

# PUTTING JOURNALISM EDUCATION IN ITS PLACE

## a critical pedagogy of place experiment

By Nkosinothando Mpofo

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**T**he business models of legacy media organisations are under immense pressure from the corrosive power of online media. Business models lay out the preconditions for journalism organisations to survive and succeed and these in turn have implications for the skills and capabilities that are seen as essential for the practice of journalism and therefore for the training of students who will be a good fit and be able to work in such (market-driven) environments. But several scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with this approach to journalism education.

Mensing argues that such an approach “is a disservice to students who learn skills and techniques that reinforce one-way communication, in the process being socialised for the newsroom and thereby neglecting critical inquiry” (2010). This form of training breaks the connection that journalism has to the society as a watchdog of democracy and a platform for citizens to make their voices heard. The worry is that ‘training’ prepares students to fit fluidly into news market-oriented organisations rather than educating them with an inclination to ethical public engagement in service of those whose voices are muted by dominant for-profit models of journalism that often reflect the voices and interests of the socially-powerful and empowered. Journalism education (rather than ‘training’) in the service of deepening democracy, it is argued, requires a reorientation of journalism curricula and pedagogies

(MacDonald 2006; Carey 2000). In a country where the majority of people are poor and poorly-educated, reorienting higher education to serve the interests of society involves making opportunities available for students to participate in communities as citizens and to also see themselves as responsible partners in and with communities rather than as privileged consumers in a market that is worlds apart from the needs of citizens whose lives are often far removed from centres of power and consumption.

Recognising the challenges that elite institutions of higher education may face in relation to developing socially responsible graduates, the 1997 White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education calls upon universities “to promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes”. However, what, in practical terms, might be meant by the development of a sense of citizenship and social responsibility as one of the missions of higher education in South Africa has been the subject of wide debate. Our NRF-supported research focus at Rhodes University’s School of Journalism and Media Studies is developing the notion of ‘place’ as a viable starting point for the renewal of curriculum and pedagogy. Our argument is that what has variously been termed ‘place-conscious education’ and a ‘critical pedagogy of place’ holds exciting possibilities for the transformation of journalism education in South Africa.



Soweto by Jodi Bieber

### *A critical pedagogy of place*

The notion of a 'critical pedagogy of place' sees the convergence of two mutually supportive traditions – place-based education and critical pedagogy. Place-based education describes an approach to learning that endeavours to connect students with local places, allowing them to participate in those places in the process generating knowledge, understanding and even a sense of caring for those places.

Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) described place-based education as an educational philosophy that is: "inherently multidisciplinary and experiential; broader than the notion of 'learn to earn' and primarily concerned with connecting place with self and community".

Thus place-based education moves away from the uniform and standardised curriculum to one that is "focused on the unique strengths, histories and characteristics of local places" (Graham 2007). Place-based education emphasises the study of places and is motivated by the desire to contribute to the well-being of the people who inhabit them.

Place-based education thus "embraces the experience of being human in connection with others" in a particular locale which has particular (historical, geographical, social, cultural, economic, biological, etc) characteristics (Gruenewald 2003). While place-based education has been criticised for taking a celebratory approach to place, a critical pedagogy of place is characterised by an emancipatory, transformative agenda (Bowers 1993). Critical pedagogues such as Freire, McLaren and Giroux consider education to be political and call upon teachers and students to become transformative intellectuals with an ability to identify and redress the injustices of an oppressive world. Critical pedagogy thus has human liberation as its key animating component and challenge the individualistic nature of education whose tendency is to support and further entrench the dominant and oppressive status quo in the education context.

For Freire, critical pedagogies must lead learners to what he calls *conscientizacao* (1970, 1995). *Conscientizacao* or "becoming conscious" is seen as

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the ability to perceive social, political and economic injustices in society and to have the courage and audacity to take action against injustice. To enable coming to consciousness, Freire and Macedo (1987) proffer the notion of 'reading the world in order to read the word'. That is to say, understanding the (worldly) context in which one experiences the (academic/theoretical) word is a necessary condition for the emergence of the capability to reflect and to act on reflection in ways that advance justice rather than reproducing injustice. At the centre of critical pedagogy is the ability of pedagogy to support coming to consciousness among students of injustice as a necessary condition for taking transformative action in society.

Gruenewald thus describes a critical pedagogy of place as place-based education that aims to:

1. identify, recover and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our environment (re-inhabitation) and
2. identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit people and places (decolonisation).

Reinhabitation and decolonisation are seen by Freire as means for acting on one's 'situationality' or conditions of existence. Learning to live in a place could mean pursuing the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological lives of the places people inhabit. Decolonisation on the other hand involves learning to recognise disruption and injury and to address their cause: to confront a dominant system of thought in order to be able to craft just and sustainable ways of being in the world.

A critical pedagogy of place is thus concerned with the effects of social inequalities and power imbalances, seeking to question the established order and encouraging working for the common good including a commitment to environmental sustainability and social justice. A critical approach to place-based education is seen as an approach that is grounded in the peculiarities of the local community that provides the context in which particular educational exchanges occur, and attentive to how power and culture work through places to enhance or limit human potential. Therefore, it presents a critical perspective as a starting point for education that promotes civic engagement, democratic practices and fosters values largely absent from individualistic approaches to education.

