

## Exploring the ‘Project Method’ in the teaching of Media and Society course at the tertiary level

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### **Abstract**

*Approaches to teaching at the tertiary level are quite diverse. Although some subjects by their very nature dictate the mode of delivery, in most cases the teaching method is left to the discretion of the lecturer. In the past years, the author’s mode of delivery was defined by what she had experienced from her lecturers during her student days; lecture, give notes, quizzes, assignments and set questions for end of semester examination. The author’s desire to explore the project method as a teaching approach was motivated by her observations and experience of more global practices as well as the need to be a reflective teacher. In this approach, students were grouped and given the freedom to select topics from the course outline, design projects and share with the rest of the class. The rest of the students were given opportunity to pose questions to the groups and to contribute to the post-presentation discussions. The author facilitated the class by filling in any gaps during this period. The feedback elicited from the students at the end of the semester showed that barring the high noise levels that sometimes characterised the discussions, most of the students felt their research skills and ability to do teamwork had been enhanced. Additionally, they had built confidence through the presentations and interactions and discovered some innate abilities hitherto had been unaware of. Most importantly, the procedure aided a better understanding of all concepts outlined for the semester. In this paper, the author shares the procedure and reflections on this approach to teaching and makes recommendations for improvement in the future.*

*Key Words: Project Method, Knowledge Discovery, Creativity, Media and Society*

### **Introduction**

Approaches to teaching at the tertiary level of education are quite varied. Lecturers are familiar with teaching, assessment, research and such duties required at this level. Whilst doing a PhD at the University of Exeter the author did a two-stage course in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, where she was introduced to various approaches to teaching at the tertiary level. This was a requirement to take on a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) job. Although she did a similar course at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW), Ghana, at the early stages of her teaching career at UEW, it was the knowledge acquired during the two stages of this course and the experiences gathered whilst working as a GTA at the University of Exeter that intensified her desire to explore more engaging teaching approaches and to be an innovative lecturer.

Various researchers and academics have blamed classrooms teachers’ inability to use innovative and creative methods on the limited approaches used by their lecturers during their training. For instance, Owu-Ewie (2008) indicates that most teacher trainees are not familiar with engaging approaches to teaching. He further states that this has resulted in rote learning and classroom autocracy. He suggested that teacher educators use more

engaging methods that teachers could emulate in their teaching. Harber and Mncube (2012) corroborate this by stating that:

*... in many countries, including developing countries, teacher education tends to help perpetuate authoritarian practices rather than be a source of more democratic ones. This is because teacher education tends to perpetuate traditional, unreflective and teacher-centered pedagogy rather than challenging it (p. 112).*

Similarly, Schweisfurth (2011) attributed some teachers' inability to use child-centered approaches of teaching in African, (Ghana inclusive) to the fact that the teachers have not experienced these approaches during their training. Dull (2006) discovered that Ghanaian teachers were more concerned with classroom discipline and preferred to use approaches that sustained order and quietness in the classroom. It has been suggested that critical thinking approaches should be adapted in teaching at the tertiary levels in Africa, as this 'can effect major improvements towards critical thinking skills among students' (Marbell, 2009, p.20).

One of the courses in the Department of Theatre Arts allocated to the author at the beginning of 2016/2017 academic year was Media and Society. This course, per its description was to provide students with an overview of the entire media process; from various tools, contents, through to presentation and audience receptivity. The objective of the course was for students to be able to identify different types of media, the motives of initiators, target audiences and what each form intends to achieve. The focus was to deliberate on different facets of media and target audiences, packaging of media products, media ethics and audience sensitivity. It was the first time the author was going to teach this course and she decided to explore the project method of instruction. In this article, she shares the experience, the outcomes, some responses of the students she interviewed after the project, as well as her own reflections and makes recommendations for the future.

### **The Project Method**

The project method was initiated by William Heard Kilpatrick in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It has its roots in Dewey's progressive education proposed in the early 1900s. Dewey's 'model of progressivism' emphasised learning by experience, critical thinking, problem solving, social responsibility and such skills that are needed for life (Dewey, 1982). Dewey advocated child-centred education that allowed each child to progress in a manner relevant to their abilities (Marzano, 2003). In Dewey's view, each student has varied capabilities in different fields and it is important that these capabilities are harnessed to the benefit of the student. There is also an assertion that Kilpatrick was influenced by Edward Thorndike's propagated psychology of learning in the early 1900s; that students are well motivated and achieve better results in their learning when they enjoy the learning process (Knoll, 1995; Thorndike, 2014). Thus, students' accomplishments are boosted when they are in control of their own learning.

