

After eleven years of democracy,
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front of our classrooms.



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Reflections on mapping the curriculum – towards Afro-humanist values in identifying ‘new basics’ in South African journalism

A new location for journalism education and training is argued to be within the spheres of an Afro-humanist philosophy and culture. In this philosophy and culture, the concern for human welfare, dignity and values from within an Afro-centric paradigm are paramount. This exploration will hopefully lead to a new set of “basics” of what journalism education and training should be, and could lead to answers of how it should be taught.

QUALIFICATIONS

J-E&T: For the purposes of this paper, the question only concerns itself with journalism, and not with other manifestations of mass communication. Education and training, E&T, thus relate to journalism only, and not to the popular Journalism Mass Communication (JMC) configuration. “J-E&T” therefore refers to entry level journalism education and training at tertiary institutions only.

Afro-humanist/Afro-humanism, *ubuntu* journalism: A theoretical framework that takes its basis from the liberatory theory, with elements of developmental journalism, as it expanded from the Western libertarian model; also defined as an Africanised journalism based on the principles of *ubuntu* (Blankenberg, 1999:1) as “an egalitarian, humanist philosophy”.

There are caveats around the term *ubuntu*, because it is described as an “ideal” concept, one which therefore promotes “an ideal of liberatory” journalism.

Ubuntu usually translates to read as a shared humanity, an aspect of communitarianism, to behave humanely toward others. It has also been described as African humanism, which includes “sympathy, care, sensitivity to the needs of others, respect, consideration, patience and kindness” (Chikanda, as cited in Prinsloo, 1998:42).

To summarise, African liberatory journalism should be located within an Afro-centric, Afro-humanistic, *ubuntu* paradigm, with its object human welfare, dignity and values, and which should be embraced in J-E&T programmes. It raises the question how *ubuntu* and “objectivity” can be aligned.

HOW DOES ONE TEACH THIS NEW JOURNALISTIC PARADIGM?

If one assumes that the outcome is a vocational journalism qualification, students should be equipped with the basic skills and knowledge of entry-level journalism as identified according to Audit 1, and it should go beyond that: these skills should be practised within an Afro-humanist *ubuntu* journalistic model.

WHAT A JOURNALISM PROGRAMME SHOULD BE

The students

There should be a focused selection programme. Students should go through a selection process that can assess whether they have the potential to comply with the basic requirements of journalism. This means prospective students should have, relative to an undergrad or post-grad course, a certain proficiency in reading and writing, as well as an awareness of news.

Selecting suitable students mean smaller classes – to ensure individual, quality E&T. Mass communication might possibly be taught in mass classes. Journalism can only be taught in small groups on an individual basis.

The teachers

Journalism can only be taught by experienced, accomplished journalists from a journalism practice point of view. There is also reason to suspect that those who teach certain journalism related courses and who never have been journalists, do so with a somewhat derogatory reference to journalism and its practice. What impact will this have on the minds of beginners on the eve of entering their chosen careers?

Another concern is that after eleven years of democracy, diversity is not reflected in front of our classrooms.

Journalism teachers should constantly challenge current thinking, and question existing paradigms through research, even if it means the industry feels the “boat should not be rocked”.

Journalism has a unique mode of teaching – therefore the student/lecturer ratio simply cannot be replicated from other disciplines and be applied to the “academic newsroom”.

Curriculum

Afro-humanistic, *ubuntu* liberatory journalism should be researched as a way of seeking to address and redress existing libertarian, Western style concepts and practices in the newsroom, and translated and mainstreamed into a new curriculum for J-E&T. An example of how such “new thinking” was incorporated into J-E&T is the Polytechnic of Namibia where gender was mainstreamed into their curriculum (Morna and Shilongo, 2004).

- A re-thinking of existing programmes should result in a new curriculum together with new materials. Textbooks and other material should support and include the envisaged new paradigm.

- Higher (conceptual) and lower (practical) order skills should be combined to ensure critical, analytical, independent minds whose “bullshit detector” is constantly switched on.

