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Empowering j-students to think and write in a 'flat' world

Eric Loo

Abstract

Australian journalism education has progressed from its vocational model, predominant in the '70s and '80s, to a somewhat hybridised form where theoretical explications sit comfortably with skills training. The past decade or so has seen a distinct body of Australian journalism practice-led research emerging, with applied journalism texts authored by local educators used widely in undergraduate and postgraduate classes. The journalism education paradigm may well soon shift, with the useful features retained and less useful ones discarded. This commentary explores some of the useful features.

That the general public perceives journalism as one of the least ethical professions is a wake-up call for journalism educators. Public opinion polls consistently show a general distrust of media reporting, and its decline as a reliable source of "wise" counsel. Distrust continues with each exposé of journalistic fraud. It deepens further with stories on the internet and weblogs being filed on the fly, some breaking new paths in investigative methods and narrative structure, and others being byproducts of expropriation, fabrication and replication. Given the sully of what was a respectable profession, we wonder how best practice in journalism education can be fostered¹.

To add to the ongoing discussion, here's one approach, which I term the "Oracle process of reporting" that I have adopted to encourage "best practice" among my students. The acronym – Observe, Reflect and Report, Analyse, Contextualise, Learn/Liberate and, ultimately, Enlighten – may add to the current pool of practical tips for designing reporting assignments with a critical learning objective in mind: to empower in students the perceptual, conceptual and narrative skills to engage their role as their readers' voice, eyes, and ears.

Webster's dictionary describes an oracle as "a typically ambiguous or enigmatic revelation or utterance believed to issue from a divinity through a medi-

um thought to be inspired” by a higher source. An oracle implies “an authoritative or wise expression: an answer delivered with an aspect of oracular certainty; a medium by which a pagan god reveals hidden knowledge or makes known the divine purpose”. While today’s journalists are far from Webster’s depiction of a medium of communication from a divine source, journalists traditionally were seen as a source of great authority or wisdom whose opinions or judgments are regarded with great respect. And, despite the public distrust of journalists, readers do indirectly rely on the media to interpret events and issues for “guidance and direction”.

Fundamental to the “Oracle” approach to teaching reporting is the synthesis of facts in context, and transformation of hard data into meaningful knowledge. Without explaining the context, facts are cold data isolated from their reality. This apparent flaw can often be seen in stories framed by assumptions of, for instance, the subjects’ ethnicity, religious beliefs, politics or sexual orientation. Thus, one of the approaches to best practice in journalism education is to expose students to self-reality checks of their personal worldviews. And this approach many vocational-oriented journalism programs have variably adopted while drilling students on the ABCs of journalism – to be Accurate, Bold and Balanced, Contextual and Complete, Deliberative, Ethical and, ultimately, Fair in their storytelling.

Shooting for the ideal curriculum

Journalism programs generally fall into three broad categories – liberal, vocational, and liberal-vocational. The “liberal” approach is articulated in its liberal arts education program underpinned by theoretical and conceptual media-related subjects. The “vocational” approach is oriented towards teaching students basic job-entry skills as defined by industry job requirements. The “liberal-vocational” combines liberal arts education with offerings in media communication studies, cultural studies, media discourse analysis and the social sciences, among others, with professional internship placements usually in the final semester of a three-year undergraduate program.

Vocationally oriented courses generally attempt to familiarise students with journalism mechanics through core subjects such as news writing (for newspapers, radio and television); media and society; media ethics, law and standards; media history; and production subjects from editorial design to computer editing, and desktop to online news publishing. Students are then tracked into sequences of specialisation – print, broadcasting (radio or television) and, in some cases, advertising and public relations. The internet has added a popular major – online or convergent journalism and its equivalent, Web publishing.

Journalism faculties are generally inclined to see students as potential cadet journalists, and lecturers as chief-of-staff and editor. At the core of the industry

model of teaching is the simulation of newsroom ethos in the classroom, adhering to professional conduct and codes of media ethics. Students are drilled in industry skills with related attributes through intensive media writing exercises, hypotheticals², and field trip assignments. Mock press conferences expose students to the rigours of asking the hard questions, taking notes, transcribing interviews and completing their stories within limited time. This teaching approach is reinforced by practising or former journalists commissioned to write and develop the course content.

The vocational model does have its pedagogic imperatives – among which are to delve deeper into the internal logic of news, theoretical explication of journalistic practice and methods, reflection on local and global contexts of reporting, and analysis of news texts in relation to, for instance, (mis)representation of race and religion, gender and sexual orientation, and the media tendency to reinforce cultural stereotypes. Understandably, students enrolled in vocationally oriented programs tend to see the contextual-theoretical exercise more as a prerequisite to graduate from the program than as a crucial cognitive tool.