Kilpatrick further advanced progressivism and psychology of learning in what he termed the project method (Kilpatrick, 2010). In this practice, popularised as 'child-centred education', Kilpatrick asserted that the child should be the main focus in the teaching and learning process. He argued that education must be democratised in the sense that the teachers should no longer be viewed as the storehouse of particular knowledge that ought to be transferred to learners. In his model students explore and discover knowledge, relegating the teacher's role to that of a facilitator (Kilpatrick, 1918). The project method, if used appropriately aids students to: '(a) develop independence and responsibility, and (b) practice social and democratic modes of behaviour' (Knoll, 1995, Online). Thus, this approach allows the students to share knowledge and take control over their own learning; thereby democratising learning.

*Ideally, the project was proposed and carried through by the students themselves, i.e. without any help from the teacher; for only if the students got "freedom for practice" and exercised "practice with satisfaction," could*

*they increase their self-confidence, self-reliance, self-efficacy and improve their ability to initiate, plan, execute, and judge – abilities Kilpatrick believed were essential for the preservation and advancement of democracy (Knoll, 2014, Online)*

Although this seems to be a good approach to teaching and learning, it has been confronted with controversies. Some scholars have argued that the use of the word 'project' is ambiguous, because it is difficult to differentiate a project from other practical aspects of teaching such as class exercise, practicum etc. Alford (2009) offers a clarification thus, a project (as used in the project method), should be an activity or product initiated and produced by the students and not the teacher. Learners 'generate tangible products that frequently transcend disciplinary boundaries and are typically displayed to the general public' (Knoll, 2014). These characteristics gives the learners opportunity to explore their potentials in different facets of lifelong learning.

Over the years, the project method has gone through series of reviews and currently prevalent as 'problem-based learning' (PBL). Problem-based learning is 'a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks' (Markham, Larmer, and Ravitz, 2003; In Pecore, 2015, p. 159). PBL just as in the project method, is grounded in constructivist learning theory influenced by the work of early-20th-century psychologists Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner (Pecore, 2015, p. 160). The key idea in constructivist approaches to teaching and learning is that teachers stimulate learners to construct their own knowledge in collaboration with other learners (Woolfolk, 2013; Pritchard, 2009; Marzano, 2003; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson 1999; Reid, Forrestal, & Cook, 1989). In a constructivist learning approach, 'learners actively develop their knowledge, rather than passively receive it' (Woolfolk, 2013, p. 360). Similarly,

*... the goals of problem-based learning are to help students develop flexible knowledge that can be applied in many situations, in contrast to inert knowledge; to enhance intrinsic motivation and skills in problem solving, collaboration, and self-directed lifelong learning (Woolfolk, 2013, p. 352).*

Despite the various reviews and varied names for this liberalised approach to instruction, they come to the same principle of student-centeredness. Thus, allowing students to take control of their learning and develop skills aside the main learning material. These reflect in the principles of progressive education, constructivist advocates, project method approach and problem based learning. It is those principles that the author sought to pursue with the level 400 students who had registered for the Media and Society course.

