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Broadcast journalism education is about much more than simply teaching students how to use recording and editing equipment. Practical skills are critical, but a theoretical foundation is essential to encourage critical journalism practice. Moreover, engagement with real world scenarios via service learning or problem-based learning approaches is useful when approaching the subject of broadcast journalism education.

To a large extent, teaching responsible ethical broadcast journalism is about helping students to cast a critical and analytic look at their communities. Radio journalism is not just about the mechanical production of audio, but involves an ability to think critically about global news events and their relevance.

Classroom discussions about current political affairs often lead to well-written and well thought-out features, even if they cover different topics. Asking students to refine their arguments verbally often results in better writing and presentation skills.

This builds on the notion that the role of journalism in a democracy is to reinforce participatory citizenship. As such, journalists should be prepared to contribute to the debate in the public sphere as analysts, information brokers and as constructors of nation and state in “managing the symbolic arena” (Gans 1980: 290).

Most importantly, there has to be a balance between practical learning and engagement and skills development, theory and theoretical application, and real work experience and engagement with society. The civic journalism approach becomes critical here, to involve students with local communities and to foster a meaningful engagement with the ‘real’ world.

This problem-based learning approach moves beyond traditional approaches of lecture/seminar in classrooms, and results in greater self-directed learning.

I’ve found that placing students in real-life situations, conducting formative research and producing audio for actual clients, resulted in higher reflexivity about the process, and a more meaningful learning experience for students.

Groups that I’ve worked with have produced voter educational public service announcements (PSAs) for a local NGO and HIV/AIDS PSAs targeting youth and based on the tenets of behaviour change theories, for the campus community radio station. They have also produced gender-related podcasts for Durban-based NGO Agenda Feminist Media, as well as a range of short documentaries for various community radio stations.

Similarly, students at Stellenbosch University produce news for the local community radio station; and students from various institutions work as interns at local stations.

Internships are useful, but structured service learning projects, which place a strong emphasis on learning through deep, guided reflection, are also important. Research has shown that “the long-term impact of youth service experience on later political and community involvement can best be explained by the contribution these service experiences make to the creation of an enduring sense of oneself as a politically engaged and socially conscious person” (Erlich 2000: 6).

Through these processes, the trainee radio journalist begins to identify with the notion of civic journalism, discarding ideal notions of impartiality in favour of a journalism which favours social development and developing agency and self-efficacy among its audience.

This represents a fairly radical departure from the notion of the professionalism of journalism, often highly regarded in Western curricula, towards a kind of Africanisation of the curriculum, more sensitive to the local socio-political context.

In this approach, multilingualism becomes a key issue. Students who can speak languages other than English often

Using RADIO to encourage civic- minded

journalism



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find it easier to conduct their research in areas other than the affluent suburbs surrounding the university.

But interestingly enough, students who are fluent in African languages are often reluctant to use these languages professionally. This is not surprising given that all the academic literature (and practical textbooks) on radio journalism are in English (mostly from the UK and North America); as well as the low levels of status afforded to African languages in university environments.

Firstly, good writing skills are critical to good radio journalism, and must be deliberately taught and not left to other areas of the student’s curriculum. Moreover, multilingualism should be encouraged. I know of some radio teachers who have made it mandatory for students to study an additional African language at tertiary level, even if they are already proficient in a language other than English.

I have found it useful to encourage students to produce material in their second language; and to encourage students who speak African languages to produce radio material in that language.

This kind of practice will, hopefully, ultimately lead to the strengthening of our public broadcast and community radio stations. Students must realise that we live in a diverse society, and that public sphere debate need not only take place in English-language media.

Many of my undergraduate radio journalism students go on to produce documentaries and news for community radio stations. Some of them also go to work for commercial music stations, and hopefully the development ethos of their training stays with them.

Hopefully they do not return to the paradigm of “objectivity” when they enter industry. Their exposure to forms of civic journalism may mean increased potential for a trickle-up effect with an increase in the numbers of civically-minded journalists in mainstream media newsrooms.

Radio journalists must also be taught to multitask. For a long time, community radio stations have used rhizomatic approaches to work allocation. News readers often also write the news, programme managers present programmes and manage the schedule, everyone multitasks and records, edits and presents.

Increasingly, this approach is gaining currency among broadcast journalists. Radio students must be taught all aspects of their craft if they are to survive in industry.

A new emerging media ecology also flags the need for revisiting the role of technology and new media. Deuze (2008) argues that the changing interactions between users and producers in the digital era results in a more fluid or

“liquid” journalism.

With the rise of digital technologies and online and mobile social networking, radio journalists have new challenges – they have to blog and podcast, produce digital stories, and record media other than sound to accompany their stories. I have tested a model in which third-year radio production students produce educational podcasts for a second-year introductory writing course. Having graduated from this course themselves, the students strive to produce material which will be entertaining and educational for their peers.

The student-driven podcasts are then also later broadcast on the campus radio station in the pre-exam period.

Moreover, radio journalists have to negotiate a terrain in which the old sender-recipient model is no longer current. The new citizen, argues Deuze (2008) is “monitorial” in that they scan a range of different media, consuming only what they find to be personally relevant.

Online social networks begin to play an important role for journalists as breaking news often finds its way onto networks like Twitter first. Many radio stations are already widely engaging with audiences via Facebook.

In essence, broadcast education in the current epoch is multifaceted. Teaching students to be good radio journalists means first teaching them a host of other skills, within the framework of an advocacy approach to journalism.

Radio is still the most consumed medium in South Africa, and there are over 80 active community radio stations. Radio students must be trained to work within the local context instead of following international models of broadcast education, which tend to focus heavily on mainstream news production.

Fortunately for the student, the resultant composite of skills can be transferred to other disciplines and contexts.

References

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