



# The paralysis of politics

by Fern Greenbank

**W**hen it comes to the issue of journalism education, there are dozens of important, relevant and interesting topics to explore as we struggle to identify our place in higher education, defend ourselves against critics and keep pace with a fast-changing world. I would argue, however, that the greatest challenge to journalism educators is not outside pressure, but inside politics.

I recently spent two years in South Africa at Rhodes University pursuing my doctorate in journalism education. At the time of this writing, mountains of paper are piled in my living room in rural Tennessee. Journal articles, conference papers, books and interview notes from around the world have taken over my home. Although I am investigating the potential uses of the documentary tradition for journalism training, all this research and immersion in the general issue of journalism education have **led to this one very clear conclusion**: no amount of discussion about theory vs. practice, teaching qualifications, professional partnerships, liberal arts balance or pedagogy, will lead to a stable framework as long as reflection is considered only a collective effort, not an individual effort.

For starters, there is no credible evidence that journalism education is even largely responsible for the state of the media in South Africa or the United States. If such evidence surfaces, that will be another story.

Neither a Sanef-directed skills audit nor the training needs assessment commissioned by the NSJ and NiZA “prove” that journalism education is largely responsible for a perceived poor-quality journalism in South Africa. Both studies were performed under **unreasonable** time-frames and were limited by inadequate co-operation and sampling groups.

Some fair comparisons can be made between American and South African journalism education curricular issues. In both countries, programmes are “evaluated” based on editors’ perceptions and those perceptions are based on the skill and knowledge base of specific employees. Programmes are rated based on criteria that assume quality is the end result of a universal set of practices. The research does not address the variables such as hiring practices, specific educational experiences and newsroom conditions. It does not explore the student intake profile at different institutions. The research does not address the individual nature of journalism programmes based on the individuals within the programme. Quantitative research, though it has merits, cannot address nuance and politics.

Thomas Kunkel, president of American Journalism Review and the dean of the University of Maryland journalism school, said it best when he reminded us that **“there’s no monolithic entity called journalism education”**.

Even the mammoth study of journalism education, Winds of Change by American consultant Betty Medsger in 1996, failed to provide a grass-roots look at journalism education. **Without proper research to**

**link weaknesses in specific journalism programmes to poor performance in the newsroom, the debate will continue unabated with no resolution.** Until the issue of implementation is addressed, we’ll continue to be engaged in what Everette Dennis has called a “dialogue of the deaf”.

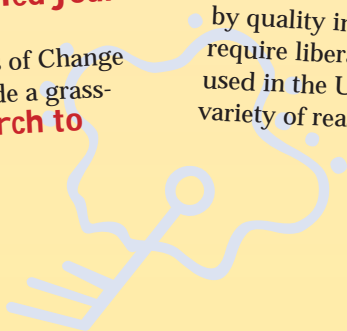
Implementation is affected by institutional policy; however, change is predominantly a people problem. There’s an entire body of literature on change theory, which can be applied easily to curriculum development. If we stop generalising for a moment, we’ll see that there are highly skilled, critical thinking, intelligent young people graduating from all types of programmes every year in every country.

Last year at Rhodes, the fourth year students were, in my view, a truly remarkable group. **In the midst of a renewed, hostile debate** on the quality of journalism education in South Africa, here were 12 young, skilled, passionate, talented journalism students available for employment.

In other words, reality on the ground didn’t match the public, generalised debate. Sure, the Rhodes journalism programme has its own issues, but at the end of the day, at Rhodes, and all across South Africa in tertiary institutions, brilliant graduates can be found. There is no proof that an adequate pool of excellent journalism candidates does not exist. Observation will show you that there are also highly qualified, critical thinking, passionate, committed, intelligent teachers in every country. Tiny programmes with few resources can produce great journalists. Large programmes with every bell and whistle can produce great journalists. The one thing all programmes have in common is teachers.

Journalism education, and the media industry, need more than a cause-and-effect mentality. They need honesty and courage. I’m not naïve enough to think this will ever happen on a wide scale. But, it needs to be said nonetheless. There is simply a reality that the public conversation and research do not acknowledge. And that reality is that few people have the courage to do what is in the best interest of stakeholders (students/public) because it often means it is not in the best interest of the educators, programme or institution. This does not mean that educators are evil in some way, **conspiring to skew public information** or deny students skills to sabotage news organisations. It does mean that educators are as human as editors.

