Finding common ground: student learning and identity formation on a praxis-based 'alternative journalism' course

Paper for presentation to WJEC, 5-7 July 2010

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Introduction

The Journalism, Democracy and Development–Critical Media Production (JDD-CMP) course was developed at Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies in response to a perceived lack of congruence between the 'academic' and 'vocational' streams of our undergraduate curriculum. Taught over the past six years during the last semester of the third year of study, the JDD-CMP course is premised on the idea that differing conceptions of democracy and development have implications for the way journalism is conceived, organised and produced, which in turn shapes journalistic form and content. By exploring this relationship between ideas about journalism's role and the alternative assumptions and practices of various 'journalisms', the JDD-CMP course aims to bring together – through critique – the Media Studies and Media Production components of the third year curriculum into a praxis-based melting pot described as 'critical media production'.

Asked to contribute in some way to the goals of 'democratisation' and 'development' students have, over the years, experimented with a number of 'reformist' approaches to journalism (like investigative journalism, development journalism and public/ civic journalism), as well as with more 'alternative' approaches to media production (for example, radical advocacy journalism, participatory/ citizen's journalism, and communication for development). All these approaches are predicated, in one way or another, upon critiques of routinised forms of 'mainstream' journalism, and offer diverse ideas and methods for producing 'better' – meaning, alternatively, more purposive, civic-minded, principled, engaged, inclusive, bottom-up, exhaustive, systematic, innovative, oppositional, and reflexive – ways of doing news work. In other words, scholarly work is seen as 'practical' and 'doable' for journalists.

The first part of this paper focuses on the way one group of JDD-CMP students (called 'Common Ground') drew on scholarly work on just one of these approaches – public journalism (Rosen 1999a, 1999b; Haas 2007; Eksterowicz & Roberts 2000) – to engineer innovative new ways of doing 'better' journalism, but also to constructively and rigorously critique those same attempts. It is argued that students and lecturers learn together through critiquing journalistic practice in the light of the rich theoretical frameworks on offer in the course. This critique helps students to develop a deeper understanding of the theoretical issues and problems that underlie all journalistic production work and a deeper appreciation for when and how it might be appropriate to bend, break and ignore the canons and 'rules' of mainstream journalism and instead adopt alternative journalistic methods, frameworks, styles, methods and forms.

"Theory and practice, intellectual life and social intervention, academic endeavour and political action" are all seen as integrated in this praxis-based approach (see Mosco, 1996:38 cited in Wasserman 2005). In this sense the JDD-CMP is understood to contribute to more than just the intellectual growth and journalistic 're-skilling' of students through the mutual constitution of conception and execution – it also helps to reshape the 'professional' and personal-political identities of many of the students. The second part of the paper draws on student evaluations and essays to explore some of the ways in which the identities of students have been influenced by their engagement with this course.

Lastly, it is noted that before the introduction of the JDD-CMP, it was not common for third year Rhodes journalism to strongly identify with the sorts of positioned, interventionist, alternative journalisms taught in this course. It is argued that journalism educators should be willing to give their support to a more radical conception of the democratic role of media.

Outline of the overarching JDD/CMP course structure

As can be seen in Figure 1, the JMS curriculum is divided for three of the four terms of the year into two parallel and equally weighted components – Media Production and Media Studies. During this time the Media Production component is further divided into five 'specialisation' streams – writing & editing, design, photojournalism, radio and TV. But, in the last term, following the Journalism, Democracy and Development course in the third term, the five specialisation streams are dissolved and reorganised into 8-10 multimedia groups, which are then challenged to produce journalism on a theme – for example, education, youth, fatherhood, the local environment, crime – that will contribute in some way to the goals of 'democratisation' and 'development'.

	Term 1	**Term 2**	**Term 3**	**Term 4**
Media Production stream (50%)	5 specialisation streams: TV (24 students), radio (20), writing & editing (28), design (24), photojournalism (24)	5 specialisation streams (part 2)	5 specialisation streams (part 3)	***Critical Media Production: 8-10 multimedia groups*** *(all 120 students)*
Media Studies stream (50%)	Media & Society (all 120 students)	Media Law and Ethics (all 120 students)	***Journalism, Democracy and Development*** *(all 120 students)*	

Figure 1. Outline of third year Journalism and Media Studies course structure

Overview of the JDD component

The third term JDD course maps out key theoretical, historical and conceptual contexts for the course relating to the role of the media in development and democracy, including:

- The contemporary 'crisis' in journalism (Barnett 2002);
- Normative theories of the media, including the monitorial, facilitative, radical and collaborative roles developed by Christians et al (2009);
- The public sphere and 'public sphericules' (Habermas 1989; Fraser 1990);
- The journalism/ state relationship (Drale 2004);
- The NWICO debates (Masmoudi 1979);
- Development paradigms and their implications for media practice (Servaes 2004).

