The Ghost of Felix Culpa
What is a student newspaper?

A student newspaper is usually something produced independently by students out of the student union office. At right is the final edition of *Sensorium*, the student newspaper at what was the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education, known to many of us as the Destitute. It’s a typical ‘70s student newspaper, run off on a Gestetner by a tiny cabal of hairy students in the dead of night, stapled by hand, stealing shamelessly from *National Lampoon* and *Monty Python* and predicting the end of the fascist Bjelke-Peterson regime any day now. Not much to do with journalism, then.
And what is a journalism laboratory newspaper?

In September 1977 CIAE journalism lecturer, Shelton Gunaratne started a mimeographed publication written by journalism students called Four Winds. It was essentially a laboratory publication intended to allow students to see their work in print. (Gunaratne’s autobiography reminded me that I led a delegation to the administration to protest at the censorship of the publication.)

Ten years later, with my newspaper closed and needing a job, I was back at the CIAE as a lecturer and discovered that Four Winds was still alive under the care of fellow former student turned academic Liz Huf.

I decided that I wanted Four Winds to be much bigger and grander. I had ideas. I had spent a lot of the previous decade editing community papers, ranging from the now defunct Brisbane Express group to the North Queensland Register and decided to model the student paper on that model.
And what was it actually for?

So here’s what happened.
The paper became a tabloid.
Eventually in colour.
Eventually financially self supporting and making a profit.
I wanted it to be a paper where the students would learn about every aspect of putting out a publication, from dealing with our printers in Gympie, to organising our colour seps with the repro house in Brisbane, selling ads, making editorial decisions, chasing down good stories and covering events on and off the campus, being as independent as possible (with guidance from me and the head of department and then the dean wielding a blue pen.)
I wanted to produce people who could go off and start up their own newspaper, or walk into a newsroom and be able to turn their hand to pretty much anything.
This was the age when desktop publishing had arrived and so, with a battery of Mac512Ks with tiny black and white screens and a copy of Pagemaker 1, we set out to make a newspaper.
I decided we could make a real newspaper that would serve the needs of both the journalism course and serve the student community. We covered international stories when we had students with contacts overseas or who had been abroad, ran an election special and generally gave students at least a year’s experience on the paper through two layout and design courses. I also determined that it should be as much fun as possible, so we opened the lab 24 hours a day, put in a fridge, a video, TV, stereo, fold-out couches, our own fax machine and phone and the students blue tacked a barnyard full of plastic farm animals upside down on the ceiling so they could shoot them off when they got bored at 2am. Oh, and we had an annual pool party. The name was suggested by a student. It means lucky fault or happy accident, which was a fairly good description of how we operated. We still got mail for Mr F.Culpa. After I left for PNG and Fiji Felix was carried on by my successor, the late Jeff Young. But then in 2006 Jeff was gone, the journalism programme was killed and Felix was gone. Except that it wasn’t really, because thanks to the efforts of one of my former students, Dan Logovik, it survives as an online Facebook group. Hence the title of the paper.
A small diversion. How we got into the *Melbourne Truth*. 
And then I moved to Fiji and decided to start a student newspaper at USP. What follows is me quoting myself being quoted in *Mekim Nius*:

“Common sense would have dictated that I start the paper with a second or third year group of students who were familiar with desktop publishing, but I felt that what was needed was a group of students who would stay with the paper for a few years and grow with it. I therefore decided that I would give the project to what was then the first year class. They were, thankfully, enthusiastic about the idea and programme leader Francois Turmel gave his blessing to the project and persuaded the French Embassy to fund us.”
Moa Wansolwara

“We didn't actually have a name for the paper and the suggestion that we call it the Stanley Weekly was not met with complete enthusiasm by our first editor, Mr Simpson. However, it occurred to me that an expression I had heard in Papua New Guinea might be appropriate — Wansolwara. Wansolwara expresses the idea that all of us who are born in or live in the Pacific are bound together by the ocean, whether our home is Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tahiti, the Marianas — or even Australia and New Zealand! USP is home to students and staff from all over the great ocean, so Wansolwara seemed a perfect name.

