

Learning about learning

Young journalists are emerging from learnership programmes with exactly the mix of practical skills and knowledge their newsrooms need; they are employable and – budgets permitting – are employed.

... by Gwen Ansell

It's hard to believe that the National Certificate in Journalism has been on the books since December 2004 – or, indeed, that some of the earlier-registered Unit Standards are already up for revision. But in what seems that short time, all the major media houses in South Africa, and some of the independents, have begun to run learnerships or work skills programmes related to the qualification; the first learners have graduated; and we are beginning to see what works (actually, a great deal) – and what does not (unfortunately, almost as much).

When the qualification was first mooted, fears were expressed that the supposed behaviourism of an “outcomes-based” journalism training programme would narrow and dull those undergoing it. That certainly hasn't happened. The portfolios of stories I've looked at as an assessor have had all the vividness, variety and risk-taking anyone could hope for from beginner journalists. But the massive subjectivity that used to be employed deciding whether a trainee was the “right stuff” for newsroom employment has gone. Instead, learners are evaluated on the work they produce and the thinking behind that work. Assessment is transparent and must prove it was fairly applied; there are no secret reports. All of this is fairer and far more consistent than previous practice, and may even force a crack or two in the glass ceiling the SA National Editors' Forum is so concerned about.

It is far harder than it used to be for young journalists to enter a newsroom still credulous enough to swallow one of those recurring, alarmist, “airborne Aids” rumours. Now the qualification requires all learners to understand the basic science of Aids and the best ways to communicate it to readers. The same is true for the basics of how our democracy is supposed to work. Not all previous cadet programmes and college courses covered such topics; many young journalists are now better informed, with a bedrock of vital, relevant general knowledge, because of the new curriculum.

In the media houses for which I have assessed, they are emerging from the programme with exactly the mix of practical skills and knowledge their newsrooms need; they are employable and – budgets permitting – are employed.

There's a very healthy focus in the qualification on self and time management, and on understanding and dealing with the stresses of the job. Individual work records and tutorial profiling offer the potential for genuine equality of opportunity, by identifying and supporting learners' weak areas and letting them forge ahead on their strengths. Where newsroom mentoring supports this focus, I'm seeing learners who are far more self-aware about their problems and coping strategies than were the old cadets (in some newsrooms deliberately left to sink or swim as a test of “toughness”). Perhaps in the future that might remedy the unacknowledged epidemic of alcoholism our newsrooms swim in.

But that points to the first problem. The curriculum works best in a newsroom that supports and respects it. It entails a planned progression of learning and experience,

so that learners can consolidate and build on basics as the amount and level of practical newsroom work they do grows. Yet I've seen and heard of some newsroom seniors growling that “journalists don't learn from workbooks”, dragging learners out of training sessions to do reporting, and trapping beginners in onerous roles they're clearly not ready for.

So there's a need for better communication in newsrooms generally about the scheme, and for the designated mentor – whatever his or her title – to have sufficient authority to intervene and make changes when things go wrong. There's a need for more designated mentors, and for those mentors to be helped to understand better how adults learn, and how to document the process. A model set of tutorial record documents from the Seta (written in plain language, not opaque SAQA-speak) would help support this process.

What the Seta has provided is a set of curriculum documents comprising self-study texts, exercises and workbooks for learners, with helpful additional commentary for mentors. Some newsroom mentors have ignored these; others have insisted that learners work through them religiously; yet others have used only the relevant parts, to plug gaps in learners' previous knowledge or the formal training available via the newsroom.

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The last approach is the best. The curriculum materials were designed as models. Perhaps over-optimistically, it was hoped that mentors would adapt them to context, for one size definitely does not fit all.

At present, the curriculum materials have two major flaws and two weak areas.

The first flaw is that they are oriented largely towards newspapers, ignoring the fast-growing magazine and multimedia sectors. The second is that they are unilingual, when half our media environment uses Afrikaans and a significant proportion IsiZulu. Particularly in relation to the grammar and usage knowledge sub-editors must have, this short-changes learners. The basic English language section in Skills Programme Two (writing) is a ragbag of random schoolbook grammar drills based on no recognised instructional approach to language teaching and unrelated to the commonest writing problems or needs encountered in newsrooms. Finally, the stress man-

agement section, while useful, is too generic to handle the two key newsroom stressors: reporting on traumatic situations and handling fierce deadlines.

