

**B**efore the media industry plunges headlong into teaching “general knowledge”, we’d do well to examine both the concept and its history as a recognised subject area. Anyone who schooled in the 1950s, 60s or 70s in an English-language institution, whether here or overseas, may well have experienced a class or activity dubbed “general knowledge” or “general studies”.

The form this took ranged from quizzes, through planned series of lessons or educational films or radio programmes, to odd hours devoted to a teacher’s or lecturer’s hobby (or hobby-horse). Idealistically planned as a “broadening” or “balancing” activity in a narrowly-focused curriculum, “general studies” too often ended up as time that must be filled, **a burden to teachers and at best a diversion for students**, with a very tenuous relationship to any coherent educational approach. Even slowly-changing curricula like those of the City and Guilds certificates are now abandoning “general studies” in favour of what ought to be the more relevant “life skills”.

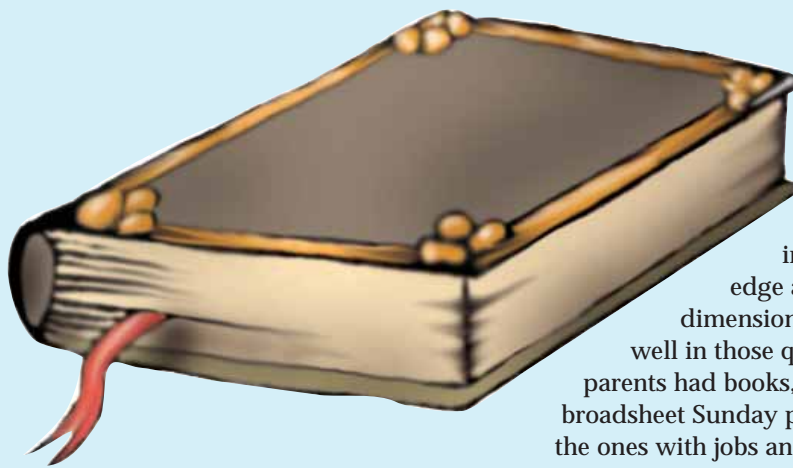
In the secondary and tertiary sectors, teaching “general knowledge” simply didn’t work: it was hard to discern its purpose and even if it had one it was even harder to discern whether it achieved it. That is one reason why it has fallen out of favour. It isn’t, however, the only reason.

**Over past years, the amount of “general” knowledge swilling around in the world and accessible through broadcast and electronic media has increased exponentially.** It’s a media truism that the average US Sunday paper today contains more information than the average citizen of the 16th Century world could have accumulated in a lifetime. And while that doesn’t diminish the value of acquiring knowledge – knowledge is, after all, still power – it makes the potential benefit of a general knowledge class look even more comically puny.

What’s more, the shape and boundaries of “general knowledge” are not definable by academic or logical means. The concept is ideological, often context-dependent and, at worst, the subject of an editor or researcher’s whim. To take one example, as a cultural writer I’d personally support everyone knowing that Brenda Fassie’s first band was called the Big Dudes (that was one of the questions in the Sanef Skills Audit). But, hey, that was a quarter of a century ago; pop music information is ephemeral and, frankly, what’s the point of insisting that all reporters stuff that bit of information into their brains when most of them are never going to use it?

We should not trivialise the problem the Sanef survey uncovered. But nor should we be surprised that the products of an examination system like Matric, which prioritises narrow rote learning, have limited knowledge outside the parameters of **what the exam requires**. It will take more than a few general know-ledge classes or even certificates in general studies to counteract that. It will take what is actually happening – although far too slowly – the reform of secondary and then higher education.

When I was a school kid and



again when I was a teacher in tertiary-level UK institutions, general know-ledge also had a powerful class dimension. The kids who performed well in those quizzes were the ones whose parents had books, took them to the theatre, left broadsheet Sunday papers lying about the home; the ones with jobs and some disposable income. If a culture of reading for interest outside the class-room has not developed, the South African reasons why for the majority of our people should not be **hard to spy**.

But even if Matric were a better exam, rooted in a better system, if more than three-quarters of our population was functionally literate, if everyone had a job and money to spend on theatre tickets and books it would be wonderful, but it wouldn’t solve the 21st Century general knowledge problem.

There are some solutions. The first is a decent HR, mentorship and discipline system in newsrooms. If reporters can’t be bothered finding out how to spell the names of important role-players on their beat, discipline them. **If they still can’t be bothered, send them warning letters and eventually fire them. Sorry, but if they want to take the salary, they must be prepared to do the work.** But don’t forget the other side of that moral equation. Newsrooms have a labour-law duty to help staffers develop and acquire the knowledge they need. That involves mentorship and formal training on reporting, which will allow them to see what readers (and therefore they) need to know to make sense of events. For the press barons, it involves spending on training and development activities.

Former Mail&Guardian newseditor Rehana Rossouw used to run context quizzes for colleagues (senior as well as junior) on topics in the news. It wasn’t only juniors who didn’t know the answers. But the quizzes were part of a structure of research assignments and reading lists so that reporters did, gradually, build up context-relevant knowledge. It had the added advantage of making sure that nobody was allowed to forget the history from which today’s South African news has sprung. And where it worked (which was not universally, because you can lead a horse to water), **it worked precisely because it was not “general” knowledge that was taught, but useful, relevant, news-linked knowledge.**

But to cope with today’s knowledge environment, the real education needs to be not in how to work harder (“learn more facts”) **but how to work smarter.**

If reporters can identify the gaps in a story and know how to research to fill those gaps, it really doesn’t matter that they don’t have the name of the Big Dudes or the capital of Paraguay lined up in a dolorous queue of unemployed facts in their brain, waiting to be called for that tiny piece-job. Decent research skills and the motivation to use them are the modern way to solve the general knowledge problem.

There’s a gap in my general knowledge here, because **I can’t remember the name of the person who said:** Give a journalist a fact and you feed her for one story; teach her how to discover facts and you set up her career for life. But don’t worry, I have an Internet link-up, and that name will be there somewhere...

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by Gwen Ansell

# what

# basics?