

Conference 2003: Unit Standards

The Place of Unit Standards in Journalism Education of the Future

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I want to talk about where journalism education in New Zealand is positioned and the issues it faces. We will later hear Bill Southworth, executive director of the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation giving the industry position, Margie Comrie giving the university position, Frank Morgan talking about Australian universities and the Western Institute of Technology's chief executive, Paul Sutcliffe, taking an administration view.

This paper has been written after discussion with a number of people, including David Venables and Charles Riddle. I have put together some academic research and used a great deal of industry knowledge.

Over the years, I have had considerable industry and academic experience, first as a journalist, then as the managing editor of two chains of community newspapers. I've also been very active in the community newspaper organization. I was the national vice president at the time when the organization was at its strongest, 1993, and also the community newspaper representative on the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation. This was a time when the unit standards were introduced and I was a strong supporter. For the last nine years I've been at one of New Zealand's 11 journalism schools. When I went there the institution was the Auckland Institute of Technology and the course the Certificate in Journalism. It became the Graduate Diploma in Journalism and the institution the Auckland University of Technology. Like many of us here I've also upgraded my qualifications. Two years ago I completed a Masters in Education (adult and tertiary learning) with a thesis entitled "Learning News writing: A Process Intervention in a Product Setting" at Auckland University. These days I have just completed the research for a PhD. Basically it is about the cognitive and social influences on students learning to become journalists.

I am fairly typical of these changing times. I am very much a product of the changing world....and changing views. From industry editor to academic, teaching first on a certificate course to a graduate diploma in an institution that was first a polytechnic and is now university. I've experienced a lot of the pains of the process and as well as the joys. This paper does not seek to provide definitive answers, merely to raise the issues, have my say and act as a discussion point to start off some very necessary discussions.

Our organisation is also growing up. The first conference I attended was a joint one in Christchurch with the Australian Journalism Educators Association. I remember David Venables and I being wide-eyed in wonder at the debates, the arguments and the knowledge of some of the speakers. It was incidentally at the time of the so-called Media Wars, the theoreticians against the practitioners, the academy versus industry. In those days our JEANZ conference had very few speakers, no academic papers. Today we have moved past that. Our conference has a theme and an aim but it's interesting to realise we're still basically talking about the same conflicts, The Odd Couple: industry versus the academy (O'Donnell, 2001-2002).

I will start by looking at the situation as it is at the present.

This information comes from a survey in June last year so things may have changed somewhat.

Ten institutions are accredited by the Journalists Training Organisation to train journalists for employment in New Zealand. They are from north to south:

1. The Auckland University of Technology, Auckland.

Seven tutors.

Bachelor of Communication Studies (established 1991) 35 students.

Graduate Diploma in Journalism (established 1975 as Certificate of Journalism) 25 students.

2. Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton.

Two tutors.

Bachelor of Media Arts (established 1992) 9 students

National Diploma in Journalism (established 2000) 9 students

3. Waiariki Institute of Technology, Rotorua.

One tutor, part-time equivalents.

Waiariki Diploma in Journalism (established 2000) 21 students.

4. Western Institute of Technology, New Plymouth.

One fulltime, one half time equivalent.

National Diploma in Journalism (established 1996) 22 students.

5. Whitireia Polytechnic, Porirua.

One fulltime, one half time equivalent.

National Diploma in Journalism (established 2000) 24 students.

6. Massey University , Wellington.

Three fulltime tutors, some part-time.

Graduate Diploma in Journalism (established 1967 as a certificate course) 48 students.

7. New Zealand Broadcasting School, Christchurch.

Two fulltime tutors

Bachelor of Broadcasting Communications.(established 1993 from certificate course and diploma in broadcasting journalism) 16 students.

8. Aoraki Polytechnic. National Diploma in Journalism, Timaru

One fulltime tutor, less than one half time equivalent.

National Diploma in Journalism (established 1989) 16 students.

9. Aoraki Polytechnic, Dunedin Campus

National Diploma in Journalism, Television or Radio (established 2002) 12 students.

10. Southland Institute of Technology, Invercargill.

One fulltime tutor, a number of parttime equivalents.

National Diploma in Journalism (established 1993) 16 students

11. Canterbury University, Christchurch.

Two fulltime, one close to fulltime equivalent.

Graduate Diploma in Journalism (established 1910) 20 students.

I have added Canterbury University 's course to this list but it is not an accredited institution to teach the journalism unit standards.