The critique of classical liberal perspectives on the role of journalism in democracy and development leads to an accent on a number of 'reformist' and 'alternative' approaches to journalistic production. Students are asked to choose either one, or a combination of, the following non-mainstream approaches based on their group's vision/ mission and on the overall objectives they set for themselves:

- A **public journalism** approach which might aim to stimulate increased civic commitment to, and active citizen participation in, democratic procedures like public deliberation (Rosen 1999a, 1999b; Haas 2007; Eksterowicz & Roberts 2000). Allied to this approach is **solutions journalism** which involves attempts at public problem solving, usually at the local or micro level (while paying close attention to the relationship of these problems to meso and macro contexts).
- A **citizens' or participatory journalism** approach which might encourage various local citizens to gather, record and express their own experiences and viewpoints on the subject (Gilmour 2005; Nip 2006).
- An **investigative journalism** approach which might expose wrongdoing and interrogate the effectiveness of public and corporate policies and practises in relation to the topic (Glasser & Ettema 1998)
- An **alternative journalism** approach which might assist in the nurturance of opinion formation and agenda building amongst 'subaltern counter-publics' (Downing 2001; Atton 2002)
- A **radical journalism** approach which might attempt to provoke, persuade, sway and mobilise audiences through the adoption of non-mainstream political positions related to the topic at hand (Atton 2002).

- A **development journalism** approach which might: assess the impact of the issue at hand on its human protagonists; turn away from objects/victims with "needs and deficits" and concentrate instead on subjects/actors creating sustainable livelihoods; report not only in terms of problems but in terms of positive programmes; focus not only on popular opinion but also on popular knowledge (Domatop & Hall 1993).
- A **developmen*tal* journalism** approach which might act as an extension of government policies of social, economic and cultural development ((Domatop & Hall 1993).
- A **social marketing** or **communication for development** approach which might produce media resources that could be used for social change purposes by community-based and non-governmental organisations working in the topic area (Melcote 2001).
- A **good, 'old-fashioned', in-depth journalistic** approach which might on the one hand provide human interest to encourage empathy and solidarity on the part of audiences, while on the other hand provides analysis that fosters an appreciation of the structural context within which the issues occur.

In each of the first four incarnations of the JDD-CMP, each multi-media group was free to try its hand at one or more of these journalistic approaches in Term 4. However, in each year there was at least one approach to journalism – public/ civic journalism – that the course lecturers insisted had to be practiced by every group during the JDD section of the course in Term 3. This is explored in the next section.

Public journalism – uncovering a 'citizens' agenda'

One of the central critiques of mainstream journalism, offered by a wide range of media theorists, is its lopsided focus on the agendas and perspectives of elite actors (see, for example, Manning 2001). Public journalism is presented in the JDD course as a reformist approach that attempts to overcome journalism's elite bias by unearthing and engaging with layers of civic life buried under the official and quasi-official realms. To achieve this, some public journalists leave their offices to uncover the concerns and voices of ordinary citizens in 'third places' and 'incidental spaces', while others set up democratic 'listening posts' in the form of town hall meetings, focus groups, citizen juries and the like. These strategies are aimed at uncovering a 'citizens' agenda' (or perhaps more accurately, a set of competing 'citizens' agendas'), relatively uncontaminated by the perspectives and claims of elites, and

less prone to influence by the agendas of other, more powerful, news organisations and the stultifying professional routines of their own newsrooms.

In parallel with their JDD essay writing assignments in Term 3, students are divided into groups and asked to do some preparatory, citizen-based research before embarking on their fourth term journalism projects. The precise nature of this preparatory research has differed over the years. In 2005, when the theme was local schools, research groups were each assigned two local high schools by their lecturers and asked to conduct separate focus groups with learners, teachers and parents at each school. However, in 2006 when the theme was local youth, it was left up to the students themselves to decide exactly who to invite and how to frame and facilitate the focus group discussions, so long as they adequately justified their decisions, wrote up the research findings and shared them with the rest of the class. Once all nine groups had shared their research results with each other, each group chose a sub-topic to work on in during the Critical Media Production course in fourth term.

