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Learning the skills of editing pictures.

Professionalism and Training for Mass Communication

Challenges and Opportunities for Southern Africa

By Guy **Berger**

Judging by the amount of activity that we dedicate to media training, Southern Africa exemplifies a strong belief in the mantra "no train, no gain". But it's not quite clear if the reality actually matches the theory of this slogan – whether all this training is delivering the expected benefits. The problem is that it is a very tricky task to track just what difference, if any, training makes to improving the media in the region. And even more, what difference – if any – this in turn makes to politics, economics and social life in Southern Africa.

Yet, considering the many resources invested in training as an input to the media, it would be nice to have some sense of results on the output side. There's a sneaking suspicion that much energy is going to waste. This is especially in regard to higher education institutions where the gap between graduates and the goings-on in the media is such that the value of tertiary training can come with no guarantees.

For instance, it is not even clear that many graduates either want to, or will, get jobs in the media – and if they do, whether conditions are conducive to them implementing what they have learnt. We assume, and hope, that there will be a link, and most of us understandably act as if this were so. But romantic beliefs that training automatically results in "gain" no longer wash with many of the stakeholders in the business.

It is indeed complex to try to establish the connections between training and media trajectory – and not just in Southern Africa. However, if we want to raise the "productivity" of teaching and learning efforts, we do need some notion, beyond anecdote and "feel" of "what's working" and "what's not". How else can improvements be made – and measured? In turn, this quest requires a degree of empirical knowledge of the relationship between people as products of training, and the performance of the media. The point is that training is not just about trainer-trainees, but a third party as well: the media industry. Employers can make or break the impact and relevance of training.

Tracking the results of training

The issue was highlighted in 1998 when the Nordic SADC Journalism Centre (NSJ) – a training centre for the region, headquartered in Maputo – commissioned research into the impact of their short courses. The job fell to me. Amazingly, worldwide there seemed to be no prior research on the topic. However, by drawing on the methodology of environmental impact assessments, a number of principles could be adapted (and these were ultimately written up as a booklet, see Berger, 2001). First was the need to work against a base-line: what is the situation on which an impact was expected to be made? Second, what is the scope of impact – is it on the trainee,

the newsroom more widely, the media product… or even the indirect impact on society?

The NSJ study tried to look at the entire scope – operating with different baselines and indicators for each aspect. For individual journalists, before-and-after assessments were done retrospectively using the subjective perceptions of the trainees and their supervisors. But there were even less objective baselines for newsrooms, media content and societal significance. Nonetheless, the NSJ research showed up some interesting things. One was that there was a future need to track actual, rather than perceived, gains on the part of the individual – through testing or formal assessing projects. In turn, this required a shift from certificates of attendance to certificates of proven competencies, with corresponding changes required in the objectives and operations of NSJ's short courses.

Another interesting point was the need to differentiate between impact on the individual in terms of knowledge, and actual ability to put this knowledge into practice. Findings from the research seemed to indicate that people reporting back on courses completed more than 18 months previously recorded higher impact on their work, than did those fresh from a programme and with less time to apply their new-found knowledge in practice.

Also of interest were the findings on impact of training on attitudes – a realm that many, for good reason, caution is not really raw material for training (unless one is talking of brain-washing). In NSJ's case, many participants reported a reinforced commitment to journalistic ideals as a result of the training. And there was an unintended gain as well – an attitude of international solidarity amongst the course participants in the programmes that included delegates from different Southern African countries.

In terms of a "pay-off" dimension of impact, referring to the hard benefits – financial, career-pathing, societal – many delegates reported they had been promoted in the period following their training, and ascribed this to their better performance made possible by an NSJ course. Whether the training increased profitability or saved on costs, and whether it enriched society, was not adequately probed to be able to come up with significant findings.

Finally, the NSJ study found that women trainees, more than men, said they shared their course materials with colleagues when returning to the newsroom. At the time, NSJ had been running programmes three continuous weeks in length. Informed by the research finding about impact on the newsroom, a decision was made to increase the proportion of women on programmes. This required a change in the course duration, because current gender relations are such that many women journalists find it difficult to take off three weeks in one go. So NSJ restructured most of its courses into two ten-day blocs, divided by a couple of months in between.