The shortage of materials on journalism beyond newspapers is also reflected in the structure of the qualification and its options. There is a shortage of multimedia options: while “other medium” is a recognised elective path, so far only radio unit standards exist to assess it (although a photojournalism unit standard is on the way).

Other structural issues need resolving too, particularly around Skills Programme Nine (small business topics designed to support independent local newspapers), which assumes experience, authority and information no media house cadet or intern would have. There's also a mismatch between the rules of combination (the way electives can be combined) as set down in SAQA regulations, and the far more rigid rules applied by the Mapp-Seta for approving learnerships.

But the major problems are not in content or learning, they are in the bureaucracy that is supposed to support them. A ridiculously-weighty imported terminology and a Byzantine labyrinth of regulations and requirements deter smaller media houses from even trying to board the train. Some of the resource agencies and experts contracted by the Seta seem to understand the spirit

of the SDA and the principles of integrated assessment at Level Five far less clearly than those of us doing the work. And as my colleague Paddi Clay points out in her article here, these bureaucratic problems continually stall implementation.

That's the bad news. For facilitation and curriculum, the problems can be resolved with only a little more discussion, communication and, of course, resources. It is not only junior journalists who are “on learnership”. Those of us involved in implementation and assessment are also learning as we go. When I reflect on the portfolios from young writers I have just assessed – lively stories; intelligent commentary; acute self-criticism and spot-on summaries of “how I'd do it differently next time” – I still think it remains a journey worth taking.

Whether the same is true of battling the bureaucracy (in a cliché that no journalism learner should ever be allowed to employ), only time will tell.

Q&A

Media24 is now in the second year of running full-scale learnership programmes under the Level 5 National Certificate in Journalism. The company runs a certificate in journalism learnership over one year for 25 learners. Dolf Els and Tobie Wiese of Media 24 offer the following reflections on their experience of the programme.

Q Have you used the curriculum workbooks provided by the Mapp-Seta? Do you have any comments on these?

A Yes. The workbook is useful and promotes self-study and the material is generally good and relevant. However, non-English speaking learners do not get as much value because some language-specific skills programmes (eg Skills Programmes 2 and 4) focus on English only. The examples and tasks are of no use to those who work in languages other than English. It means that a lot of time needs to be spent on translating and substituting materials. Some modules need to be renamed or expanded, eg the Production Process module which has little to do with production; and Reporting Government, which also deals with reporting on democracy and the role the media can play in inculcating democratic values. Skills Programme 9 (Managing in the Workplace) should be included in the new management elective and not in sub-editing. It does not fit in with the sub-editing skills programme. The required outcomes are also unrealistically high for a Level 5 qualification; one can't expect junior/learner journalists to function in a managerial role at this level.

Q Does your newsroom have designated mentors/coaches to tutor learners? Describe how day-to-day support for the programme is provided.

A We have a designated mentor/coach in each newsroom who works with the learners on a daily basis. The mentor/coach also completes a monthly progress report on each learner (after discussing it with the learner) and submits it to the head of the programme. The head of the programme has one-on-one interviews with each learner approximately every two months (sooner, if the monthly reports indicates a problem).

Q How are the coaches and mentors supported?

A They've done mentoring/coaching courses. They also enlist senior journalists in the various news departments to help with the daily coaching. We rotate the learners through the various news departments and senior staff there also lend a hand. They also have the full backing of their editors.

Q Does the content of the curriculum (the skills and knowledge detailed) meet your newsroom needs?

A Mostly, except for the language-specific modules (Skills Programmes 2 and 4) referred to above. It might be a bit over-ambitious in some respects, requiring learners at entry-level to master two specialist beats in a relatively short period of time. Also, the competency required in Skills Programme 9 (Managing in the Workplace) is beyond the reach of most learners at this level. The module on media law is also on the thin side. This section's materials could be expanded.

Q What are the biggest challenges you face in running the programme?

