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Rethinking The Journalism Curriculum in PNG

This paper reports on the changes Divine Word University in Madang, Papua New Guinea, is making to its journalism curriculum. It has taught journalism since 1979 mainly with an emphasis on journalism craft skills. This model has been replaced by an ideological model that identifies social justice and the need to provide a voice for the voiceless, while holding the powerful to account, as the central issues for journalists. This new mission is aspirational and much work still has to be done on the curriculum. This paper examines the new model and situates it in a number of contexts: the challenges facing journalism in the country; debates in the developed world on the true path for journalism education and the needs for journalism training identified from within PNG. It concludes with suggestions on what the new curriculum might contain to achieve the aspirations.

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Divine Word University, which today is one of the fastest growing of PNG’s six universities, is a private university conceived in 1958 by two Divine Word missionaries who wanted to carry on the society’s traditional involvement in tertiary education. In 1964, having secured a site in Madang the missionaries failed to secure government assistance for a university project. Planners reassessed their commitment and developed a Catholic co-educational high school, which with an enrolment of almost 600 emphasised academic excellence and self-reliance.

A feasibility study in 1977 into the possibility of returning to its original idea of tertiary education led to the phasing out of the high school and the establishment of a university. In 1979 students began enrolling in four year diploma programs. The Divine Word Institute as it became known was incorporated by Act of Parliament in 1980 and in 1996 became a recognised university by the PNG government (Czuba, 2003 4-5).

Students have been studying journalism at DWU since 1979 and the first six graduates were awarded their diplomas in

Today, the Communications Arts department offers a two-year full-time diploma programme, which aims to take 38 students each year. About 12 students each year are enrolled for a further two years of study to complete a bachelor degree.

In 2002, after an internal review of its programmes the Communications Arts department identified its new mission as: “to encourage responsible journalism which makes a positive contribution to social justice within Papua New Guinea and the Pacific region, promotes and defends the right to freedom of expression and promotes and enhances communications between the diverse elements of society within Papua New Guinea and the Pacific region” (Communications Arts Department, 2002: appendix 1).

The department intends to achieve this by providing courses of study which equip students with the skills and attitudes to enable them to be journalists who will “provide a voice for the voiceless, hold the powerful to account and expose abuses and corruption.”

The craft approach had been dominant at DWU since the programme’s inception. This approach was strengthened in 1999, the year Divine Word upgraded from a secondary institution to a university. The university relaunched its diploma program and launched a bachelor degree. The changes were made upon recommendations of a retired editorial executive from the British Broadcasting Corporation. John Jefferson took a model for newspaper training from England and transplanted it in PNG.

The new programmes which covered only English language print journalism were predicated on the belief that there was an “international consensus on the elements required to deliver a competent news journalist into the media industry,” and that journalism is “essentially a craft skill i.e. vocational rather than academic” (Jefferson, 1998: 1).

The new diploma had five central themes. 1) Journalism – the basic skills and knowledge required to gather information and turn it into a hard news or feature story. 2) Essential craft skills – shorthand, keyboard, word processing, and layout. 3) Essential knowledge – knowing a little about a lot. Basic and PNG oriented knowledge which is needed by a journalist to analyse and evaluate the significance of a story and know where to go to get information. 4) News and current affairs awareness – the development of an insatiable appetite for news and wide knowledge of current local, national and international issues. 5) Improved written and spoken
language skills – a confidence in written and spoken English and the development of a writing style (Jefferson, 1998: 1).

The reliance on the English trade school model can be seen in the diploma’s newsgathering components. Students were expected to concentrate on official sources – the police, the fire station and the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (Jefferson, 1998: 6-8). The course in “community reporting”, in which students would produce their own newspapers, concentrated on attendance at meetings, writing news releases and handling copy from freelance agencies and local correspondents. The programme also placed a high emphasis on telephone interviewing. The features course included “leisure and pleasure” concentrating on “issues such as television, cinema reviews [and] recreation” (Jefferson, 1998: 10).

DWU’s BA journalism programme was less well defined, but it was intended for “more experienced writers and performers or editorial managers such as editors and news editors in newspapers, radio, television and publishing” (Jefferson, 1998: 2). The programme outline covered a single page, but identified the need to study under these headings: media management skills and issues; understanding the media; journalism in a developing country; exploratory and innovatory study and advanced craft skills (Jefferson, 1998: 16).

