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**Capacitating Community
Newspapers: Effective English
Language Techniques in the Training
of Journalism Students at Walter
Sisulu University – South Africa**

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ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
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Abstract

Community newspapers in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa have an important function in local communities. They play a critical role in community empowerment, where other sources of information are lacking or completely absent. Part of this role includes, bringing relevant socio-economic issues to communities so as to empower communities on issues that affect their daily lives. Walter Sisulu University (WSU) through its Media Studies Department, has identified the empowerment of communities through developing capacity within local independent newspapers. The development of journalism students' writing skills through various techniques using the medium of English, not only as a language of instruction and learning, but also as a language to transfer skills to local independent newspapers, has been identified as critical to the development of these newspapers. This paper focuses on the language techniques used to develop the skills of journalism students in their second year of study. The article outlines the qualitative approach used to collect data on students', the specialist media consultant's and editors' perceptions of the effectiveness of the intervention.

Keywords: Journalism education, English language competencies, local independent media, community empowerment, practical teaching, practical learning.

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BACKGROUND

The majority of students at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) come from disadvantaged communities in the Eastern Cape. Only few have attended former Model C schools during their secondary and matric years. Most of them have been educated in township and rural schools, which primarily teach subjects in isiXhosa. This background applies to students within the Department of Media Studies and the 2010 intake of Journalism students studying toward their National Diploma. Students who apply for the Journalism qualification course at WSU are given rigorous entrance assessment tests to judge their suitability for the course. Each student has to write three tests and undergo an interview session with two lecturers. The student's matric/National Senior Certificate English pass mark plays a large role in the initial stages when inviting a student to write the tests. The tests include an advanced level reading comprehension test from the Human Sciences Research Council, a language proficiency assessment set by the Department's Communication lecturers and a news awareness and writing assessment set by the Journalism lecturers. All the tests, including the interview, are assigned a mark value and the student's overall marks are added to give one total. Students who achieve an overall percentage of 60% and higher for the assessments are invited to attend the course. Those who achieve between 50% and 60% are placed on a waiting list and are called telephonically to register for the course if the invited students are unable to register.

The lecture room experience

The first impression of the 2010 class was that while their English marks were good, many of the students spoke or understood English as a second or third language and this created a barrier to their understanding in class, in terms of the terminology and nuances as comprehended by English First Language speakers. With the exception of a very small group, they lacked, though appreciated the importance of, correct spelling, grammar and sentence structure within journalistic writing. The lecturer had challenges in explaining how the students should use nuances in language via their journalistic writing techniques, as they didn't understand the underlying language complexities, including tone, amongst others. It was even more difficult when requesting analytical work from the students as they were unable to communicate their thoughts effectively and had very poor language skills. The 2010 intake, in their first year, underwent rigorous practical sessions, where they had to write introductions for fictional stories based on the 5Ws and H (Who, What, When, Where, Why and How). They then had to critique each other's work. This took place approximately six months before they were given their first news-writing assignment, so as to improve their writing and comprehension abilities. Second year students had the chance to volunteer at the Student News Agency (SNA), a project initiated to address English language skills, particularly in journalistic writing. The project is aimed at not only benefitting journalism students but also under-resourced local independent newspapers in the Eastern

Cape Province. The articles produced for the SNA were circulated to these newspapers on a regular basis for publication without any charge.

LITERATURE

The literature review reflected competences required for journalistic writing, with theoretical debates which are highlighted. The debate between media professionals and media researchers on journalism education being too theoretical or too practical began after World War II, 'and they have waxed and waned in intensity since' (Brynildssen 2002, 2). Today, researchers continue to discuss the balancing of skills and conceptual content while journalism schools have been at the centre of criticism from newsrooms, which blame them for not preparing students adequately (Brynildsson 2002; Dickson 2001). This discussion is not only relevant in the United States but has also taken root on the African continent. However, 'it is assumed that although media systems and journalistic cultures may differ widely, the changes and challenges facing journalism education around the world are largely similar' (Deuze 2006, 19).

