

# THE TRANSFORMERS

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

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**S**o, when we think about journalism education at university, we need to think about it in both these ways: it is a means of transforming the student into the kind of journalist or media worker we as educators desire and this transformation takes place within a space in which conservative forces are at play.

At the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies this transformation has a very particular flavour, infused by our vision statement. Here we articulate the kind of revolution that we desire to take place – the young people who we teach must leave us as “self-reflexive, critical, analytical graduates and media workers, whose practice is probing, imaginative, civic minded and outspoken”. However, these are not merely a set of personal and specialised skills. Through a critical praxis we seek to inculcate the attributes, values and practices that we deem necessary for journalists and media workers to engage with our specific South African context, a context mired in inequalities and injustices. In other words, they are a set of relational, intellectual and professional tools designed to equip students to participate in “heal[ing] the divisions of the past and establish[ing] a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights; [and] lay the foundations for a democratic and open society...”. In other words, the transformation that we seek to engender is a political one.

But how does such a transformation occur? And can we assume that the transformation is permanent? These questions are partially answered by examining the other side of the equation introduced earlier, that universities are not just places of transformation, but also of privilege. This privilege is primarily economic – Rhodes is increasingly compromised by withdrawal of state support and as a result it is an expensive university. The majority of students who come here must have access to resources that enable them to afford the fees. In addition, students come to study expecting to graduate into jobs that will enable them to retain or better the lifestyles they have enjoyed before. Inevitably, this privilege comes together with worldviews and values aligned to those aspirations. Here, the connection to the media becomes crucial.

Media are not neutral. Quoting again from our vision statement, where media do not deliberately set out to challenge social injustices, mediations can “contribute to the production and reproduction of the dominant relations of inequality that structure social life, and are implicated in questions of gender, class, culture, race, geography, [and] sexuality”. Ultimately, then, our transformation agenda extends to the transformation of the media, including journalism. In effect, we use our graduates as agents to drive social change within and by the media industries.

But here the argument comes full circle and we need to ask a few questions. One is: “If students come to university, a privileged space, wanting to retain or gain privileges, privileges supported by the media (after all, mainstream media are hardly revolutionary and at most promote change within the limits of the status quo), then how will they respond to the transformations we demand?” Another is: “How do we count the cost of these demands both for ourselves and our students – who pays the price of transformation?”

Challenged by these questions, I conducted a four year longitudinal study in which I tracked students’ perceptions of our curriculum and how their ideas about themselves as journalists or media workers changed over time through their encounter with our programme. The questionnaires and interviews indicated that most students come to Rhodes to study journalism because of the reputation of the school. They assume that the status of this desirable degree, together with the skills that it will endow, will provide an easy entry into the field of journalism or media more generally. For some, in addition, journalism is a means to achieve personal growth through creative writing. Remarks like Daniel’s are not uncommon: “I think I was quite good at English at school and so I thought about writing and then ... I just thought journalism could be quite cool, going around the world, reporting.”

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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 journalisms 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 journal 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