At the time I got these figures, last June, there were 257 students in their final year of training in these 11 schools. Most of the students were relatively young, between 22 and 25 was the average age, and were predominantly Pakeha.

There are several issues these statistics raise.

Size of schools

1. The first is the small size of the schools and the fact they are predominantly one or two tutor schools. While most use tutors from the media industry on a part time basis being a lone tutor is a very isolating experience as some of you here today know well. One tutor schools are also vulnerable to changes in staff,

and fluctuating standards. There is also the uneven spread. Six schools are in the North Island and five in the South Island, whereas most of New Zealand's population is in the North Island. I know that many schools struggle to enrol full numbers of students even if they don't usually admit to this. To my knowledge in the past at least three courses, one at Manukau for Pacific Island journalists, one at Northland, and several private institutions in Auckland have closed and they have usually been one tutor schools. The Government is currently looking at the number of teacher training institutions and most institutions are constantly looking at their programmes in an effort to cut costs. It would seem to me, looking at the pressures, that not all journalism schools would survive a review.

Lack of diversity in schools

2. There is also the question of the lack of diversity. Apart from Waiariki, all schools are mainly teaching middle class white students. This is too large an issue to debate fully here. But New Zealand is not a one culture country and nor should we have a one culture media. But where are the Maori, Pacific Island and Asian students being trained? And if we aim for diversity, what about journalism standards? In Auckland we could describe the difficulties of teaching journalism to Asian students whose English is not up to the required standard and Annabel could tell you about teaching Maori students using remedial classes to maintain standards. We get over the issue but simply stating we are not remedial English teachers but this is really begging the question: if we are to increase diversity in the media, what about such things as the standards of English?

Over-assessment and unit standards

3. The one factor that all journalism schools have in common is they all teach the unit standards. I won't go into details about what unit standards are and what they contain as all of us know a lot about them but there are some comments that I must make. There are 120 unit standards. I was on the JTO when they were introduced and thought they were a good idea because they standardised what had previously been a very uneven training scene. I consider they still fulfil a worthwhile purpose.

Critics complain they produce a "ticking the box mentality" and lead to over-assessment. They don't have to – there are easy administrative ways round the issue of assessment. But there are issues about unit standards that should be raised here.

Industry control through unit standards

4. For years in talking about unit standards I repeated the line that "the unit standards did not tell schools how to teach, just what to teach." I note the only bit of literature on this subject quotes this same comment. (Oakham & Tidey, 2000) Of course this isn't true. First off the JTO require a journalism educator to have had at least five years experience in the media. That immediately sets the tone of who is teaching. Basic equipment for all courses include having a permanent room set up equipped as a newsroom and state the teaching programme should mirror the working environment. They also state the nature of journalism teaching and assessment require a high level of one-to-one teaching.

These requirements immediately set the pattern for both what we teach and how we teach it.

It means that we use the industry method of "subbing" to correct students' work. My survey showed basically the same method used to teach news reporting in all schools. We sub a student's work into the shape it should be by one-to-one teaching. Subbing works well in newsrooms to standardise newspaper products and it has worked well for journalism educators. But times have changed and it needs a particularly heavy ratio of staff to students, far higher than for most other disciplines, particularly in universities.

This means journalism education is often seen as "difficult" by management, meaning expensive and not fitting the mould. It also means there is little spare time for the staff with the increasing trend towards the need for academic qualifications and doing more research. A research portfolio has become the basis of

extra funding for universities. AUT is feeling the pinch of this. You can't upgrade your qualifications, teach and be available to sub students stories on a one-to-one basis- there are just not enough hours in the day. Journalism never fits in properly, says Jim Tucker. As one way of alleviating some of these problems, Jim Tucker and Allan Lee are both working on on-line courses.

David Venables believes we should stop seeing journalism as a problem rather as a different way of teaching that should be a model for other courses.

I only agree with these comments in part. I think we should look at our own methods first before we join a battle we are not going to win with the ever-increasing need for economies in tertiary institutions. We don't have to subscribe to the traditional methods of one-to-one . There are other ways of teaching.

In order to learn we basically build on the body of knowledge or experience we already have. So we need to provide students with learning tools allowing them to be able to evaluate and criticise their own or others work. It could be done through problem based learning. Some of our Australian counterparts are working on research into this method. It's worth looking at the work of Lynnette Sheridan Burns (Sheridan Burns, 1997; Sheridan Burns, 2001a; Sheridan Burns, 2001b) and Michael Meadows , (Meadows, 1997) to name just two. There is also reflective learning. Mark Pearson (Pearson, 2001) uses this. I also have looked into reflective learning, studying learning news writing by concentrating on the process of writing rather than the final product. Two years ago I did a project where ten students learnt by the process method and ten students learnt by traditional methods. The process model students learnt critical awareness techniques and learnt to evaluate their own work. They didn't all like it, because it was different and I wasn't holding their hands every step of the way. But they did succeed and became good writers and along the way they learnt other traits too, independence, persistence, using their initiative - all things required in a journalist (Thomas, 2001) .