So too in South Africa, where a study revealed that most journalism students were not adequately trained for the industry. The author of the study calls for a move from a more rhetoric, formulaic to a more operational, practical teaching of journalism (Addison 1996, 34). Another dilemma on the African continent is that of 'finding the ideal balance between so-called knowledge courses and skills courses' (Chibita 2010, 2). Chibita's question focuses on how journalism training in Africa can nurture good writing skills. While some believe journalism schools are not the right place for addressing these skills, and students should seek assistance in language departments, extra remedial courses would be too costly for the majority of students (Chibita 2010, 2).

International and local journalism educators seem to agree, that most importantly, there has to be a balance between practical learning and theoretical application, as well as real work experience and engagement with society (Bosch 2010, 33). Deuze (2006, 29--30) points to an important discussion that 'involves tensions between advocates of standardized methods (including testing, coursework, and pedagogy), and those who emphasize a culture of learning rather than teaching (emphasizing the importance of individual expression, exposure to much more than just the consensual knowledge of the day)'.

For Kunkel (2003, online), 'journalism, like so many of life's endeavours, is part skill, part craft and part art. It makes no more sense to try to reduce it to an algorithm than it does to diagram a sentence from "Ulysses". However we elect to do it, we are obligated to teach our students certain skills, to help them think critically, to prick their consciences...and then send them bravely into the world'.

Deuze (2006, 26—27) argues that journalism education should organise the training of journalists in a way so that it can be interconnected with developments in society at large. 'This understanding is based on the

assumption that journalism cannot exist independent of community; it is a profession interacting with society'. While the debate on creating equilibrium of theory and practice in journalism schools continue, a common understanding exists that students need to be taught proper writing skills.

In their paper, Brocato, Furr, Henderson and Horton (2005, 511), examine one department of journalism's efforts to identify, address, and correct basic writing deficiencies and ask, 'what are universities doing to correct students' writing deficiencies?'. The deficiencies described in their paper resemble the deficiencies experienced by lecturers in the Department of Media Studies at WSU, as mentioned in the learners' profile in the previous section.

Considering the debate as discussed, there is also a move to a more practical approach, in terms of textbooks prepared for journalism educators and students to discuss the necessity for good English language skills. Randall (2000, 141--160), lists planning, clarity, fresh language, honesty, precision, suitability, efficiency and revision as the most important ingredients for good journalistic writing. However, he rates right attitude and character above the ability to write well. 'The most important equipment reporters have is that which is carried around between their ears. Some of these attitudes are instinctive, others are learnt quickly, but most are built up through years of experience – by researching and writing, re-researching and re-writing hundreds and hundreds of stories' (Randall 2000, 3).

Nel (1999, 107--114), highlights the importance of using clear and concise English. He laments that Orwell's suggestions of fighting against bad English in 1968 are still valid today. Nel recommends Orwell's guidelines; never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print; never use a long word when a shorter version is available; do not use the passive if the active can be used, and do not use a foreign phrase, scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Greer (1999, 120), lists six characteristics of good writing, namely, precision, clarity, a pace appropriate to the content, transitional devices that lead the reader from one thought to the next, appeals to the readers senses and uses analogies.

In research conducted by Wiltse (2005, 9), to establish if students' attitudes toward writing, as well as their writing skills, should be considered in choosing a communication major, it was noted that many students may have limited writing experience, and that writing apprehension might be reduced by increasing their writing opportunities. The study emphasises that students who write more often may improve their writing skills and perhaps reduce writing apprehension', a reason cited as affecting poor writing skills. Addison (1996, 34) observed that journalism students display 'an excellent grasp of the democratic role of the media', however lamented that most journalism students do not know how to craft a narrative, read newspapers, follow current affairs on the airwaves, read good books for pleasure, and prepare for interviews, and so forth.