With no formal accreditation system in South Africa, there is confusion regarding which schools offer **bona fide** journalism education, which are general communication programmes, which are staffed by quality instructors, (quality meaning excellent teachers), which require liberal arts supplements, etc. The type of accreditation system used in the United States would be inappropriate for South Africa for a variety of reasons. Even accreditation does not guarantee quality. A





simple (yet difficult to compile) comprehensive and centrally-located listing of all programmes in South Africa purporting to train journalists and communication specialists with published curricula would be useful for the industry, which must be held accountable for hiring practices. At the moment, every listing available in South Africa differs depending on who compiles the data.

To set strict accreditation standards now in South Africa would be **a highly political act** considering the state of inequality and access to higher education and, I believe, would lead to a homogenous pool of available journalists. What is needed is the development of evaluative tools to combat the inherently political nature of implementation.

Dave Berkman, an American journalism professor with more than **20** years experience, had the courage to say aloud what many of us think privately. "The result [of what I've described] is an excessively large academic journalism establishment designed primarily to meet the needs of those who staff it rather than those it's supposed to train," wrote Berkman in the 6 April 2000 edition of Milwaukee's Weekly News.

Berkman's answer to the self-serving nature of journalism education is to call upon outside professional associations and the industry to exert pressure on journalism schools to force a student-centred curriculum.

**Does this bring me back to square one?** I don't necessarily agree with Berkman's solution, because when professional organisations and the industry do not base their suggestions on hard facts, and the realities of academic life, then we are back at square one. When journalism programmes are unable to work through their own political obstacles, even when effective evaluation tools are available, we see programmes that either stagnate or reflect the needs of a few. At the very least, Berkman did get to the heart of the matter. That is, what do we do if our programme's obstacle to curriculum development is ourselves, the teachers?

In response to the recently renewed debate inspired by Columbia University, Betty Medsger summed up the issue this way: journalism education needs to get out of the way of journalism education.

We all have a good general idea about what is needed to perform as a journalist. We know what the curriculum should include. We all generally agree that the media play a crucial role globally, nationally and locally. We can agree on these things, but there will never be, and shouldn't be, a singular formula for a programme.

The reality, again, is that there are many ways to achieve a particular goal. Even though we know what factors should be considered when building a curriculum, **the one factor that matters to most people, if they are truly honest, is "where do I fit into this picture?", instead of asking "how effective is this course of action?"**

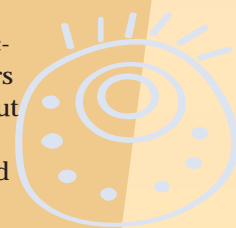
South Africa may be a newly developing democracy, but it has a sophisticated higher education environment. If the media industry wants quality new hires, will only accept quality new hires, treats them well, provides them with a quality work environment and opportunities to produce quality work, you'll see the closing of dozens of programmes and the restructuring of others.

I say this with great confidence, believing it is true, but also believing that consistency and doing the right thing, again leads to politics.

A journalism programme designed to satisfy the staff may or may not be successful, depending on the staff. If you have a programme heavy with practitioners and light on research or theory, how do you increase expertise in one area without threatening the domain of the other? **If your job is in jeopardy** because enrolment numbers fall, do you agree to an intake of students not truly prepared for the rigours of journalism education? If a group of staff lean in one direction, but industry or societal needs require a curriculum bend in another direction, who is going to advocate for the students and society? Even though we know students need broad general knowledge, are you going to give up journalism time to political studies, languages and history? **Some staff have outlived their roles** in a programme, but there is no way institutionally to remove them or force them to "change".

When strong but fair and empathetic leadership is in place, it is possible to put personal fears on the table and create a curriculum that draws on the strengths of the staff, recognises weak areas, while also serving the needs of the students, university and – hopefully – the industry. And, leadership does not have to come from the top.

Two recent studies offer sound recommendations for educational institutions. Implementation of these recommendations, however, depends again on personal courage and integrity. The Southern Africa Media Training Needs Assessment commissioned by the Nordic and SADC Journalism Centre (NSJ) and the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa (NiZA) in 2001, provided a good snapshot of the journalism education environment in Southern Africa. Researchers Colleen Lowe Morna and Zohra Khan admitted the limitations of the study, just as the research team, commissioned by the SA National Editors' Forum (Sanef), found co-operation and sampling lacking.