Students had to manage all steps in the focus group process as outlined in Figure 2.

Step 1 – Week 2	**Step 2 – Week 3**	**Step 3 – Week 3**	**Step 4 – Week 3**
Start up: a. Elect convenor; b. Discuss research process	Research youth: a. CARR; b. Document/ book research; c. Source identification	Analyse data a. Synthesise, organise data b. Re-purpose data for focus group interview guide	Focus group mechanics. Book: a. Venues b. Recording equipment

Step 5 – Week 3	**Step 6 – Week 4**	**Step 7 – Week 4**	**Step 8 – Week 4**
Focus group prep: a. Contact organisations (e.g. schools) – get permission; b. Advertise for respondents; c. Scout around for participants.	Finalise focus group samples: ➢ Select sample. Finalise focus group materials: ➢ Prepare interview guide.	Focus group mechanics. Book: a. Transport; b. Refreshments.	Conduct focus groups a. Top 5 problems; b. Follow interview guide.

Step 9 – Week 5	**Step 10 – Week 7**	**Step 11 – Week 7**
Transcribe, analyse data	Present findings in class	Decide on final topics for Term 4 projects

Figure 2. Step-flow diagram of citizens' agenda research process, JDD-CMP 2006

This approach to research yielded an unusually rich and sometimes surprising array of issues and concerns. The research transformed students' perspectives regarding the real issues affecting local communities, helped them come to care about the issues they uncovered, and ultimately improved the depth and quality of their journalism. Students learnt to practice a news research skill and by taking time to listen to the views and ideas of local sources the Rhodes students signalled that they were not simply parachuting into local communities to 'get the story'. Through the reciprocal exchange of ideas and meaning, a more equal

relationship of mutuality and trust developed between some of the Rhodes journalism students and the focus group participants. In course evaluations some students reported that close contact with sources had been "an empowering experience". Others said they had been moved out of their "comfort zones" and that it had "opened their eyes to the reality of the other communities in Grahamstown".

However, the disadvantage of this approach is that it is cumbersome and time-consuming. In 2008, the lecturers decided that instead of identifying sub-topics via community-based focus groups, they would themselves conduct a few in-depth interviews with local environmental science academics. This saved time and generated some interesting results, but this was, in effect, an 'expert agenda' rather than a 'citizens' agenda' or even an 'activist/ social movement agenda'. Students spent the third term doing background research on their topics, but it was really only in Term 4 that students met with local citizens and activist groups.

Exploring the theory and practice of public journalism in the South African context

Like the Term 3 public journalism experiment with the 'citizens' agenda', the fourth term Critical Media Production course presents many further opportunities to explicitly assimilate into practice, the theoretical concerns raised in the Journalism, Development and Democracy course. Each year, the multimedia groups are asked to decide where they stand and what they want to accomplish and every year a wide and intriguing diversity of journalistic approaches, methods and forms are adopted in service of the broad goals of democratization and development.

Given the limited space in this paper, I will focus on just one approach – public journalism – taken by just one of the multimedia groups ('Common Ground') in 2008, when the theme was the local environment. This example exemplifies a key principle of the JDD-CMP – that students should be given responsibility for their own learning and be encouraged to experiment, innovate and 'play'. In so doing it is acknowledged that they will inevitably also 'make mistakes'. The key was to make these mistakes 'count' by engaging in a process of critique.

'Common Ground' was tasked with investigating Makana's municipal commonage lands, which surround Grahamstown and provide many landless, urban residents with essential resources (for example, grazing land for livestock herders, wood for fuel and building materials, and plants for traditional medicine). The group explored various issues affecting commonage users and other commonage stakeholders, including overgrazing, over-

exploitation of certain plant species, poor management, inadequate infrastructure and the lack of a permanent water supply. The results of their efforts – including a 'mockumentary' and other audiovisual documentary work, a number of audioslide shows and a variety of print media products (including posters, pamphlets, and a magazine) – were exhibited at a 'Moo-vie premiere' held at a university venue towards the end of the course. A diverse audience of over 150 people attended the event, including seven commonage farmers, various local government and environmental officials, community activists, academics, postgraduate researchers, and interested students. The student journalists were surprised by the solid turnout at an event designed to debate a topic as ostensibly obscure as commonages. Students turned up in large numbers, presumably because the event happened on their doorstep and because they were attracted by a clever marketing campaign for the 'Moo-vie Premiere', which promised some student-friendly satire and silliness. By contrast, many of the other stakeholders attended because they had already acted as sources for the students' journalism and had been issued with personal invitations and, in the case of the commonage users, were offered lifts to and from the event.

