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Curriculum on QUE: A case study in course development

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Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) aims to produce capable practitioners for the media and communication professions. For UNS, as for all of us in a world of university sloganeering and self-promotion, “only the best will do” – as the Benson and Hedges ads insist. Its institutional capacity to realise its own rhetoric is, however, a little problematic.

UNS is a state-funded university at Solo (Surakarta), about 70km east of Yogyakarta in central Java. The city, with a population of 650,000 is a textile and trading centre. Its landscape and the prolific fertility of its surrounding region are due to the towering presence of the volcano Merapi.

The university has 16,500 students and nine faculties. The Faculty of Social Science and Politics (Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik - FISIP) houses the Department of Communication Studies (Jurusan Ilmu Komunikasi).

Solo’s daily newspaper Solopos (www.solopos.co.id/) whose website hits already exceed its circulation, is a subsidiary of the Jakarta-based Business Indonesia Group and competes for local sales and advertising with the national dailies Kompas and Jakarta.
Solo also has several radio and television stations – both public and private – and vigorous advertising and public relations industries. All are still coming to terms with the increasingly commercial environment that has followed the deregulation of Indonesia’s media since 1998. They are continually reminded of the social and economic upheavals of those years by the gaunt, burned-out supermarkets, stores and restaurants.

Betjaks (trishaws) daily wheel past Internet cafes and shops full of computer games, DVDs and VCDs. Myriad motor bikes, buses and trucks, hurdle by on an all-pervasive cloud of blue exhaust. Wherever the traffic pauses, old men and boys with ukuleles strum for alms. In the markets, little girls mew softly for change. Yet, satellite dishes mushroom indiscriminately from the rooftops, only their size indicating their owner’s affluence.

Each year, 100 school-leavers enrol in the 4-year undergraduate communication degree at UNS. On average, 75-80% graduate. About 35% of graduates go to work in some form of journalism, either print or broadcast; 20% go into the broad field of marketing and PR; and 10% proceed to “research and development” jobs in business, government and development agencies. The remaining 35% are described locally as “irrelevant”.

Solopos editor Danie Soe’ood reports that communication graduates generally require at least a year’s in-house training, initiation and induction before they become capable reporters. For him, communication skills are more than just grammatically good writing. They include “knowing a good story” and “being able and willing to chase it” as well as the ability to be “balanced, accurate and clear”. Above all, he insists that his staff must reject the “financial inducements” often offered by some “sources”. Few Solopos journalists are communication graduates. Nevertheless, Soe’ood offers 3-month internships for journalism students, donates his time as a visiting lecturer and looks forward to graduates subsequently improving his paper’s reportage.

I G Hananto Sumano, managing director of radio station 100.3FM, also teaches in the UNS degree program and provides internships for students. His company grew out of a campus station at UNS in the 1970s, before the Communication degree began. He seeks to recruit copywriters, graphic artists and people with print media skills as well as radio producers and presenters. He estimates that the radio industry in Central Java needs 35-50 new recruits each year to work in production and presentation, news, promotions and stations’ own marketing and publicity. For him, formal academic qualifications are meaningless without professional capability. His weekly 2-hour English-language, talk and current affairs program is produced and presented by two young economics graduates from UNS. Like his counterparts
worldwide, he values personal qualities such as flexibility, persistence, inquisitiveness, enthusiasm, self-confidence and “personality”, together with wide general knowledge, above erudite theory.

The Department of Communication building labours under several constraints. The tiled floors and high ceilings of its louvered, airy buildings make it difficult to lecture to large classes and hold discussions with small ones. They also hamper the sound, light and atmosphere control needed for audio, video and computer equipment. Books are prohibitively expensive. Imports from Europe and the US cost the equivalent of several weeks’ pay for a lecturer. Despite the 350 titles (most in multiple copies) purchased with QUE Project funds since 1998, the department’s library still has only about two books, and fewer titles, per student. And, while many students are more comfortable and competent with English than some of their lecturers, very few books are in Bahasa Indonesia (which for most staff and students is anyway their second language after Javanese).

A further constraint on the university’s ability to achieve its aim is the lack of professional media experience among its staff. Several have written features or opinion pieces for the press but none has been a reporter or broadcaster. All are graduates of their own degree program. One has a doctorate in history from France, another a masters in library science from Australia. Otherwise, the highest qualification in the Department is the 4-year undergraduate doctorandus. Several staff have only subgraduate diplomas.