The Amazing General Knowledge Backpack is the one piece of equipment you cannot be without as a Superjournalist. Snuggly within its perfect back-fitting dimensions it contains a world atlas and timeline (self-updating as the boundaries and political leaders change); a concise history of the world from multiple viewpoints; a definition dictionary and thesaurus; an acronym organiser; the incredible calculator with instant link-up to share prices and add-on economic trend interpreter; a quick guide to current theories with a special postmodernism attachment; a who's who of not only the mainstream but also the fringe; and all this comes with optional add-your-own-special-field-knowledge-builder whenever you change beat or need depth to your reporting.

others, the process takes place in a safe setting where all voices are valued and the result is not only educated students, but also energised staff. This same instructor went to great pains to explain the way South Africa's history plays itself out with regard to authority and group dynamics. For this very reason, good mediated evaluation is all the more needed. **Just as we should admit self-censorship occurs in the newsroom, we should admit it is not always possible for teachers to look at themselves as part of the problem.**

If South Africa's tertiary institutions could do just one thing, the tone and substance of the debate would most likely change and **inertia would be disrupted** – seek out a process of mediated evaluation. An evaluation by a “neutral” person or body could provide programmes with invaluable perspective based on fair criteria such as location, size, tradition, staff qualifications, scheduling, resources, facilities, curricular offerings and most important, personalities. Even those programmes that feel comfortable with their structure and results can use continued input and new perspectives.

For example: at Rhodes University, the Academic Development Centre offers a two-year programme for lecturers leading to a certificate in professional teaching in higher education. At the present time, the programme is voluntary, but I believe it should be mandatory. I don't think an entire programme staff could engage in the reflective programme together, as that would diminish the safety of the speaking space.

In short, the Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education programme could serve as a model for a journalism curriculum reform movement. **It facilitates a transformation from defence to personal responsibility via a simple awareness process.** Teachers explore their own histories, develop teaching philosophies, investigate philosophical viewpoints and engage with teachers in all disciplines. It is hard to imagine a teacher completing the programme without a deep appreciation for the connection between the pedagogical and the personal and equally important, a new respect for the views of others.

In 20-plus years, the journalism education debate has barely changed. It's usually an argument fought by a few based on anecdotal evidence for us all. An honest and courageous effort on the part of media programmes to open themselves up to independent scrutiny using a variety of evaluative tools would certainly decrease the “violence” of institutional life and lead to a curriculum that serves the students as well as those who teach them.

*Fern Greenbank is a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Rhodes University. She holds a master's degree in cross-cultural education and is a former newspaper editor and journalism instructor in America. She can be reached at [mgreenbankf@aol.com](mailto:mgreenbankf@aol.com).*



“Each training institution, whether tertiary or in-service, appears to be trying to provide a little of everything to everyone, without succeeding in providing a good quality service to anyone,” concluded the NSJ/NiZA study.

Among Morna and Khan's recommendations is that universities should focus on producing specialised media practitioners, analysts and researchers. Morna and Kahn recommended that tertiary institutions should focus on what they can do best, creating niche programmes striving for quality, not quantity.

However reasonable that sounds, implementation of recommendations from any study is going to require change, compromise and shuffling of teaching duties and responsibilities. **And we're right back where we started.**

Rhodes University commissioned a study in 2002 to look at its curriculum development process with an eye toward relocating into a new, centralised building. A non-journalist researcher was engaged to perform the study. The result of the quasi-qualitative research is a fascinating glimpse into the personal nature of curriculum development. At the top of the list of recommendations based on hours of interviews and questionnaires? Urgent institution of an open communication process. It would be interesting to see this type of painful but honest study performed in all journalism programmes. I venture to bet the results would be similar in all cases.

One way to encourage programmes to engage in constructive dialogue is to seek outside assistance, and not from the industry. It isn't enough to say that we all should become reflective, action researchers because we are dealing with many personalities in differing stages of pedagogical and personal enlightenment. Politics prohibit all programmes from having dynamic leadership.

Do we want to follow Berkman's recommendation for forced change from outside entities with agendas, or can we find a few brave programmes willing to engage in a little postmodern curriculum deconstruction.

**Great, or even good leadership is hard to come by.** Department heads and chairs are often the ones with the most to lose and are under intense pressure institutionally. If you buy into the theory of personal responsibility, such as the one espoused by American education activist Parker Palmer, you'll agree that leadership does not necessarily have to come from the top. People have to decide for themselves whether they are going to build walls that keep them safe or build a curriculum that serves students. In Palmer's philosophical treatise, *The Courage to Teach*, he calls it the moment when a teacher decides to “live divided no more”.

During my stay in South Africa, one instructor used a phrase to describe the feeling of working within certain environments, not just educational. **He called it the “violence of institutions”.** How many of us have been part of organisations at one time or another that felt oppressive enough to be called “violent”, even if only on an emotional level? For many, it is this environment in which curriculum development occurs. For