The knowledge of impact had some utility. However, it is important to note that there was no infallible science involved. For example, the possibility exists that the trainees might have been promoted irrespective of being on a course; or that those who missed promotion were not less improved by their training – perhaps there were just not opportunities that became available. It may also be that the courses that took place 18 months earlier, as distinct from those freshly completed, were simply better run and more relevant to trainees. And perhaps those women who shared materials happened to be on courses with take-home content that lent itself well to being disseminated in the newsroom. In the nature of the exercise, one cannot factor in all variables. But at least the research meant that NSJ could plan on something more than pure hunch, guesswork or anecdote.

No serious research seems to have been done in terms of matching output to input in terms of tertiary training courses. Many graduates working in the media would be hard-pressed to say exactly which part of their courses helps them in regard to a given story. Still, the point is that even if there are many "ifs" in looking for a cause-effect relationship, that's no reason not to try.

It is the case that distilling a sense of impact in a rigorous way takes time and personnel and money. I am aware of no study done in the region since the NSJ one. I also found little enthusiasm to allocate resources to impact assessments by even well-endowed US institutions like the Poynter Institute and the Nieman Program at Harvard. They seem satisfied to take it for granted that they have impact. What then for much poorer and pressurised institutions in Southern Africa? The answer, I believe, is that this very character of our facilities makes for all the more reason to try and establish what's working best and least! It's a false economy to ignore the question, particularly when resources are scarce and prioritisation is needed. Accordingly, a given teaching institution may be quite efficient in terms of what it does, but the significance of such success is vastly undermined when effectiveness in terms of impact is not as high as needed.

So, despite the difficulties, a strategic understanding of the effective value of journalism teaching is worth trying to obtain. Although, as indicated, much is hard to pin down directly, there are some clear extremes that form parameters. On the one side, there is the situation where trainees do not join the media, or if they are already there they do not stay long. The reasons in both cases may be many, but either way, the objective outcome is that educa-

tion has been unsuccessful – at least in terms of the field itself. At the other side, another parameter is award-winning journalism on the part of former trainees (provided that this represents an increase over what pertained before – the relevance of a base-line again). Between these two extremes of impact, a very grey area prevails – and the question is how to make sense of the differing degrees.

Counting on quality

It is precisely this kind of question that underpins the quest to measure quality and compare the value of one institution in relation to another. In regard to broadcasting, ISO style standards have been defined in a recent initiative (www.certimedia.org). These are based not on quality of output (e.g. whether it is award-winning or not), but rather on the context of production. The thinking here is that a host of indicators – such as whether a medium has a clear vision and mission, whether there is a training budget, etc. – will in all likelihood mean high quality product. (The inverse also applies). In effect, the argument is that it is easier to agree on, and to measure, production processes rather than emanating products.

It is the same kind of system that operates in several places in regard to assessing the quality of journalism training institutions (see Berger, 2005). The means, rather than the end-products, are assessed.

In the UK, accreditation of tertiary journalism schools is done by a formal body, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. It looks at (1) if there is an institutional mission; (2) internal approval, monitoring and review processes; (3) external participation in internal review processes; (4) external examiners and their reports; (5) student representation and feedback. In practice, some reviews also report on: the degree of theory-practice integration and whether there is a critical approach to media; tracking of alumni including with regard to their career destinations; and employer approval. Missing is how the graduates have actually impacted when in the industry. Nor is there a score for whether a school does any community service.

The USA has a voluntary system of quality monitoring, done by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC), which consists of eminent figures from the media industry and a selection of journalism schools. It applies nine standards: These are: (1) mission, governance and administrative systems; (2) curriculum covers media freedom, history, critical thinking, numeracy, etc., and a minimum of courses outside of journalism; (3) diversity in students and staff; (4) balance of academic and professional competencies amongst staff; (5) scholarship and research; (6) student support services. (7) resources, facilities and equipment; (8) service to profession, community, alumni and public; (9) learner assessment systems.

France has developed a system called the Théophraste Network certification. It is a voluntary system covering three categories of certification: type A for professional training schools; type B for university courses; type C for continuing training centres. It uses 15 criteria, much like the above, but also singling out (1) a proper balance of theory and practice; (2) systems for matching training with changes in the profession; (3) staff development options; (4) external linkages with industry associations and/or teaching institutions.

