

Conference 2000: Industry Links

Industry Influences on Journalism Training: Thoughts for the Future

A paper delivered by Ruth Thomas at the Journalism Educators Association of New Zealand Conference, December, 2000 in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Introduction

Recently I read an article comparing the way we teach students how to become journalists in New Zealand as compared with Australia and England. It praises the New Zealand model in comparison to what is happening in Australia and England for its standardisation of skills-based teaching (Oakham & Tidy, 2000). Today I'd like to look a little more closely at the New Zealand model, how it developed and to suggest some improvements.

But first let's look at a comparison of the three models.

The Australian model: There is no formal monitoring of course content in the Australian model, nor the institutions which deliver the courses and there is no formal qualifications or other prerequisites for entry into journalism in Australia. In 1996, 845 students completed 18 journalism courses and roughly only one in three got jobs (Oakham & Tidy, 2000).

At the Journalists Education Association in Australia last week I started to understand the differences between journalism education in New Zealand and Australia. Very few Australian courses teach shorthand because "the students won't go to it," I was told. Australian journalism programmes vary from very good to very bad and there is a split between those who see journalism as an academic discipline and those who believe it should adhere to industry standards. At the conference, there was a discussion on setting standards for "accredited schools". At least two major newspaper groups, News Ltd and Fairfax, have their own training schemes. They employ interns, many of whom have graduated from a university journalism degree course. During their one-year internships they receive one day a week training whilst working on a newspaper. Their training includes shorthand and lectures from prominent journalists.

The English model: There are three main modes of training: First, traditional providers providing traditional in-house professional training established under standards set by the National Council for Training Journalists. Then there are new providers combining educational and professional models of training. These have standards set through a national vocational qualifications, an endeavour to standardise training methods much like our New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). There are also commercial providers, charging large fees and using a purely professional model. So again there is no one overall model of training.

The New Zealand model: In contrast, training in New Zealand is much more consistent. Skills-based training is standardised through the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation. Journalism training, like many other skills-based training schemes, has since the seventies been taught through polytechnics apart from Canterbury University. Approximately 80 to 85% of graduates throughout New Zealand gain jobs on graduation.

The article praises the New Zealand model for its standardisation, close links with industry and high employment rate for students.

The present New Zealand situation has come about historically.

On the Job Training

The media, in particular newspapers, have traditionally seen learning-on-the-job as the best way to learn the skills for their industry. Up until the present day, many newspaper editors continue to believe that training journalists is only about teaching the practical and often technical skills and formulas that enable stories to be written quickly and efficiently. Editors are often more concerned with getting the product out at the end of the day, week or month, than they are with the critical, ethical or analytical quality of their work. (Guerke, 1996)

While this quote comes from Australia, New Zealand is no different. Until the late 1970s, most journalists were trained on-the-job.

However, the earliest journalism training course was university-sponsored and the first university journalism graduate from Canterbury University in 1915 pre-dated any Australian university journalism graduate by about nine years. Despite that early start, university training for journalists in New Zealand, unlike in Australia, did not become widespread until the present day when the three main journalism schools are all based in universities.

Industry Influence

Formal training courses, strongly influenced by industry, became established in polytechnics and dominated the training scene. The seven New Zealand journalism training schools train their students to the standards set for the industry-controlled national diploma in journalism. Journalism educators are required to be professionally trained journalists with at least five years industry experience. Industry members also remain closely in contact with the journalism schools through providing work experience, taking part in the selection of students and sitting on advisory committees.

However relations between journalism educators and the media industry haven't always been straightforward. Historically, the industry never saw the university as the place to train journalists. One course in Auckland was no sooner started than it closed. The present Canterbury university course in Christchurch has also had a chequered history and was closed for 10 years, from 1954-1964. (Newth, 1997)notes that times of crisis occurred frequently when journalism courses failed to meet the needs of employers.

Industry Training Role Established

In 1971, the industry role in training became formalised when the New Zealand Journalists Training Committee, the body that was the forerunner to the most influential force in journalism training was set up. Funded solely by newspaper employers, it comprised members of the Commonwealth Press Union. By 1973 it had reconstituted itself as the Journalists Training Board, reflecting a government-initiative to lift the standards of apprenticeship and in-house training through the establishment of vocational training boards. In 1993, again following a trend favoured by the current Government, it gained additional status and became an industry training organisation, the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation.

