



Opinion Piece: Journalism training at university

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Professor John Biggs, elsewhere in this *JALT*, expresses alarm at the gaudy ubiquity of university education, noting a consequent decline in the craft schools of old. As he puts it:

We have wound down vocational and technical education and broadened university courses to take in some of the technical content previously taught in technical colleges. A massive mistake, leaving us with ... overcrowded and downgraded universities.

I can assert – on the basis of 25 years as a university teacher and another quarter of a century in mainstream journalism – that his argument makes considerable sense. In semi-retirement (and working part-time as a newspaper sub-editor), I am able to reflect with some authority on what universities can achieve and what they are less equipped so to do when it comes to the craft of journalism. ‘Craft’ is the term, I feel, that best describes it, for it cannot truly claim to be a profession as its practitioners do not require any specified qualification or formal registration. Nonetheless, it remains a singularly demanding practice, requiring in addition to a sound command of written expression:

- An awareness of, and persistent interest in, matters political, economic, fashionable, unfashionable, literary, historical, animal, vegetable, and mineral – all allied to unfettered curiosity.
- A tough hide – in order to withstand criticism, learn from one’s inevitable mistakes, and penetrate the lying and obfuscation peddled by authorities and corporations.
- Self-discipline and abundant energy, along with a healthy streak of cynicism and an ability to eschew political correctness.

In my own case in the UK, more than half a century ago, those qualities were encouraged through what was known as a ‘sandwich’ course, offered in an era when technical colleges flourished in tandem with industry. Within journalism training, it worked this way:

- Newspaper companies (there were few trainees in broadcasting back then) would hire school leavers on three-year cadetships. We would work four days a week (and inevitably on weekends too, without overtime), then attend the local technical college on

Fridays for a course operating under the aegis of the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ). The course was the filling in the sandwich.

- Over those three years, it embraced English literature, creative non-fiction, media law, civics (a study of the rights and duties of citizenship), current affairs, politics, and shorthand. A certificate was awarded to those who passed its examinations. I remain grateful to it, in particular, for instilling in me an enduring passion for Orwell, Waugh, Steinbeck, Trollope and Austen.

With the general decline in newspaper circulation figures and a consequent loss of job opportunities, much has changed. The NCTJ still exists in the UK, though, and delivers a variety of courses, in a variety of packages to suit contemporary demands. They include an online option, offering the same certificate as pursued in my own formative years. Overall, the NCTJ curriculum appears both practical and versatile.

The system in Australia has operated rather differently. It has long hired graduates in journalism from the universities and the colleges of advanced education (now transformed into university status themselves). The progress of trainees in the craft – or ‘cadets’, as they are officially defined – was supervised in most newsrooms by counsellors. These were generally veteran reporters who would set the resident cadets a series of practical exercises and work with them on their drafts of actual assignments. That in-house exercise had the capacity to be cosy and productive, as indeed was the old UK sandwich affair.

I say ‘was’, ‘were’, and ‘had’. Cadets and cadet counsellors alike are few in number now, owing to staff cut-backs. Media organisations, however, still look – when they are able to look at all in these times of financial restraint – to the universities for new talent. Cadets, for the most part, then learn their trade through on-the-job enlightenment.

This brings us, consequently, to that key point raised by John Biggs in his *JALT* interview: the ability of universities to offer adequate training of a practical and technical nature so that transition to the workplace is not too much of a shock. In reflecting on those questions, I restrict my observations to the training encountered within journalism awards at

Australian universities. While my postgraduate research in the field has embraced a substantial overseas element (largely concerning media history), especially in the USA, the UK, and Canada, I have not taught in those locations and must limit any judgment accordingly.

