

by Anthea Garman

**Y**ou would think being located in a small town in one of the most impoverished provinces in South Africa would be a drawback for making media. But a small town is a reachable, convenient laboratory environment for student journalists – **and never more so than when** the National Arts Festival comes to Grahamstown during the winter vacation.

For 15 years Rhodes University's Department of Journalism and Media Studies has produced Cue newspaper to complement the experience of attending the arts festival, then seven years ago CueTV was started to allow broadcast students to put their craft on display. This year – with funding from the Ford Foundation – the department ran CueWire (an agency supplying copy nationally through East Cape News and African Eye News Agency); CuePix (a picture agency servicing both media and theatre companies) **and various collaborations were spawned** – radio students doing packages for SAfm, other students joining local media like East Cape News to produce the WordFest publication, WordStock.

Although we have had the festival on our doorstep for years it wasn't until we as a department started experimenting with the value of special events reporting, and the opportunities it opened up, that we began to really take advantage of the festival.

**Let me backtrack:** When South Africa was declared host of the World Conference Against Racism (2001 in Durban) we felt it was a chance to involve students in international processes and world debates. We took a small group (15 fourth year writers and two staff members) to go and **experience the crush and pressure** of being there. Prior to the conference we studied the issues, swotted up on the political positions, did research on the key subjects for media coverage. Once there we attended press conferences, talked to as many journalists running as many shades of media operations as we could, and generally soaked it all up. Our own media production was modest. **We had a wall back home in the department** waiting vacant for us to file stories by email and cellphone. Students in Grahamstown received the messages, printed out the pieces and put them up daily to inform whoever was interested enough to read.

The experience emboldened us. Having imbibed the atmosphere **we felt braver about actually producing our own media** should we get another opportunity like this.

So last year when the World Summit on Sustainable Development came to Johannesburg we partnered with Prof Anton Harber, head of the Journalism School at Wits University, and the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) to run a news agency for the duration of the main summit.

We took about 40 students (writing, photojournalism and new media, plus masters students) **to Johannesburg for nearly three weeks.** The agency was run by Darryl Accone, with help from Wits part-time lecturers Jo-Anne Richardson, Hugh Lewin and Franz Kruger, and Gwen Ansell and Nicole Johnstone from the IAJ. In addition Nai'em Dollie from the Business Report joined us as a sub and mentor.

The agency mainly supplied the special edition Summit Star – inserted into The Star daily – but also supplied a variety of websites, including the official summit site and the Johannesburg City site.

**Our students grew in leaps and bounds.** They rubbed shoulders with world figures, they got their heads around complex and brain-wrenching issues. Their confidence soared, they negotiated a big and scary city all on their own. They moved into territory that challenged and stretched them. Many of them made contacts in Johannesburg that led to job offers.

We took them home exhausted and altered for the better. We could **see the effects powerfully** in all the courses that followed.

So when the arts festival rolled round again we decided to take a more aggressive approach to using this event for curriculum development purposes. **We no longer assume that just working on something real is good for student journalists,** we plan harder, seek out the funding to support the creation of nurturing newsrooms with mentors and evaluate better just what is working in these environments, so that we can build on this when we return to the classroom.

#### **What we've learned from events reporting:**

- While working on anything real has a benefit, truly great benefits come from setting up a newsroom in which teacher-practitioners create an environment in which all those issues discussed in theory (gender- and race-sensitivity, multi-sourcing, awareness of self interest, reflexivity about the product produced) are made obvious. **"Real" newsrooms certainly expose students to the "real" world in all its harsh realities, but newsrooms in which best practice is set as a standard and talked about often, is a superior environment** in which to begin a career in journalism.
- The space created by these kinds of environments (especially if they are funded) also means that one can practise **more than just bog-standard journalism.** Experiments with WED (writing-editing-design); literary journalism; taking time to craft stories with more depth and perception by going back and doing better and more intense news-gathering and interviewing.
- Use the special event to **immerse the students in knowledge** they would usually bypass. Show them how to efficiently, and within a short space of time, seek out useful information and figure out how to use research for the purposes of journalism.
- Add mentors: seek out practising journalists and people with a wealth of experience who believe in training and its value and expose students to them. The World Summit newsroom was such a powerhouse because **the combination of young energy and talent with wisdom and guidance** was so strong and so effective. It's also very good for students to be exposed to people who are not their teachers and to hear different points of view, or have important things re-affirmed by someone else.
- Evaluate the results. When an experience has been heady, it's tempting to not go down the track of asking where the negative bits were. **Scrutiny is very good for improvement.**
- Use the practice to fuel research. Practitioners in academic environments are not good at the translation into research product, preferring for the media product to stand by itself and not take the further step of turning that into reflection on what it means and what impacts it's having (and there are always impacts). **Research allows the information to be put into an environment where others can comment on and use the information.**
- And thus craft a curriculum that is a combination of teaching and experiencing, **safety and risk.**

The amazing thing about our experiments in event reporting over a period of time is that the students seem to get better and better at it. Yet they are not the same students as we work with new groups every year. Somehow the general atmosphere we have created as a staff seems to **engender an enabling context and the next group of students seems to stand on the shoulders of those before** making it possible not just to repeat but to build on the previous experience.

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