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# On (not) teaching journalism: The experience of UCT

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## Current position

The University of Cape Town established a major in Media & Writing in 2002 and a Centre for Film and Media Studies in 2003. Currently the centre takes responsibility for two majors (Film Studies and Media & Writing) and five streams within an undergraduate Film and Media Production Programme: in print production; film and television production; multi-media production; scriptwriting; and radio (from 2005). It also has nominal control of the MFA and the Institute for Film and New Media on the Hiddingh Campus, but this course and institute are under the effective leadership of Drama and Fine Art.

The two majors have attracted large numbers of students and both rank among the six largest majors in the Humanities Faculty: we have about 240 students in the third-year media courses and 150 in the third-year film courses. The majors and the programme have attracted significant numbers of high-quality white and black matriculants to UCT, with our students having significantly higher entrance points than the faculty average.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the centre has a small but growing number of research postgraduates registered for MAs and PhDs, and runs three postgraduate programmes: one in Film Studies; one in Film Theory and Practice; and an Honours/MA programme in Media Theory and Practice.

## The background to the implementation of the programme at UCT

UCT's adoption of the notion of focused programmes as a way of structuring the BA or BSoc Sc degree – administrators claimed it was in response to central government pressure – turned out to be a fairly thorough flop. Of the thirty odd programmes originally set up, four have survived; the faculty returned to a general degree with a double major as a concession to notions of coherence and focus.<sup>2</sup>

The one new programme that not only attracted significant numbers of students but also drew in good students who would have gone elsewhere is the Programme in Film and Media.

## Programme or major? Theory or practice? Media studies or journalism?

So we ended up with a programme and then with majors and some confusion. You can do the programme without a major, or with a major or both majors; you can do

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<sup>1</sup> In one cohort, 60% of African students registered for FAM courses had A, B, or C aggregates for matric compared to a faculty average of 10%. Half of FAM's white students have A or B matric aggregates.

<sup>2</sup> As the former Arts Faculty merged with other faculties during this period, there are several programmes that were in effect formerly separate degrees like the four-year Music or Fine Art degrees.

the majors or either major without the programme. You can do the major in Film or in Media & Writing with almost any other major.

Most students who come to UCT to do film and media come with the intention of getting into the production programme, particularly the film and television programme. As production only starts mid-way through the second year of study and has stiff academic requirements (a 65% class-mark average) as well as demanding a portfolio of work, many students eventually do not apply for the roughly 80 places in production (24 in film/TV; 24 in print production; 12 in scriptwriting; 12 in radio; 12 in interactive media) or, if they apply, do not get into the production stream. (About 70% of those who apply do get in, though not always into their first choice.)

We thus had to devise a fallback position for students. In brief, students who do not get into production do a general degree with a double major, usually in Film and Media & Writing. In this double major, if they do media and film courses, they get opportunities to do creative and project-based work.

We remembered Karl Kraus's famous dictum ("When faced with a choice of evils, choose neither") and designed a major that is neither a major in journalism nor in media studies, but in Media & Writing – something that combines what we believe are the strengths of both. For us, critical analysis and theory without practical application are as unacceptable as practice without theoretical reflection and analytical rigour.

### **Strategic strengths and weaknesses**

When we started thinking about teaching media courses, I took advice. Ken Owen told me most editors preferred students who had a strong basis in the disciplines, for example with a good degree in English and history, and that editors were best placed to teach them the media side of things; Harvey Tyson advised me to skip print journalism and use UCT's strengths in drama to push broadcast media, Stan Katz told me not to send students with any fixed ideas if they wanted to work in talk radio. Viv Gordon told me that good essays do not get students media jobs – that they needed portfolios and media products of some sort to strut their stuff.

Around us, in Cape Town, traditional print journalists looked like an endangered species as the *Cape Times* went from 70 editorial staff to 10 with breathtaking cynicism and speed. What we saw during this process was also a revelation: usually it was the most competent journalists with the greatest skills who moved on to other areas as the process of juniorisation and the destruction of the culture of the newsroom went merrily ahead.

The Sanef forum, reacting in large part to the monster they'd created, produced a completely spurious set of complaints about the inadequacies of graduates. When I put it to the late Stephen Wrottesley that all their survey showed was that they'd hired very badly and weren't paying enough to attract quality journalists, he retorted that, as Winston Churchill had said, one ideally needed an independent income to be a journalist.

