

# When 140 years of small-town newspapering meets journalism education

Anthea Garman

**B**y acquiring a 140-year-old newspaper<sup>1</sup> as its site of experiential learning for journalism students in 2003, the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies set out boldly to enhance both journalism teaching and journalism practice in Grahamstown and South Africa.

But the relationship between newsroom and classroom has proved to be complex, and the desire to produce excellent teaching and excellent journalism has often been frustrated.

In a quest to understand why this is, I have turned to the idea of “community of practice” to reflect on whether posing *questions* about our identity and practice in the newsroom is not a more fruitful way of understanding our situation than trying to solve the *problems* which we locate in budget, infrastructure, context and curriculum.

In the conclusion to her 2009 history of *Grocott's Mail* ([www.grocotts.co.za/content/history-grocotts-mail](http://www.grocotts.co.za/content/history-grocotts-mail)) the newspaper's General Manager Louise Vale says: “*Grocott's* continues to grow and evolve *within the traditions* [my italics] that have sustained it over the centuries.” The paper which was purchased by Rhodes University in 2003 with a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies, is now operated by a new entity, the David Rabkin Project for Experiential Journalism, and its purpose is, as Vale says, twofold: “To produce a high-quality, independent newspaper that serves the community, and to develop new ways in which journalism is taught at university level.”

In 2004 Rhodes teachers put their first batch of students into the *Grocott's* newsroom for “experiential journalism” and discovered just how complicated an exercise it was to take over a newspaper with its “centuries” of tradition and marry that to the educational desire to provide an excellent and nurturing space for apprentice journalists.

The desire to acquire the newspaper was part of an evolving effort to locate real, consequential practice (and not just simulated practice) at the heart of journalism teaching.

Although there were no overt theoretically-critical discussions at the time of just what kind of model of practice and indeed teaching we were espousing, we knew as teachers that we wanted to marry intellectual and critical approaches to journalism taught in the classroom with actual doing so that we could experiment with new forms of and approaches to journalism in a real setting.

The experience of the next six years of teaching there has upended our simple notions of attaching a working newsroom to an educational imperative. While our students unfailingly come out of their experiences at *Grocott's* with a great deal of learning, they learn because life and experience are great teachers, not because we have managed to craft new forms and approaches to journalism or innovated new ways of teaching.

In a previous paper, provoked by this situation, I argued that the model of “professionalism” as a rationale for teaching young journalists was inadequate (see Garman 2005). This model I saw as “the transfer of a certain parcel of knowledge plus a certain set of skills, together with a dose of ethics and accuracy mixed up in the ether of a critical humanities environment” which would constitute professionalism and be the cure for the ills of journalism by instilling in a new generation ‘best practice’ (2005: 201).

I was persuaded by the Barbie Zelizer argument that: “Seeing journalism as a profession... may have restricted our understanding of journalistic practice, causing us to examine only those dimensions of journalism emphasised by the frame through which we have chosen to view them” (1997: 23).

By contrast, the Zelizer idea of an “interpretive community” understands journalists as belonging to an “inner-authenticating practice” (1997: 23), a community which has modes of performance, rituals, and narratives. At the time I was persuaded in particular that the journalistic role in the world is one of “interpretation” rather than simply reporting or recording, and that this particular role is important. And that journalists behave as a community, was also a persuasive idea, and the ideas of induction and apprenticeship were therefore important.

## “Experiential learning”

In 2008 the School of Journalism and Media Studies hosted a colloquium in experiential learning, to help both us and other educators debate and think through our experiential projects and their effectiveness. Susan Boyd Bell from New Zealand, whose research involved a case study of a university-based newspaper, was invited as keynote speaker. In her presentation Boyd Bell made the following “provocative propositions”, saying that experiential learning:

1. enables students to draw from the expertise of their peers;
2. sensitises students towards their peers;
3. motivates students to give more time for deeper learning;
4. is effective where there is a large amount of responsibility and learning is completed by doing;
5. enables staff expertise to be drawn on in strategic ways; and
6. activates greater opportunity for communication, negotiation, problem-solving and role-playing skills in real-world environments (2007: 16).

