

Conference 2003: Practical Training

Let's Keep it Practical: the Importance of Hands-on Experience for Tomorrow's Journalists

By Lance Girling-Butcher, Editor, The Daily News.

Before we start let me make one point very clear. I have nothing against academics. In fact some of my best friends and closest family have degrees. I have even tinkered with university qualification myself.

However, more than 35 years in journalism, most of them working with, and training young journalists, has left the indelible impression that success in academic study and success as a journalist are poles apart. That does not mean they are incompatible, far from it. I think the influx of university graduates into journalism has enriched and strengthened the profession, but that does not overcome the fact that the qualities that make a for an A pass in a university essay are not those of the great news story, or even a compelling magazine piece. And the people who produce these works cannot be taught in the same way. Academics tend to put names to things journalists do intuitively.

When it comes to training, the word journalism assumes the status of a verb, a doing word, something that is better learned by practical experience, rather than long hours in a classroom or poring over books. I am also firmly convinced that the existing diploma, well-taught and managed by people with newsroom experience themselves, is a happy compromise between full-on teaching and the essential opportunities to put what is learned in the classroom into practical use in the field. I have even had university graduates say how much more they enjoy the focused nature of journalism training to university lectures.

Sadly for editors like myself, experience shows that the cruel truth of learning to be a good journalist, is that we learn best by making mistakes. The more students make while training, hopefully the fewer traps they will fall into while on the job proper and therefore the fewer complaints I have to deal with and the less the credibility of my publication suffers. To have the opportunity to make these errors safely they have to work like fully qualified journalists. That process is all the more meaningful if their work can be published, but only after careful checking by tutors well versed in the failings of trainee journalists. Incidentally no self-respecting newspaper or radio station is going to accept low quality copy which is one of the reasons the tutors' subbing is such a vital part of the process. This careful subbing and the feedback from it is, I believe, a cornerstone of the diploma. Without this time-consuming, one-on one coaching, you would often be wasting your time. It is work that you should fight to have recognised by your administrators, many of whom I suspect are unaware of how important this unusual teaching technique is to the success of your charges. Not only does it detect errors, but it provides the means to improve writing style, spot holes in interviews and tune-up other techniques. It cannot succeed if classes get too big, or you are not allow subbing resources and assistance outside classroom time. Too often it becomes confused with essay marking which is something else again.

Another essential is real time in a real news room. Again and again I get students telling me how important work experience has been for putting their training into perspective. Suddenly all the warnings and teaching takes on new and logical meaning. This is also a wonderful opportunity for students to establish their credibility with prospective employers and it would be an interesting statistic to establish just how many work experience placements have led to a full-time jobs . My own research shows that of 19 journalist graduates hired in the last 10 years more than half got jobs because we knew their work. They had been here on work experience and impressed senior staff to the point that when a vacancy occurred we gave them a call. In one case we were so impressed we created a position and in three others students ended their training early to fill vacancies we did not both to advertise. All continued their course part time and graduated, but we had greater access to their work and got them onto the staff.

Which brings me to an anecdote you may find interesting. While the diploma system is a great way to train reporters, there have been other systems tried. In saying this my mind goes back to a happy experiment organised by the former New Zealand Newspapers Ltd management under Mike Forbes, before it was torpedoed by Brierley some 13 or 14 years ago. The success of this scheme adds weight to my argument to keep things practical.

In those days the group comprised the Auckland and Christchurch Stars, two newspapers in New Plymouth, The Taranaki Herald and The Daily News, and two in Hawke's Bay, The Napier Daily Telegraph and Hawke's Bay Herald Tribune plus various communities and eventually the Auckland Sun, before that Brierley pulled its plug.

Each paper recruited two or more cadets and paid their wages while they underwent a two week induction program run by retired Taranaki Herald news editor June Litman and Auckland Star man of many parts Garth Gilmour. Both were highly successful, articulate and motivated people with a deep love for journalism, good English and an overwhelming hatred of bullshit, bad spelling and poor grammar. The youngsters spent the introductory two weeks of intensive training immersed in the basics and emerged so tuned-up you only had to touch them to get a resonate note. They were then subjected to a couple of months working as cadets did in those days, doing things like the shipping, weather map, caption stories, collection copy, making subs coffee and generally being brought back to earth before regrouping for a long weekend session on local body reporting. Back in the office, in the days before local body mergers, there were more than enough county councils and borough councils, hospital boards and school boards for them to cut their teeth in the next two months while staff on the individual papers kept an eye on them. This was repeated with a number of key subjects including court reporting, roundswork, media law and so on. At the end of the two years they all got certificates and many (the good ones) went on to successful careers in journalism.