The literature emphasises a balance between theory and the practice of journalistic writing, highlighting various skills and competences critical to

journalistic writing. These are considered in the discussion section of this paper.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method was used, with the development of three questionnaires with the aim of gaining perspectives on the pre, intermediate and post intervention strategies in terms of the development of the students' writing techniques. This was complimented by an in-depth analysis of the students' writing techniques again according to pre, intermediate and post intervention. The questionnaires were aimed at the second year journalism students of which six of twenty-six were used in the study, a specialist media consultant, and three editors from a population of approximately thirty of the local independent newspapers, who had received articles for publication. The triangulation through these questionnaires also assisted in gauging the consistency in the responses. This was also then tested in terms of the analysis of the students' articles which they had submitted to the lecturers for comments and once input was given, was corrected by the student and re-submitted to the lecturer, onwards to the specialist once the lecturer was satisfied with the quality of the article. For an in-depth analysis, the six students were chosen on the basis that they submitted more than the average number of articles, and also participated more actively in the project. The questionnaire, upon return from these students, was analysed according to their input on their perceptions of the progress as per the intervention strategies. Their perceptions were further tested through the analysis of their draft and final articles, which was kept within the records of the Media Studies Department.

The development of the questionnaires, as well as criteria for the analysis of students' scripts was guided by the literature study which highlighted the skills critical for good journalistic articles. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained via the Research Committee of the Faculty, and via the letters of consent as signed by participants, who fully understood the study.

The questionnaires focused on the impact of the intervention strategies on the students' journalistic writing skills, with the triangulation approach verifying the responses through analysing their submissions, as well as analysing the responses of the specialist media consultant and three editors.

FINDINGS

For an understanding of the context of the discussion, the following background is provided. At weekly editorial meetings second year journalism students submitted story ideas which were registered for purposes of monitoring and evaluation. They then produced stories to the best of their ability and submitted these electronically to their lecturers. The lecturers either commented one-on-one mainly by giving advice on how to improve the

introduction, to change the ‘angle’ and to add more information by contacting different sources and interviewing them. Sometimes the feedback was given in writing. The weekly editorial meeting further assisted students to discuss any doubts they had about writing their story as well as any difficulties they experienced. This exercise mainly addressed the content of the articles, advising students to take into consideration the audiences they were writing for, especially the issues relevant in such communities. It was meant to evoke an interest in issues-based topics more than just covering events.

The students then worked on their stories to improve them and re-submit to their lecturers. While on average the rate of sending back stories was about three times, in some instances stories were sent back to the students more than four times. Once the lecturers were satisfied with the quality of the story it was sent to a specialist media consultant. The specialist has many years of experience in journalism education and editorial management. He has the role of a newspaper sub-editor - to read the copy and evaluate it. In addition he indicates what information might be missing or inaccurate, suggests any other improvements which might be made to the report and corrects the spelling and grammar. Finally, he comments on the overall quality of the report submitted.

Changes were effected to the student’s articles by using the Microsoft Word tool “*Track Changes*”. Articles were corrected in terms of spelling and grammar mistakes as well as style. The changes also included feedback, highlighting the need to read the story before submitting and checking it for unnecessary mistakes, by, for example, switching from English (United States) to English (South Africa). The comments would make it easy for students to better understand some of the mistakes they had made. Comments also highlighted areas that would require more work by the students such as double checking a name, punctuation, especially around quotations, capital and small letters. It also included commentary around style, highlighting sentences that were too long, the need to omit unnecessary words as well as switching paragraphs around to allow for a better flow of the story.

According to the specialist media consultant, most of the corrections were around “*style points: initials, quotations, subtleties of grammar*”. A common problem was repeating the same statement, first in indirect speech and then, as a quotation, in direct speech e.g. (simplified): *The school has many problems. Mr T. Jongenenge, the headmaster, said: “The school has many problems...”*.

In 2010, twenty six students actively participated in the Student News Agency (SNA) on a voluntary basis. They produced 48 articles that were circulated to local newspapers. Some of the articles produced in 2010 were only circulated in 2011. On average articles got published in four to five different newspapers.