Experiential learning as a teaching method is based largely on the thinking of David Kolb, a professor of organisation management. Its value is that attention is given to the kind of learning that comes from direct encounter, from both having an experience and then asking what that experience means (see Smith 2001) and that allows teachers to place value on activities that happen beyond the classroom or outside of the usual academic pursuits of reading,





thinking, debating and writing.

But, as Smith points out, the weakness of the Kolb model (and the various models that have flowed from it) is that it does not problematise the notion of experience itself.

In line with these criticisms I would venture to say that the intractable nature of the problems we encounter in the newsroom experience of teaching is that while we can manipulate a number of things to make changes in our teaching, it is very difficult to change the *nature of newsroom experience* and *the situation in which the newsroom itself is embedded*.

As a result of these critiques I have begun to think more systematically about the Zelizer idea of interpretive *community*.

### Communities of practice

It has been tempting to resort to the label “two cultures”<sup>2</sup> when operating between *Grocott's Mail* and the classrooms at Rhodes, but while evocative, that label leads one into a dead end of negative description and insurmountable barriers. The description “community of practice” is far more flexible and useful because it not only describes and explains actual situations it also has a definite link to learning and education. For my understanding of this term I am working with Mark Smith’s commentary on the work of anthropologist Jean Lave and teacher Etienne Wenger. Smith says “learning is social and comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life” (2009: online).

Learning is not simply an acquiring of knowledge (as in the usual classroom mode of transfer) but a participating in social situations that generate it.

Quoting Wenger, Smith says: “Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour...” A community of practice therefore has these characteristics:

- a shared domain of interests organised around a joint enterprise and identity;
- members who engage in joint activities and discussions;
- a practice, which Smith defines (using Wenger) as “a shared repertoire of resources”: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems, documents, routines, vocabulary and symbols and
- such a community also builds a “shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories”.

If the emphasis in learning is placed on what takes place in a community then position in the community becomes key to accessing, using and generating knowledge. The notion of apprenticeship is important. Those who join communities start out on the periphery; as they learn and acquire ways of knowing and practising they move further into the community. “In this,” says Smith, “there is a concern with identity, with learning to speak, act and improvise in ways that make sense in the community”. To be a full member of the community is to grow in confidence and ability to generate meaning oneself, or as Lave and Wenger comment, “the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation” (1991: 108-9).

As a result knowledge can no longer be thought of as “decontextualised, abstract or general”, according to Smith. Neither can conceptions of knowledge continue to be separated into “theoretical” and “practical”, “experiential” and “simulated”.

For an educator this way of thinking significantly alters the

**WE HAVE MORE AT STAKE THAN JUST  
THE REPLICATION OF JOURNALISM AS IT IS  
OR THE REPRODUCTION OF NEW  
GENERATIONS OF JOURNALISTS**

approach that can be taken towards teaching in an actual newsroom situation with young apprentice journalists and opens up spaces to engage with the situation and *community* itself that hosts the teaching and learning.

Instead of interrogating the routines, the operations, the infrastructure and the curriculum demands, this frame enables different questions which can start with asking who is in the community, what do they share, what do they think knowledge is, how do they practice and what is their attitude to those joining the community?

The “community” I am examining consists of newsroom practitioners, who are mainly journalists, and teaching practitioners who are journalists and teachers. We are not all one kind of member of this community.

But also important is the newspaper itself. As a reading of the histories written by Vale, Brand and Berger shows (2009), *Grocott's Mail* is itself a significant context. It was started when Grahamstown was a booming cultural and economic power in the Cape Colony. In the 1860s it was one of six newspapers in this city. It moved from a weekly to a bi-weekly to five editions printed a night during the South African War (1899-1902). It remained a daily during World War 1 and was distributed at its high point “throughout the Cape Colony, the Orange Free State, the Transvaal Republic and to missionary subscribers in Kuruman, Bamangwato and on the Zambezi” (Vale 2009).