All undergraduate curricula in Indonesia are required to include a centrally prescribed block of 23 subjects, including Bahasa Indonesia, English, Mathematics and the national political philosophy Pancasila. For Communication programs, a national board of studies in social sciences has prescribed another 11 subjects. The sequence and content of those 11 subjects, however, is determined locally. Nevertheless, the belief that “theory” (or knowing about) is clearly distinct from and superior to “practice” (or knowing how) remains a strong force in the planning and implementation of communication curricula.

Consultancy

Head of Communication, Haryanto, as executive director of the QUE Project at UNS, first invited Morgan to review and revise the whole curriculum and specify the most appropriate technical support facilities. In subsequent discussion, they decided that it would be better to have a team with wider and more varied expertise. Morgan has had extensive experience in both professional media development in Asia and the Pacific, and
curriculum development worldwide. Loo was a journalist and journalism educator in Malaysia before moving to Australia, where he now heads a graduate school of journalism. Todd has both worked as a designer and taught design in S E Asia, as well as in Australia. Together, their expertise covers the field targeted by UNS, including both the professional areas of broadcasting, journalism, multimedia, and advertising/public relations and the theoretical study of media and communication.

We visited UNS for two weeks, 15-29 June 2000. We were briefed by the Rector of UNS, Dr Haris Mudjiman and the Deputy Dean of FISIP, Dr Julyan Slamet. We consulted with the teaching staff and the media industries, inspected existing course materials and resources, including equipment, facilities and libraries, and observed current teaching practices.

The teaching staff were divided between those who were enthusiastic for change, those who were afraid and those with a strong intellectual commitment to the status quo. We noted that low salaries (further eroded by massive currency devaluation during the past two years) and employment as civil servants deprived staff members of much incentive to invest great effort in curriculum development. Many need other jobs to make ends meet.

From our series of general meetings with the staff, there was considerable agreement on the need to consolidate the media communication subjects to be more vocationally-oriented through appropriate subject sequencing. However, there was less agreement on how the subjects ought to be restructured and sequenced given the varied arts and social science subjects designated by the government as compulsory in the first two years of all undergraduate education.

Subsequent small group discussions led to a consensus that the revised communication curriculum needed to respond to the relationships between the different media, the increasing convergence of media forms, and the importance of building practice into the current theoretical subjects.

The recommended subject offerings were thus aimed at:

• providing students with a conceptual map of journalism, communication and new media technology, both in Indonesia and overseas;

• providing students with a framework for applying the concepts to existing media realities in Indonesia and overseas;

• training students in entry-level communication and journalism skills through professional course modules;

• encouraging students to work across disciplines in joint production projects.

Due to differences in frame of reference and language, there
were moments of miscommunication between our intent, as consultants, and the staff’s reading of the QUE project objectives. On reflection, we were reminded of previous consultancies provided by experts from a foreign culture in parts of Asia, which were ultimately fruitless because of culturally intervening factors such as:

• Lack of attention by foreign consultants to the importance of giving their local clients a sense of ownership and pride, which subsequently led to minimal commitment by the client group to implement recommended alternative work practices.

• Failure by foreign consultants to empathise with real psychological, personal and practical needs of the client group struggling with in-situ infrastructural and political constraints.

• Lack of understanding of verbal and non-verbal communication cues of members from the local culture, thus, affecting foreign consultants’ reading of the client group’s disposition for change.

• Tendency by foreign experts to measure the tangible and intangible benefits to be derived from the recommended work practices from the perspectives of a foreign working culture rather than the client group’s.

• Inadequate attention paid to the institutional capacity or incapacity, especially in relation to the knowledge and experiential gaps of the client group; the operational deficiencies of the organisation, and aspects of sustainability of the consultants’ recommendations for change within the institution.

• Failure to provide opportunities for active client participation in the formulation, implementation and follow-up evaluation of the consultants’ recommendations.

Our daily personal interactions with FISIP staff in fleshing out their ideas and opinions, we believe, managed to accommodate these factors sufficiently well.

Our concern was the lack of sustained career development programs for the staff, its fragmented course offerings, repetitive course contents in every semester, and inadequate computer equipment to support a new professional-oriented curriculum in the areas of journalism, electronic media and computer-assisted design.

Dedicated reading materials for journalism and communication, however, are well-resourced in the faculty library which holds titles mainly from the US and UK. There are no video titles to support practical teaching in journalism, advertising and public relations.

The notion of consensus as a core value in Javanese culture, implied by the University Rector in the briefing session -- of which we were highly aware — also was a constant reminder for
us to frame our proposals for change in the curriculum through an advisory structure consisting of the head of department, the faculty staff, and with practical input from the media industry in Solo. This we managed to accommodate in a series of general meetings with the faculty staff and practitioners at Solopos and the local FM radio station.