- Even at post-graduate level, languages must be compulsory modules.

- Curriculum content that will provide the prospective journalist with enough writing practice – “you learn to write by writing” (Cillie, 1979:4).

Writing is one of the skills in which practical and conceptual skills converge and is the basic skill expected of a beginner-journalist. It encapsulates other skills: information gathering (the skill to conduct interviews and to do research), skills to identify news values to ensure a news report, skills to package the report in a way that reflects the fact that the student knows what legal and ethical stumbling blocks are, and where the student is also cognisant of the liberatory, Afro-humanist, *ubuntu* paradigm in which it should be done, as well as technical skills to package the information for print, broadcast or news media/ICT.

- Curriculum content should form a bridge between the various media platforms to make the prospective journalist multi-skilled for a career in a converging multi-media world.

- A curriculum that includes a knowledge of diversity issues, an awareness of stereotyping and representation, and the know-how to apply this in practice.

- It means real issues of the “here and now” should be included in curricula – such as gender, other diversity issues, HIV/aids, poverty, globalisation, xenophobia, as well as aspects of ICT and how it impacts on the dissemination of information.

- It includes interaction with J-E&T on the rest of the continent.

- This curriculum content should provide the news industry with sound generalist reporters for the newsroom.

- The beginner-journalists should not only replicate existing news practices, but should also be confident in their education that the practice could be broadened each year with skilled journalists who question their own profession in everything they do.

- By adding seminars as part of the curriculum that will support success and which will redress one finding in Audit 1, namely a lack of life skills. Such seminars and workshops could be on time management (or rather, more accurately, self-management), intercultural/multicultural communication skills, conflict management, and an understanding of what a holistic health lifestyle means.

- The student-newsroom – the laboratory – should have equipment representing all media platforms so that they can get hands-on training as part of their daily curriculum, which should also include a daily news conference.

- But most importantly, the curriculum should contribute to providing the SA citizenry with robust, but responsible journalism.

Collaboration

- There should be close co-operation between industry and J-E&T, not only in terms of sponsorships and bursary schemes. Interaction and an almost revolving door of role-model journalists visiting as guest lecturers, bringing the newsroom – and

the real world – into the lecture room, should be a characteristic.

- Industry should also help ensure that the latest technology is available for J-E&T.

- Industry should always be transforming itself, and answer to an Afro-humanist paradigm, so as to be recipients of these “transformed” journalists.

- Provision of media products (newspapers, magazines) as small investments by industry to J-E&T. How can beginner-journalists otherwise study unless they are exposed to daily/weekly news products? These are the real textbooks in a J-E&T programme.

Community involvement

There should be community involvement in the form of experiential training at a community news product. This will not only teach students journalistic principles, but will also make them aware of the primary task of journalism – to give a voice to the voiceless, and to embed responsibility towards communities within individuals, in accordance with an Afro-humanist, *ubuntu* paradigm

IN SUMMARY

The “how” in the curriculum should be taught in an inter-paradigmatic, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary way – incorporating those basic doing and thinking skills that the news media expects from the beginner-journalist – and of which the requirements of *ubuntu*-journalism form the basis.

CONCLUSION

How should one teach journalism at an academic institution?

With a new paradigm of journalism which answers to an Afro-humanist set of values, and which would follow:

- a complete re-thinking, re-imagining and re-execution of the basics of the profession of journalism by

- a triumvirate of role-players, namely the industry, the teachers and media publics,

- which should result in a re-thought, re-imagined and re-executed curriculum,

- together with a transformed faculty to teach this,

- together with own, indigenous teaching material that would support this new paradigm

- to answer the question of understanding of what humankind has done to discover what humankind is, and to prepare a new generation for a future that cannot yet be envisaged and to provide prospective beginner-journalists with the head, the hands and the heart to become “servants of the people”.

For full text and references, see
<http://journ.ru.ac.za/colloquium/papers.html>