Vocationalism in journalism courses with its focus on skills training may have depoliticised the media, and inadvertently diverted students' focus from the media's critical public service function³ to one that perceives the media as primarily a commercial entity in the open market of information, opinions, pseudo current affairs⁴ and entertainment. Within this media reality, one may be excused for thinking that vocationally oriented journalism programs with their pragmatic teaching approach are basically stuck on emulating the industry cadetship model. Whither the higher educative function?

Commonly, a journalism teacher's perspective is framed from the position of how events and issues would be interpreted by mainstream journalists – just report the problems, don't try to solve them, leave that to the experts, quote the authorities. Textual production techniques and news values transmitted from teacher to students in tutorials and practical reporting assignments defer to industrial performance indicators. Teacher-student interaction takes the form of a professional relationship between cadet reporters and chief-of-staff. Consequently, news coverage of issues and events with significant cross-cultural (global) implications are framed by its relevance to an assumed monocultural mainstream readership market. The conflict between keeping on side with the industry to facilitate students' job placements, and critical analyses of global media processes and its performance, for instance, is generally resolved in favour of the former. Herein lies one of the causes of apprehension by the conservative academia with vocational-oriented journalism programs.

To the extent that students are conditioned to meet their lecturers' expectations to operate within the dominant news framework of mainstream media, the journalistic applications that students are honed to "master" are, theoretically

and intellectually, divergent from the need to instil in students an insight into the process of, for instance, conflict reporting, or the ramifications of covert racial and cultural stereotyping in the mainstream media. The reflective approach to journalism education is further constrained by inadequate emphasis in the journalism instructional texts of old on cross-cultural (and global) implications of issues and events⁵. This shortfall is, however, easily overcome through students' easy access to the Internet for alternative perspectives.

I often remind students to constantly reflect on the Oracle process when they go about their assignments. These self-reality checks are critical for various pedagogic reasons, such as: (a) that in observing and reporting what they see, feel and hear, students are made aware that they will be clouded by their perceptions of right and wrong; (b) that in analysing the issues, they will be influenced by their habits of thinking acquired over years of learning in different cultural environments; and (c) that in contextualising their stories, they will be guided by what they have learned through researching the issue, and what they think their readers need to know. This, hopefully, helps students frame their stories to shed new light on old issues.

The diversity of cultures, learning styles and needs of students will continually challenge journalism educators to dovetail their teaching methodologies and content accordingly. The "chalk talk" approach and localised content may be somewhat anachronistic when super-empowered students, being avid media users themselves, have ready access to cyber-sites from Wikipedia to weblogs and bulletin boards. Obviously, the teaching of journalism, being a product as well as a producer of culture, needs to adapt to a learning environment that's vastly different from only a decade ago. One option is to internationalise the curriculum.

Why 'internationalise'?

"Internationalisation" means different things to different stakeholders. For most university administrators, "internationalisation" is directed by economic imperatives. This means aggressive marketing of courses overseas, establishment of twinning relationships with overseas colleges, provision of infrastructure support for a multicultural student population – from access to foreign language websites to accommodation facilities and "ethnic" food in the cafeteria.

With students, "internationalisation" generally refers to exchange programs, international credit transfers, scholarships for Australian students to study in non-English-speaking countries, and provision of pre-matriculation English language classes for foreign students. With academic staff, "internationalisation" mainly alludes to establishment of exchange programs with overseas universities, development of offshore courses adapted to local environments and delivered online, and collaboration on research projects with overseas universities.

Among the current “internationalisation” benchmarks is the extent of course delivery via the WebCT, claimed as the most cost-effective medium to teach students from around the globe⁶. However, online course delivery to a global student body does not necessarily translate into internationalised subject content. This is because an “internationalised” program is built less by economic imperatives than by subject matter, context of course assignments and outlook of course instructors – all geared to graduate students capable of interpreting and explaining issues across cultural, geographical and political contexts.

An “internationalised” print media curriculum is, by definition, responsive to the diversity (and commonality) of the students’ backgrounds, thinking and learning styles. It recognises that while there are universal principles of media writing and editorial production, interpretation of issues and events, and subsequent textual construction, may require different approaches in different cultural and political environments.

