



Harold Gess

Wearing

two

hats

ACADEMIC WORK IS USUALLY AN INDIVIDUAL ENDEAVOUR, SO WHAT HAPPENS, ASKS JO-ANNE VORSTER WHEN A GROUP OF JOURNALISM AND MEDIA STUDIES ACADEMICS DECIDE TO WORK COLLABORATIVELY TO CONSTRUCT A CURRICULUM?

In an attempt to find out, I sat in on the weekly meetings of Rhodes University Journalism and Media Studies (JMS) academics who were developing a curriculum for a fourth year course in 2006. My interest as an academic development practitioner is in collaborative development of professional or vocational curricula. What the meeting transcripts and interviews with these and other academics in the journalism school uncover is a complex process that underpins the curriculum development of professional courses – particularly, those professions that are not regulated by a professional board.

The curriculum development group comprised seven to eight academics at any one time, the majority of whom taught one of a range of practical specialisations. There were also at least one or two lecturers who provided input into the process from a media studies perspective.

Since about 2002, the Rhodes JMS curriculum has been underpinned by a shared value position that states, inter alia, that its aim is to prepare students to be “self-reflexive, critical, analytical graduates and media workers, whose practice is probing, imaginative, civic minded and outspoken. Such graduates are equipped to act as thoughtful, creative and skilled journalists and media practitioners able to make meaningful and technically proficient media productions”.

The school, as outlined in its vision statement, recognises the power of the media to influence the way media consumers experience and view the world. It furthermore appreciates that the media operates within particular political, economic, technological and historical contexts and that it is complicit in the production and reproduction of dominant gender, class, cultural, racial, geographic and sexual relations.

This discourse adopted by the school can be referred to as a regulative discourse, a concept coined by sociologist of education Basil Bernstein, and this value position has implications for

curriculum and pedagogy.

For example, it was recognised that to pursue the values inherent in the discourse the strong boundaries that had previously existed between media studies and media production needed to be traversed to enable the integration of theory and production. Thus, media studies and media production staff would need to co-operate in developing the new curriculum which, in turn, would require students to integrate the understandings they developed in media studies with their media production work.

A strong academic or theoretical basis develops students’ capacity to participate intelligently in “humanity’s conversation with and about itself”. And a strong theoretical foundation makes it possible for students to pursue postgraduate studies.

However, there is also the need for vocational or professional curricula to “face both ways” – towards the industry and towards the academy. It is self-evident that professional courses should take account of the requirements of the target industry.

This begs the question of what the relation between theory and practice should be in a professionally focused curriculum.

The fourth year of the Bachelor of Journalism degree at Rhodes University is regarded as the “professionalising” year. In contrast to the first three years of this degree, the bulk of the final year is taken up by developing or strengthening students’ proficiency in their chosen area of practical specialisation, such as new media, photojournalism, writing and design. At the end of the fourth year, students should be “industry-ready”.

However the school aims not only to cultivate technically adept journalists and media workers, but also ones who can cast a critical and analytical gaze upon their practice and upon the context within which they work and live. To relate the theory they learn with the practical work they do in their production work means they are also able to study media studies as a field in its own right.

During the curriculum deliberations, lecturers articulated the need for students to be “hybrids”, to “wear two hats”, to be able to “code switch”, to be able to “integrate” and “bridge the

gap" between theory and practice. Thus, the pedagogical imperative is the development of graduates who can juggle their academic and journalistic identities.

The lecturers, who have to help students achieve this end, also have complex identities that influence how they relate to their field and, therefore, how they approach the process of curriculum formation.

In the past, practical specialisation lecturers were recruited primarily for their media production expertise and experience. However, given the nature of the graduate identity that should be cultivated, the specialisation curricula are now potentially more complex than they have been in the past.

The complexity of the curriculum they are required to teach, as well as the fact that they work within a university context, require the so-called "specialisation lecturers" to have or to develop a congruent theoretical knowledge base and thus also an academic identity. The combination of academic identity with their specialisation identity allows specialisation teachers to teach in ways that enable their students to become critically reflexive media practitioners.

These lecturers also believe they are able to teach theoretical perspectives on their field. However, it is difficult to achieve the demands of the development of technical proficiency in and creative practice of their specialisation while also developing students' capacity for theoretically informed critique.

Bernstein distinguishes between esoteric or theoretical knowledge and everyday or mundane knowledge. It could be argued that the technical, procedural aspects of what students learn as part of their practice specialisations is closer to the everyday and mundane. This knowledge is highly context-dependent and can be contrasted with the conceptual knowledge that the study of media theories requires.

Media studies as a theoretical field and the practical journalism and media specialisations are underpinned by different forms of knowledge. The highly abstract nature of the theoretical endeavour of media studies academics is qualitatively different to context-dependent theorisation of practical specialisations.

The reflexive engagement that the school's regulative discourse points to calls upon the need for students to develop technically proficient, creative productions that take account of the critical, conceptual understanding of the complex interaction of their media texts with the socio-cultural-historical context within which they are being produced.

This is a complex juggling act given that a theoretical curriculum necessitates the development of principled conceptual knowledge, while the development of practical skill and expertise involves learning principled procedural knowledge.

It could be argued that a critically reflexive JMS education also calls upon students to learn how to put into practice some of the theoretical principles they learn in media studies. Thus, there is also a need for a form of proceduralised conceptual knowledge. However, aspects of media studies cannot always be directly related to the media practices that students engage. This creates a need for JMS students to study media studies as a field in its own right.

In other words, the curriculum has to be constructed in a way that respects the different logics of the fields that make up the discipline of JMS.

Lecturers argued that, given the structure of the university year, there simply was not enough time to enable adequate practical learning and the kind of theory-practice integration that allows the development of the kind of critically reflexive journalists and media practitioners envisioned by the school.

This ring-side perspective of the JMS lecturers' curriculum deliberations has underscored for me that curriculum development is not a process of rational planning. The complexities of the interplay between the regulative discourse framing the curriculum, departmental culture, lecturer identities and the forms of knowledge of the field or fields that make up the curriculum, together with the concomitant logic of the curriculum demanded by the forms of knowledge, all play a role when colleagues collaborate to jointly develop a curriculum.

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My analysis of the process points to the nature of the knowledge of the field and requisite curriculum logic as having greater influence within this context than the ideal of integrating theory and practice in order to produce critically reflexive journalists and media practitioners. This does not mean that theory-practice integration is impossible, only that it is not a simple matter.

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