A general agreement was finally reached on a number of issues:

- The curriculum should move systematically from the broad-based conceptual/theoretical map to a professional media sequence.
- Elements and attributes common to the media must be emphasised rather than to restructure the curriculum around media differences.
- Detailed work could then proceed on the sequence and content of individual subjects, and the best ways for students to learn that content is through adopting the principles of “reflective practice” (Schon, 1983; 1987; 1991) in the development of their courses.
- Computer literacy will only be possible with a comprehensive computer infrastructure support. Purchase of new equipment will be delayed until the faculty and students are brought up to scratch in two years.

The pragmatic principle guiding our task was that without increased access by the staff to career development programs both in professional practice and teaching techniques, our recommendations would fall short of its intended objectives.

For the time being, after two weeks of intensive consultation and detailed planning, the consultancy can claim the following achievements:

1. The teaching staff recognised that curriculum planning proceeds most effectively when it works “backwards” from the desired outcomes for the learners (in this case, the professional capability of the graduates) rather than “forwards” from the interests and skills and abilities of the teachers.

2. They also recognised that “reflective practice” is doubly beneficial for professional media and communication educators. Practice is always theoretical in that there are always ideas that explain why one way of doing things is better or worse than another. “Reflective practice” thus obviates the old-fashioned distinction between “theory” and “practice”. It also provides a constructive framework for learners, teachers and course designers alike. “Reflecting on action” and “reflecting in action” together help enable all of them to act independently and professionally.
3. The staff were reassured that, when Western research and theory fails to explain the realities of media and communication in Indonesia, the need is to change the theory not the reality. They and their students can confidently proceed to undertake their own research to rectify such shortcomings and then use that research to strengthen their own teaching and learning. Publishing that research internationally will then enrich understanding of media and communication, not just in Indonesia but globally.

4. Instead of trying to teach “everything to everyone”, especially in professional practice areas, the staff decided that it was better to let students develop their capabilities more substantially in two selected areas, through double-unit subjects.

5. Staff obtained current technical advice on the most appropriate equipment, facilities and software to support their teaching.

6. Last and perhaps least, because they are now better able to modify it according to emerging needs, the staff agreed on the following course structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEM</th>
<th>GENERAL STUDIES</th>
<th>COMMUNICATION CONTEXT STUDIES</th>
<th>PROFESSIONAL MEDIA STUDIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>6 subjects (18 credits)</td>
<td>1 subject (3 credits)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>6 subjects (18 credits)</td>
<td>1 subject (3 credits)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>6 subjects (18 credits)</td>
<td>1 subject (3 credits)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>4 subjects (12 credits)</td>
<td>3 subjects (9 credits)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>2 subjects (6 credits)</td>
<td>1 subject (3 credits)</td>
<td>2 subjects (12 credits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1-2 subjects (3-6 credits)</td>
<td>2 subjects (12 credits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1-2 subjects (3-6 credits)</td>
<td>2 subjects (12 credits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 subject (3 credits)</td>
<td>2 subjects (12 credits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>24 subjects (72 credits)</td>
<td>10-12 subjects (30-36cr)</td>
<td>8 subjects (48 credits)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 10 Communication Context Studies subjects are:
- Introduction to Communication Studies
- Mass Communication
- Indonesian Communication Systems
- Developments in Communication Technology
- Ethics and Philosophy of Communication
- Communication and Culture
- Communication and Politics
- Communication Research Methods
- Communication Theory
• Social and Development Communication;
  plus two electives.

The two Professional Media Studies are chosen from:
• Journalism
• Advertising and Public Relations
• Radio
• Video, and
• Computer Design

Yet, this is ultimately no more than a recipe for a curriculum. The real curriculum will be the lived experience of the course, in all its subtle complexity, not just its plans and proposed content. As with all puddings, the proof will be in the eating. UNS and the World Bank will each make their own evaluations, as will the media industries and the Indonesian public. Only then will the final outcomes be known.

Notes

1. The Indonesian Journalists Association (AJI) said in The Jakarta Post (June 24, 2000) that bribery and mob attacks were the “nemeses of the free press”. The association blamed the low income of Indonesian journalists for their vulnerabilities to bribes, a practice tagged as “envelopmental journalism”. The other threat is mob violence and attacks on journalists, the last of which was in early May when the Nahdatul Ulama Muslim’s civilian guards attacked Jawa Pos, a vernacular paper in Surabaya for the paper’s alleged unfavourable coverage of the organisation.

References


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