While the mechanics of reporting with impact and precision, page design and sub-editing are unarguably universal in their application, the causes of events and issues, and their consequences on people’s lives, are relative. One’s liberation is another’s invasion. One’s freedom fighter is another’s terrorist. An impressionistic analysis of media coverage of the US-Iraq war, the Schapelle Corby trial in Bali, the Israeli withdrawal of settlers from the Gaza Strip, black “looters” and white “finders” in the September floods in New Orleans, shows how stories can distort realities when reflective contexts are omitted.

“Internationalising” the contents and contexts of print media education is significant for obvious reasons. As a profession and a global business entity, journalism spans space, time, political systems and cultures. In the “war against terrorism”, journalists as agents of change have to transcend narrow nationalism and xenophobia to refocus on shared universal values, however these values are defined. The transcendent potential of print media, driven by today’s convergent technology, is most obvious in the international media coverage of 9/11, the US-Iraq war in April 2002, and the suicide bombings in London in July 2005. To limit the teaching of print media processes to local issues and events oblivious of the “butterfly” effect created by the dynamics of global politics, trade and cultural transformations is tantamount to reinforcing in students a tunnel vision of the world – thus, a disservice to the ideals of “oracular” reflective journalism.

Teaching an ‘internationalised’ curriculum

A thin line separates pedantic teaching from teaching that is culturally integrative, which treats student journalists not as sponges but as individuals with an array of values, prejudices, worldviews, and a mindful of (mis)information of cultures different from their own. Once, teaching the processes of interna-

tional reporting and its representation of global events was limited to studying wire copy from AP, UPI, AFP, Reuters and reviewing yesterday's world news from today's broadcasts. The extent of "internationalising" the journalism curriculum was limited to American-authored books stacked on library shelves or photocopied notes handed out by visiting media academics and itinerant retired journalists. Today, the significance of a global (or cross-cultural) focus in journalism education is obvious from the fact that global sensitivity and literacy are more likely to lead to quality contextual reporting as a consequence of the journalists' appreciation of how different audiences perceive world events, understand, and react to their environments.

Increasingly, journalism educators are focusing on teaching conceptual skills tailored to develop in students the aptitude to "think global but act local". Commentaries and research reports in media journals show a renewed consciousness among journalism educators of the need to critically reflect on the "glocal" ramifications of events and issues – current example being the Islam-terrorist equation and, consequently, the bad press received by Muslims and those of "Middle Eastern appearance". In this context, global literacy is acquired from experiential reporting assignments and active participation in global (or cross-cultural) encounters by both teacher and student.

Some ways to enhance global literacy by "internationalising" the teaching of journalism was brainstormed at a pre-convention print media workshop, which I facilitated, at the AEJMC conference on August 3, 2004, in Toronto. The objectives of an "internationalised" print media program were noted as follows⁷:

- ♦ To provide students with learning opportunities to look at community issues and affairs in a "global" context.
- ♦ To imbue in students an aptitude for reflecting on the impact that local, regional and global forces have on themselves and their readers.
- ♦ To develop in students the capacity for interpreting and, thus, contextualising issues from a cross-cultural, "global" perspective.

The following is a selection of approaches published in the workshop booklet *50 fabulous ways to internationalise your journalism and mass communication courses* (Bautista, 2004). Many of the ways to "internationalise" the teaching of print media are already being practised by Australian media educators, but others aren't. The list includes:

- ♦ Set up a website to act as (a) a repository for educators from affiliated universities to upload their course outlines, course assignments, reference materials; and (b) a publication outlet for international students' feature stories, investigative reports, commentaries and essays.
- ♦ Set up a moderated listserv group for journalism students and educators to discuss critical issues that affect their communities but which

have global implications. For example, the impact of illegal migrant labour on community health, law and order, race relations, and pollution; or the portrayal of Islam and terrorism in the local media. A roster of moderators frames the discussions within the context of international communication realities. The listserv group also provides a space for students and educators to initiate and collaborate on international communication research projects.

- ♦ Tape or obtain television news broadcasts to show in class. Compare and contrast the formats of major local networks and abroad. It is especially enlightening to see how the networks report on a common world event, such as 9/11, the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Theresa, the Olympics, US occupation of Iraq, the tsunami in Asia, the withdrawal of Israeli settlers from Palestinian land.

- ♦ Use current media events in lessons about news. Current events serve as highly potent happenings that drive home the point where world events and mass media intersect – events that do not necessarily fall under crisis and chaos in geopolitics of the world. Human triumph and tragedy can be enhanced to touch the common chord that students across the world possess. Since events such as these are already on television news and in the newspapers it is easy and appropriate to draw from them in order to teach students about media and culture, media and politics, and media and human interest.