### **Rationale of the Study**

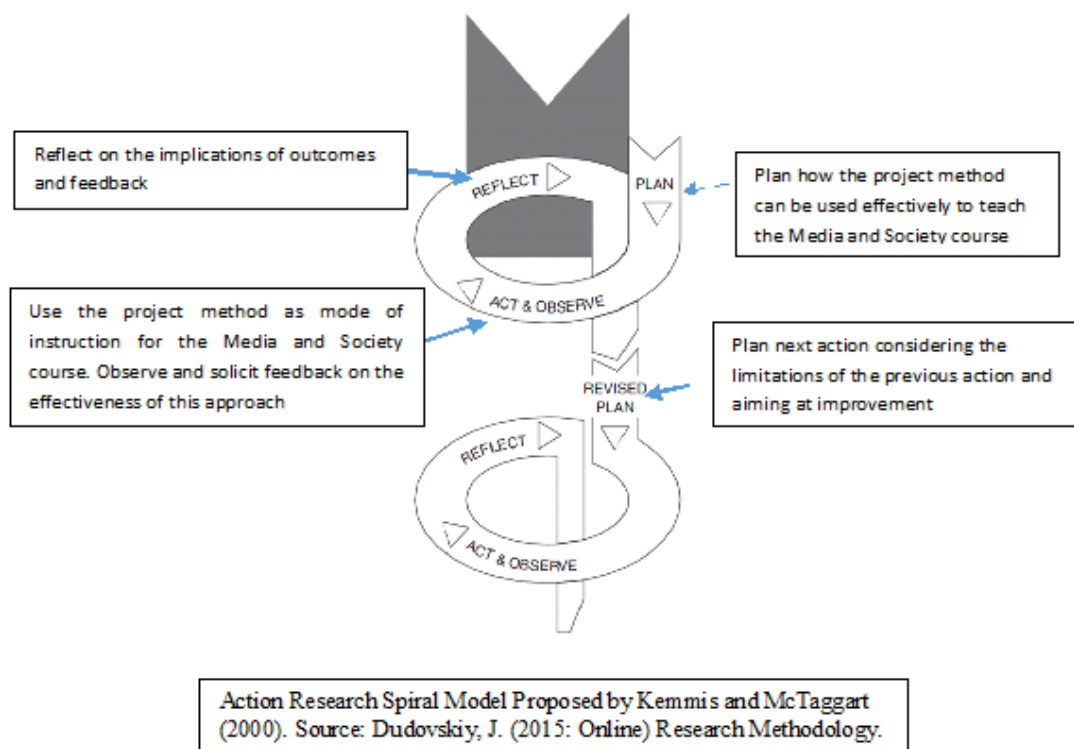
This study explored the project method of instruction at the tertiary level. It was a search for ways to improve the author's instructional approach and offer students a richer teaching and learning experience that would give them extra benefits in addition to the specific course contents. Although the project method introduced by Kilpatrick was popularised in the 1900s as a teaching and learning approach for younger students in Europe, the author perceived its application in higher education would be very appropriate. This approach is more student centred; a more global trend that offers students autonomy over their own learning. The use of the project method for this course was also to explore opportunities for students to exchange ideas with others, learn through group discussions, develop new and extended insights into how the various forms of media engage with society in reciprocal ways. It was perceived as an approach that could further develop their creative skills as theatre arts students, that instead of just learning about what others are doing in the media, they create the products themselves, developing skills that would help them in their future endeavours. The author had used this approach in a drama research project she did with children and reasoned it would work with adult students as well.

### Methodology

The author used action research because the models provide systematic action approaches to practitioners who 'seek ways in which they can provide good quality education by transforming the quality of teaching-related activities, thereby enhancing students' learning' (Koshy, 2010, p.1). She had perceived that the project method as a teaching approach has the potential to improve teaching and learning at the tertiary level. Koshy explains that action research:

*... is a continuous learning process in which the researcher learns and also shares the newly generated knowledge with those who may benefit from it ... It deals with the practices of various people, quite often within their settings. Its main purpose is to improve practice – either one's own practice or the effectiveness of an institution (Koshy, p. 9).*

There are several models of action research. The author chose to use the model proposed by Kemmis & McTaggart (2000). There is a spiral model, which proposes three stages for planning, action and observation and reflection. It follows a series of spirals which progress through a continuous cycle of 'Planning a change; Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change; Reflecting on these processes and consequences and then replanning' (Koshy, p. 25). The figure below shows how this research followed Kemmis & McTaggart's model.



With a total number of 48 students made up of 20 females and 28 males, twelve groups of four were formed. The author used purposive sampling and did the grouping in a random manner, making sure each group had at least one male or female, to create a kind of gender balance and that group members were not friends. This approach was in line with the fact that in purposive sampling the selection is based on specific characteristics of the population (Cozby, 1997). At the end of the semester, a cross-section of the students randomly selected from the various groups were interviewed on how the approach had affected their learning. Although the author was not using a quantitative approach, the students were asked to respond to questionnaires to authenticate the responses received from the interviews. Excerpts of the transcribed interviews are included in this paper.

### **Exploring the Project Method - The Task**

Each group was to select any form of media and design a product. They were to decide on a topic, product, the appropriate media to use and the target audience. They were also expected to pay attention to content in relation to design, audience sensitivities, ethical and other issues discussed earlier in class. The groups were to make a presentation on their projects for 15 minutes, targeted at a particular audience. The initial audience was another group of four (the society group) who would respond to the presenting group whilst the lecturer facilitates. In another 15 minutes, the society group responds to this media, showing their acceptance or otherwise and to discuss how the message affects them. The rest of the class join the discussion for another 15 minutes after which the lecturer gives comments to conclude the session. Two media groups took their turn each week; two as media and the other two as society in separate presentations. This was followed by a general class discussion on tasks of the day.

