

# CALLS ACROSS THE DIVIDE

Grahamstown is named after Colonel Graham who, in 1812, cleared the area where the town is now located of the local population, the amaXhosa, through a campaign that he personally described as deploying a “proper degree of terror”.

A hero to some, a proto-terrorist and one of the most vicious of colonial oppressors to others, a debate about renaming Grahamstown had been simmering. Even Thabo Mbeki, then the state president, got involved, coming out in favour of changing the name – and fierce debate ensued.

When local school children were asked what they thought about this emerging debate and the proposed new naming options, most replied, “What debate?”

Something so fundamental as the naming of the place where you live is something young people should be interested in. Indeed, once apprised of the issues, they were very interested and wanted to be involved and have their views heard.

Why were they so unaware of this naming controversy? For young people who are poor, and even those who are not, traditional media no longer play the same role as they might have in decades past.

In an age of Mxit, cheap mobile phones in almost all pockets, tabloids and a culture of entertainment and pleasure (rather than civic engagement and activism), how do you involve young people where they are at and through the media they use?

And how do you bridge the divides of wealth, geography, race and technology – even in a small town?

For Lindaba Ziyafika, the answer to a lot of these questions is mobile phones, known as cellphones in South Africa. Using

phones as a way to stimulate debate, to get learners and young people involved, and as a way to get

**USING MOBILE PHONES AS A WAY TO STIMULATE DEBATE, SHARE NEWS AND INFORMATION – AND INVOLVE YOUNG PEOPLE AS WELL – IS AN IDEA FILLED WITH PROMISE. AND THE IINDABA ZIYAFIKA PROJECT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO REALISE THIS, WRITE KHAYA THONJENI AND HARRY DUGMORE**

news and information from and to users, seems filled with promise and potential.

To kickstart the project, 40 or so learners from four Grahamstown schools participated in day-long training courses last year, covering the basics of mobile journalism.

This produced a flurry of learner journalism, at least in terms of short news tips and expressions of interest – a lot of promise, but also a lot of learning about the next step to offering deeper educational opportunities for young people to become more involved in citizen journalism and civic activism.

This year, the core idea has been to develop and involve more learners and more schools, evolving the project to allow higher levels of training, interaction and citizen news production.

Learners at the participating schools were invited to become members of newly formed mobile media clubs. Some of these will be based at schools, while others will be part of the overall club based at *Grocott's Mail's* new citizen journalism newsroom. Training, outings, membership cards, free airtime and fun are all core to the mobile media clubs.

Just over 100 students began their training in earnest earlier this year with participants attending day-long training sessions. Headed up by Rhodes University writing and editing lecturer Rod Amner, and photography lecturer Paul Greenway, the workshops covered the following topics:

- Introduction to news and citizen-centric news as well as news genres, such as hard news, school news, reviews and opinion.

- How to gather school-related news.
- Identifying school stakeholders and creating school mind maps.
- Explanation of *Grocott's Mail's* online plans and how the news generated by the learners and other citizens would fit into the plan.

Learners were taught, in fun and interactive ways, how to research a story, write and improve it, and then text it in mobile phone-friendly lingo. In practical exercises, the learners created three sets of messages, all while working to deadlines.

The participants also took part in an interactive photography workshop, which focused on taking pictures with mobile phones.

Further training – including interviewing skills, ethics and telling the differences between gossip and news – will be undertaken at the individual schools, allowing a more tailored and individual approach to training.

New more modular courses in citizen journalism are now offered three afternoons a week at the *Grocott's* citizen journalism newsroom. On completion, these short courses are acknowledged with a certificate of participation which, although informal, might be the first such recognition of citizen journalism training in the world. An advanced course in citizen journalism will be also be offered in 2010.

It is hoped that through their participation in this project, learners will understand the difference between citizen journalism and journalism as well as their role and responsibilities as citizen journalists. They will be

given the skills to identify potential news sources as well as use different news genres – especially as they will be expected to use their mobile phones to send stories and take photographs.

## Observable outcomes

Although this project is still in its initial stages, interesting elements have started to emerge:

**Language** – while the text used by the learners is predominantly English, we are likely to have a new language, a kind of digital Creole, emanating from our three local languages, isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans.

We are also creating new language syntax, which we've termed “cellphone lingo”. This allows the development of a new language writing style, the short form.

**Community news** – the type of news coming through from the learners is based on their experiences in Grahamstown East, the poorest parts of Grahamstown that have previously been largely ignored by news outlets. In dominant news items, such as crime stories, we are likely to have stories from victims and survivors of crime as secondary sources, making a change from the usual single-source official police report story.

The project also offers the opportunity to include issues that are important to people outside the town's urban perimeters, creating new kinds of classifieds, for example. So, instead of listing pets such as dogs and cats, animals for sale could also include donkeys, which are among the most sold livestock in the poorer parts of Grahamstown.

The news produced by the learners has tended to be more human and personal, with most of it a first-person account or opinion. With this shift from traditional news reporting to personal narrative, there is honesty, less distortion and free expression. There is also less negative reporting and elements of constructive criticism are starting to emerge.