A Mapp-Seta bureaucracy! We spend a lot of time dealing with red tape and completing forms – time which could rather be spent on implementing the programme. We are also required to submit documents timeously, but the Seta takes its time, external moderation of last year's assessments will only be done in August of this year. The result is that learners who completed the learnership at the end of 2006 will only be certified towards the end of 2007! Another challenge is the fact that the learners are spread all over the country. We have learners in six cities. It poses logistical and financial challenges. Also a big challenge is getting enough suitable black Afrikaans-speaking candidates despite a huge recruitment exercise. Then there is always the possibility of learners leaving the programme partway through to pursue other interests or (mostly) because of better job offers from elsewhere. (The prospects of immediate employment with a bigger salary sometimes count for more than having to sweat through a learnership!)

Q What comments have learners given you about the content and methods of the programme?

A The learners appreciate the fact that they are fully exposed to the newsroom environment and its different departments. They like the fact that they get as much opportunity as possible to work as journalists under the guidance of a mentor/coach and that they are given challenging assignments and not merely run-of-the-mill stories. Some of them commented on the fact that they were familiar with a fair amount of the learning materials, although most saw it as an opportunity to refresh their minds!

The learners talk

Elijah Moholola has been appointed as a sports writer with City Press in Johannesburg after he completed the learnership. "I think the learnership is essential for anyone entering a newsroom. After two degrees (from the universities of Limpopo and Rhodes) I didn't expect that I would learn a lot from such a training programme but I was surprised as it was not just a revision. The material was very relevant and the case studies quite challenging." Moholola also found the section on life skills, like how to handle stress, very helpful. "That is something that you will not learn at varsity. Yet it is very helpful as you find yourself in stressful situations almost every day."

Lucille Botha has been appointed as a reporter at *Landbouweekblad* magazine after completing the learnership at *Die Burger* newspaper. Botha said the learnership made it much easier for her to adjust to the practical environment of a newsroom and to apply the theory taught at university. It also afforded her opportunities to enhance her skills as a working journalist. "I enjoyed the workshops, especially the ones on HIV/Aids and Media Law."

Kgomotso Mathe says when you enter a programme like this, you start thinking: "classroom set-up and assessments, another university environment". But that was not the case with this programme. You have a far more interactive setting. Someone who has never done journalism before might need 110% attention to get started, and that is not a problem because everyone is judged on an individual basis. And because of the support you receive and the learning materials, you can sail through with no difficulty – that's if you communicate with the relevant people when needed.

The most amazing thing about this programme is that you have a support structure that builds you and encourages you even when you think you are out of the game – not only from the people that you work with everyday, but from every person associated with the programme. Mapp-Seta inspections allow you to express your concerns about the programme, and you also have the chance to voice your opinion of what you think they can do better to make the programme bearable.

I think the chance to attend the kinds of courses offered on this programme is the best opportunity for any aspiring journalist. Even with a commerce background, I still did not know how to do proper company analysis and simplify the results. It's not about what you know, but how you can use what you know to improve yourself, and for me that is the main thing that I picked up on this programme.

There is nothing as frustrating as entering an industry and finding that you do not have a proper basis.

When I came onto this programme it wasn't a test to see if I could write, but more "What can I get out of it?", which so far has been a positive result. When I finish the programme, I will have been fully prepared, from the basic writing and editing through to the legal side of journalism.

Though it might be a bit of a challenge to be on the programme, it is rewarding at the end, when you know you have put together a good portfolio which could be your ticket to greater heights in this industry.

I may not have much on my portfolio at this point, but I do believe that it would be looking good come the end of this year. And the little that I have, I am very proud of: not every commerce student has that urge to enter a creative industry of this nature. I look forward to adding more stories of value to my portfolio, because this is my platform to make people see that I can rise to the standards.

And the certificate, I believe, will be an added bonus to go with the portfolio. It is also a great reward after putting in so much into your portfolio stuff.

A learner speaks

Tamlyn Stewart, who undertook a learnership on the Johncom Pearson learnership programme reflects here on the section of the programme that required the compilation of a portfolio and the assessment that followed.