### **The Projects**

The first group presented a drama on a perspective on giving young girls who are supposed to be in school out into marriage. In the drama, a couple gives out their daughter in marriage to a rich old man against their daughter's wish. The girl in her desperation commits suicide and the man demands the dowry he paid from the parents of the girl. This satiric comedy borne out of research, revealed some atrocities in child marriage. Their target audience was the people of the Upper East Region of Ghana where child marriage is reported to be most prevalent (Akapule, 2016).

The second group run a talk show in which representatives of a bank advertised a pension scheme dubbed *Okyena Asem – Invest today for tomorrow* for people engaged in small private business, such as women selling in the market, small shop owners, mechanics, artisans etc. They realised that the petty traders who do not contribute to Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) will not get any benefit when they grow old and cannot continue their various businesses. Their idea through this media was to encourage this group of people to make some savings that will mature for their retirement.

The third group did a talk show that was preceded by a short drama. The focus was how to cope with people living with HIV/AIDS. In the drama, a man discovers his fiancé was HIV positive, at the point where the marriage preparations were far advanced. The question posed to the panel was whether the man should go ahead and marry the woman or end the relationship. The group had done a good research on this topic and the person who played the role of a doctor was able to give very valuable and up to date information on how people living with HIV/AIDS could have a relationship without infecting the other.

The fourth group created an electronic billboard on which they projected a happy couple and their children as against the dangers of gay marriage. Aside the content of their message, the electronic billboard proved to be an innovative work by the group. The fifth group did a TV show on how to handle domestic gas fires. They had done their research and got information from the National Fire Service. They took the class through how various fires start and what to do to prevent the fire from getting out of control and what to do when it does. They also gave information on how to handle domestic gas cylinders to prevent fire. The sixth group did a seminar presentation on the proper use of condoms. With a wooden carved penis, they showed the correct way to use a condom in order to prevent damage that could reduce the efficacy of the product. The seventh group did a radio talk show on how to deal with anger and other private matters in a relationship. The talk show was preceded by a short radio drama in which a husband gets infuriated when the wife receives a call to his mobile phone. In the ensuing talk show, a member of the group played the counsellor whilst others called in to make comments and ask questions.

The eight-group created a radio station they called 224.7 FM. In the devout program aired to the class, a false prophet gave ridiculous advice to people who were calling in into the program seeking for help on various issues. This was exposing the influx of charlatans in Ghana. The program was intercepted with short clips advertising the products of the sponsors. Group nine, dealt with some aspects of media addictions that could

affect relationships in diverse ways. This was a TV show that was preceded by a short drama. In this a woman decides to watch the television series *Kumkum Bhagya* leaving the food she was cooking on fire to burn. The husband returns from work but she ignores him because she is so engrossed in the show. This creates a rift between them and the husband threatens divorce. This opened the discussion which allowed people who called in and contributed to the debate.

Group ten did a TV show focusing on the cause and effects of *Skirt and Blouse* voting (split-ticket voting). The main speakers were from the various political parties with a host who tried to solicit their views on the topic. The group had also video recorded the views of others aside the panel which they played in-between the discussions. Group eleven did a radio talk show on the effect of illicit relationships. They created a radio station, 88.8 FM. As the program came on live, the presenter introduced the program and played a commercial followed by some music before the actual program started. Group twelve did a radio show that discussed various sex styles and how these could enhance marriages and other relationships. The group engaged a resource person and others to phone in to contribute or ask questions. Their target audience were adults and as such the program was aired after midnight. This project was pre-recorded and played to the class.