- ♦ Introduce cross-cultural and global themes in reporting assignments. Have students write news articles about current world events or cultural activities on campus and in the community. Encourage them to interview international students and faculty or other appropriate sources. They may even do email interviews with someone from another part of the world. When students interview people of different cultural backgrounds, they learn to understand the story from the sources' perspectives and be mindful of the propensity for sources to be misquoted or taken out of cultural context.

- ♦ Assign students to analyse code of ethics of local and overseas media organisations. Identify core common values and those that are culturally differentiated and defined. Students may be divided into groups (per medium or per media organisation) and present oral reports to the class.

- ♦ Discuss the life of foreign correspondents. When teaching about biographical writing, personality profiles and obituary features, focus on foreign correspondents as a topic. Discuss their educational training, excitement and dangers of the job. Find ways to acknowledge current and past journalists who have dedicated their lives to journalism and, in the case of developing countries, their crusade for press freedom. This

will make students more aware and appreciative of foreign correspondents.

- ◆ Encourage international topics for research projects. Advise students to focus their research, thesis and dissertation topics on international issues and media impact. Suggest analysing media systems throughout the world. Encourage students to present their research at professional associations and international divisions. Lecturers could also collaborate with senior or graduate students as well as another colleague in doing research. This, in turn, will enhance teaching with current issues and new knowledge in the international communication field.

- ◆ Host international journalists or mass communication practitioners. Likewise, contact local newspapers and invite a journalist or mass communication practitioner to class. They bring a “real world” frankness when they speak about their experiences working abroad or on global-theme media projects. Some guests might show samples of their work in class, giving the students a tangible example of what to expect when they themselves join the work force after graduation. This is also a good networking opportunity for students seeking internships or job referrals.

- ◆ Create a special international-theme website. The site can become a repository for educators from affiliated universities to upload their subject/course outlines, teaching methods, course assignments, assessment guidelines and reference materials as well as a publication outlet for international students’ feature stories, investigative reports, commentaries and essays. Enhance the site with graphics (photos and global-theme clip art) and sound files. An example of a journalism student website with an international theme is *The Graduate Reporter* at the University of Wollongong.

- ◆ Encourage student exchange programs and international media internships. Initiate a “study abroad program” where students can opt to study for a year at a foreign university. The credits taken in subjects offered by the foreign university are counted towards the degree awarded by the home university. For example, by completing an investigative reporting subject at a foreign university, students might obtain advanced standing in the final-year investigative journalism subject back home. Two-month journalism internships can also be organised with foreign news media, communication research organisations, non-governmental organisations or news wire agencies. A structured program to be negotiated and agreed upon by the university and host organisation.

- ◆ In journalism schools with international student enrolments, conduct case studies of newspaper reports and draw from students’ experience and familiarity with related issues in their respective home countries.

Introduce cross-cultural and global themes in reporting assignments where students interview people of different cultural backgrounds and understand the story from the sources' perspectives.

- ◆ Students to work collaboratively with sources, local and overseas, who are accessible via the internet in fleshing out the issues. Probe cultural values and beliefs, and confront stereotyping.
- ◆ Case studies and current newspaper reports of cross-cultural and global issues can be used to help students understand abstract theories and concepts presented in the lectures and readings.
- ◆ Organise cross-cultural dialogues with community organisations, the ethnic media and ethnic organisations to explore cultural and perceptual commonalities and differences.
- ◆ Use overseas examples and cases for class discussions. Draw from students' experience and familiarity with issues back in their home country.

To "internationalise" the print media curriculum is ultimately to provide students with the confidence and ability to live and work with people of other countries and other cultures; to empower them with the capacity to think globally and consider alternative perspectives and the ability to make an informed choice from a wide repertoire of possible angles for their stories – thus reclaiming journalism's traditional oracular function. While the imperatives of internationalising the print media curriculum are obvious, there are factors which may hinder its smooth implementation. They were identified as:

- ◆ Demographics of the student population. There are different levels of fluency in the English language, exacerbated by phonetic and syntactical variations. This effectively limits students' access to global reading materials – predominantly in English – and class discussions.
- ◆ Ethnocentric lecturers, and thus a lack of academic and professional commitment to the "globalise-glocalise" process. This sentiment is also reflected in journalists from the mainstream media, where the value for news and stories are measured by its relevance to a mainstream mono-cultural audience.
- ◆ Lack of awareness of the benefits of "internationalising" print media subject content. Thus, curriculum development is often reactive to and directed by university strategic requirements rather than being proactive, that is, in anticipating the changing trends in international journalism.
- ◆ In terms of assessing print media assignments, the issue is whether stories should be assessed in the context of diverse students' learning styles, the media they will be working for when they return home, and

their fluency in English. Should assessment place less emphasis on grammar but more on story structure, story content, angle, sources interviewed, degree of factual and contextual accuracy and backgrounding?