Despite the irreverent tone of the mockumentary, a serious, solutions-oriented and animated debate followed the screening of the work. However, the event lacked a crucial ingredient – meaningful participation from any of the commonage users present. Towards the end of the event, two of the commonage users were eventually persuaded by the (student) chairperson to speak to the plenary. They obliged, but spoke very softly in isiXhosa, a language not understood by the majority of the people in attendance. Unfortunately, the JDD-CMP students (and their lecturers) did not have the foresight to hire either a skilled facilitator or an effective translator for the commonage debate. A translation was offered, but was not easily understood by the audience, and the deliberative process began to stutter and break down.

In theoretical terms the student journalists who organised the 'Moo-vie Premiere' were attempting to facilitate, following Habermas (1989), an open public sphere where all citizens had access and in which all opinions available could be articulated, deliberated and critiqued. The students hoped that the citizens attending the event would set aside social inequalities and interact as if they were social equals. While many of the people in attendance at the 'Moo-vie Premiere' were in theory willing to set aside these social inequalities, there was a glaring lack of participatory parity at the event.

These problems serve to alert us to Fraser's (1990) critique of Habermas (1989) in determining what the goals of public deliberation might be, and which arrangements would best serve those goals. Fraser is critical of the idea that citizens should set aside social inequalities and focus on topics of common concern because this privileges the interests of

dominant groups over subaltern groups. Instead, Fraser argues that citizens should explicitly articulate or 'publicise' inequalities. She would thus be critical of the students' notion that the citizens attending the 'Moo-vie premiere' are part of the same community, bounded by shared values and interests. By virtue of inhabiting a certain geographical territory, the students assumed that these citizens would share an overarching vision of the common good that enables them to reach consensual solutions to those problems (if they treat each other with mutual understanding and respect). But, for Fraser this ignores how communities are fragmented into multiple social groups, "situated in relations of dominance and subordination, structured by race, class and gender" (1990: 65). These social inequalities, particularly acute in the South African context, may preclude the emergence of a shared, overarching vision of the common good. Drawing on this analysis public journalism theorist and advocate Tanni Haas argues that journalists should help citizens reflect on their different, potentially conflicting, concerns (2007: 36). They can do this by making social inequalities the very subject matter or focal point of public deliberation.

To dwell on conflict may seem like poor advice in the context of South Africa's immature democracy, where public discourse is already highly fractious and ill-tempered, with protagonists resorting to racial name-calling, mud-slinging and the recitation of well-rehearsed, pat answers to public problems. But, Haas's point is that public journalism can penetrate the superficial conflict of public debate, by becoming a means through which citizens come to understand that they have vastly different and conflicting interests. Commonage users have been rendered landless, penniless and powerless by colonialism, capitalism and apartheid, and Haas argues that journalists should help wider publics see these sorts of largely hidden historical and social processes. They should orient themselves away from the glib solutions and platitudes of elite actors and instead listen for difference among citizens and encourage an acknowledgement that some social locations – like those occupied by the commonage users – hinder, or even prevent, certain citizens from speaking effectively in public. An emphasis on transcendent communion may in itself be silencing. In other words, poor, marginalised communities need to be heard, and citizens with more social power may be more willing to listen if journalists helped them consider how social inequalities may harm some citizens' abilities to participate on an equal footing.

Part of the frustration of politics in South Africa is that elites speak on behalf of marginalised communities ("the masses of *our* people"), yet we seldom get to hear from these marginalised people speak for themselves. Journalists need to actively seek out these marginalised citizens in terms, at times, in languages and in places that would permit their participation. The 'Moo-

vie Premiere' was not conducted on terms, in a language or in a place that favoured the participation of commonage owners.

Haas goes further to argue that subaltern social groups like the commonage users should be given more spaces and opportunities for *intra*-group deliberation *among themselves* about their particular concerns "outside the supervision and control of dominant social groups" (2007: 39). This would enhance the formation of horizontal bonding social capital between the members of this 'group'. Meanwhile, public journalists are encouraged to nurture this subaltern discursive domain and carry articles on the *intra*-group deliberations to help wider audiences understand how the particular social locations of the subalterns (like the commonage users) "affect their sense of problems and solutions" (Haas 2007: 40).