The mix of classroom time followed by immediate and extensive supervised practical work proved a happy compromise. Times have changed since then and I am not suggesting the same scheme would work as well now, but the principle is there and a useful one it is too.

The other great lesson I learned from that experience and it has been reinforced many times since, is that the best journalists are born, not made. Those who failed following that course and those I see fall by the wayside from the diploma courses are the ones without the genetic disposition, the innate inquisitiveness, natural observational skills and writing and research ability to make in this game. All the classroom time, work in the field, abuse from tutors and prodding by chief reporters and news editors may eventually get acceptable results - but not brilliance.

What's my point? The foundation to successful training is finding the right people to train. It makes the process so much easier. And the right people are not necessarily the most academically adept although that can help. I have to say that probably the best and most productive and professional member of my present reporting team has learned on the job. He is an example of the promising stringer who went full-time and made it. He is also testimony to the fact that good journalism is 90% common sense, tempered with a bit of knowledge and experience. This guy makes up for what he does not know, or has not experienced, with natural ability and has the sense to know when to ask for help and when he is out of his depth. Otherwise he is brilliant – and without doubt has the highest profile of anyone on the staff. People ask for him by name when they want a story done.

To defend the academics, one of the best journalists I have known learned Latin to an advanced level. Not only was he a great sub, he wrote some of the finest prose I have read. He claimed the grammar and style picked up learning Latin was a major contributor. I guess he is right. Natural curiosity, however, remains my key criteria and all the rest hangs of that. Good readers, for example are generally good writers with sound general knowledge. Good researchers are not always great writers, but they have a skill some great writers do not. To discover both qualities in one person is to find the mother lode.

So why is experience so important? Beside the fact that writing is improved by practice, and many of the skills necessary for sound journalism, like shorthand, are honed and improved by repetition, there are experiences that are essential before someone can claim to be proper journalist. Call them rites of passage if you like, they are the encounters that need to go down in their notebooks before they can truly take their place in a news room as well-rounded, capable reporters and subs.

I am sure everyone here remembers their first nasty motor vehicle accident. I do. A mother driving her three kids home from school at Okato ran under the tray of a slower moving truck. There was blood everywhere and the screams coming from that mangled wreck still linger in my mind. Only the mother died. The kids were short enough to escape serious head injuries. It was a tough introduction to hard news.

.Court is another area where the first encounter can completely throw a rooky. Classroom advice tends to disappear, overpowered by the highly charged atmosphere of serious, gown-clad lawyers and grumpy judges. The first stories from an over-awed new scribe can be as full of holes as a politician's press release. It takes experience to learn how much to write, what cases to ignore, how many notes to keep and to become familiar with court etiquette and protocols. None of this can be picked up in the classroom or from one visit.

Local body reporting has similar problems. Obituary writing sounds easy until the chief reporter insists on an interview with the widow and aggressive male relatives bar the door and abuse the reporter for sensationalism and for trampling on emotions, notebook in hand. It is daunting work and evolving techniques to cope takes time that many modern news rooms do not have. They also hate wasting good stories on rookies who are too inexperienced to hack the pace. The list goes on and I am sure you need no more from me.

So, to wrap up. What is the purpose of journalism training today? Surely it is to provide recruits with the best possible preparation for work in the media and to assist them to gain employment. To do this they need, not only a sound understanding of basic like media law, court and local body procedure and a well-developing news sense, but as wide as possible experience at putting this knowledge into practice writing stories. If they don't measure up, not only do they put there chances of a job elsewhere in danger, but they influence their employer's attitude to hiring other students from the same course.

Executives in today's honed-down news rooms do not have time to spend hours briefing staff. They want to hire people who are news-ready, capable of finding stories for themselves or covering court, meetings, and interviews with a minimum of fuss and maximum results. The graduating journalists and their bosses are not going to accept anything less. To achieve this you need the recruiting techniques to get the right students in the first place and a practical mixture of classroom time and field work to train them. Oh that it was available in my time.

I must say that in my experience you are generally doing these things very well. The proof lies in the fact that of the who graduate from JTO recognised courses, more than 200, or 80% have got media jobs within weeks of finishing. Even some who do not graduate get work. Most of the rest are employment elsewhere in PR or other occupations where they find their training a significant advantage. It has become impossible to get a reporting position without a diploma, or similar qualification. My comments this afternoon are intended as reassurance from a working editor that we recognise your training is working and as encouragement to carry on doing things your way in an academic environment where the teaching techniques I have described are not well understood and the academics, poor berated species that they are, would prefer you did it their way. Don't - we in industry appreciate the product just as it is.