

WHEN FACED WITH AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE, READ!

BY GILLIAN RENNIE

The good of a book lies in its being read. A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in their turn speak of things.
Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more you learn, the more places you'll go.
Dr Seuss

A word after a word after a word is power.
Margaret Atwood

Reading and writing are in themselves subversive acts. What they subvert is the notion that things have to be the way they are.
Mark Vonnegut

The ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive.
The Autobiography of Malcolm X, 1964

The only school for the writer is the library – reading, reading. A journey through the realms of how far, wide and deep writing can venture in the endless perspectives of human life.
Nadine Gordimer

Outside of a dog, a book is a person's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.
Groucho Marx

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I was recently asked: "What do you think are the major challenges facing the teaching of excellent journalism in South Africa. How would you address these challenges in your teaching?"

This statement is based on an assumption. It assumes that the teaching of excellent journalism *does* indeed face challenges – but this is a fair assumption, in view of the fact that the minds concerned with this issue are located in the academy, situated in one of the country's most prestigious schools of journalism and media studies, operating in a country which seethes with challenges.

It is debatable, however, whether these challenges are unique to teaching in South Africa, and whether the pursuit of excellence is specific to journalism and the way it is taught. But these broad questions, essential as they are to note, are not foremost among the challenges I face when I think about how to teach excellent journalism.

For me, teaching excellent journalism in this country at this time presents three types of challenge:

1. the ones in front of my face,
2. the ones that haunt my brain, and
3. the ones that inhabit my bloodstream.

There are myriad other challenges, too, such as: the evident absence of financial literacy, maths literacy, citizenship literacy, and an understanding of the role of information in society. But these are, arguably, chiefly challenges of curriculum planning and consequently not the focus of this brief glance.

The first challenges – the ones in front of my face – are the ones I bump into every day of my teaching life. They include:

- planning for the effective teaching of large classes (200-300 first years, for instance);
- how best to meet learning needs equably in a context of educational diversity; and, sometimes,
- responding wisely to symptoms of contemporary stress.

The second challenges – the ones that haunt my brain – are the challenges which affect our very existence as journalists and as teachers of journalism. They include:

- the Protection of Information Bill and its implications on the media landscape;
- the way shrinking newsrooms require fewer people to produce more in less time; and
- the fact that journalism is no longer governed by the ideology of vocation; journalism now is a job or, for many entering students, the path to celebrity status.

The third are the challenges that inhabit my bloodstream. They may appear more abstract than those already mentioned but it is my contention that, given their far-reaching implications, they are the most pressing:

- how do we prepare students for an industry – indeed, for a world – which is changing so rapidly we cannot know today what would be

appropriate kit to pack into a 2016 graduate's knapsack? Students who started university this year will, according to Professor Harry Dugmore, graduate when the iPhone9 launches.

- And how, in a time of textbling, do we instil a culture of reporting depth?

Wits University's Professor Anton Harber told Rhodes colleagues in 2011 that to prepare students for an uncertain future requires a radical re-organisation of the curriculum. He is, I believe, correct in engineering his school's increasing emphasis on so-called new media in the classroom so that students become accustomed to applying what they know about journalism into this "new" space, and so that they learn to distinguish between the rules and norms of journalism that are platform-specific and those that are platform-general. He also claims a focus that is increasingly writing-centric rather than print-centric. Naturally, as a teacher of writing and editing, this philosophy makes sparkling sense to me. But re-organising a curriculum is a massive undertaking and is collaborative. What, I ask myself, can I do, alone in a classroom facing the challenge I love i.e. students? What can I do – now, today – to start preparing them for a hidden future and to encourage an awareness of the beauty of depth?

My answer to this dual challenge is: reading. Reading books.

I read to them; they read to and for themselves. They also read to and for each other.

In first year classes, I spend the last minutes of every lecture reading a bedtime story. It always has a direct relationship to the content of that day's lecture and it is never longer than two paragraphs. On occasion, this can mean as much as a page. For these minutes, I ask students to stop taking notes, to put their pens down and do nothing other than listen. They can close their eyes, they can dislike what they hear, they can wish it was all over; I don't mind as long as the room is quiet and I can read to them for a couple of minutes.

In this way, amid the hurly-burly of 5 Ws, an H and a nut graf, they encounter ideas, people, lives and times they might not have realised coincide with theirs. They encounter Fred Khumalo, *Drum* magazine and its writers, Maya Angelou, Hunter S Thompson, Nelson Mandela, Kate Adie. For some students, it is their first experience of being read to. For some, it is a return to an unremarked childhood harbour. And for some, according to course evaluations, it is the highlight of the course. For all of them, though, I hope it is the start of their lives as analytical, self-reflexive, civic-minded media workers.

Last year, I introduced the concept of a book club to third year students. The idea was wrought in the conversational fire that ignites the corridor I work on, and which, along with the colleagues I share ideas with, I cherish. The Incredible Chocolate Cake Book Club was born to show its members how rich and inspirational is the heritage they now follow, how thoughtful and creative and skilled this

heritage demands them to now be.

It was also my hope that, by reading whole books of their own choosing, these readers might start feeling benefits such as:

- the development of abstract thought,
- the development of logically connected ideas,
- a sustained attention span,
- loads of information,
- the sense of smartness that comes from a well-exercised brain, and
- an expanded vocabulary.

In these ways, I reason, the journalists of the future might find a sense of feeling at home in that future. And, because of this, they will be equipped to explain that home to all who dwell there.

The logistics of the book club meetings are less important at this point than comments from the incredible chocolate cake eaters. Again, they emerge unsolicited from the course evaluation and include:

“I would have loved there to be more reading assignments.”

“I have gained a better appreciation of reading and writing in general, and a sense of the art and humanity it takes to make good journalism.”

“The book club was a good idea – not only because of the coffee and cake but also because of the skills one learns by reading and listening.”

This last comment is particularly heartening. Web writer and new media developer Dave Winer has posited that if journalism is anything, it’s the art of listening. My response to this is: Is there a training in the art of listening more efficient than the art of reading?

Actually, Winer says more: If journalism is anything, it’s the art of listening, and then the art of being heard.

Because we write only as well as we read, the matter of being heard leads me happily to the matter of writing, and its importance in any journalism curriculum that cares about the future. Unhappily, however, nine of the 10 minutes allocated to this presentation have passed. So I have time only for your bedtime story, which today is by Mark Vonnegut:

Reading and writing are in themselves subversive acts. What they subvert is the notion that things have to be the way they are, that you are alone, that no one has ever felt the way you have. What occurs to people when they read [Kurt] is that things are much more up for grabs than they thought they were. The world is a slightly different place just because they read a damn book. Imagine that.



References

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- Winer, Dave.** 2009. What does the J-school of the future look like? In *Rebooting the News*. Downloaded from: <http://rebootnews.wordpress.com/2009/12/02> on 21 March 2012.