It was clear, both from the student journalism presented at the 'Moo-vie Premiere' and by the failure of the commonage users at the event to articulate a coherent political position, that the commonage users had not in the past been well organised and had seldom, if ever, had the opportunity to deliberate with each other to work out a unified programme. They needed a more 'exclusivist' discursive domain rather than being forced to participate on unequal terms in an overarching public sphere. Fraser argues that this is because, in socially stratified societies, "arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public [sphere]" (1990: 66). This does not mean that journalists should essentialise social identities, elevate differences, promote divisiveness, or exaggerate the impact of minor differences. Neither does Fraser mean to completely isolate her subaltern counterpublics from a wider public for all time. After finding using intra-group discussions as "training grounds", subordinate social groups would then articulate their counterdiscourses to wider publics (Fraser 1990: 65).

Thus, following Fraser, our students could have made better use of their time and resources by nurturing a 'discursive domain' for commonage users where they could deliberate exhaustively amongst themselves, build some developmental power and create media products that articulate 'oppositional' intra-group positions to a general public, before deliberating jointly with other commonage stakeholders (Haas 2007: 40). Journalists would then, finally be in a position to produce journalism reporting back on these more encompassing *inter*-group deliberations (including the prominent display of commonage users' positions), which would stand a better chance of helping audiences compare conflicting concerns, as well as "identify possible points of overlap that might subsequently form the basis for joint public problem-solving" (Haas 2007: 40). Haas's basic point, then, is that a sense of social solidarity is more likely to emerge from an acknowledgement of inequality and

diversity, and a subsequent politics of mutual recognition and respect, than from an abstract pursuit of commonality.

This example exemplifies the power of a praxis-based approach for journalism education. While it would be possible to nurture and hone students' conceptual thought around the concept of the public sphere in a 'theory-only' Media Studies course, the concept of praxis is based on the view that knowledge requires more than this process of honing theory and instead "grows out of the mutual constitution of conception and execution" (Mosco, 1996:38 cited in Wasserman 2005). Of course, it is not always easy to effect this 'mutual constitution' of theoretical critique and practical action. Haas's ideas may have theoretical force, but the notion that journalists – especially inexperienced student journalists drawn from South Africa's more privileged social classes – should be responsible for the nurturance of 'multiple discursive domains' (including domains for 'subaltern counter-publics') in a town with high levels of unemployment and poverty and an extremely weak civil society, may seem a daunting, time-consuming and even inappropriate burden for student journalists to have to bear.

But, there are even deeper conceptual and theoretical problems here. This is because despite Haas's (2007: 38) enthusiastic embrace of Fraser's critique of Habermas's notion of the public sphere, he remains wedded to Habermas's proceduralist-discursive notion of the "deliberating public", including the idea of that all citizens (subaltern or otherwise) should submit their opinions to rational-critical evaluation by others. It could be argued that subaltern publics like the commonage owners – even those who have the chance to 'find their voices' by deliberating amongst themselves – would nevertheless continue to be disadvantaged by having to conform to this rational-critical bias. Christians (2004) confronts this problem by introducing in normative media theory his concept of *ubuntu* communitarianism, which is critical of Western epistemology. He follows Blankenberg in urging journalists to help build community solidarity and moral agency by aligning themselves with the common values, indigenous storytelling practices, interpretations and epistemologies of "the common people" in order to "tell the stories that accurately reflect, and reflect on, their experiences and spiritualities" (1999: 59). Christians argues that the traditional barrier between journalist and citizen should break down as they occupy "the same social and moral space" opening pathways for "reconciliation across cultures" (2004: 251). Again, these are strong ideas, but can public journalism produced by students reasonably be expected to effectively do this kind of work? Even if individual student journalists felt motivated to forge close ties with subaltern social groups, there would be significant barriers to achieving this in practise (not least, the limited time available to students completing a semester-long university course).

The central place of 'critique' in the JDD-CMP

Despite these and others difficulties in forging a theoretically-informed practice, the notion of 'critique' remains central to the JDD-CMP project. For Adorno (cited in Dant 2003), critique is essential to democracy (and, for me, that includes journalism) as it provides the system of checks and balances that protect democracy.