"The Manual" was a phrase seldom uttered by the 13 trainees on the Johncom Pearson learnership programme. When it was reluctantly, fearfully, brought up in conversation, it was usually followed by a heavy sigh and a shake of the head. Or a heartfelt, "Eish..." as the speaker contemplated the impossible task of Completing The Manual.

"The Manual" was part of the Mapp – yes that's a triple 'p' – Seta learnership. Our fate, we thought, rested in the Competent Completion of The Manual.

But I breathed a sigh of relief when I was told that the 300-plus page tome would not solely determine my future career, or lack of future career as a journalist.

We also needed to build up a well-stocked contact book, put together a portfolio of our best pieces at the end of the year, and not cock up our internships at the various publications.

I was, I admit, rather terrified on my first day as an intern at *Business Day*. A vast newsroom filled with veteran journalists, all with specialised beats, all with bulging contact books.

They seemed to know what companies were going to do before they did it and they always had the inside scoop.

My first day I was seated at a desk next to one of the veterans that managed to turn out at least two, sometimes three great pieces a day, and still have time to sort out her medical aid admin stuff over the phone. I spent most of the day reading the *Business Day* in detail, trying to think of a story idea I could pitch to the news editor. When I did try to pitch story ideas to the news editor, each attempt would meet with a similar response: He would lean back in his chair, cross his arms and grimace as if I'd forgotten to put deodorant on, and sigh. Then he'd shake his head and say "No, maybe for a feature... but it's not a news story."

This continued for the next eight weeks. Fortunately I did get to write stories, but usually they were assigned to me by the news editor. My "pitching" was lacking. Nevertheless, the reporting and writing experience was excellent, and I managed to slowly build up a portfolio of strong stories.

After two months at *Business Day* I served a two-month stint at a community newspaper, where I covered things like flower shows, pineapple farming, eisteddfods and retirement home AGMs.

Then followed two months at Summit TV where I learnt to produce business and finance news stories under very tight deadlines. The skills I learnt were invaluable – understanding a complex subject, getting to the "so what?" straight away, and then translating it into something understandable in a 30-second story.

Compiling a portfolio at the end of the year was in itself a learning experience. I had to reflect on what kind of stories I'd done and how well I'd covered them. By the end of the year I'd learnt how to find the "so what?" in a story and, looking at some of my earlier stuff, I could see where I'd missed the point on some stories, or really nailed it in others. Putting together a "brag book" of my best stuff was also very useful – it helped me realise where my strengths lie, and as a bonus, it was also quite an ego-boost to see that I had produced some good quality stuff.

As for the more formal assessment – the interview with Paddi Clay, examining my portfolio and answering questions about reporting skills, ethics, and stress, was useful. It wasn't particularly stressful because we'd been well prepared throughout the year, to meet all the "competency" requirements.

At the end of each internship the news editor of the publication had to complete an assessment sheet, evaluating our reporting skills. These assessments varied from brutal stuff that made my toes curl, to glowing. But the brutal comments were the most constructive.

Overall the learnership experience was brilliant. The opportunity to work in a variety of news environments, to learn various skills and still have the security blanket of the programme was great. Going from the programme into a "proper" job was relatively painless thanks to all the training I'd had, and after seven months as a financial reporter for Summit TV, my own contact book is bulging, and occasionally, I get a scoop or two of my own.

Opportunities like this don't come by often, where you get offered an opportunity for practical experience and a certificate to go with it, so one needs to grab it with both hands.

Journalism training in SA – a glossary

Institutions and legislation

SDA – The Skills Development Act: the overarching legislation framing the powers, responsibilities and rights of all those involved in or contributing towards workplace-based training and national skills development.

The Public Finance Management Act – exactly what it says: among other things, allocates oversight for the financial management of the Setas to Parliament via its portfolio committees.

DoL/DoE – Department of Labour/Department of Education. Jointly tasked by the SDA with national skills development but too often involved in a tug-of-war about who does what and how. SAQA and the ETQAs are often seen as representing the standpoint of the DoL, the Council for Higher Education (**CHE**, which has oversight of universities) and Umalusi, the standpoint of the DoE, but interdepartmental relations are probably far more complex than this. At present, the DoL appears to be winning the turf war, but DoE retaliation can't be far away.