Publishing the first edition was not easy. The students were being thrown in at the deep end with everything — writing the stories, taking photos, scanning images, selling ads and organising the printing. However, the students were enthusiastic and determined to get the paper out with the first edition being published in November 1996.
Moa Wansolwara yet

In the end, the first edition came out late, we didn’t have many ads and some of the scanned photos produced people who were two inches wide and 12 feet high, but the important thing was that the students had proved they could do it. Our aim had been to strike a balance between campus news and a broader range of stories about issues affecting everybody in the Pacific. In the first issue, for instance, we had a piece on the use of skin lightening creams.

By 1997, when I left for the UK, we were in a stronger financial footing and had a better handle on the technology. We had begun to tackle some big issues such as the civil war on Bougainville, the role of fa’fine in Samoa and suicides in Fiji. We had also begun to be noticed by the students. Our coverage of some questionable goings on at student functions and financial irregularities in the USP Students Association led to one of our staff, Mithleshni Gurdayal, being threatened — always a sign that our reporting was not only true, but causing embarrassment.”

After I left USP, Wansolara passed into the hands of one D.Robie, who did rather well with it.
The Coranto.
Some first steps in multi-platform student journalism

While I taught at Teesside University in the UK I decided to start another student newspaper. Our course was run in a very shaky partnership with Darlington College of Technology, where the students already had a newspaper, The Badger. This was not printed, but was simply run off in black and white and the sheets put on the notice board. Before the collaboration – and the course – collapsed, I managed to get out two editions of The Coranto.

Apart from the print edition, the students were required to make an audio version, which was broadcast on Alpha FM in Darlington. A cassette copy of the programme was produced for distribution to libraries.
The one that didn’t happen

After Teesside I moved to Zayed University in the UAE. Once the layout and design course and the journalism courses were up and running I decided to start a bi-lingual Arabic/English newspaper. *The Mirror/Al Miror* was a fabulous idea that just didn’t work. For a start, newspapers and journalism were not part of the students’ cultural background. Secondly, because of their English, so much subbing had to be done that work progressed very slowly. Eventually it was finished and then went to the dean for approval. Then it went to the Provost for approval and there it sat for so long that it got old and died. My colleagues on the Dubai campus had similar experiences when they tried to start a news magazine. Eventually I became assistant dean in Abu Dhabi and got sucked into the vortex of administration and didn’t teach journalism at ZU again.

Somebody else came along and produced *The Mirror*, an English language magazine with lots of stories about ‘our field trip to Paris’ and fashion tips. At least I wasn’t the one having to answer awkward questions when a fairly large sum of money went missing from the magazine’s account.

- There may be a file of *The Mirror/Al Miror* somewhere on a jazz drive or a zip drive or something equally exotic at the bottom of a cardboard box. Maybe.
After Gutenberg

At the end of last year I took over After Gutenberg, which had been run in fits and starts as a student journal in the Department of Communication Studies at Unitec. We only have one journalism-type course, News Writing, which has been highly praised by our external examiner. I took over that course a couple of years ago and have managed to squeeze pretty much everything I can into it, but the student work needed an outlet. We had an annual radio programme with Planet FM, but after a disastrous experience (that had nothing to do with Planet FM) we decided to take the whole thing in-house. When AG became available I grabbed the chance to take the student’s work in print, audio and online journalism and give it a permanent home. Hence the After Gutenberg Summer Special, of which you will see more in a minute. We will use this format in the coming semester and, hopefully, years to come. Link opening
The AG format was designed by me with input from students Anusha Bhana and Steve Ellmers. It would not have been possible without the help of our department’s IT expert, Mun Naqvi.
So, what can we learn from all of this?
There is no point in having students producing stories for any medium unless they have an outlet.

Any product must be able to cover campus news and larger events. You must be able to appeal to a target audience. (Remember *The Mirror* magazine? I hated it. The students loved it.)

Journalism and student media production is very culturally specific, even when it’s a country that speaks the same language.

Students must be given the opportunity to experience as many facets of media production as possible.

Given my background I’ve concentrated on newspapers, but other people will want their students to know about working in different (or several) media.

I have students who have gone on to work for some of the biggest media outlets in the world – and some of the smallest - along with free lancers and PR people and book editors and producers.

I like to think the experience of working on *Felix Culpa* or *Wansolwara* or *The Coranto* went some way to putting them there.

Make sure you have one fixed space for meetings and/or production. This will help create a centre point for the project and the esprit de corps that is essential to keeping a student publication going.

Make sure you have at least one staff member crazy enough to devote the hours necessary to make it work.