### **Reflecting on the Outcomes of the Use of the Project Method Approach**

In the project method, 'Kilpatrick advocated for student-initiated projects that utilize the laws of learning to intrinsically motivate the student to emerge with a high degree of skill and knowledge, view school activity with joy and confidence, and appreciate school and other social agencies' (Pecore, 2015, p. 158). The outcomes of the use of this approach in this study accrued such gains for the students. Through the projects the students did not just learn about media and related activities, they created the media and content as well. Some of the students discovered innate talents they were not aware of. For instance, the creation of the electronic billboard was a great innovation, coming from students who have no regular contacts with any media house. The television talk shows were very impressive. Although students view such shows, creating the TV stations and the programs and to arrange for others to call into the programs and ask very pertinent questions, altogether exhibited great talents in the making. The resource persons who were members of the groups had significant knowledge on the various subjects which illuminated the amount of research the students did. The radio shows were also brilliantly created. Some groups recorded the show and played it to the class, however, there were some annoying background noise that made it difficult to hear some parts of the recordings. This depicted the work of amateurs but with their level what they did was very innovative. These as per the benefits of the project method, has offered these students some skills they could use in the future, to further develop for personal business or join the practice somewhere.

The project method proposes team work and opportunity for students to generate knowledge on their own (Knoll, 1995). Through the grouping mentioned earlier, the students had also experienced the very important job market need of teamwork and collaboration. As Kneale (2009) observes, ability to cope and work with people you barely know, do not have acquaintance with, or people you may not like to work with becomes a challenge in the workplace. The project method approach however, proved to mitigate this challenge.

Aside the creativity and teamwork, students had opportunity to learn the content of the projects. Most of the groups did a lot of research on the content which made the presentation very educative. The presentation on how to prevent and handle domestic fire caused by gas was very educative. A student who had previously worked at the Ghana National Fire Service (not part of the group) gave further insight on the topic. At the end of the session, students were so enlightened not just on the media tool used but also the content.

The presentation on the proper use of condom was another exciting topic, considering the age group of the students. Out of the 44 students, 35 were in the range of 21 -25 years, 5 in the range of 26 – 30 years, whilst 2 each in 31 -35 years and 36 – 40 years respectively. This group knew the best media to use because they needed to physically demonstrate something to the audience. They used a phallus (a wooden carved penis) to do the demonstration. They showed the right way to remove the condom from the package and how to slip it on the

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penis to have efficient protection from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. They also showed the students how to safely remove the condom after use. It came out that condoms have sometimes failed because of wrong application and handling.

The group that presented a T.V. show on the impact of various media, especially television series and telenovelas made great impact as their presentation opened avenues to discuss the major component of the course. Their approach was most suitable because they showed a media within a media, a performance of a woman neglecting her duties to watch *Kumkum Bhagya* leading to her husband's threat of divorce. The next section was the talk show where the couple had gone to see a counsellor who opens the discussion to the public. It was good opportunity for the class to discuss both positive and negative impact of media on society.

The project that caused a stir was the radio show that was meant for adults and was expected to air after midnight, when children are supposed to be sleeping. They discussed different sex styles and asked people to phone in. It was very interesting how they played in adverts intermittently to show who their sponsors were and this was a company that sells medication to increase libido. The language was vulgar and raw, which made some students very uncomfortable. But it was clear to the class that the effects of media on society are varied: they may generate laughter, irritation, tears, comfort, among others. It however emerged that those night programs often do not get to the target adults because they might be tired and asleep and the children would rather be up and listening. Some young people who are not the target of such programs are sometimes tempted to try those sex styles meant for the adults. The group that did the radio presentation of the false prophet angered the students the most. They were intrigued by the ability of this prophet to twist the arms of unsuspecting listeners and requested those who needed help to do mobile money transfer to his account.

At the end of the semester, the students had experienced various media tools -created by themselves-, learnt important contents, enhanced their research skills, practised teamwork and unearthed their creative abilities. These were the author's observations, but there was the need to get feedback from the students who were supposed to be the beneficiary of the project method approach used. Moreover, as this approach was new to the author and the students, the feedback from the students would help improve future approaches as action research methodology proposes.

### **Feedback from Students**

The benefits the students felt they accrued from this experience include: better understanding of concepts, broader knowledge acquisition, enhanced research skills, group/team work, presentation skills, more engaging class participation and interaction, sharing of knowledge, high motivation to learn, discovery and enhancement of their creative abilities. Included here are transcribed excerpts obtained from feedback interviews with the students at the end of the semester:

*This approach is very good because it encouraged me to learn and do a lot of research. It has also helped me to identify my potentials and explore our creativity and think outside the box. Through the creation of our own media, some of us have learnt how to do video recording and editing, some have created digital billboards and we have also learnt to do class presentations. It also helps students' participation. I think it should be encouraged.*

