

Teaching the future: A case study in preparing journalism students to work in a new (and multiple) media future

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ABSTRACT

Journalism schools and departments are faced with a number of challenges in adapting their curricula to meet the demands of a changing professional media landscape. One approach is to add new courses – in online journalism, citizen journalism, television journalism, radio journalism etc. The more radical, and the authors suggest, the necessary approach, is to re-think the way we teach journalism. This should be based on the reality that we are uncertain of future technologies and how journalists will use them, and the likelihood that future journalists may find that not only the range of media workplaces but the operational structures of those workplaces may change and vary greatly. Teaching needs to impart skills and values common to all journalism practice, and inculcate a flexibility to adapt and use these in an as yet undefined variety of contexts.

Over the last few years the authors have been involved in developing a new media course which has experimented with some of the most advanced technologies. The experience of exposing students to these technologies offers valuable lessons in what may or may not be successful. In particular the case study points to the challenge of using these new technologies not only (or mainly) to teach students how to use them but rather to teach them how to use what they know about journalism whatever the medium they find themselves working in.

Drawing on the findings from the course, the authors suggest that the way that ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are combined in the curriculum should be reconsidered and specifically that there may be an important opportunity to look at ways of integrating or combining these in new ways. They argue that the future of journalism teaching lies firstly, in moving from a print-centric to a media-independent model of teaching where the fundamentals of journalism practice and theory can be imparted in ways that acknowledge both the range of media in which journalism is now being practiced and the impact of this on the practice and theory of journalism itself; and secondly, in using new media in the classroom in ways that strengthen students’ ability to adapt their journalistic understanding to *any* medium.

Introduction

Wits Journalism main course is a one-year Honours (4th year) programme which prepares graduate students for entry into newsrooms.¹ Since 2002, the programme has introduced a number of media-based options including photojournalism, online journalism, television and mobile media journalism and radio journalism.²

Working on a model of experiential learning, the practical work done by students has focused since 2004 on producing a weekly newspaper – called *Vuvuzela* - with all content written and edited by these 4th year students. A long-term aim of the department has been to create radio, online and television equivalents of *Vuvuzela* so that students can gain practical experience of a range of media. Students now contribute daily to ‘*Vuvuzela online*’ (www.vuvuzela.org.za) and from next year will also contribute news bulletins and magazine programming to the *Voice of Wits* student radio station.

This paper examines one of the optional courses that the department has run over the last three years, which has offered students access to some of the most advanced new media platforms in the world, and has offered them practical experience of television and mobile online journalism. It has also offered us, as educators, a space in which to experiment with a number of methods and approaches which inform our current thinking on integrating the increasingly wide range of media forms of journalism that exist now and are likely to come in the near future.

Background

In common with journalism schools around the world (See Carnegie-Knight (2006); Sciences Po, (2009); Columbia University (2003)), Wits Journalism finds itself having to balance the need to train journalists for immediate entry into a traditional newsroom with the need for them to have the flexibility to adapt to major likely changes to newsroom production. Do we train them for next year, when they are likely to be tested in a conventional newsroom, or for the next few years, when newsrooms and the demands made on journalists are likely to be radically different?

¹ The programme has a different stream for mid-career students, but that needs separate consideration and this paper focuses only on career-entry students.

² For full details of the programme, see www.journalism.ac.za/wits

Journalism training institutions have been grappling with these problems (Sciences Po (2009)) and adopting different approaches (Carnegie-Knight (2006)). One of the world's oldest and most prestigious institutions, the Journalism School at Columbia University in New York, embarked on a major examination of their curriculum and chose to shift their focus from skills and craft teaching to a focus on content. In other words, they chose to give students the knowledge in specialist content areas of journalism – like finance, health or international affairs – that they would use in any medium rather than keep their energy focused on learning to use different media. This, they argued, would give them the essence of journalism and the flexibility to use it in any medium. Some institutions have moved swiftly to a focus on new media, believing that students have to stay ahead of this curve. Other institutions have focused on a return to the basic craft of journalism: researching, interviewing, handling sources, writing, etc – which will again be of use in any medium (Clark, 2009).