In terms of the students’ responses, the main motivation for participating in the SNA was to improve their writing skills and to build their portfolio of published work. Other factors included gaining experience in the print media sector and in a newsroom-like surrounding. Having had observed the SNA the

previous year, students felt encouraged and wanted to prove to themselves that they too could do it. *“I’ve always wanted to see my name in a newspaper (the by-line). I took it as a test for me to see whether I am really capable of writing an article and besides I knew it was for my portfolio so I had to participate because I knew it was for my own good,”* was a response.

The responses also indicated that students had high expectations, such as coming out of the SNA a better writer than before with improved writing, especially grammar, the skill of coming up with good story ideas, newsroom experience as well as getting equipped for the future, including better chances in getting an internship.

All students who participated in the research, said their expectations were met. The experience also contributed in another way. *“It affected my journalism studies in a positive way, because once my first article was published it gave me energy to write more and it gave me a positive attitude towards my school work,”* said one student. Another student said, that that all her expectations were met, *“because now I have more faith in myself as a person and a reporter”*. Yet another student explained, *“It has enhanced my confidence in the English language because I took it lightly; now I realise that it is very serious in the journalism world/profession because there are people who read newspapers so as to improve their grammar”*.

The students interviewed produced an average of five articles. All the students rated their general English language skills as good. Asked about the impact the SNA had on their English language skills, the students indicated that it instilled *“a love for writing, improved vocabulary, improved punctuation, improved verbal language skills, gained confidence (sic), improved networking skills, easy to get story ideas, knowledge about different audiences and different styles of newspapers”*.

The majority of the students said that they experienced shortcomings in English language skills prior to their participation in SNA. The main problem was punctuation and spelling and to a certain extent grammar.

The media consultant explained that beginners do not always see that there are many sides to the story and that they need to cover the main ones, as well as needing to learn specific points of grammar and newspaper style.

All students who participated in the research felt that their language shortcomings were addressed during their participation in SNA. The techniques they mentioned were that the media consultant corrected their mistakes all the time and also advised them to change the language settings to English (South Africa). Asking other students to read through their work before submitting the article also helped (a tip given to them). One student felt that it helped in terms of her language style. *“I used to have these long sentences and refused to cut them short because I felt that they made more impact but as time went by I realised that there was nothing wrong with my writing style but I just needed to have shorter sentences and that I can do that without changing the meaning and structure of the story itself”*.

These techniques helped students to progress, *“Every time I got corrections from my articles, I never repeated the same mistakes the next time I wrote an*

article". Another student explained, that he initially experienced a lot of problems because of a basic understanding of English, "*but because our stories were edited I became better with each story*". While the first articles submitted to the SNA came back with many corrections, the corrections became fewer as time went by.

The positive progress is echoed by the media consultant by stating that there is an obvious improvement by the third or fourth report submitted, which consist of more sources, names or initials of all the people quoted, better grammar and spelling, and style. As students progressed, by the third academic term fewer changes were required. This allowed lecturers and the media consultant "*to be more critical and raising the standard, say from "passable" to "excellent". One could suggest more complex questions to ask the subject. The observations were that some students were also more ambitious about the reports they attempted*".

In short, as mentioned in the response of the media consultant, improving any language requires regular reading and writing and correction, particularly of the styles being used. The best way in addressing language shortcomings is to read newspapers if one wants to write for newspapers, and to read magazines if one wants to write for magazines. Generally the best practice is to read anything and to write regularly.

The questionnaires from the three community papers revealed that not only did they find the articles "*relevant to the public and touch (sic) on issues that everyone has to deal with, either on a daily basis or it is at least an issue they have debated with friends... The articles are socially responsible and that is what our newspaper stands for.*"

They judged the language skills as average to "*good*", by two of the editors, including a well-established English First Language community newspaper. Not only was the use of language perceived as good, but also user-friendly to both English and Isixhosa readers, as reflected in the following: "*... We are a 80% Xhosa newspaper so our focus is not on English, but the SNA articles are of a sufficient level to be understood by the Xhosa people and scholars while not being poor (making careless grammatical and semantic mistakes) for more avid English readers.*"

DISCUSSION

Writing skills of second year journalism students improved through their participation in the Student News Agency. Not only did the project address poor English language skills it also evoked interest in writing and a more general appreciation of journalism.