Growth of Polytechnics

At about the same time as the first training committee was established, journalism training through polytechnics started and the close relationship with industry was cemented. The first course was established in 1969 at the Wellington polytechnic and was followed in 1975 by an Auckland course which immediately gained favour because it was headed by well-known journalist, Geoff Black, who "talked the same language as newspaper editors" - he shared their standards and views. The Auckland course, what was taught and how it was taught, was to be seen as the way to train journalists for many years. When I joined the then AIT five years ago, I was given Geoff Black's class guides and notes to use to help me. In contrast, as the Auckland course gained favour, the Wellington course fell from grace for a time with the industry threatening to boycott employing its graduates and close it, unless it was restructured.(Thomas, 1999)

Industry Influence Strengthens

The influence of the media industry continued to strengthen when, in the late 1980s, the Government decided to reduce its vocational training funding, placing the onus of providing money back on to employers. A two-day industry conference was held where media industry representatives re-iterated they were dissatisfied with the uneven abilities of young people who had been trained and were entering the industry. The conference agreed that employers would provide funding but the New Zealand Journalists Training Board should set the standards and control training. This led to the drawing up of a document which listed the minimum performance and standards required of a new entrant into journalism who had completed a formal, basic course. These criteria and skills were performance-based and capable of being tested. They formed the basis for what are known today as journalism unit standards and are at the heart or core of all journalism training in New Zealand.

Educational Reform

Since 1989, New Zealand, like other western countries, has seen widespread reform in the education system as well as in its health and welfare systems. In order to remedy perceived shortcomings such as inefficiency and lack of accountability in tertiary education, corporate reforms were introduced, characterised by greater self-management in educational institutions, increased competition, user charges and corporate planning. The NZQA was established to develop a new qualifications framework and to ensure these qualifications were delivered. The qualifications on the framework became known as unit standards. NZQA, as part of its second purpose, was able to give institutions other than existing universities the power to grant academic

degrees.

Funding

At the centre of these reforms was the law establishing a direct link between funding and equivalent full-time students. The financial success of a tertiary institution was aimed at attracting students in a competitive market place. When it was realised that students required a degree rather than a basic certificate, polytechnics moved to introduce degrees and lobbied to gain university-status and thus attract more students. The result was a huge increase in under-graduate numbers as popular courses such as journalism became part of university degrees.

Today the main three journalism courses, Auckland, Wellington and Canterbury are university-based. Wellington became a university through a merger with Massey University. One of the largest tertiary institutes in New Zealand, the Auckland Institute of Technology, gained university status in 2000 just before the new Labour Government halted the creation of any new universities.

Industry Links Strong

Not surprisingly, the media industry was suspicious of journalists with a degree. In general, degree courses saw themselves as elite and academic, not as the kind of practical industry-driven courses that it was considered polytechnics had provided. But gradually the suspicion started to erode. And with the journalism unit standards remaining at the core of both degree and non-degree courses, the media industry realised it remained in control of standards and skills.

As journalism educators, our connections with the media industry are very strong. The establishment of this body, JEANZ came about through a JTO initiative. We could all describe our own links with the media industry in detail. When you look round the room you realise we all have worked in the media industry for at least five years, many of us for much longer. Not only do we teach the unit standards, but industry representatives assist closely with our courses, sit on our advisory panels, help with our selection processes, take our students on work attachment and internships and are an invaluable part of journalism education. I'm no exception - I worked in industry for 20 years and have had far greater experience on the other side of the fence, that is taking students on work attachment, internship, helping on selections, etc., than the few years I've spent in education.

Our teaching methods are also strongly influenced by the media industry. Assessment is focused on the products of student writing and journalism is taught using an industry method, known as one-to-one subbing where the final product is corrected by an individual tutor. Work attachment, where students are attached to a newspaper, is an integral part of most of our courses as are internships where students work in a newspaper office or elsewhere in the media industry for several weeks.

Today my aim is not debunk the standards we have achieved and the programmes that have developed over the years training journalists to a high standard, but to look at the challenges ahead and how to progress into the future.