During the South Africa War *Grocott's* had 18 war correspondents in the field and was doing a weekly war summary which was read in London where an office was opened. By the end of the century it also had offices in East London and Johannesburg. Today's *Grocott's* distributes only in Grahamstown and is bought by only about 3 000 people (but read by about 16 000 each edition).

At its height *Grocott's* operated in the grand, liberal tradition of publishers who banded together to make sure the business of news and printing was free of interference by the government of the day. The spirit inherent in their newspapering and publishing ventures of the time is captured by the intention to found a Newspaper Press Union in 1882 for the purpose of “promoting all objects of common interest to the South African Press, and for the protection of its members in the *proper discharge of their public duty* [my italics]”. It is evident that the high aims of being a vehicle of the public sphere permeated these papers.

By contrast the paper today, while confined to its town, is nevertheless a paper grappling with the demands of speaking to all Grahamstown's residents as citizens. It makes valiant efforts to cover township news and to negotiate the very complex political, economic and social landscape that is post-apartheid South Africa.

The four editors who have been in the employ of the David Rabkin Project, have made strenuous efforts to move the paper beyond its coverage of just the white middle-class and its schools and events which was the situation that prevailed in the more immediate past.

So as a “community of practice” we operate against the backdrop of what seems to have been a glorious history and what appears to be a hollowed-out present<sup>3</sup> – although one that is more honestly assessing what it is to make media in South Africa today. This cannot be discounted as a major factor in what can be experienced in doing journalism at this newspaper.

So how to understand our job as teachers against this backdrop? Theodore Glasser's comments on journalism education in a university are useful. He says:

*What journalists need to learn – the knowledge they must master – comes mostly from the field, not the library. Journalism requires phronesis, the term Aristotle used to describe the practical wisdom that comes from practice and experience, not books and lectures (2006: 148).*

Avoiding the theory/practice trap, Glasser goes on to outline a subtle distinction between what young journalists do in the university and in the newsroom. What they learn in the academy (in the other subjects a university offers) is an education *for* journalism and what they learn in a newsroom is an education *in* journalism (2006: 148). The academy provides the knowledge to draw on for the practice of journalism but only by *doing* journalism



does a student learn how to be a journalist. Turning to the curriculum, he says:

*But an education in journalism also involves the study of journalism, an enterprise that benefits students not because it provides a foundation for the practice of journalism but because it provides a context in which to critique and improve the practice of journalism" (2006: 149).*

Glasser then goes on to talk in terms which evoke somewhat the idea of a "community of practice" in the academy:

*While the practice of journalism remains the centrepiece of any viable journalism curriculum, the study of journalism accounts for the distinctive contribution of a university to the education of journalists. A formal education in journalism matters and succeeds as it engenders among students a certain quality of thinking about journalism, a state of preparedness that manifests itself in the eloquence students exhibit when called on to respond to questions about the value and purpose of what they do as journalists" [my emphasis] (2006: 149).*

Our attitude has been to understand ourselves the teachers as part of the academic community, and the journalists at *Grocott's Mail* as part of a separate newsroom community. We have set up what we call a *Grocott's Mail*

Teaching Forum as a *bridge* to get these two communities talking to each other. But I am beginning to think that what we need is not just talking about problems we encounter in order to rectify them, but exploring how we could build a shared community or practice.

We could do worse than start by abandoning the rigid duality of the theory-practice mindset (and its associated communities) and begin to think of what we do in apprenticing students as having three interlinked and vitally important components: education *for* journalism (the knowledge of the world and how it works, and how to think about how it works from their other university subjects); education *in* journalism (their doing in the newsroom); and education *about* journalism (the head space we provide in journalism and media studies to think critically about the forms and effects of journalism).

We could also focus more on members and membership of this shared community rather than solely on infrastructure (computers and network), resources, routines and processes.