Unit standards need reviewing

5. There are other factors too about the unit standards that should be mentioned here. The document of 157 pages is now six years old. A few years ago journalism educators were asked to review it. A number of us went to Wellington to the JTO to help in the review and I know many people sent in submissions. But nothing happened. Last year, when I asked about what happened I was told it didn't go ahead because NZQA put in too many obstructions. I have to say I am horrified that day by day, year by year, we are teaching to the requirements of a document which the JTO cannot or will not fix.

I'll name just some of the most obvious anomalies of the present document. In the survey I did last year, unit standard 10375, work in a newsroom was seen by most journalism educators as vital to the learning of journalism, yet it is only worth two credits, or twenty hours of work, out of the 120 required. The unit standard states it covers “ demonstrating knowledge of a news organisation, demonstrating newsroom work practices including the writing process, monitoring or using newsroom equipment and maintaining standards of professional practice.” The reality is that this involves various practices in various schools, work attachment, work experience, field trips, and internships all taking far more than 20 hours of work.

The unit standard on local government is another and I spent some time suggesting changes. I recall suggesting newspapers no longer went to meetings and wrote up absolutely everything. Such changes as the introduction of Local Authority Trading Enterprises (LATEs) meant that knowledge could more easily be withheld. And there were other vital matters and knowledge students required, for example to be able to write about town planning matters they needed knowledge of the Resource Management Act . The JTO agreed to these changes that brought the unit standard up to date. But now they appear to be lost as we continue to teach to the old unit standards.

Producing critical journalists for tomorrow

6. The unit standards relate only to skills based training. They discuss and describe the attributes a journalist needs, such as fairness, accuracy and balance but they pay only the barest of lip service to many things that are wrong with the media today. Just to use one example given to me recently by Avon Adams

... the problems of embedded journalists during the Iraq war. Teaching only skills-based journalism means that such issues are relegated to media studies courses, whether we call them this or cultural studies or some other name. This means that the unit standards do not acknowledge the world students will work in when they are journalists...or if a tutor sees these issues as important, they will not get any credit for them. At present, there is one element, in one unit standard, identifying and advocating news, that could be interpreted as "media criticism." It states; "The investigation describes ways in which media coverage can reflect and shape social attitudes and cultural understanding." Explanation of this takes five lines in a document of 147 pages where every imaginable skill is carefully described, documented and analysed.

I do not accept Bill Southworth's comment that this can come later after students have learnt the skills. However we teach or talk about it, students must know about the influences on journalism and media criticisms and how to avoid them perpetuating them. They must understand about embedded journalists and the like. We can no longer just teach a skill and expect that to be enough. The media industry now needs more than skills and standardised methods to stop the decline in circulation or readership (Green, 2003) .

The Future

7. To conclude, let us look at the question of Canterbury University and its lack of industry accreditation. We all know it produces excellent journalists and their students are highly regarded. It basically teaches the unit standards but it teaches more. Perhaps this may be a model for the future. Today two more institutions where journalism is taught have become universities, Auckland and Massey, and they are reviewing their positions as regards accreditation. As well, several other schools are teaching journalism as part of degree qualifications. If the trend continues what will happen to the whole accreditation/ moderation issue ?

Industry plays a vital role in our journalism schools. Its members sit on our advisory committees, help with the selection of our students, provide voluntary help and employ our students. Journalism courses need the influence and support of the media industry. Australia , where journalism is taught in universities through liberal arts courses is currently looking at an accreditation system to gain this vital media support. But they have something our students are not necessarily getting. A liberal arts degree means knowing about the theories behind media criticism, it means such things as understanding how important journalists use of language is in persuading and changing views. It means being able to discuss, analyse and evaluate the role of embedded journalists and what they write.

In the future, I do not see the academy or the industry "winning." I do not see learning only journalism skills as precluding a wider knowledge or understanding. That would be a loss for the journalists of the future. Nor do I see industry and the academy as making up an "odd couple, " our conference theme. Rather I see it as the basis of a good working partnership for the future.

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