> "[Critique] builds on the possibility of resistance: to established views and opinions; to the taken-for-granted presumption of institutions to decide; to simple acceptance on the basis of convention or established authority. What is implicit here is that critique means not only fault finding but setting up a line of opposition, one that deals not just with the detail but rather with the whole system. Faults are not the result of mistakes, correctable once they are pointed out, but are the result of the workings of established systems. Critique begins to challenge whole systems rather than identify failings. A critique of society confronts the form of society as a whole, perhaps identifying particular features but treating them as consequent upon the underlying character of the social system." (Dant 2003: 7)

For me, the principal 'faults' of my students' work lie not in the many correctable mistakes of accuracy, grammar, syntax, story form, attribution, general knowledge and so on (although it is undeniably important that these mistakes be pointed out and corrected), but in the fact that this work is too seldom informed by a challenge to 'the form of democratic society as a whole', which includes the particular forms journalism has taken as an integral part of that society. This is because students mostly do no realise that they are operating in particular, dominant paradigms, which makes the very possibility of mounting this challenge impossible. They are usually unable to adequately articulate what the various approaches to journalism are for, or what they as journalists could or should be for or against. (Of course, this is not *their* fault, since this outcome had not, until we developed courses like JDD-CMP, been inscribed sufficiently clearly in our curriculum.) Some might say it is not our job to engender or mount a political challenge. But to act as if what is given is what is normal, is itself an unacknowledged yet highly 'political' position to take.

One has a limited amount of time within which to teach. Should one use that time to run endless hard news boot camps? Or could one use this time to help students discover a sense of the possibilities and purposes of journalism. To help them discover what they are for and against, or feel what it is like to contribute to a community's effort to discover itself and solve its own problems. In other words, to help them navigate an exciting intellectual and moral journey, not just in the classroom, but in the newsroom, too. This is surely more lasting. The other things (like wide general knowledge, crisp lead paragraphs and better grammar) will surely constitute a happy by-product of a practice framed by a genuine interest in and

commitment to some of the (contested) ideals of journalism, backed up by rigorous reflection on the ethics of the craft and effective coaching in the finer points of practice.

It is my contention that some of the weaknesses in South African journalism identified in the Sanef skills audit (Deuze 2002; De Beer & Steyn 2004) – a lack of reporting, writing and accuracy skills among reporters – might be ameliorated by an education that builds commitment through rigorous thinking about the nature of journalism. Theodore Glasser (2003) asks:

> "Who among us hasn't wondered if there's any meaningful difference between a graduate from one of our better journalism programmes and a well-educated liberal arts major who spent summers interning at a good newspaper and four school years reporting for and finally editing the campus newspaper? I bet there is a difference, and I bet the difference has little to do with basic skills and everything to do with rigorous thinking about the nature of journalism. Still moving away from basics, or at least moving quickly beyond them, doesn't mean abandoning the craft of journalism and substituting for it an education of little or no relevance to practitioners. No one seriously denies that the practice of journalism requires students to practice journalism. I don't know of a single journalism educator who would quibble with the proposition that the practice of journalism belongs at the centre of any viable journalism curriculum. But, practice at what level, in what context, to what end."

As the JDD-CMP has shown, students and lecturers learn together through critiquing journalistic practice in the light of the rich theoretical frameworks on offer in the course. Critique helps students to push the envelope on in terms of journalistic method, style, form, and structure because they develop a deeper appreciation not only for the 'rules', but also for when it is appropriate to bend, break and ignore them, and when and how to create new frameworks, styles and methods. Theory and practice, intellectual life and social intervention, academic endeavour and political action are all seen as integrated. In this sense the JDD-CMP aims to contribute to more than just the intellectual growth of students through the "mutual constitution of conception and execution" in a praxis-based approach – it also helps to reshape the 'professional' and personal-political identities of many of the students.

The JDD-CMP challenge to professional and personal-political identity formation

Through the JDD-CMP students engage with the wider community and develop much stronger sense of attachment to Grahamstown and its problems. They develop deepened relationships with their sources which can lead to stronger feelings of empathy, solidarity and a better appreciation of diversity. They also develop a sense of agency, a sense that they can make a contribution, 'a difference'. And all of this leads to a re-evaluation of their values, ethics and sense of social responsibility. Some students report that they are 'surprised' by the

ideas underpinning non-mainstream approaches to journalism and that this led to the evolution of their journalistic identities:

> "The JDD/CMP course has exposed me to many alternative kinds of journalisms and the ideas they're premised on were surprising yet intriguing. As the course progressed I started realising how little I actually knew about journalism and its role in society, and of course, in turn, my ideas of myself as a journalist and role in society changed as well…My identity as a journalist evolved. Now, as a journalist, I do not merely want to report facts and write as succinctly and objectively as possible, I also want to maintain the values of democracy and contribute to the development of the country as well as the people of my country…When I do stories now, I don't necessarily want to stand on the fence. I want to engage with my sources. I now value an ordinary person's opinions as much as I would an 'expert's'. I feel that horizontal communication is important as people have a lot to learn from each other and that all 'teachers' do not necessarily have a degree or formal education…I realise as a journalist, I can provide 'in-depth' information in order to create awareness but also educate audiences…" (Extract from student 1 exam, 2008)

It is perhaps unsurprising that students are surprised by the ideas underpinning non-mainstream journalisms, since these approaches are not well known, highly regarded or enthusiastically embraced by most journalists. But this does not in itself make them less legitimate or interesting. Far from being outlandish, they are practiced around the world by significant numbers of committed media workers and documented and supported by a growing academic literature. Moreover, as we have seen, these approaches are precisely predicated on the sorts of critiques of mainstream journalism that students usually encounter in the Media Studies or 'academic' curriculum. The primary value of studying and practicing non-mainstream approaches in the curriculum is in destabilising the idea that there is a coherent, universally accepted and superior way of doing journalism. Non-mainstream approaches achieve this destabilisation by deviating from the 'objective journalistic stance', foregrounding epistemology, emphasising the social construction of 'facts' and knowledge and striving to develop critical thinking and reflexivity. They force students to probe their political position by asking questions like, 'what do journalists stand for (and against)?'

Since the Media Production coursework usually requires students to practice one dominant model of journalism over a number of other competing approaches, the academic and vocational components of the overarching Journalism and Media Studies curriculum are ordinarily epistemologically incongruent, the former venturing into 'interpretivist' and 'critical' paradigms, the latter stubbornly rooted in post-positivism. Again, this is seldom apparent to students and manifests in diminished intellectual and ethical engagement with the subject at best, and epistemological confusion and political apathy at worst. By contrast, some JDD-CMP students express a revelatory sense of purpose in being "allowed" to "take sides":

"After looking at the different approaches to journalism and the different theories presented, I took a stand. I believe in advocacy. I am pro-poor. I believe in working and doing all I can to be the voice of those who are marginalised in society." (Extract from student 2 exam, 2008)

"The courses also opened me up to the concept of societal justice, where I can, as a journalist incite and call for change around particular matters that require attention…I also have a stronger concept of what makes freedom of speech free…I feel that I now have a better understanding and consciousness of my identity not only as a journalist, but as a journalist in a social context with moral and important obligations to that society." (Extract from student 3 exam, 2008)

"In paraphrasing a notion I came across in my readings, I feel I can best illustrate the fundamental change which the JDD and CMP courses have made on my identity as a media producer and journalist. The fundamental thrust of the quote is that he who steps outside the conflict between the powerful and the powerless is not a neutral observer, they have instead sided with the powerful. The ideas which have most impacted upon me then, are those which contest the notion of neutrality and the over –balance in the modern journalistic crisis and the need and ability of journalists to take up causes…We all operate within the power spheres within which we are located. Any attempt at neutrality then, will only provide consent to that power system. One cannot but step outside the bounds of neutrality if one is to have any hope of contesting any inherent imbalances and injustices within that system. If one is to improve or highlight the lot the powerless within that system then it is their perspective which must be highlighted." (Extract from student 4 exam, 2008)

"I think what drew me in the most to development journalism was the idea that media, through the act of communication has the ability to unite people, and society as a whole, and this can be done through the grass roots of a community—starting with the little stories that will soon affect the big ones…By having the ability to change and improve the lives of others made me grateful that I had learnt such a skill at university. This course completely changed my view of journalism and what it means to be a journalist. I was able to create my own identity through the ideas that were taught to us over the period of JDD and CMP." (Extract from student 5 exam, 2008)

