

by Rod Amner

When I proposed to 26 third-year journalism students that our writing class take **inspiration from an idea** pioneered in places as unfashionable and inhospitable as the former Soviet Union and Nepal, I should have expected the **icy stares**. But happily, within five weeks, this winter of classroom discontent, had begun to thaw into a tentative **spring of journalistic and pedagogical innovation**.

In retrospect there were many sound reasons for insisting on a “wall newspaper” (and I will elaborate on these later). But, in truth, the main impetus for the project was the simple fact that my department didn’t have the money to produce a “proper” newspaper.

Newspapers are expensive – the basic costs of printing a modest 1000 copies of a 16-page tabloid were prohibitive.

The act of reading a newspaper has been compared with **immersing oneself in a soothing tub of hot water** – an enveloping, private pleasure. But, just as a deep bath is wasteful in semi-arid South Africa, the privately-owned copies of our newspaper reach precious few readers. **Worse,**

the newspaper enterprise demands the cultivation and processing of millions of alien, water-guzzling trees and the endless use of energy-inefficient processes of production and distribution. In places like Grahamstown, the writing has always been on the wall for newspapers – they are a luxury most cannot afford. A cover price – any cover price – puts the newspaper out of the reach of the 70 to 80% of citizens who are unemployed.

In contrast to a conventional newspaper, 25 copies of our 18-page wall newspaper – potentially reaching thousands of eyeballs in strategically-placed schools, libraries, clinics, taxi ranks, spaza shops and other public spaces all over the city – cost just R200 to print and distribute.

Our wallpaper, which carried the trilingual title of Mamelani/ Listen Up/ Hoor, was simply the latest incarnation of a concept that has a long pedigree. In post-1917 Russia newspapers were seen as an important part of promoting literacy, but were too expensive to produce. So the practice grew of “publishing” the newspaper on an exterior wall where anyone could go to read the news. Since the 1990s, in the remote Himalayan country of Nepal, wall newspapers have been posted in areas where local villagers gather. The objective is to **provide locally relevant news to areas with poor media penetration and literacy**.

For us, the willful placing of a wall newspaper in parts of Grahamstown where other newspapers fear to tread was **a political act** because it uprooted economic logic and disrupted cultural assumptions about who constitutes an appropriate media audience. This willfulness stemmed from the belief that journalists are people with a mission to **stimulate public discourse and serve the public interest**. All literate citizens are necessarily a part of the target audience of such an enterprise.

But, having conquered the economic problem, we were still **uneasy about our public role**. “But, I only want to write about things I am interested in,” opined one of my students. As temporary sojourners in Grahamstown and cloistered in the relative privilege of a green lawn university, many of my middle class Rhodes students feel a profound cultural, social and economic alienation from most potential news sources and news audiences in the city.

How could we claim to stimulate discourse for a public we barely know, understand or even empathise with? One of the wallpaper



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project's answers to this problem was to plug into the department's seven-year-old media training project, called Grab. Every year fledgling youth-based media clubs approach us for training. And in 2003 the 26 third-year writing students broke themselves into five sub-groups, with four working with media clubs at local high schools, and the fifth serving the Eluxolweni Children's Shelter.

I asked my students to write journalistic profiles on these high school learners in an attempt to get to know them better. In addition, guided by poet and lecturer Robert Berold, they wrote **"creative non-fiction"** about their attempts to provide ongoing support and training to the media clubs. This exercise, written in the first person, gave students the opportunity to express anxieties and problems, but mostly served to affirm their commitment to this developmental approach to their journalism work. This work, which we labelled **communication for development, aimed to empower these young people to speak for themselves**. And indeed, all of the media clubs went on to either publish local stories in their own newsletters, explore youth-related issues by using airtime on community radio stations or set up public meetings in their schools using a hybrid public announcement outside broadcasting technology called a "streetcaster".

According to Stuart and Bery (in Servaes et al, 1997) in participatory communication **community members should control the tools of communication, not outsiders (like journalists)** who do a "poor job" of mediating information and representing public discourse. "Participatory communication focuses on who is communicating, because who creates the message shapes its content, perspective and impact." They argue that the main goal of this project may not be the finished media product, but instead the process of possibly mobilising an audience or building awareness or confidence among the producers. Participatory communication thus echoes Paulo Freire's notions of "dialogical communication" and "problem solving education" (Freire, 1996).

