# The gap between

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## what 'ought' to be and what students want

"**T**here's no curriculum! There's no curriculum!" The young man in the focus group was so frustrated that he had to repeat himself, not just once, but several times. I had just asked the group what their feelings were about their second-year coursework.

His sentiments were echoed by many of the students in the group, all of whom had passed the rigorous application process into second year at Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies.

None of them seemed happy about what or how they were learning or the direction in which they seemed to be going. Their evident sense of exasperation and annoyance made me pause for thought when the interview came to an end.

As a member of staff at the school, I have participated in the many hours of debate and reflection that has resulted in what many consider to be one of the most demanding, critical and engaging journalism and media studies curricula on the continent.

This reputation precedes us: 80% of about 300 first year journalism and media studies students come here each year because of Rhodes' reputation for academic excellence, specifically to study journalism and media studies.

So, what is the cause of the discrepancy between the expectations that draw students here to Rhodes, and what for some students proves to be profound disillusionment with the subject of journalism and media studies?

In 2008 I began an empirical longitudinal study conducted via electronically-distributed and self-administered questionnaires, supplemented with focus groups and individual interviews, in which I explore the changing expectations and experiences of first-year students as they traverse the four years of the degree.

In particular, I have been interested in finding out what students' perceptions are of the field of media before they enter the university and how these might inflect students' understandings of the school's curriculum, structured to fulfil the vision statement of producing "self-reflexive, critical, analytical graduates and media workers".

The vision statement clearly positions the department vis-a-vis its identification with the South Africa Constitution, its critical understandings of media industries within the structural inequalities of the South African socio-political context, and its place within the academy. While vocationally-oriented, it emphasises independent, critical and civic-minded journalism, in many cases the obverse of what has drawn the students to the course in the first place. While journalism as a profession has the advantage of being "visible" to its consumers through its products, the academic discipline of media studies and the role it potentially plays in fostering critical and self-reflexive media practice is opaque to students, to whom it is an entirely new – and not necessarily welcome – subject.

The question of what kinds of students the school attracts is not a new one. There have been occasional concerned enquiries – see Carol Christie's story in RJR 22 http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjrpdf/RJR_no22/who_are_they.pdf – about our students' lack of a sense of history, poor general knowledge, disinterest in current social and political issues, and a move away from books and newspapers to digital sources for news and information (with all that this implies in a deficiency of in-depth knowledge and focused and sustained attention).

I suggest that these observations can only take us so far. In a sense, they are the lament of the traditional print media with which journalism education has aligned itself in the past.

It is not surprising then that these anxieties serve as a self-evident explanation for some of the current woes besetting journalism in South Africa.

Globally, in the last decade, there has been a steady current of debate around the "quality" of journalistic reporting and writing, and the "crisis" of public confidence in the profession.

In South Africa this debate is articulated through a lens focused on the deficiencies and needs of the local context, which includes depressingly low skill levels and the urgent need for racial transformation of the media industries. The two reports commissioned by the South Africa national Editor's Forum (Sanef 2002 and 2005 http://www.sanef.org.za/programmes/quality/) are testimony to media leaders' grave concern over the parlous state of key journalistic and editing skills in South Africa.

However, while necessarily of concern to the academy – which provides the industry with so many of its workers – the debates in the academic literature do not focus much on "mere skilling".

This is because in the SA context, an exclusive focus on skills could be seen as inimical to critical understandings of the historical place and role of journalism in South Africa and the necessity of re-visioning its present and future roles in a developing democracy post-apartheid.

What journalism's democratic role "ought" to be and what contribution the academy and its graduates can make to a wider process of social transformation, of which the media is part, thus forms a central theme around which the conceptualisation and structure of our curriculum is organised.

Which brings us back to our frustrated students. What is journalism to them, and what do they think is its role in contemporary South African society? How do they come by their understandings of journalism, and how do these understandings impact on the ways in which they approach their learning?

The Rhodes School of Journalism and Media Studies attracts nearly 300 students a year: these numbers do not suggest that young people see an industry in crisis. Instead, evidence points the other way – that they perceive the media to be a land of infinite possibility in which to build an ideal career and lifestyle, developing their own media empires, travelling the globe for *National Geographic*, editing *Vogue* or reporting from the frontlines of an exotic war.

Many want to be "real journalists", citing somewhat stereotypical examples of well-known war or investigative or fashion journalists. Few talk about going back to their home towns or local communities and working for social justice through the local media.

This leaves us as teachers in a difficult position: not only do students' preconceptions about the journalistic field and their potential place in it have to be challenged, in line with the vision of the school (and the ensuing resistance to change empathetically managed), but we must offer an alternative position or positions for students to occupy that entice, enrich and provoke new understandings of what journalism, and media more broadly, can be.