Common issues and questions have emerged. For one, if students need to operate in multi-media environments, do they no longer need to specialize in particular platforms, but rather be conversant with them all? However, few programmes have the time and resources to make all students comfortable operating in all media. The level and range of skills needed are just too wide, the demands on journalists becoming too complex and uncertain, time and resources too short and few.

The old media-new media dilemma is complicated in our situation by two factors. The first is that the low level of internet and computer penetration in South Africa (with only 7% of households connected, see ITU (2009)), is delaying change and only a few of our newsrooms have started adapting to new media. Most of our students will go after graduation into traditionally-structured single media newsrooms, some will go into newsrooms starting to experiment with multi- and cross-media journalism and demanding that their intake be able to move between media, and all of them will have to be fluent in multimedia within a few years. In addition, we have to ask ourselves if we are or should be preparing students to work in a global marketplace.

The second is that journalism schools have to deal with the fact that the quality of African media varies enormously, and the frequent lack of quality (reflected in such things as inaccuracies, lack of balance and ethical misconduct) is a stick often used by repressive governments to justify beating the media. This places an onus on us to address basic reporting skills before we can embark on the use of complicated technologies. This puts a

brake on new media experimentation, as much time is expended on fundamental skills training.

We have dealt with this until now by building a foundation in print, insisting all students start by reporting in the newspaper medium, and only later adding on options in other media such as radio, television and online. This has steered us towards a conventional journalism programme, whereby students learn news-writing skills and then choose additional media skills – such as radio and television - as add-ons, often taught in isolated silos.

The television and mobile journalism course

In 2006, Wits Journalism embarked on a Television and Mobile Journalism course which was notable in three respects:

- It grew out of a partnership with a major media company which shared with us a mutual interest in having students experiment with new media technologies
- It involved the students not only in content production, but in the study of audiences, markets and the management of a media operation
- It demanded the acquisition of high levels of new skills in a very short period of time.

Wits Journalism entered into a partnership with the mobile television unit of Multichoice, one of Africa's leading broadcasters, owners of the DStv pay television network. DStv Mobile has run an extensive pilot project in South Africa with some 10 channels broadcast to mobile phones via the DVB-H platform. These services have been launched commercially in a number of African countries and Multichoice has indicated its intention to launch this service commercially in South Africa as soon as they receive a licence from the South African regulator. (Anderson, 2006)

The partnership provided a basis for exploring not only television but also some of the world's most advanced new media technologies including mobile television (DVB-H), and 'mobisites' (websites designed specially for mobile phones) as well as utilising bluetooth as a broadcasting medium.

DStv Mobile was keen to have students experiment with content in this medium. They are themselves having to learn what works in this medium and how people use it, and having

students do it provided cost-effective research. For our students, it provided a rare opportunity to try a new technology.³

To achieve this, however, students had to research and analyse the market (campus) their audience (students) and also understand the particular constraints of this new medium – to inform their ideas on what forms of content would be effective in the medium and what kind of content would get students' attention. This was unlike an established medium where much of this is known and passed on through a set of practices and norms.

Pedagogical Approach

The course has varied considerably each year, but certain approaches and objectives have remained fairly constant. Key to these approaches has been project-based collaborative learning⁴, with students taking a high level of responsibility for a finished product, working in an environment modeled on professional working conditions, but largely under their own control.

The Collaborative Learning methodology meant that editorial responsibility, media management and indeed project responsibility rested largely with students themselves, with the educators acting as facilitators and mentors. The project was organized, and individual roles and responsibilities defined, on the basis of standard professional practice, in an attempt to make the experience as much like the workplace as possible. The critical education difference, apart from the presence of mentors, was regular and structured individual and group reflection and criticism.

Previous experience in teaching a television journalism course in the department had shown us that, without a very high level of professional support⁵, students new to television and video could not reach a technical standard of video recording and editing that enabled them to tell their stories proficiently. Wits Journalism therefore partnered with City Varsity film school to bring their first year film students onto the course. These students had had no

³ jAs well as the support of Multichoice, we were supported by Nokia SA who provided a set of Nokia 95 mobile journalism kits for the use of students.