Given this background, training traditional print journalists in the age of convergence and the rise of the bean-counting publisher-manager and the staff-

slashers seemed like raising turkeys for Thanksgiving or lambs for the slaughter. So, we said that our role would be to educate versatile media workers-entrepreneurs, able to work as freelancers, to find new ways of producing and distributing content.

Instead of resisting the obvious - that most students studying journalism don't work as journalists, or certainly not as print journalists on newspapers - we accepted that our students might end up with a variety of careers, and that they needed analytical ability and skills that would enable them to change careers and flourish in the uncertain new media environment. They might end up working in advertising, HIV-Aids education, television production, magazines, television scriptwriting, editing, sub-editing. We hired staff whose background was in novel-writing and narrative journalists, so we probably give more emphasis to good stories and the mechanics of story than most traditional journalism schools.

We also used Cape Town's strategic advantages of lots of ambient media expertise - in desperation but, as it turned out, alluringly. Roger Lucey on his scooter explaining one person television, Manoj Lakhani explaining early etv, Mike Wills explaining radio as guerrilla medium, Justin Nurse explaining T-shirts as even more subversive medium, or Viv Gordon explaining how to go about getting a media job - all these had ways of waking classes up (inevitably we were scheduled to teach at times no other classes would). Roberta Durrant ran a seminar on writing sitcoms, Dr Justin Fox taught one in travel writing, Lindy Wilson ran one on documentary and Nic Dawes on Brand Me. Adrian Hadland, Andy Davis, Tom Eaton, Henrietta Rose-Innes and other writers have come to teach seminars on various forms of writing. If we have survived and grown, it has to a large extent been thanks to the generosity and expertise of local media people.

We had to make the case, within departments and in the university more generally, that Media and Film could not be contained profitably within four or five other departments. It took time, student pressure, subtle and not-so-subtle threats, and a sympathetic Dean in the form of Robin Cohen to get Film and Media into a position of autonomy, though we still do not own the Film major completely.

What were our strategic advantages in media? We had good students, the best in the country if one believes matric results, a location that had become one of the world's leading production sites, lots of generous local expertise, useful industry links, staff who happened to have some media expertise and started getting more. We had strong departments around us with strengths that complemented ours: in Drama, English, Social Anthropology, History. We also had the advantage of the Humanities Television Unit, formerly part of the Teaching Methods Unit, but since integrated into the centre with the expertise of Alan Johannes and Sidney Francis. We also had the advantage in the beginning of teaching courses without having to produce a full major, and a structure of selected seminars that allowed us to experiment and teach advertising or sports journalism or creative Internet courses.

Against us were a conservative faculty, naturally intent on preserving what privileges they had accumulated over the fat years, and the state of journalism in the country with newspapers shedding staff like autumn leaves in Vallombrosa. We were told regularly, even, it seemed, in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, that we were

reducing the university to a technician; there was a dystopian and myopic vision of what we were doing, even as departments used the students we brought in to get resources for their traditional business.

But the reality was that we had released a huge energy, we were getting the students, as Peter Anderson of English says, to the point of combustion. They grumbled, they said they were guinea pigs, that they expected more cameras and equipment and expertise, but they came and came and came. And, as Lionel Trilling says somewhere, the university administration can resist everything except student demands. Suddenly we were, under Lesley Marx's inspired leadership, a centre, one of the nine strategic thrusts of UCT, offering majors and getting new staff and a hefty injection of funding for equipment.

While old departments seemed to spend their time fretting about plagiarism and carrying the same colleagues and tired old family feuds they'd been burdened with for twenty years, we had – and still have, I hope – a kind of zest at new creative energy unleashed.

### **Why are we so brilliant?**

We see many of our strengths stemming precisely from our insistence on values that should be central to a good arts or humanities degree, but which have often been neglected: careful attention to writing and expression; creative original development of ideas; a critical reflection on the cultural milieu in which they exist, exploitation of the diversity of students; and the culture to reflect on one's own cultural assumptions.

We feel that many of the traditional disciplines have struggled to come to terms with issues like plagiarism and the new electronic landscape. Many if not most of our assignments involve projects where plagiarism is simply not possible and we make students reflect critically on their own research habits. By embracing the Web as a learning tool, as Jane Stadler and Marion Walton in particular have done, we have suggested to students that the Internet is not a forbidden fruit or solitary vice, but a workplace resource.

Where *Disgrace* has the English professor glumly teaching the technocratic issues of communication, our students were preparing pitches for a new television programme, or for St Luke's Hospice or Fubu footwear in South Africa, analysing soap operas, producing educational entertainment and Vodka ads, writing feature articles or columns, learning through doing, working in groups so that they confront issues of cultural diversity and learn to disagree creatively.