Ironically those die-hard journalists and educators who believe firmly in journalism as a "trade" are correct in one respect: learning on the job, learning in a community and learning by apprenticeship are extremely powerful and effective forms of education and socialisation.

But we have more at stake than just the replication of journalism as it is or the reproduction of new generations of journalists who can take up the baton from those who've gone before. The "poly-crisis"<sup>4</sup> nature of our world, and the challenges of the post-apartheid public domain in South Africa, require of us to impart new values, new ideas, new forms of journalism which are responsive to these new challenges and to the future of journalism.

## References

- Berger, G. 2009. "The press and its people" *Grocott's Mail Then & Now Exhibition: Celebrating 178 Years of Independence*, May.
- Boyd Bell, S. 2007. *Experiential Learning in Journalism Education: a New Zealand Case Study*. MEd AUT University.
- Brand, R. 2009. "Timeline of South African newspaper history" *Grocott's Mail Then & Now Exhibition: Celebrating 178 Years of Independence*, May.
- Garman, A. 2005. "Teaching to Produce 'Interpretive Communities' Rather than just 'Professionals'" *Ecquid Novi*, 26(2): 199-211.
- Glasser, T. 2006. "Journalism Studies and the Education of Journalists" Debate: Does Journalism Education Matter" *Journalism Studies* 7(1): 146.
- Lave J. and Wenger E. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peires, J. 2007. "Economic Empowerment in the Eastern Cape" in Marcus, G (ed) *Visions of Black Economic Empowerment*. Johannesburg: Jacana.
- Smith M. 2003, 2009. "Communities of Practice" *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education* www.infed.org/biblio/communities\_of\_practice.htm accessed 19 August 2009.
- Smith M. 2001. "David A Kolb on Experiential Learning" *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education* www.infed.org/b-explr.htm accessed 19 August 2009.
- Vale, L. 2009. "History of *Grocott's Mail*" *Grocott's Mail Then & Now Exhibition: Celebrating 178 Years of Independence*, May.
- Zelizer, B. 1997. "Has Communication Explained Journalism?" In Berkowitz, D (ed). *Social Meanings of News*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Zelizer, B. 1993. "Journalists as Interpretive Communities." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10: 219-237.

## Endnotes

- 1 What is now *Grocott's Mail* was founded by TH Grocott who started a printing works in Grahamstown in 1869. He then published a newspaper called *Grocott's Free Paper* in 1870. In 1872 this paper was renamed the *Grocott's Penny Mail*. As soon as the paper cost more (after World War 1) the name became just *Grocott's Mail*. And in 1920 Grocott and Sherry (Richard Sherry became a partner in the business in 1892) bought the *Grahamstown's Journal* a paper which predated the birth of Grocott's paper having been started in 1831. So the claim can be made that the existence of *Grocott's Mail* today represents 178 years of independent newspapering in this city.
- 2 Made famous by CP Snow in his 1959 book *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* which was a fierce critique of the humanities. As the Wikipedia entry on Snow's book points out: "The term two cultures has entered the general lexicon as a shorthand for differences between two attitudes" and comments that it is a "polarisation of perspective". It is exactly this kind of polarisation in dealing with our teaching difficulties that I wish to avoid.
- 3 For an assessment of how the Eastern Cape and Grahamstown were removed to the periphery of South African economic and political life in the early 20th century see the work of Jeff Peires.
- 4 This term, according to Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Director of the Environmental Education Unit at Rhodes University, describes the "set of mutually-reinforcing nested crises" our world faces in which "cause and effect relations are uncertain and mutating". From "Teaching in the world: the place of room 20", lecture for the Distinguished Teacher's Award, 19 August 2009, Rhodes University.

# Where to now?



**CAXTON**  
COMMUNITY  
NEWSPAPERS

Contact  
Gien Elsas – (011) 248-6215  
gien@caxton.co.za

**The studying is over...**

**... it's time to begin your career in journalism**

**Caxton Community Newspapers**

**The Training Ground for  
South African Journalists.**