The major obstacle, as I see it, to effective university-based delivery of hard-core training is that of class size. When my teaching engagements began, in the 1980s and early 1990s before the broadening and overcrowding defined by Biggs, some institutions were still able to rule off their annual journalism intakes to manageable numbers (of, say, 30-50). With astute streaming, notably in applying separate print and broadcast specialities, it was possible to restrict classes to even more workable totals. This enabled lecturers to:

- Demand a dozen or more individual written assignments, in the print element, each term. This was not as instructive perhaps as a newspaper cadetship, where trainee reporters would write that number in a single week; but it was not a bad alternative.
- Mark them in fine detail, addressing errors and omissions in much the manner that a sub-editor or cadet counsellor would in the workplace. In one course with which I was involved, any assignment with a name misspelt (a cardinal sin in the industry) would automatically be failed.
- Apply practical techniques to publishing them in a course newspaper (and even, in fortunate locations, distribute the newspaper through local shopping centres). The best experience I enjoyed in that regard was a print production class back in 1990 when I had just 17 students to instruct, a feat accomplished in part through a final examination conducted on floppy discs.
- Devise broadcasting courses that gave students a reasonably frequent opportunity to write and report for radio, and – albeit less frequently because of equipment restrictions – gain some television expertise too.

I concede that I have long left that field, shifting to the teaching of graduate research methods 15 years ago and then, in 2014, retiring from university employment. My observations retain a measure of currency, nevertheless, through guest lecturing, a research fellowship, and contact with old acquaintances in the field. Further, through my part-time employment today as a sub-editor for a major Australian newspaper, I encounter final-year students when they come to the newsroom on internship.

On the basis of all that, the areas of journalism education that I believe the newly developed and heavily populated universities cannot address with unalloyed assurance are these:

- Setting an appropriate number of written assignments; with intakes of 100 or more today, the sheer weight of assessment can become prohibitive.
- Assessing assignments with the rigour and detail found in the workplace – again, because of substantial intake growth.

- Offering realistic opportunities to practise broadcast journalism technique, especially in television training. Equipment in some instances is of indifferent quality; editing sessions and facilities are often limited in terms of accessibility.

In addition, in the broadcasting field, I have long held reservations about the ethical nature of assessing students for their on-air or on-camera proficiency. There is a real danger of subjectivity intruding when tasked with awarding a grade; accent and appearance might well influence the assessor's opinion. Can a tyro television reporter truly be marked according to a pedagogical rubric? My inclination is opposed to such a belief.

What then, with apparent imperfections in the university model, is the best choice confronting those who still harbour ambitions of a journalism career? I recommend the following to any who seek my advice:

- Take a classic university degree, majoring in a discipline of a type that the universities do well: law, economics, politics, modern languages, history, the natural sciences.
- Read, read, read: newspapers of quality (in print and online), and authors of renown.
- Study a copy of news organisation's style guide (available in book form); this conveys an understanding of precise, regimented composition. Apply its lessons in emulating published reports. It's not difficult. All those years ago, it took me only a day to grasp the principles of paragraphing and quoting, along with identifying the leading angle and telling a story with clarity so that the reader is not left wondering. You really don't need three years of on-campus lecture-theatre simulation.
- Travel. Study the atlas and learn the names of capital cities, rivers, mountain ranges.
- Get your hands dirty and mix with workers. In my schooldays, I had a marvellously instructive job on Saturday mornings at a butcher's shop. I was offered an apprenticeship, too; might own a chain of shops by now and a villa on Santorini instead of writing esoteric articles and vacationing at Butlin's on Barry Island. (OK, that unpretentious Welsh holiday camp closed in 1996, but its alumni will get the point.)
- Seek an industry placement for a month; if this can't be done through a university-linked internship, then fix it yourself. This might require the purchase of a public-risk insurance policy – an eminently worthwhile expense.

I must acknowledge, too, that the process is subject to persistent change. On a recent visit to the London newsroom of *The Times*, I encountered a concentrated variant of the old sandwich course. The newspaper had employed two trainee reporters who were then despatched to an intensive three-week 'boot camp' with News Associates (a specialist training organisation), followed by refresher courses during their two-year programme. At face value, it appears a workable model, with international possibilities – and of greater substance than a university-based journalism award.

In conclusion, I am grateful for being prompted, by the Biggs interview, to offer these thoughts. He raises some important questions in response to the Rudolph/Harris interviewing duo. The *JALT* initiative has produced a singularly rewarding exchange; it warrants global reflection, and citing, by scholars of repute.

References

Biggs, J., Harris, C., & Rudolph, J. (2019). Teaching for Quality Learning at Changing Universities. A tour de force of modern education history – an interview with Professor John Biggs. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, 2(1).

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