The Attributes of a Journalist

We've already done some thinking and talking about this body and its aims and aspirations...so it's fitting to do some thinking and talking about what a journalist is. A few years ago at this conference, I asked conference attendees to list the attributes they saw as important for a journalist in order to help out with questions in our graduate diploma selection. I also later asked some media employers what they thought. There was general consensus - the main ones were that journalists should have independence, persistence, flexibility, able to use their initiative and could work in a team. There was also another attribute which didn't feature but is seen as important by others- being a critical thinker. John King in *Principles, Professionalism and Philosophy* describes this as "questioning". He suggests most journalists would like to see themselves as having a questioning attitude but their actions don't fully back this up (King, 1997). Australian academic Lynnette Sheridan Burns says much the same thing. Journalism graduates need self-reliance, self-reflection and critical thinking skills to be able to skilfully negotiate the complex, social, economic and commercial context in which journalism is practised today, she says. (Sheridan Burns, 1997)

Encouraging These Attributes

During the course of the last few years, I've thought a lot about how we train our journalists – both as part of doing my masters degree, and through my own experiences in teaching. What has slowly dawned on me is if we are not totally satisfied with the media industry as it is today - and I suggest we aren't - and if we want to produce the right attributes in a journalist, perhaps we should be looking at our teaching methods. There are also the pressures of educational reform and the need to use our resources carefully that contribute to my belief that we should look at our methods. Perhaps, I thought, our traditional ways of training for industry aren't the only way to do it.

Lectures, tutorials combined with one-to-one subbing are our main ways of teaching news writing. Sheridan Burns sees lectures and tutorials as part of the didactic model of learning (Sheridan Burns, 1997). In the didactic model, information provided by lecturers is absorbed by students and is illustrated through the completion of professional tasks. Evaluation is limited to a teacher's assessment of the final product. The didactic method is part of the traditional view of seeing the student as a passive receiver of the body of knowledge that the teacher chooses to feed him. Teachers (the subjects) narrate to the students, patient, listening objects, who are like containers, receptacles waiting to be filled (Freire, 1972). This concept known as "banking education" emphasises the divisions in society, the dominant and the subordinate, the subject and the object which Freire sees as reproducing power relations. Sheridan Burns argues for the introduction of problem-based learning into journalism which values the process over the product and learning over teaching so that learning becomes active, reflective and constructive.

Subbing

In the same informal survey referred to earlier (Thomas, 1999) we all said that we used some form of one-to-one tuition, vetting or subbing to teach news writing as well as lectures and tutorials. The advantages of subbing were seen as the ability to provide students with individual attention. However all but one of us saw disadvantages, mainly the time the method took and its lack of practicality in today's educational climate. Our method of subbing or vetting also fits the didactic mould, where the tutors' views are supreme. The student writes the story. The student takes the story to their tutor. The tutor subs their story and provides guidance. The student corrects the story, following the tutor's corrections and recommendations until the tutor is satisfied it is suitable for publication.

After watching our own students and thinking about what we do, it seems to me that reliance on the use of the traditional subbing method can create a dependent relationship between the tutor and student. That is, students' control over their own writing and level of independence may suffer in the process. It can encourage dependence by allowing the student to rely on the tutor to correct copy before any self-revision has been attempted. It's not uncommon to overhear students saying they'll take their stories to a tutor and he/she "will fix them up". Sometimes stories, which are really just drafts, full of spelling errors and basic mistakes are presented, again with the reasoning that it's the tutor's job to tidy up the copy.

The practice of attachment to newspapers, known as situated learning, can also cause problems. Situated learning became popular in the 1970s as a way of linking the economy and higher education and providing relevant and useful education (Dunlap, 1994). While it too has many benefits, it also has disadvantages and can cause conflicts between learning and values for students and also problems when the views of a tutor and an editor are different.

The subbing method, by its very nature, also requires a large amount of teacher time which is contrary to modern trends. The polytechnic format of instruction with students in a classroom all day has now largely been replaced in some New Zealand journalism training schools by university-style lectures and tutorials and a change to the semester system. The result has been teaching time has been compressed and also a wider range of speciality subjects has been introduced appropriate to a university education. In addition, in the new environment, there are greater pressures on staff who have less time available for students as they are expected to do more research and upgrade their own academic qualifications. In my own study at an institute I will call Sunshine University (SU) for anonymity, I found the formal time allocated to news writing had not increased in 10 years. Rather it had dropped by about a third. (Thomas, 1999) I don't believe this is unusual or atypical not only for news writing but many other tertiary subjects as well.