While Addison's (1996, 35) study among journalism schools and recruits in South Africa revealed that English comprehension and composition was average, students failed the proofreading test. He urges staff to be more insistent that students pay attention to detail.

This comment is reflected in the practice of the specialist's comments in terms of sending feedback and corrections in the form of tracked changes back to the students for them to affect the necessary changes. This helped to groom students that produce good English including spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Using a more realistic project rather than classroom exercises, such as the SNA copy, makes students take writing more seriously, as well as doing better interviews. As far as the media consultant could see all the students improved while writing three, four or five reports. He believes that the improvement would not be as dramatic with paper exercises (as distinct from "real" exercises). This confirms the balanced approach needed in terms of skills and conceptual content as debated in the literature. Students can only be adequately trained through a more operational and practical approach (Addison 1996, 34). This, balanced with theoretical application, nurtures good writing skills.

One student claimed that the SNA has turned her into a mini-editor because it is now easy to spot her own mistakes and even notice that there should be a comma, semi colon and other punctuation marks. At the same time SNA instilled a sense for issues-focused journalism, thereby creating a balance between competence and motivation. In his study, Addison (1996, 35) refers to German critical theorist Juergen Habermas who suggests that efficiency must go hand-in-hand with motivation, which must also be accompanied legitimacy.

SNA has not only motivated students to take it onto themselves to improve their writing skills but also to view their journalistic writing differently. A student who participated in SNA said that he wanted to empower communities, *"make them aware of things they might not be exposed to. I wrote articles that one can read even next year and that would somehow still be relevant"*. Another students said, that *"published articles shape peoples thinking and we make people talk about what is happening in the communities, the big mainstream newspapers do not write about some of the stories we did for the SNA"*. SNA focuses on stories that are ignored by the main stream publications. More importantly though is the fact that students realised that they write stories to which community members can relate. Students felt confident about making a big difference, because they write about things that affect their communities and the issues that are sometimes ignored, such as cultural rituals. Kunkel's (2003, online) observation that journalism is 'part skill, part craft, part art', as does Deuze's (2006) point that 'journalism ... is a profession interacting with society' finds relevance here as students' conscience are awakened to community needs.

Although the benefit for journalism students from SNA is obvious, it still needs to be explored further as to how local newspapers could gain similar benefits. As mere recipients of the articles they are not practically involved in the production and commenting and correction of articles. Students editing poorly written articles in local newspapers in a similar manner as they are being taught by SNA could be a possible solution which would be a further

step for students to improve not only their competence, but also their motivation.

While SNA seems to serve the purpose of improving English language skills and is doing so by bridging theory with practice (as debated in the literature study), it serves another very important purpose by narrowing the divide between the media and the rural population, a problem recognised and discussed at the Forum for African Media Educators (FAME) at the Conference of African Journalism Educators (CAJE) in 2009. Participants felt that the media mostly serve the elite in urban areas, leaving out a large number of people in rural communities whether through language use, distribution, the kinds of topics that are addressed, and the type of professionalism practiced by journalism (Focus on FAME, an RJR special feature, July 2010). The articles produced at SNA address people in rural communities with topics of immediate importance and interest to them in clear, concise language.

The SNA has also been incorporated into the curricula of the Advanced Reporting course for second year journalism students and is compulsory. As a further step to improve English language skills the articles are now also being assessed as part of the year mark. This approach combines 'knowledge courses' with 'skills courses' as proposed by Chibita (2010).

CONCLUSION

Though resource intensive, and time-consuming, the intervention strategy as adopted by the SNA has impacted positively on students' journalistic writing. This intervention allows for a balanced model of teaching and learning, as it is applied in combination with theoretical knowledge as taught in the classroom. The model confirms the literature debate that purports the need to balance skills and conceptual content in order to produce journalistic writing of a good quality.

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