We also see ourselves pushing students to be evaluated in producing material that they know is relevant to the new world they live in, in ways the traditional paper-based essay is not: CDs, short films and videos, radio documentaries, culture jamming ads using Photoshop, Mindset material, television documentaries.

More than twenty years ago, John Coetzee remarked to me that, whereas in North American universities everyone started with popular contemporary culture but ended up wanting to study the heavyweight classics, everyone in South Africa was forced to start with the Great Tradition and so ended up by wanting to study popular culture. I think that the presence of Media has had something of that North

American effect at UCT over the past few years. There has been a significant shift in the Humanities Faculty from the previous social science departments to the central 'expressive' departments. This year both English and Media have strong increases in enrolment, while most of the social sciences have seen enrolment drop. Lots of entering students see the English-Media or English-Film-Media combination as important for journalism or scriptwriting or doing writing in depth. (Having Tom Eaton force scriptwriting students to produce a screenplay from the first three pages of *Moby Dick* shows the grim lengths to which some of us go to stress the importance of the masterpieces...)

Students who have to spend time writing see the advantage of studying the great models. Having two young novelists on our staff in the form of Susan Mann and Mary Watson probably helps make this combination attractive. When all the other software fails, writing well will still matter.

### **Postgraduate developments**

My intention was always to see the undergraduate programme and major as enough to produce graduates who would go out and work or, perhaps, go out and do a fourth year somewhere else: in a journalism school; a publishing course; an advertising school; in marketing; or teaching; or film-making.

Nonetheless, this year we started an honours/MA in Media Theory and Practice, designing a course aimed not at students straight out of third year but at those with experience of the media. We're aiming at something more like a mix between a Master Class in journalism and a media MBA and we particularly want part-time students.

Our aim is to produce the next generation of editors and media entrepreneurs and we offer two ferocious writing courses, taught by Andre Wiesner and Justin Fox, a course in media theory and research, and a course on media markets and strategies. The first batch of graduates will be unleashed next year.

In addition, we have attracted some very high-powered MA and PhD students. Most of our own staff are still finishing their PhDs, something at once a source of concern, but also of energy and the optimistic sense that we are going to be giving all other media and journalism enterprises a run for their money in the years ahead.

### **Concluding unscientific postscript**

What we do that works for us that might be applicable elsewhere:

- Media work is much wider than print journalism as traditionally conceived or even journalism more generally. Most people trained as journalists in South Africa probably don't work as formal journalists and training should adjust accordingly.
- Don't compromise on expression and expressive writing skills. We were warned that this had damaged the reputation of several journalism courses in technikons. We have had the pleasure of seeing the very students who complained that they hated writing and just wanted to be in television coming back, part surprised, part shame-faced, and admitting that they got into television because they could write treatments or summarise scripts; or of seeing internships turning into

permanent jobs when our students were able to handle the formal writing and reporting that other interns couldn't.

- We've found the South African industry very open to working with us. They have shared expertise, ideas and projects with great generosity. For example, we have one of the few advertising courses at any university taught with the collaboration of a major agency – something that is a source of envy to our Commerce Faculty. And if you want a properly critical view of advertising or marketing, you are much more likely to get it from insiders.
- We accepted, maybe not with good grace, that media people often (usually?) knew more about media than we did.
- We found out that students wanting to work in the media industries needed portfolios and show reels and applicable skills, not only certificates and essays, and adjusted our modes of assessment accordingly. In our print production stream, for example, our final requirement is to try to have an article accepted for publication. A surprising number of students succeed.
- We hired staff, for the most part, who have a mix of academic and industry expertise. Almost all of our staff mix creative and academic interests and strengths: they are writers of novels, short stories, feature articles, environmental journalism; have worked in film or advertising or at developing computer games or run Internet news services. I think, consequently, that we have a healthy relationship with the industry but also within the department, because there is no class system or class struggle between the peasant-producers and the artist-theorists, or prince-producers and worker-critics.
- The clichés about diversity being a source of strength become true when you want to study and produce South African media. When one of your staff understands Zulu and Xhosa, you do better research, ideally in teams. Group work between students doesn't always make for tidy projects or easy marking, but it creates a much more dynamic and sophisticated level of work. We have also found that getting our many foreign semester-abroad students working with our own students energises both groups.

We face new challenges: of developing research profiles and research gradings; of finding time in punishing teaching schedules for thinking and reading; of trying to maintain collegiality and the sense of having a wonderful time, of growing up disgracefully.

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