⁴ A pedagogical approach where “students and faculty work together to create knowledge” Matthews (1996).

⁵ In previous years on television courses we had provided professional video crews and editors for the students to work with. This mirrors professional practice in television newsrooms where reporters or producers (the journalists) research and write the stories and conduct interviews along with video crews who record the story and editors who edit it. This was not practical in this course due to the long period during which the students were producing content.

journalism training but had received training in editing and filming. Our belief was that the two groups of students would be able to combine a complementary set of skills and knowledge⁶.

Intended Learning outcomes

The course was designed to achieve a defined set of learning outcomes. Important amongst these were:

- Successfully apply journalistic research and news-gathering skills in a new media environment
- Successfully apply editorial decision-making (including story selection, editing and critique) in a new media environment
- Learn to identify differences in required 'craft' due to the nature of (and the working processes applied in) a new medium
- Learn to analyse a medium, a media 'product' and journalistic content from the point of view of the audience or reader.

Our course in 2007 gave the students the opportunity to make short programmes (usually less than three minutes), which were scheduled and programmed on one of the dstv mobile broadcast channels.

Our course in 2008 was more ambitious. As well as being responsible for making content, the students were tasked with creating their own media platform, marketing it to their target audience and managing it on a daily basis.

Mojo Course Outline 2008

The course in 2008 consisted of a three-week training programme followed by a further eight- week practical (part time). After the practical, the students were required to submit a project portfolio of work and to write an essay that captured their learnings on the course.

The students were set an objective at the beginning of the course: to create a mobile news and information service for students at Wits. They were given access to a set of sophisticated resources. These included: a mobile internet site using a platform developed

⁶ We had tested this approach the previous year where the film students shot and edited with the journalism students acting as producers , writers and reporters.

by Boost, a Norwegian company that is a leader in developing mobile journalism sites; a Content Management System (CMS) operated online from three PC workstations in a student newsroom located on the University campus; a Bluetooth broadcasting network installed at five sites across the campus run from a CMS server in the newsroom; one Final Cut Pro editing suite running on an Apple G4; five Nokia N95 phones with tripods, useable for recording audio, stills and video with specially developed software to enable direct uploading of media from the phones to the mobile site. In addition, the students were given a small budget for marketing.

Course schedule

In the first three weeks the students attended a fulltime series of seminars and workshops that provided both a theoretical framework for the practical and training in the tools they would be using⁷. The training included: using the mobile site CMS, using the Bluetooth CMS, basic techniques of shooting and editing (including some practical exercises), and use of the Nokia N95 as a mobile journalism tool. The seminars and lectures included: worldwide trends in media production and consumption, mobile media global trends, media marketing, writing and shooting for mobile web, and techniques of audience research.

During this time, the students had to prepare to launch their new media service. This involved a significant amount of work, and required them to organise and plan their activities. This planning was supported with regular coaching sessions and some theory applicable to any media (such as division of labour in the media industry, organizational models and planning). They had to establish their media product, identify their audience, create a media brand, conduct pre-launch audience research through questionnaires and focus groups, design their mobile web site and plan a marketing campaign to launch their service to their intended audience.

At the end of the three-week full-time programme (which was conducted during a holiday break), the students launched their service. Over the following eight weeks the students had to produce content daily, moderate forums on the mobisite, manage the platforms, and conduct further audience research and marketing to build and maintain an audience.

⁷ The course convenor, one of the authors, led the seminars. In addition, lecturers from City varsity provided technical training on camera and video, Nokia provided technical training on use of the phones as media devices, Multichoice provided input on audience research methods and Boost Communications provided training on use of the mobisite CMS.

What the students learnt

The students learnt and applied a wide range of skills, not only journalistic skills. In reviewing the learning outcomes we grouped these into four categories. Journalism-specific skills (what might be considered requirements of journalistic practice in any media); media skills (what might be considered necessary skills of understanding and analysis required to be able to create, evaluate or change any media product, whether a newspaper, a website or a television programme, applicable to journalistic media but also any other media product); new media skills (those technical skills specific to websites, mobisites and mobile media); and lastly, management skills (those skills required in managing a project and a team).

