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Elizabeth Barratt writes about the Star's



The editor stands in front of the class and outlines the day's course. They will learn about five elements of *The Star* and *Saturday Star's* editorial strategy. First is the Johannesburg focus: we have not been reflecting the amazing changes happening in one of Africa's biggest cities, he tells them. Then he gives them a wicked, 15-minute general knowledge test.

There are photographers, news editors, reporters, graphic artists, editorial assistants, subeditors and executives in the class. Before teatime he has collected 10 new Jo'burg story ideas from them to add to what is by now a long list stuck up in the newspaper's conference room. Next he explains the basic elements of narrative journalism.

This is the 10th day in three weeks that Moegsien Williams, editor of one of the biggest newspapers on the continent, has marked off in his diary to teach his staff of about 140, including regular freelancers. His co-trainer is the creative director David Hazelhurst, who is off production to take all staff through an intensive WED (writing, editing, design) exercise.

These strategy sessions are difficult to organise: besides taking 12 to 15 staffers out of a four-edition, 21-hours-a day, six-day newsroom for the day, they also clash with the Teeline (shorthand) and Zulu classes that are running over a few months. There is the Narrative Group that meets weekly, after a course by Mark Kramer and Adam Hochschild, and the senior writers and columnists have an Opinion and Analysis Group every fortnight or so – these are both study and critique groups.

And for two weeks, 35 journalists, junior and senior, have had Grammar Master for two hours every day – three classes running daily, taught by Melissa Stocks,

revise subeditor from Independent Cape. You'd think the word "grammar" would put everyone off – but so far it is this course that has brought out the highest level of staff commitment.

This is just the start of a year-long programme of training for *Star* journalists that has been devised to motivate, challenge, improve skills – and raise the quality of the newspaper.

Behind this lies two factors: research by the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) showing the generally low standards of journalism in South Africa, backed by our own experience, and the financial support of a foreign-owned company that must by law contribute deeply to skills development. It is thus a top-down instruction and a bottom-up need. As Independent's flagship paper, *The Star* is leading the way in developing courses that can be used, if required, elsewhere around the group in South Africa.

It also comes immediately after moving to a new PC-based, thin-client editorial production and content management system, Prestige, after 10 years on what had become a rather out-dated QPS on Macs. And it comes at the start of a new push to interact more with our newspaper website, and move beyond print towards multimedia news production.

However, the editor chose not to just throw the available money at the problem. Instead, he has insisted on a complex plan of customised, in-house training for all staff, with all courses having content and outcomes in line with *The Star's* strategic plans. And he has joined in on some courses, teaching and learning – and writing the tests.

The plan has three streams flowing at the same time:

- General – training for all staff in the newspaper's strategy, Internet searches, Zulu, use of Outlook and time management, for example.

- Basic – all of these courses are available to those who require them for their jobs, but are designed to cross different editorial departments: grammar, shorthand, Photoshop, interviewing, story structures, headlines, page design, using numbers in stories and writing for the web, for example. Many of these also serve as refresher courses for mid-level staff.
- Quality – targeted training for four selected groups: narrative writing, opinion/analysis, investigative journalism and newsdesk management.

The first stage, however, was to look more deeply at the needs by getting all staffers to play Newshound. This assessment tool was created by psychologist (and ex-journalist) Brian Dyke many years ago to assist with the selection of juniors for the cadet school. It runs as a multiple choice question-and-answer game on computer, and the results come up in a spreadsheet which makes analysing them quite easy.

Newshound looks at three aspects of thinking which are important for journalists: attention to detail, comprehension and logical thinking. It was updated and used two years ago for the selection of trainees for Independent's subeditors' course, and the idea of using it for journalism student selection was workshopped last year with SADC trainers at Rhodes University.

As a recruitment tool it must be accompanied by interviews and writing tests, which reveal other aspects

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of personality, motivation and skills. We also want to create benchmarks for what standards we can expect from different levels so it can be used for wider recruitment than just beginners. But in terms of our training programme, it is helping to direct our training choices and methods: we are now building aspects of these thinking skills into as many of our courses as possible.

Managing this complex system of courses has been slightly simplified by doing all of the communication on two new, large, grey notice boards opposite the lifts on the editorial floor. Sign-up sheets, letters of explanation from the editor, class lists, examples of where strategy has not been achieved, photos of classes in progress and forms on which to give opinions about what training should be done next, are all put up there.

Adapting an idea we found on the Internet used by the *Raleigh News & Observer* in the United States, our human resources department has had simple little booklets made up for each staff member. In it they can record their training courses. In line with the editor's approach, it has "Learning Organisation" written on the top, and has a page for personal details as well as one for short notes on each course completed.

Behind the scenes, of course, is a rather painful tracking, listing and managing process to ensure 140 staff from different shifts are available (not always possible due to the ever-changing nature of news), plan course content, examine what has worked for

other newspapers around the world, rearrange training rooms, find trainers from within and without, follow-up on the dropouts and – most importantly of all – instigate ways to champion the changes being brought in so staff can implement what they are learning.

All of this is being carried along by a tidal wave of editorial enthusiasm. Photographers demand to be allowed to do grammar, reporters criticise Pulitzer Prize-winning articles in the corridors, columnists discuss the meaning of "voice". There is arguing over who is teacher's pet in Teeline, loud greetings in Zulu, swapping of books on narrative, photostating of articles from the Poynter website, agonies about missing a class, anger about the style book not being updated and bundled up piles of extra work or reading taken home at the end of the day.

Some senior staff are cynical, some seem scared to pit their wits and skills against juniors and some just plain don't like their demanding routines being disrupted. A few have avoided having their own work critiqued. But these resisters are a small group that is already shrinking. Most are beginning to welcome the chaos and challenge that they are expected to manage as well as participate in.

As one executive remarked: "All the moaning and bitching has gone: staff are all too busy doing their homework." Or as another noted: "These days reporters run out of the newsroom when they go on stories!"

All of our training must head in one direction: it must work towards achieving *The Star's* strategy. This is an editorial but also a business imperative: Johannesburg is a highly competitive media environment. In the past couple of years, two daily newspapers have been started up and have been closed down – and both had elements of direct competition with *The Star*. At

the same time, there are more magazines and radio stations than ever before, and the use of the Internet to get news is suddenly growing rapidly. *The Star* needs to ensure that it builds its reputation as the prime provider of news and views of its city.

This is just the start; there's a long way to go. It is highly idealistic to try to implement everything so that results are seen in the newspaper and hopefully on our website, and sustain this level of commitment of people and time which takes staff repeatedly out of *The Star's* demanding production cycle.

The immediate spin-offs are that it is creating an expectation of higher standards of work as well as more outspokenness and interaction among staff. People from different departments have all got to know each other better in class, they know what everyone else has been taught and their opinions have been sought. It's the start of what we hope will be a change of culture: the growth of a learning culture.

So when you hear the loud buzz of staff generating new story ideas in the training room after the editor has, for the 10th time, given his in-depth and anecdotal explanation of what we are missing in coverage of our changing Jo'burg, there is no doubt that the message is getting through. ■