It is in the light of these systems that UNESCO has now commissioned Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies in South Africa, and the ESJ at Lille University in France, to collect information on African journalism teaching facilities. The brief is to identify 15 "good quality" institutions, on the basis of developing indicators for African schools, and including attention to "training capacities, available equipment, budget, logistics, national and international support and cooperation". The idea is to begin to identify potential "centres of excellence", with which UNESCO may go on to cooperate. The project commences in October and ends in March. Early thinking is to initiate an Africa-centred collaborative process (though also to draw in views from international networks Journet and Orbicom) so as to develop indicators suited to Africa (including Southern Africa).

Noticeably, the US and French systems are operated by associations of training institutions – making their systems a kind of voluntary self-regulation, or to use NEPAD-jargon, a type of "peer review". This reflects the level of organisation in these parts of the world. For example, the USA has more than 200 members in an Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication. Southern Africa, however, lacks such associations, although the Southern African Media Trainers Network based in Maputo may yet grow into this role. The obstacles, however, are that many if not most training institutions in the region are too stretched to participate substantively in an ongoing initiative that could promote a quality system in the interests of enhancing impact.

This factor also raises the matter of what the returns ("pay-off") would be that would make it worthwhile for Southern African institutions to even think of taking part in quality assurance activities. The Théophraste Network documentation says that its aim is to raise the standard of training and "to give greater security to funding bodies,

media engaged in recruitment and, above all, the young people who set out on the journey leading to a career in journalism".

Analysed in terms of rationale for institutions to take part, this approach suggests that receiving accreditation is useful for "corporate" reasons, as it were, in terms of securing funding, pleasing industry and marketing courses to potential students. The USA's rationale for its system is similar, but discussions I have had with three heads of schools in 2001 revealed another benefit. The US (like the French system) requires applicant institutions to undergo a self-evaluation in preparation for the external team to come in. This (time-consuming) exercise compels the training institutions to do extensive introspection and planning, according to the then heads of school at Penn State, North Carolina (at Chapel Hill) and Boston. For these persons, this task – which would not necessarily happen otherwise – is a major benefit in its own right.

Whether any of this is sufficient incentive for Southern African institutions to come together, however, is unclear. The experience of South Africa may be salutary here: attempts to form associations of broadcast educators and of print educators in 1998 came to naught. Instead, where educators have congregated is in relation to the centre of gravity constituted by the South African National Editors Forum (in which senior trainers are members). A number of projects, particularly research audits into skill levels in industry, have resulted. Out of interest, one of these which showed the poor quality of junior journalists triggered varying attributions of cause. From the teaching institution point of view, facing the accusatory finger of industry pointing at them, the buck was passed on to the poor schooling of entry-level students, and also sent back to the industry in regard to the poor management of young graduates in the newsrooms. In reality, it is a combination of these kinds of factors that contribute together to explain the low level of quality.

A critical connection

What is implicit in the accreditation systems, and in the South African experience of alignment to editors, is the notion that journalism teaching should be geared to supporting the media industry. It is the case that the industry – represented usually by its editorial management, is certainly a key stakeholder in the journalism industry. However, an important qualification of this view comes from the USA. There, the Dean of Columbia University, Lee Bollinger triggered a huge debate in 2002 when he argued in favour of raising the intellectual quotient of the university's world-famous professional journalism school started by Joseph Pulitzer in 1902. Amongst his remarks was the following: "A great journalism school within a great university should always stand at a certain distance from the profession itself." Indeed, this observation assumes a particular answer to a fundamental question about the core purpose of journalism teaching.

The point is that if the purpose of training is to service employers by producing so-called "professional" graduates who satisfy the industry, then Bollinger's remark is a nonsense. But if the purpose is a greater one – to contribute towards journalism that can impact positively on society, he has a point: because the industry is not necessarily oriented towards this purpose. Indeed, the media as an institution too often wants compliant staffers trained to do the opposite – to do government propaganda or "civil service"– style communications as with much state-owned media, or to churn out tabloid-style sensationalist hype as with much commercial media. There is also a distinction between the interests of the individuals and the interests of a media house: a community radio station may want people trained in participative or development communications – whereas the individuals involved may prefer to follow celebrity DJ roles, or seek training that will elevate their prospects for finding a paid job in the mainstream (or both). In such cases, does training simply serve "the market" – or does it also try to change the market?