This approach had a number of benefits for the wallpaper project. First, **it literally shook my students out of their comfort zones** by translocating them into unknown territory, thereby expanding their ability to imagine a more inclusive, diverse audience for their journalism. Second, their immersion in media clubs allowed the wallpaper journalists to build close, mutually beneficial relationships with potential sources of news – they used these media club members as a fount of story ideas and sourcing possibilities. Third, **they went beyond mainstream journalism by simultaneously empowering these "sources" with the ability to define their own news agenda and write their own stories**. Fourth, some of the stories produced by the media clubs found their way onto the pages of Mamelani, virtually unedited, which gave us a source of authentic grassroots journalism.

Our **concern with the democratic potential of journalism** led us to another relatively new idea, pioneered in the United States by theorists like Jay Rosen (1999), which advocates that journalists should promote and improve the quality of public life and not merely report on or complain about it – a notion

described as "public journalism".

"[Media] should create the capacity for a community to discover itself, including its problems and the ways to solve them. I don't believe journalists should be solving problems. I think they should be creating the capacity within a community for solving problems." (1999; 41)

To this end the Rhodes students helped the media clubs set up a number of school-based participatory discussions, called "streetcasts". For example, over 500 learners, parents and teachers at Nombulelo and Mahlasela high schools had often-heated discussions about key issues affecting young people at the school (followed by wildly-popular dance and singing competitions). As Nancy Fraser (cited in Glasser, 2000) points out, effective participation happens through the "development of distinct groups organised around affinity and interest". School-based groups at the streetcasts had the opportunity to express themselves on topics and in ways that might not have been welcomed elsewhere – they became, in effect, training grounds for agitational activities which could later be directed toward powerful wider publics (for example, toward other better-resourced schools in Grahamstown or toward the Eastern Cape Department of Education in Bisho).

Meanwhile, the Rhodes students **used the grassroots material gathered at the streetcasts as the basis for some of the public journalism** that appeared in Mamelani, which aimed to further the process of communication and exchange of meanings on these topics.

In summary, the Mamelani project did not prepare students to slot comfortably into pre-existing jobs in "the industry". Instead, it was predicated on the belief that **journalistic education should involve attempts to pioneer new journalistic approaches** – like communication for development, literary journalism and public journalism – which could be more appropriate to the needs of South African audiences and hence more likely to contribute to social transformation.

I have come to the view that the best way to teach newspaper journalism is to insist that **students take full responsibility for producing their own newspapers**. But, in order for students to take "ownership" over the wall newspaper I, as the lecturer "responsible", had to give up some – if not all – of my power to define:

- what the publication would be called;
- what stories would be covered;
- what pictures and graphics would illustrate stories;
- how stories would be framed, researched and structured;
- how stories, headlines, captions, fact boxes and other design elements would be written, sub-edited and proofread;
- how the publication would be designed and laid-out on the page;
- where the finished product would be distributed.

Now, this is certainly not how "the industry" operates. There are **complex hierarchies and divisions of labour in "real newspapers"** – editors either tell reporters what to write or, in more progressive newsrooms, they "coach" them on what to write. What they don't do is leave it up to writers to have final control over the whole newspaper.

This anomaly might not have mattered if Mamelani had simply been a training exercise for my eyes only. The problem for me was that we were planning to stick the wall newspaper up all over Grahamstown (under the proud banner of my department) for all to see – and criticise. **A risky business**, particularly since my students had chosen to specialise in writing. They had limited conceptual knowledge of newspaper design, almost no experience in the computer program they were relying on to do the layout work, and little concept of the skills and principles of photo-journalism. **Were my third year students up to it? Would we be a laughing stock?**

Feeling rather insecure, I explained to my colleagues that my unorthodox approach to a writing class nonetheless re-enforced the department's commitment to a holistic approach to teaching writing-editing-design (WED) production skills, and spouted the idea that the main goal of the project was not the finished media product, but the process.

I needn't have been so defensive – the wall newspaper was well received on campus. More importantly, it went some way in challenging conventional boundaries of democracy and journalistic practice in the classroom/newsroom. Above all, I believe my students built a genuinely developmental relationship with members of their target audiences. They appeared to care about the ability of their newspaper to meet at least some of the complex information and knowledge needs of the Grahamstown community. In the end, the journalistic enterprise, not the marks, was the driving force behind the project.

For each edition of Mamelani three tabloid pages were reserved for audience feedback. We were surprised by the number of readers who took the trouble to scribble down story ideas, opinions and feedback on these blank sheets. Appropriately, for what was designed as a transformative media project, it was our readers who had the final word.

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