Let's Look at the Future

If we are to develop the right attributes in the journalists of the future who are able to cope and deal with the challenges that surround them in the very complex world of today, it is time to start looking at different methods of teaching, and new ways of doing things. I don't think there is necessarily the one right way, but I do think we could look at using what we already have and building from there.

There has been considerable research into how people learn and different teaching methods have emerged. Today there is a very large emphasis on self-direction, there is also problem based learning, and the process or workshop method. So that's where my own study comes in.

What my study, done as part of my Masters in Education, set out to look at was whether students at Sunshine University could gain the skills required by our industry standards – that is being able to gather news, interview, write accurately, and write clear, concise news stories suitable for publication in a newspaper, using the workshop method - that is using self-direction and working together, collaboratively. As well I wanted to see whether they could gain the additional attributes of a journalist, persistence, independence, determination and critical thinking. And I wanted to do a cost benefit analysis. Could it be done in less time than using present methods?

I learnt a lot along the way. Writing itself is a highly complex and difficult set of processes which involves

considerable cognitive pressure. The complexities of learning increases with the constraints and requirements of a news story. Gathering and selecting the news, isolating the message of the story, deciding on vocabulary and style, re-reading and revising are all additional complex processes (Pitts, 1989). The production of news, because of its tight deadlines, is also constrained by professional routines and values, types of sources and the nature of inputting texts and is highly structured into the rules-based inverted pyramid (van Dijk, 1986). Over the last 20 years there has been substantial research into the process of learning writing, in particular composition writing but little research linking the process model and how news stories are written.

The study grew from the influence of the Flower and Hayes writing model (Flower & Hayes, 1980) and my experience of using the process model of learning and workshops to introduce news writing to the second year of the degree programme where last year there were 175 under-graduate students.

In the study, 13 students learnt journalism using the workshop approach, while another 13 students remained with a subbing tutor. All students attended the same lectures and tutorials to meet the requirements of the news reporting module.

Workshop Methods

The main difference in the workshop or process method is that instead of working on the final product, the news story, the concentration is on the process of getting there.

Flower and Hayes' research produced an understanding of the process of learning to write. From the understanding of this process, the process or workshop model of teaching developed. In a process model classroom, students discuss and analyse tasks, benefiting from peer and teacher insight as well as developing their own cognitive strategies for organising material and examining their work objectively. These cognitive strategies include collaborative and reciprocal learning to guide students towards self-reflection, self-evaluation and revision strategies. Self-reflection is linked to metacognition - "thinking about thinking". Growing evidence suggests the ability to "manage" one's own thinking is crucial to effective learning and intellectual growth (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982).

Self-reflection and self-evaluation are part of self-regulated learning, popularly described as self-directed learning. Self-regulation is personally controlling the way a task is done (Garcia, 1995). To be a self-regulated learner, a person will learn to observe how they learn, monitor their own activities, and react in ways that maximise learning. Self -regulation also encompasses self-efficacy. Self-efficacy shouldn't be confused with self-esteem though it is similar. Self-esteem is a general feeling about your own worth. You can display high self-efficacy about your ability in writing but be low in self-efficacy when it comes to maths. Self-efficacy refers to people's beliefs about whether they are capable of exercising control over themselves and events that affect their lives (Bandura, 1991), and is very important in the kind of goals people set and what happens when they don't achieve them. A person with high self-efficacy will consider they might need to work harder, a person with low self-efficacy will put it down to being not intelligent enough, or having little ability.

The important components in the workshop method are:

Teacher as coach
News teams
Cognitive Strategies
Peer Editing and Self-Evaluation
News Writing Schemata
Modelling
Metacognitive Activities.