*The media and society class has encouraged me a lot. This class has given us opportunity to learn from various topics such as gas safeties, how to use condoms etc. so I have been really educated. This is a research institution and as a student, you have to do research and the task we did forced us to do a lot of research and get information to share. So, I think the mode of teaching is very, very good. So, I am encouraging Dr. Brew to keep it up.*

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*This class has been very interactive. I have enjoyed this class this semester and I have learnt a lot. This media and society class has helped me to unearth some other talents in me.*

*This course has really impacted a lot of knowledge on us. Some of us weren't doing much research but this course helped us do a lot of research. Also, some of us did not like working in groups but this group work has helped us to change our attitude. The presentation has also boosted the confidence of students as we presented on projects we did on our own. I think it's a very good approach to teaching. All in all, I think it has been a good learning experience. And if other lecturers can use this approach, I think it will be a good thing. Thank you.*

*The Media and Society class has helped me a lot. Some of us have been able to put away shyness to work with others in a group and present to the class. I was able to come on stage, hold a mike and became a star. Madam, for me, I wish you can come and teach us next semester.*

*The procedure helped us a lot. I think the class interaction was also helpful. The class was ready to lambast you when your project and presentation are not good. You know you have a presentation and people will comment, so you will prepare for them. And because of that you will also make research to support your presentation. So, I think the approach really helped me.*

It is evident the students have gained skills that would benefit them in the future, either for further studies or job applications. In a survey conducted by Hoskins and Newstead (2009) on students' motivation for entering tertiary education at the university of Portsmouth, UK, most students indicated they wanted to build a career and hoped to gain good jobs after completion. Most university students have similar ambitions, but in the highly competitive job market, is it not the degree alone that will get them jobs? Aside the university qualification, employers want evidence of creativity and ability to 'generate new concepts' (Kneale, 2009, p. 106). The author is optimistic the skills gained through the project method would give the student advantage when they apply for jobs.

#### **Challenges**

Although there were varied gains through the project method approach as observed by the author and attested to by the students, there were some setbacks with the use of the approach. The idea to allow the students to select media of their choice limited the media tools explored. Most of the students were young people and as such they all focused on modern media – radio, tv, drama, talkshows, electronic billboard etc. None did a project with the traditional media such as newspapers and magazines. Knoll (2010) has expressed reservations on Kilpatrick's insistence on project on the prerogative of students, indicating it might not always yield the desired results. Thus, following the principles of project method religiously might limit students' learning as they will normally do projects that interest them. It was also necessary for the author to get the topics the students were presenting on before each class to enable her do research that would enrich her own contribution to the discussions. For instance, the author was so ignorant about the proper use of condoms and was handicapped in the post-presentation discussion. Although the students had done research into the topics, there were instances they were asked to search for more information to clarify some issues at subsequent sessions.

Some students reacted badly to some issues because they took them too personal. For instance, the issue of homosexuality created a lot of controversy and confusion after the group presented the electronic billboard that showed images condemning these practices. It came to the author's attention later that some students in the class were known to be engaging in these practices and felt that their mates were intentionally attacking them with the



content of their project. This almost derailed the class; shifting the focus more to the content to the detriment of the media tool being studied. Others were embarrassed about some raw language used by a group that created a radio station and did a program on sex styles that would enhance marriages. A student commented that, 'although the presentation was for academic purpose, those who tackled sexually explicit issues should have been a bit discreet; their language was too raw.' In some instances, the discussions generated a lot of noise, and because lecture rooms are not soundproof, there were concerns the noise might disturb some other lectures. The author also acknowledges that the use of the project method will be difficult in situations where the class number is large and of course, it cannot be used for the teaching of all university courses.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose for exploring the project method was to find a more engaging approach to teaching the Media and Society course. Despite the limitations such as excessive noise, students limitation of choices (which was based on their interest) as well as discomfort and confusion, the students gained enormously from this approach. As indicated by theorists of the project method, it has the potential of giving the students more than just the course content. The responses from the students show this. Creating their own media tools, contents and sharing with their mates, the students gained ownership of their learning and engaged in experiences that they would hardly forget. Learning from the limitations of this experiment, the author intends to expand the students' choice by giving specific media to work on, find better ways of class control and encourage students to avoid taking any issues personally instead of learning from them. Finally, the author would offer awards to groups that would come up with exemplary projects, as suggested by some of the students. Although, project method works with intrinsic motivation (Pecore, 2015) such an award would boost student motivation to achieve more in their learning.

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