NQF – National Qualification Framework: the envisaged structure that will allow for more rational career-pathing by establishing comparability in levels and qualifications across all educational institutions from Adult Basic Education and Training (**Abet**) through vocational, college-based Further Education and Training (**FET**) to university undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

Setas – Sector Education and Training Authorities: the bodies responsible for implementing the Skills Development Act in various employment sectors and awarding accreditation, qualifications and credits.

Mapp-Seta – The Media, Advertising, Printing, Packaging and Publishing Seta, responsible for, among others, journalism training.

ETQAs – Education and Training Quality Assurance authorities; the quality assurance bodies for the Setas.

SAQA – The South African Qualifications Authority: the oversight and facilitation body for the Setas and their work; supports the development of and registers qualifications.

Umalusi – the overall quality assurance body for the general and further education and training bands of the education system.

Philosophies and policies

BEE – Black Economic Empowerment

Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) – Highly complex, controversial and worth an article in itself! But, as it relates to SA journalism training, specifies a learning and assessment design that focuses on the practical competencies a learner can demonstrate, rather than on more abstract and subjective criteria. Has been attacked as neo-liberal and behaviourist, but easily incorporates affective areas such as ethics and decision-making, does not make any teaching methods or lesson structures compulsory, and allows educators to take diverse paths to the same goal.

Programmes

National Certificate in Journalism – the full, workplace-based qualification designed by a team of journalism educators and trainers, registered with SAQA in 2004 and supported by Mapp-Seta workbooks and materials. It is at Level Five, the highest FET band, and, in the current proposed **HEQF** (Higher Education Qualification Framework) equivalent to first-year undergraduate study.

The certificate consists of a number of **Skills Programmes**. The *fundamental* and *core* skills programmes (which include basics such as reporting, interviewing, general newsroom skills, self and time management, and understanding and reporting on HIV and Aids and how government and democracy work) lay the basis for a range of *elective* skills programmes including multimedia reporting, community journalism, first-level newsroom management, sub-editing and more.

Unit Standards – the building-blocks of qualifications and skills programmes. While it is simplest in lay terms to think of them as "subjects", in fact they set out the competencies a learner must be able to demonstrate in a particular area, and the standard to which those competencies are required. Each unit standard attained brings the learner a number of nationally-recognised, transferable qualification credits based on notional hours of study.

Learnerships – full programmes offered to entrants to the profession which allow for qualification against the complete National Certificate in Journalism entailing 60% practical experience and 40% theoretical study. Currently all the programmes offered are one year long and take learners with an undergraduate degree or equivalent, but the rules do not preclude longer programmes for entrants starting at a lower educational level. Workplaces can receive a grant from the Seta for each enrolled learner and must fulfil demanding reporting requirements.

Work Skills Programmes – less extensive programmes offered to entrants to the profession, which cover only a selection from the skills programmes contained in the National Certificate and may (but do not necessarily) fill a shorter time frame. These too can be grant-supported and reporting requirements are slightly less onerous.

Role-players

Accredited providers – both workplaces and education and training bodies can register with the Seta to provide either full learnerships, work skills programmes, specific unit standards or merely specific theory components. Registration involves a thorough enquiry into the status and capabilities of the institution, including most importantly assurance that it can maintain an adequate **QMS** (Quality Management System), adequate learner records and internal systems to develop continuous monitoring and improvement of provision.

Assessor – Assesses the work of learners at the end of their training period by a range of means usually including a portfolio of stories published. Assessors must have a recognised assessor certificate from the ETDP-Seta (education, training and development practices) or equivalent and be accredited with the Mapp-Seta. Trainers can assess – but not moderate – the programmes they teach.

Moderator – Moderates the work of assessors to ensure it complies with national standards. Moderators can be internal to the providing institution, but cannot moderate programmes they have taught. Moderators must be certificated by the ETDP-Seta or recognised equivalent and registered with the Mapp-Seta.

Verifier – appointed by the Seta to provide external oversight of provision, assessment, moderation and QMS via site visits, interviews etc.