Bollinger's remark thus raises the matter of the "politics", as it were, of journalism teaching (which may often involve critique, rather than narrow service, of the industry). But it also allows us to think about the role of media teaching in regard to the changing world in ways that individual media houses are not always in a position to do. The point is that the greater the competition between media, the more short-term focussed many companies become in terms of putting energies into their daily jobs of creating fresh content and making money in the process. Yet, this very situation also calls out for someone, somewhere, to be taking a wider and longer view. People without their noses to the grindstone need to be doing the kind of innovation and creative work with media personnel that will look at the shape of media tomorrow, not only today. Training institutions that are too closely tied to serving industry's immediate needs cannot do this. No one, of course, can predict the future. The industry itself does not know exactly what it will need going forward into the medium-term. Training institutions do not have superior insight here, but they do have fewer constraints to experimenting than the industry does. Their mission allows them to create more open-ended capacities, not just tried-and-tested commodities.

What this in turn raises is the neglected question of training versus education. Although the two are often used

as synonyms, a distinction can be made. In this light, the former refers to skills transfer – to passing along of know-how. The latter encompasses the realm of know-why (and, not forgetting, the why-not). The distinction goes to the heart of pedagogy as well. On the one hand, there is the challenge of teaching the "how" of journalism as it is known, in the most efficient way possible. On the other, is the challenge of stimulating and capacitating the ability to do something different: to go beyond the formulae and skills, so that an informed creativity can emerge – generating new knowledge and know-how about vistas and possibilities of journalism. Southern Africa could well do with courses, for example, which explore alternative – and possibly more effective – ways of communicating the (unpopular) AIDS story, or which experiment with depth-news via cellphones.

This important function of open-ended education is often downplayed as already-stretched media teachers come under pressure from trainees and employers alike to produce competencies for jobs as they currently are. Such a static modality is intrinsically conservative. But it is worse than this. The problem is that it also takes us away from the value of journalism education for specific challenges, and focuses us on so-called "universal" standards. Evidence of this can be seen in the limitations of coming up with a "model" curriculum – a one-size fits all – as UNESCO attempted for African institutions in 2002 (UNESCO 2002). The organisation based its attempt back then on information gathered in 1996 from a survey of curriculae in 11 African countries, and several workshops with educators. The result, in its own estimation, was "benchmarks or standards" for communications training in Africa. A look at these outputs, however, shows up their limitations.

Their proposal was for a three-year programme. The first year would have electives in various subjects (African history, economics, psychology, etc); the second year would have introductory skills courses as well as research and some theories of communication – and a bouquet of electives relating to specialised interest. The third year would have some advanced skills, and contextual knowledge (ethics and law), plus electives in genres of communication (organisational, social marketing, news agency, etc). Many unexplained assumptions were embedded in this approach, and likewise there was no clear rationale as to what constituted core vs elective courses. The logic over the three years, and the comparative weighting of the different components was also implicit, rather than explicit. In short, the idea of serving society, as-is, led to a model, rather than a methodology – and to a product of limited, and limiting, validity.

Bringing it home

What was stated in the UNESCO contribution, however, was a valuable reminder about the need to locate journalism teaching in specific context. Thus it was noted that: "The source of inspiration of teachers, curricula and textbooks is western. Teachers are mostly western educated, curricula are drawn from western models and most textbooks are authored and published in the west and North America. Under these circumstances, communication training in Africa can hardly be said to be culturally relevant…". It further stated: "curricula developers should take full cognisance of the social, economic, political and cultural contexts existing in Africa, as well, as the background of communication trainers, teaching and learning methods and available teaching and training capacity, facilities and resources." Arguably, one of the consequences of this approach would be to assess our societies, and draw conclusions. Thus one might profitably today want to include training around the negotiation of power in, and of, the media. For instance, when so much of the media industry violates ethics on a daily basis, it is not enough to teach ethics as a theory. Trainees need support as to how to put theory into practice when their work environments militate against them, and when they face employers who see training as facilitating the "flow", rather than liberating employees in order to generate new directions.

June 24-28, 2007, sees the first-ever World Conference of Journalism Educators being convened in Singapore. Whether Africa at all, and Southern Africa in particular, will be represented – and, if so, will contribute the questions raised by our experience – is not yet certain. But one thing is certain: we are very well-positioned to present a different point of view from that pertaining to other parts of the world. Because, here in Southern Africa especially, we need our journalism training to make a major difference to our media, and our media to make a major difference to our lives.

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