything. It's just more, 'Hey let's learn and move on.'" They learned not to fear failure, but rather to grow from it.

Dealing with external criticism brought into relief these students' sense of place within their community and the importance of the work they do. The external criticism often came as the result of solid journalism, such as an article one news organization published that pointed out a conflict of interest — the Title IX coordinator was also the vice president of athletics — or another that covered charges brought against a student. The criticism pushed students to re-examine their journalism ethics and strengthened their resolve in those values. One stated, "We are the people who are carrying the First Amendment and saying we have a right to publish these things and to have this voice."

Students also use these critical moments to build stronger relationships within their community. Members of one group described increasing their dialogue with student government, campus safety and their dean after criticism that they felt was trying to blunt their work. The work to build relationships increases their levels of professionalism in their journalistic identity, which feeds further into their feelings of responsibility to their community. Getting to know their audience is an integral part of being responsible to that community.

As previously noted, this research is among the first to assess learning in student newsrooms through the lens of Communities of Practice. Learning within the newsroom may be strengthened when educators, advisers, and the students themselves are conscious of the pillars and the overlap among them. For example, while Community in the form of socialization has its place in the newsroom, when that interaction overlaps with Practice, students learn through mentoring. As students learn through mentoring and grow as student journalists, it helps solidify their sense of Identity. And, in becoming more cognizant of their Identity, students may find greater Meaning in the power of journalism. In moving through these different, yet often overlapping stages of a Community of Practice, student journalists are better positioned to handle criticism and recognize their responsibility to

and role within a larger community.

This research will continue as a deeper dive into the application of Communities of Practice in the student newsroom. Future research should investigate how advisers advance learning in student newsrooms using Communities of Practice, as well as the broader pedagogical implications of these findings in higher education.

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Appendix A:
Focus Group Question Guide

Tell us a little bit about your newsroom: How many students do you think work in it? What is your position? Why did you join? (ICEBREAKER)

When you were new to the newsroom how did you learn about journalism? (MEANING)

Is your newsroom associated with a class?

From whom or what did you learn the most? What role does your adviser play?

Do you receive any training in the newsroom?

Describe how decisions are made in your newsroom. (PRACTICE)

When you joined the news organization, did you see yourself as a future journalist? How do you see yourself now? (IDENTITY)

Can you describe a time where you learned something specific about journalism, reporting, etc., from another student? (PRACTICE)

What is the most valuable thing you have learned about journalism, reporting, etc. from another student? (MEANING)

When student journalists and student journalism come under criticism on campus, how does your newsroom react? (MEANING/COMMUNITY)

Besides your professors or advisers, whom do you feel you learn the most from? Why? (COMMUNITY)

Can you describe an instance where you saw student mentoring/peer teaching that was not successful? (COMMUNITY)

Has there ever been a time where a fellow student journalist pointed out an error that you made? How did that make you feel? What did you learn from the experience? (IDENTITY, PRACTICE)

What kind of discussions regarding the First Amendment and other press freedoms do you hear in your newsroom? (PRACTICE, MEANING)

Dr. Lisa Lyon Payne teaches journalism and public relations at Virginia Wesleyan University, where she also advises the university student-run newspaper, The Marlin Chronicle, *and edits the* College Media Review. *She has published more than twenty book chapters and journal articles in the areas of college media, popular culture, crisis communication, reputation management and public relations theory development. In addition to her academic experiences, Payne has worked as a public relations consultant, research analyst, editorial assistant, and writer. Email: lpayne@vwu.edu*

Dr. Kirstie Hettinga teaches courses in journalism such as media writing, copy editing, and content creation at California Lutheran University, where she also advises the student newspaper, The Echo. *She has previously published in* Newspaper Research Journal, the Journal of Mass Media Ethics, *and* College Media Review. *Her research explores issues of credibility and transparency, particularly in the form of news media corrections, and she has begun to expand her work to include how student journalists learn professional norms and standards. Email: khetting@callutheran.edu*

Dr. Jean Norman was a professional journalist for 30 years at newspapers ranging from USA Today, the Washington Post *to the* Boulder City News. *At Weber State University, she teaches courses in journalism, workplace writing, and interdisciplinary courses such as Writing With Numbers. She advises the student news organization* The Signpost. *She has previously published in* College Media Review *and* Communication and Religion. *Email: jeannorman@weber.edu*

Dr. Elizabeth Smith teaches reporting, editing, and ethics courses at Pepperdine University where she is also Director of Pepperdine Graphic Media and the faculty adviser of the Graphic. *Her research includes, social media and news, social media and journalism education, news literacy among high school students, and learning in student newsrooms. She is on the board of the National Scholastic Press Association/Associated Collegiate Press and is the research chair for the College Media Association. Email: Elizabeth.smith@pepperdine.edu*