"Before completing the JDD and CMP courses my identity as a journalist consisted of a vision of myself working at a magazine like Cosmopolitan or Elle. Subjects that I, as a 21 year old white upper middle class girl, could relate to were all I cared about: shoes, handbags and the latest eyeliner was all I wanted to read and write about. Even during my July vac I chose to work at a glossy where I wrote no articles rather than work at a news paper where I had the potential to publish various articles. I realised after completing these two courses that my view and goals are very materialistic and to the disadvantage of my personal growth as a journalist…I have learnt from this semester that I will never be an environmental journalist. However I have learnt valuable skills and tools which I could put toward a different beat. My other major is sociology where we too have focussed on various forms and aspects for development. I find it inspiring to be able to merge both my majors with the possibility of creating campaigns for development in rural areas and education sectors…I feel the course has given me a sense of purpose as a journalist. I personally did not produce any content for my CMP however being involved in decision-making and seeing the final product of our website, created a sense of pride within myself and also a new insight as to what exactly it means to be a journalist in South Africa." (Extract from student 6 exam, 2008)

> "… Therefore my identity has somewhat shifted from the political and environmental apathy that consumes so many young people and turned me into and activist. The work I hope to do and produce in the future would be loaded with issues that concern the citizen…" (Extract from student 7 exam, 2008)

The JDD-CMP encourages students to evaluate different theories and reflect on them in the light of meaningful personal experiences, practices and critical incidents. Students reported that, for the first time in a three year undergraduate course, the relationship between the theoretical and practical streams of the curriculum had finally begun to "make sense":

> "In first year journalism, when we moaned about learning about the printing press, we moaned about learning media theory, my tutors kept saying in the end will somehow all make sense. And while studying for this exam I came to the final conclusion that I was waiting for, the sense of it all…In this course I felt lost for most of it, but when I finally applied myself to the readings about what it meant to be a journalist I discovered how much power the media has. I can see now why there are so many debates about so many different types of journalism. Because as this course has taught me, there is no 'one' solution to a problem…The idea of being a journalist is the idea of how best to disseminate information. Who gets to tell you what, why, where and when and how? And for what purpose? This last question 'For what purpose' all came together in this course…In the end one's identity is shaped by our perspectives and I wish to continually question my perspectives in order to become a fair and good journalist, promoting good change in whatever light. The issues in the CMP course have taught me that I am able to do this through a multitude of choices." (Extract from student 8 exam, 2008)

Conclusion: Who's afraid of advocacy?

Before the introduction of the JDD-CMP, it was not common for third year Rhodes journalism to strongly identify with the sorts of positioned, interventionist, alternative journalism taught in this course. This could be explained by the class and race-based distortions of the journalism intake at Rhodes. But, a more likely reason is the simple lack of exposure to these approaches. This lack of exposure is linked to the stigma some journalists and journalism educators attach to these approaches and the perceived lack of financial incentives and job opportunities for students who might wish to practice these approaches in the outside world after graduating.

In South Africa, this is beginning to change. Public journalism is no longer simply an inspiring pedagogical device with a largely aspirational rather than programmatic purpose. In 2009, the (mainstream, commercial) *Daily Dispatch* newspaper hosted a series of highly successful town-hall-like meetings, the *Community Dialogues*, in the townships and suburbs of East London under the banner of the worldwide public journalism movement. Based on this success, the *Daily Dispatch* launched a four-person public journalism unit, called *Dispatch Civic*, in May 2010. This means that a fifth of the *Dispatch* newsroom is now

dedicated to the ongoing practice of this form of journalism. Gratifyingly, two members of *Dispatch Civic* are former graduates of the Rhodes School of Journalism and Media Studies.

If public/civic journalism is now being practiced in Africa, shouldn't we be educating some public journalists? The continuing vitality and growth of the public journalism movement in this part of the world depends upon the education of journalists who are supportive of its ideals and are willing and capable of experimenting with its practices. To what extent are we responsible for the woeful paucity of media produced by and for 'subaltern counter-publics' in our countries? If advocacy is a legitimate part of a democratic media system, as is argued by a wide range of media theorists, why are we as journalism educators so scared of it?

> "There is thus no substitute for a well developed, organised public sphere, representative of society, sustained by partisan media. The championship of propagandistic styles of journalism – denied legitimacy in liberal schools of journalism and increasingly scorned within the profession of journalism itself (particularly Anglo-Saxon countries) – is justified as a necessary response to the limitations of mainstream media, and the wider imbalance of power in society." (Curran 1996: 64)

Are journalism educators willing to give their unequivocal support to more 'facilitative' and 'radical' conceptions of the democratic role of media as a means to balancing the playing field of journalistic (and democratic) practice in our developing countries? If the classical liberal approach is dominant, why not give some impetus and credence to approaches that have so much to offer, both theoretically and practically? What do we lose by locating ourselves in this place of advocacy, at least for part of our curriculum? I hope I have shown that there is much to be gained.

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