- ♦ Limited local and international media experience among journalism educators.
- ♦ The emphasis on doctorate research qualifications for employing journalism academics at the expense of professional media experience – local and international.

Conclusion

The warp-speed convergence of communication technology has so “flattened the world” (Friedman, 2005), that many previously isolated countries and peoples are finding themselves becoming part of the global supply chain of news and information – with often bewildering global events unfolding before their eyes. And with this “flattening of the world” comes the need for citizens, communities, corporations and governments to move faster to stay on track. Likewise, with the media, and journalism schools by extension, subject content, story constructs, and reporting assignments should reflect these changes. Student journalists should be taught new tools to observe, describe, analyse, interpret, and explain from this “flattened world” perspective.

The obvious place to begin is to absorb into current media-specific vocationally oriented teaching mode a more reflective learning culture, as many journalism programs have done. A cross-cultural and global-oriented form of reporting, however, cannot be taught in a single subject or semester in the way basic news reporting can. It is a process of acculturation and acquisition, which journalism educators could initiate as topics of worthwhile discussion across the board in the curriculum. Student journalists’ ability to adapt and acculturate a global perspective of issues and events in a “flattened world” comes through reporting assignments that expose them to cross-cultural encounters both in the local community and globally through interacting with other sources via the Internet.

Australian journalism as a field of study and research since the mid-’80s has acquired a level of respectability at international forums, most recently through Australian media educators’ participation at the US-dominated AEJMC conventions, which have continually grappled with the recurring imperative of contextualising journalism education to changing world realities. I have seen Australian journalism education progress from its vocational model in the ’80s to a somewhat hybridised form where theoretical explications sit comfortably with skills training. The past decade or so has seen a distinct body of Australian journalism practice-led research emerging, with applied journalism texts authored by Australian journalism educators used widely in undergraduate and

postgraduate classes. The paradigm may well soon shift, with the useful features retained, and non-useful ones discarded.

Notes

1. For discussion papers on “Best practices in journalism education” visit <https://courses.worldcampus.psu.edu/welcome/bestpractices/>.
2. Refer to Tanner, S. (2005, December). Investigating the hypothetical: building journalism skills through the use of on-line challenges. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 16.
3. “Public service” in this context refers to the reporter’s role in helping people re-engage, discuss and solve problems in their communities.
4. For a refreshing look at how current affairs programs have been watered down, refer to 702 ABC Radio Sydney presenter John Doyle’s 2005 Andrew Olle Media Lecture, October 7, 2005. Retrieved October 10, 2005, from <http://www.abc.net.au/sydney/stories/s1476723.htm>.
5. Recent books by Australian media academics, however, have taken a refreshing contextual look at these issues. See, for example: Tanner, S., et al. (2005). *Journalism ethics at work*. Pearson Education Australia; Richards, I. (2005). *Quagmires and quandaries: exploring journalism ethics*. Sydney: UNSW Press; Sheridan Burns, L. (2002). *Understanding journalism*. London: Sage; Breen, M. (Ed.). (1999). *Journalism: theory and practice*. Sydney: Macleay Press; Tapsall, S., & Varley, C. (Eds). (2001). *Journalism: theory in practice*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press; Hirst, M., & Patching, R. (2004). *Ethics in journalism: arguments and cases*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
6. For a preview of Asia’s pioneer in WebCT delivery of graduate journalism program with students and educators located in different countries, see the Konrad Adenauer Center for Journalism at Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines, at: <http://cfj.ateneo.edu/>
7. For an example of an internationalised approach to journalism education, see the Australian Convergent Journalism Special Interest Group (ACJ-SIG) initiated by media academics John Cokley at the University of Queensland and Lindsay Simpson, formerly at the University of Tasmania. ACJ-SIG is affiliated with the NewsPlex research centre (<http://www.newsplex.org/>) at the University of South Carolina in the United States.

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 - ♦ Jenkins, C. *Reflections on practice: journalism students and the online forum*
 - ♦ Pearson, M. *Media law in action: using reflective practice strategies to help Samoan journalists cover an assassination trial*.
 - ♦ Sheridan Burns, L. *Teaching journalism as decision-making*.
 - ♦ Thomas, R. *The benefits of learning news writing through new methods*.

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