Universities are strange places. People come in as one kind of being, and leave quite different. They are places of transformation. One way in which they effect this transformation is to challenge our preconceived notions of the world, and our relationship to it. However, at the same time, universities are also places of privilege and so can be conservative – in the sense of conserving and fostering particular interests in their favour.

By Priscilla Boshoff
Despite gradually warming to the ideals of such journalism practice, and becoming more aware of the range of journalism possible, students do not forget the mainstream media with all its glamour and excitement.

To students’ dismay these aspirations clash unexpectedly with our curriculum. They discover – some to their horror – that we require them to reflect on their place and role within a developing democracy. As part of this, rather than writing idyllic articles for Getaway, we demand that they practice their journalism within Grahamstown and the wider Eastern Cape, a context marked by drastic inequalities. They are required to reflect critically about the relationship between journalism and democracy in this space, and to develop a habitual reflexivity about their practice in this regard.

For many students the growing realisation of the complexities of journalism and the responsibilities it entails lead to crises of one kind or another. In particular, they confront the personal fears that arise from being faced for the first time with extreme poverty within the unfamiliar environment of the township, as Cedric describes: “They’re like, ‘No, my car’s gonna get stolen,’ or something ridiculous like that... People don’t like it. They don’t want to know. They know that it’s there but they don’t want to be involved; we don’t want to be involved in that side of town.”

The “Journalism Development and Democracy” course designed by Rod Amner which Cedric is referring to above requires students to do quite old-fashioned journalistic work. Instead of sitting safely behind a desk, pc and telephone, they go frequently to the township and talk to people. They use these encounters to produce journalism that speaks to and for people usually excluded from mainstream journalism. Students are wrenched out their comfort zones and into new relationships both with themselves and others.

Despite gradually warming to the ideals of such journalism practice, and becoming more aware of the range of journalism possible, students do not forget the mainstream media with all its glamour and excitement. Indeed, graduating students admit to secretly harbouring the desires that brought them to Rhodes School of Journalism and Media Studies in the first place – they haven’t been replaced, merely driven underground, as Tamara describes: “Everyone’s asking me, ‘What are you gonna do?’ I’m not too sure, I’m very torn ’cause I know I always get the feeling that the journ department doesn’t want you to become a commercial photographer taking for ads and pretty photo spreads in fashion magazines and stuff like that. But they’re just so much fun, they really are! (laughs). They are so much fun and they’re very creative.”

At the same time students are keenly aware of the challenges that face them as they enter a highly competitive field. They are realistic about their ability to “change the world” or indeed find any work at all as Anele describes: “I’ve kind of now resigned [myself] to the fact that it might not be TV that I want to do, or I’m just at the point where I’m like, ‘Just employ me, somebody!’”

These opinions alert us as educators to the cost of our virtuous curriculum. Amidst the host of institutional and technological challenges that face our students as they enter the workforce, we must ask ourselves if we send them out perhaps less well-equipped than they should be for the hard practicalities of journalism. Is the intellectual autonomy and critical reflexivity that we prize enough? And, more importantly, is it durable? Can it survive outside the safety of this space in which a very specific set of values and attributes are fostered and rewarded? To what extent is the intervention we attempt here able to impact on the state of journalism in South Africa? Only future research will be able to give some indication.

For myself, I end on a positive note, drawing inspiration from Bourdieu, a French sociologist who prized university education, even as he critiqued the ways it participated in maintaining social inequalities. He argued that the university is a relatively autonomous space, free from overt influence from the field of economics. For this reason, it is able to inculcate what he termed the “scholastic point of view”, a perspective from which students become aware of the structures of power that shape their and others’ choices. Although these insights arise in a context of relative privilege, they are empowering to everyone who gains access to them. So, while our students leave with this point of view, and enter into a world that is “over determined” (to use another phrase from Bourdieu) by the economic field, they go equipped, at least, with insights and experiences that allow them to take up the challenge these pose when they are ready. The cost of the alternative – not to burden them with such capacities – does not bear calculating.

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Endnotes

1. All names are pseudonyms