### *The place project*

In 2015 we experimented with these approaches to learning by integrating 'place' into the Journalism and Media Studies first year (JMS1) course at Rhodes

University. We sought to connect learning to the local social, ecological, cultural, and historical contexts of the university. Students first wrote about where they had "packed their suitcases" before arriving at Rhodes, and went on to writing profile articles on each other. This process began to attune these proto-journalists to the profound diversity of students who arrive at Rhodes' gates every year.

The students were then tasked with doing some civic mapping – using a set of tools and techniques designed to help journalists better understand the complex layers of civic life, and the relationships between these layers, in a diverse community. One layer is the official layer of public servants and political representatives. Another is the private layer – people's private, domestic spaces and lives. But there are others – 'third places' such as places of worship, clubs and community gatherings, and the quasi-official layer of civic organisations and NPOs. While civic mapping has been employed as a way of narrowing the gap between news organisations and their audiences and between citizens and access to political influence, we were also interested in civic mapping as a teaching tool which would provide students with a more acute sense of what it might mean to be richly located in a particular local context – in this case Rhodes University.

Throughout, we explored aspects of Rhodes history, politics and sociology in the classroom, but most crucially we asked students to identify and enter a variety of third places in the university. They had to work hard to observe and understand the norms of these spaces before easing their way into community conversations, being careful to avoid intrusive or rapid-fire questions. In this way it was hoped they would tap the thinking of a diversity of people by listening for how they described both their personal concerns and the big issues.

The mapping was conducted in the heat of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign. And when the 240 journalism students explored with citizens in the various layers what it was they were thinking about in terms meaningful to them, they discovered that debates around the transformation of the university overwhelmingly dominated third place discussions. They went on to identify and profile civic leaders of one kind or another (official, quasi-official, connector, catalyst, expert).

All of this inquiry informed the second phase of the course, which entailed the production of journalism that attempted to integrate citizen concerns and viewpoints into the construction and reporting of stories. The journalism students moved well beyond purely reporting events to become

vehicles for public education, debate and structured discussion of public issues. The journalism aimed to connect the community, engage individuals as citizens and to help public deliberation in search of solutions. For their final assessment, students were asked to write a reflexive essay.

Framed as a critical pedagogy of place, then, the teaching of JMS 1 aimed for decolonisation: a pedagogy that provokes confrontations with a dominant system of thought in the hopes that students learn to recognise disruption and injury in their local places and to identify ways to address their cause; and creates the space for students to reinhabit their places. The latter would mean learning how to live well in a place which may include pursuing social action that improves the social and ecological life of the places students' inhabit.

The study, which took a phenomenological and ethnographic approach, found that there was resistance to the approach we took to teach them journalism practice and this often emanated from the discomfort which comes from being displaced and then emplaced in unfamiliar places. This unfamiliarity and displacement related not only to the physical embodied experience of being in unfamiliar environments but also to the intellectual displacement of being asked to do unexpected things that students did not associate with what their prior experience had taught them to anticipate their journalism education would be about. As one student explained: "I didn't really want to do civic mapping, I felt for me it was uncomfortable and it definitely put me out of my comfort zone. It's not something that I thought I would typically be exposed to in Journ. It's not the same as writing an opinion piece..."

Another student said: "I feel like the textbook has a lot of information in it and we were not told to use it as much as we should." Their displacement was thus also a pedagogical one – from traditional styles of teaching (such as text book-based teaching) and what they anticipated would be the content of a journalism course.

Reading the world in order to read the word is a founding idea in critical place-based education. The course was therefore interested in inviting students to understand the context in which their learning is taking place. This process of reflection was powerful in provoking some participants to think critically about the enterprise of journalism. As one student said: "I thought it was really interesting...because you are involved with people who are actually the ones who have to live with the consequences of whatever is going on, they are the people who have to face the reality. But I also thought it was really interesting because it sort of started opening up the question who do we create this journalism for? What is the market? Is it market-driven and should it be? Should you be writing certain things because a certain kind of person will buy? It was just an interesting way to explore those questions."

Another student said: "I think it's very easy to just think of journalism as probably going to interview people, writing a blog and trying to write something which you can google it. But when we were introduced to civic mapping it made me realise that there is so much more that is happening, so much more that you would not be necessarily exposed to in any other way but going out there and talking to people and finding out what is going on. Like I said that is not something that I can be comfortable with but it can generate so much content especially for local newspapers."

To engage students in learning which goes beyond the classroom context can allow them to understand the word – academic knowledge and debates – in ways that are informed by, and emanate from, reading the world. Such an approach to education becomes part of a socially responsive process of reflection, critical thinking and transformation. Journalism education that critically embraces place as a starting point for learning could ignite the restorative possibilities of a journalism practice which does not aim towards an imagined audience but will work with the inhabitants of real places to build functioning communication structures that are relevant to local conditions, needs and characteristics, in all their complexity, and that support democracy.

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