Journalism-specific skills and knowledge

The key journalism-specific skills that students applied during the course were story gathering, story selection, story writing and story editing. For the honours students, this was not the first time that they had applied these skills. They had all researched and written stories for the student newspaper and many had had editorial responsibility for assigning and editing stories. But the experience of applying these skills differed greatly from their newspaper experience. One example of the most intensive research and news-gathering was the 'gig guide' which entailed gathering information from many clubs and music venues around Johannesburg. No investigations or longer-term pieces of research were done. Overall, we could say that there was very little 'in-depth' journalism. As one of the students put it, they were in the business of producing 'bite-sized news'. This was partly a product of the medium, but mostly was result of the students own decisions about the media product and brand that they designed, based on their analysis of what news and information their audience – fellow students – would want delivered to their phones. In general the students did not gain new journalistic skills and knowledge as we have defined them. Rather they gained from applying these in a new medium, which may have enabled them to understand their applicability beyond the print medium they had work in previously. If we consider this outcome in the light of the debate between those arguing for a specialist content curriculum and a medium-focused curriculum, it is clear that the students did not deepen any specialist knowledge or related reporting skills to any significant degree.

Media skills and knowledge

The key media skills the students gained were those needed in designing media for audiences, conducting and analyzing audience research and marketing media. In general this was an entirely new field for them and they learnt an extraordinary amount in a very

short time. In designing their media brand - “MOJO, All Bark All Bite No Bull” - they considered the requirements of their audience through conducting questionnaire-based and focus group based research. They then applied their findings to the design of the mobisite and to the content strands that they created. This is relatively unusual territory for Journalism School curricula but also dissimilar from media studies courses. In our view this is an important area of learning which is likely to become increasingly important for journalists amongst other media professionals. In the new media landscape, understanding audiences requirements and creating products for those audiences is no longer the prerogative of large corporate national or international media groups.

Mobile and online medium-specific skills and knowledge

The key skills the students learnt in relation to the medium they were working in – specifically mobile media – were in mobisite design and content management, creating and adapting content for the mobile phone. In addition a number of the students gained skills in shooting and editing video.

Many of the students became accomplished in using professional content management systems to upload content and also to change the features of the site, manipulating media on editing systems and using forum moderation tools amongst others.

At a technical level these skills are the equivalent of knowing how to use the proprietorial input and page layout software tools that almost all modern newspaper newsrooms deploy. New journalists in a newsroom may get a few hours or a day’s training in them when they first arrive. The difference though is that in the mobile media space there are still few ‘norms’ and the students were able to experiment with layouts, fonts, colour schemes, and interactivity and then test their effectiveness with their audiences. So more important than the skills they learnt may have been the understanding they gained of the options and choices of how mobile sites can or should work and how these choices relate to content.

Management skills

By management skills we refer to the skills required to organise others, to work within a system of division of labour, to manage a project and indeed to organise oneself! The extent to which they were able to gain these skills was directly related to the collaborative learning approach adopted for the course, which devolves a very high level of control and responsibility to the students themselves.

The students found this aspect of their work very challenging. Each student was part of a team of between three and six people and these teams had to manage their own time, their outputs and their work processes. On occasion, there were significant conflicts between team members. An important tool used to manage these conflicts and to create a framework where the students could recognise that they could learn, even when (or especially when) they made mistakes, was our use of structured 'critical reflections'. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) argue that experiential learning approaches need to be augmented with structured forms of reflection in order to convert and embed an 'experience' into a learning outcome. We conducted weekly sessions where each student had to reflect on the problems, the successes and suggest how the team could address problems they had. The students also had to write and manage a code of conduct.

Lastly, the students learnt to treat new media as a research space. In the case of the Bluetooth broadcasting network for instance, the students learnt by experimentation, what was and what was not possible in what was one of the very few experiments in the use of this medium to deliver audio-visual content.