Teacher as Coach: The teacher as coach is central to the collaborative classroom. The teacher is not the guru, the authority-figure and the fount of all knowledge but just another member of the group. The aim is not the familiar pattern of the teacher/tutor observing performance, considering the final product, pointing out the errors and rewarding correct responses. The tutor is available to help with individual problems but does not dominate the workshop but works to encourage student voice, self-management and self-evaluation. Students learn by doing and through dialogue.

News Teams: Students are divided into news teams consisting of about three students, reflecting the social nature of the media industry and encouraging them to develop team work and team spirit. News teams also provide mutual support and a basis for organising peer editing and discussion about self-evaluation.

Cognitive Strategies: Peer editing and discussion about self-evaluation are two strategies that are useful in

assisting students to think about what they are doing and to become self-regulated learners. There are other individual strategies that can be helpful. One strategy useful for students who consider they are poor at grammar or punctuation is to encourage self-efficacy. Instead of their continuing to believe they have no ability and "can't write, spell or punctuate correctly", they can adopt a technique where they reward themselves when they find mistakes and keep a tally of how they are improving. They can also use an appropriate peer to check out mistakes.

Peer Editing and Self-Evaluation: These are important elements of the workshop method. Students first need to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing, and follow this by discussion on constructive criticism. To assist constructive criticism, they are given checklists and guidelines for writing more complicated stories. They are encouraged to work through their own stories first by themselves using their checklists, instead of coming to their tutor, and they then should ask a news team member to evaluate their story.

Peer editing requires careful handling. The disadvantages are the over-critical student, students want tutor approval rather than peer approval and the lack of knowledge in the early stages. But it also has strong advantages: it provides an audience, and immediate feedback and is also important in the transfer of knowledge, that is if you can see a problem in someone else's writing you will learn to avoid it yourself. It also means the students using both self-evaluation and peer editing techniques are taking important first steps to become self-regulated learners.

News Writing Prompts: Checklists and guidelines to writing more complicated stories act as news writing schemata which provide a set of prompts so that students have a structure to use to develop self-evaluation and peer editing skills. The checklist takes students through questions from "What's the story?" to "Did I read the story out loud to a friend?" It also asks the students to check their own writing for any weakness they may have identified. The guidelines to writing more complicated stories cover story ideas, thinking about the reader and testing for trouble spots which occur when there are mismatches between what the writer is trying to express and what the reader understands. For example, if the writer is reading the story out loud and the person hearing it says "I don't understand that word", or "Can you say it again?" it indicates a trouble spot.

Modelling: Modelling also assists students, particularly in the early stages, to understand what a news story should look like. Students volunteer to have their stories placed on an overhead transparency and projected on to a whiteboard. As a group, they work through the changes necessary to improve the story. From this, they understand revision is not an immediate process and also learn to discuss - use dialogue- the writing process.

Metacognitive Activities: Most of the activities already described are intended to encourage thinking about thinking or metacognition. When using a cognitive strategy like a checklist, the student must think about what they are doing and why they are doing it. The aim is the next time they write a news story they will think about the steps they needed to take previously; "Last time I needed to keep my intro short and punchy. This time I must check it is short and work on bringing the reader into the story." Students are also encouraged to record their thoughts in writing notebooks, reinforcing metacognitive thinking. In the early stages, free writing can be encouraged. "Write for five minutes in your notebooks without stopping to think about your first news story" is one useful topic. Writing notebooks are also a way of monitoring student progress. While they provide useful information, students should be encouraged to see them as their own.

In Conclusion

The study found the workshop students gained the skills expected of them in about one third of the time usually taken using one-to-one subbing.

They also gained additional benefits, they were independent, persistent, showed initiative and gained the ability to self-evaluate their own work and were critical thinkers.

Now to sum up. Today we've listened to David talking about Massey's newspaper project. That's an example of self-directed learning, using an important idea, giving students practical experience without totally following the usual pattern of newspapers – run by the editor who has full control.

This reinforces one of the points I've been making. We need to use the good things we have in our skills-based journalism training but look at progressing our methods. I don't believe you can train journalists for industry without huge input from industry – that's not what I'm saying. But nor do we want to train journalists who are clones of the past. We should be thinking of improving the journalists of tomorrow through a partnership – using the strengths that we have already gained from our media industry but adding to this - moving towards making journalists and journalism better. Education can never be taken too lightly.

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Biography:

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