What they didn't learn

While the range of learnings was very broad, it was clear that, within the constraints, it was not possible to teach technical skills in the medium to the same level of depth as the students are taught in print.

The most significant constraint was time. The students spend over six months working on the Vuvuzela newspaper. They spent much less time working on mobile media. Another constraint though is that in mobile media, as with many new media, the medium specific 'rules' of design, layout, writing etc are far less well established.

Also not all students learnt all things to the same level. In the nature of the collaborative learning approach, students specialized, with a significant division of labour. So students on the editorial management team learnt much more about editorial decision making than many on the 'day teams' that generated and wrote or recorded the stories, and only some of those on the day teams learnt much about shooting and editing video stories.

Overall, in reviewing the intended learning outcomes which are outlined above, our analysis of the students learning found that the course was very successful in enabling the students to learn how to analyse a medium and the relationship between content and the medium,

and also successfully applied editorial decision making in this new environment. And while they did identify and experiment with the differences in 'craft' or technical skills associated with this particular new media environment, they did not learn this craft to the same level to that achieved in print.

Findings

The course confirmed that, given the tools, students were able to produce new media content to a high standard. With no prior experience, they were able to learn to use sophisticated professional online content management tools as well as video uploading and editing tools.

The course, and the course that proceeded it, also demonstrated that students could experiment with and research new media – creating insights through the practical experiences and through research that were in some cases original and in other cases consistent with major studies undertaken both by researchers and by industry (Orgad, 2006).

The course also underlined the complexity of the range of skills and knowledge required to be taught. We anticipated, and largely successfully negotiated, the potential challenges of the students learning the required technical skills, and also succeeded in enabling the students to experiment with appropriate forms of content within the constraints of the medium. However, what emerged was the difference in practical teaching within an established medium such as print, or even television, and teaching in a new media context where these norms are still 'under construction'. In established media, journalistic values, norms and practices have been formed within the profession itself and indeed codified and documented. Some of these may indeed apply to all or at least many media (ethics for example), but many may not. To take a writing example, journalistic writing for newspapers, television and radio all differ. In the mobile space, the students learnt through practice that they had not only to write much shorter stories (due to the small screen), but also develop a new approach to headline writing and intros, which differ from newspaper or even web headlines and intros.

This also suggests that experiential and collaborative learning approaches are the right ones for educators to use in teaching new media where a set of standards and norms are yet to be well defined. As Bruffee (1993) states, collaborative learning works from the starting point that knowledge is "something people construct ... together". This approach

therefore does not require an already defined set of knowledge outcomes but rather allows these to be genuinely discovered.

The lack of these defined norms also provided a great opportunity for the students and indeed the educators. Multichoice have used learnings and insights from the courses they have supported, in their own research and development of new media platforms. This points to an opportunity for Journalism schools to become much more active as research institutions.

Impact on curriculum design

These findings pose challenges for the long-term strategy of the department to include print, online, radio and television within the core curriculum of the programme. We highlight three key curriculum issues.

Is More Less?

The course demonstrated the challenges of having students undertake practical work in more than one medium simultaneously. The stress of being responsible for both the student newspaper and the mobile journalism platform at the same time was at times too great and threatened to compromise the students' learning. This has significant implications for the debates currently taking place in Journalism Schools around the world concerning adapting the curriculum to take account of new media. Where teaching is focused around practical experience, and there are only so many hours available during the year for this practical work then, if new media platforms are added into the curriculum this may well be at the expense of experiential learning on the traditional platforms (usually print) that form the bedrock of many journalism school curricula.

We found, in the course under consideration, that this issue was exacerbated by the specifics of the medium the students were working in. The students quickly came to the conclusion that their audience expected a very high refresh rate of new stories⁸. This level of output was very challenging given the available hours of the students. This problem is not limited to mobile media. As many newspapers have found, news web sites require almost continuous updating, whereas even daily newspaper newsrooms are organized around a fixed number of editions. At Wits, this continues to be a challenge on the news web site that Honours students currently contribute to.

⁸ This finding of the students themselves is consistent with other studies and professional experience (See Orgad (2006), Urban (2007)).

What are we teaching?

One answer to the time dilemma would be to reduce experiential learning and replace it with lecture or seminar-based teaching. The course showed however that experiential learning, and more specifically collaborative learning approaches are well suited to, and we would argue, best suited to teaching the practice of journalism and especially the practice of journalism in new media.

This raises interesting questions about the nature of what it is we are trying to teach. Over the last few decades, a number of textbooks have sought to define a body of journalistic values, principles, craft and techniques which together we might call the set of professional norms. It is important to note also that these norms were not developed within the academy but were in fact created by the profession itself over a long period. The findings from the course clearly demonstrate that while many of these values and principles may be universal – in other words applicable to any media at any time – many others may not be. In teaching journalism in a new media context we are faced with the challenge that sorting out which is which is a project yet to be completed. Indeed it may be that, in a period of such great flux and uncertainty over what will emerge as a new stable practice of professional journalism, it is simply not possible to do this now⁹.

However, while the norms may be becoming increasingly contested and complex, the issues they seek to address certainly remain constant: What is ethical practice? What is the function (and responsibility) of the journalist to his or her society and audience? A pedagogy based on collaborative learning is ideally suited to teach students to address and understand these questions in a context where there is lack of consensus on the answers.

Conclusion

Drawing on the findings from the course, we would suggest that the way that ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are combined in the curriculum should be reconsidered and specifically that there may be an important opportunity to look at ways of integrating or combining these in new ways.

⁹ This debate is also present in the professional world. For a recent example, see Massing (2009).

We need to balance the need to prepare students for the immediate work environments they may find when they enter the profession and the need to prepare them for the fact that those environments are likely to be unrecognisable within their own working lives.

If we aim to prepare students for an uncertain future simply by adding to an already crowded curriculum, we are likely to compromise the depth of our teaching. Instead, we need to consider a radical re-organisation of the curriculum.

We propose that the core curriculum should move away from the print bias that has dominated almost all journalism teaching to a more 'media-neutral' position. In order to start moving towards this, we need to begin to distinguish the 'rules' and skills of journalism into those that are platform specific and those that are platform neutral. Conversely we need to be able to identify those norms that are actually products of the particular historical modes of production that we ourselves as educators and professionals have become so used to that we may have assumed they are universal truths. However we need to acknowledge that this may not be possible to do in a definitive way at this time and that this has implications for the way that we teach theory (or norms).

At the same time, we need to offer students the opportunity to produce journalism in as wide a range of media as possible so that they themselves experience applying general journalistic principles in a wide range of media-specific contexts.

An approach to be considered is to create an integrated newsroom with a (media-neutral) newsgathering hub feeding media specific output desks (radio, print, television online, mobile etc). This is, in fact one of the models that some news organizations are experimenting with (and one which some broadcasters began experimenting with in the early 1990s).

If we can re-organise the structure of our courses and meet the practical and intellectual challenges this entails, we may enable a new generation of students to have confidence that they carry a set of tools and understandings that can be applied in any medium.

The challenges we face in teaching journalism in this era are not dissimilar to the challenges that media organisations face. Many news organisations are considering (and implementing) new ways of organising their resources. Some have kept their newsgathering resources on the newspaper, while adding online resources that take

material prepared for print and re-edit and package for online [cite examples]. Others (for example the South African daily paper, The Times) have tried to integrate their newsgathering and then have specialist teams editing and packaging for a range of different outputs.

Finally, our engagement with a leading media organization (Multichoice) affirms our view that these challenges in fact represent a significant opportunity for Journalism Schools. After decades of stability, professional news organizations now have a pressing need for high quality research on how to use new media tools most effectively and how to organize their resources to meet audience demands in the most effective way. Journalism Schools have the opportunity to become leaders in providing such research and we have found that Honours students are capable of participating in such research. As teaching institutions, we need to be at the leading edge of experimenting with these changes, not fighting to catch up. This points to a new research role for Journalism Schools in the future – one that can enhance, rather than compete with, our pedagogical responsibility.

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