The programmes were premised on four misunderstandings. The first was that a programme of journalism training suitable for the needs of the mainly local press in England could be transported to the Pacific. Second, the reliance on leisure reporting, cinema, television and telephone interviewing all reveal a lack of knowledge of the reality of life in PNG. Third, the heavy reliance on official sources ignored the ordinary people in PNG. Fourth, that there is an international consensus that journalism education should be essentially vocational rather than academic.

DWU was not the first institution to deliver journalism courses in the Pacific. Journalism education started at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in 1975, with support from the New Zealand government (Henshall, 1997: 97). A four-year bachelor program was offered for the first time in 1986. The university was either unable or unwilling to fully resource the journalism education and the courses effectively closed in January 1999, although since 2002 journalism units have been offered.

The UPNG programme was distinguished by its commitment to investigative journalism through its student newspaper, Uni Tavur. The newspaper charter identified a clear ideological position for journalism highlighting the needs “to promote a fairer and more tolerant society and to seek an improved quality of life for
citizens in PNG” and “to ensure that activities and concerns of the poor and powerless are represented” (Robie, 1997: 100; Robie 1999: 122-124).

UPNG took a combined academic and craft approach, but teachers often had a background in journalism rather than academic research (Moore, 1995: 63).

The only other Pacific-based university journalism course is at the University of South Pacific, with its main campus at Suva, Fiji. It teaches a three-year program in journalism which is offered as a double major with social science units as part of a Bachelors degree, and a two-year diploma in Pacific Journalism. The courses are funded by the French government (Craddock, 1999: 85).

All these programmes have been running long enough for Craddock to report that the real difficulty in journalism training in the region is to get students to deal with real cultural pressures. The South Pacific region has strong hierarchies of authorities at the family, the community and the political level. It can be an intimidating task for students to ask their leaders searching questions on their political policies (1999: 84-89).

We cannot divorce the needs of journalists and of journalism education from the context of the country as a whole. The state in PNG is weak and has severe problems. The country has great potential from its natural endowments of minerals, petroleum, fertile land, forestry and fishing resources, but the unprecedented wealth these created during the 1990s have not been converted into real development. Corruption is rife, caused in large part by development policy objectives to generate wealth through developing natural resources coupled with communal ownership, diverse ethnic groups and the acute incapacity of government (Mellam and Aloi, 2003: 10). This is compounded by the extremely fragmented nature of PNG society. There are more than 850 distinct cultural groups, each with their own language, in PNG and cultural pressure to look after one’s clan or wantoks is very high (AusAiD, 2000: 9).

PNG ranks 129th out of 170 countries in the UNDP human development index – below all its Pacific neighbours. About 85 per cent of PNG’s population, estimated at 5 million, live in isolated scattered rural settlements. Poor roads, bridges and air transport are barriers to providing education and health services. Only 23 per cent of PNG 15-19 year olds are enrolled at secondary school and 31 per cent of 5-14 year olds are at primary school (UNDP, 1999: 110). About 3.5 million Papua New Guineans depend on subsistence agriculture for their survival and are largely outside the formal economy.
The news media in PNG is free and guaranteed under the constitution, although there have been two unsuccessful attempts made by the national government to introduce legislation to limit media freedom. Media in PNG are not regulated and anyone can start a company (Mellam and Aloi, 2003: 35-36).

A US Government human rights report concluded the media provide independent coverage of major issues, including accusations of corruption in government and excessive use of force by police officers (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2002).

The PNG news media serves elite communities. A total of 72 per cent of adults in PNG are deemed illiterate and most newspapers are published in the English language. The readers are likely to be leaders and opinion makers (UNDP, 1999: 110). Despite the low number of readers, the PNG press gains its immense importance because of its ability to reach decision-makers (Rooney, 2002).

There are two daily newspapers in PNG, both are based in Port Moresby, and share a metropolitan bias. The Post-Courier is the oldest daily newspaper, established in 1969 and owned by South Pacific Post, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch’s News Ltd. It has a circulation of 29,819 and is the country’s largest selling newspaper. The National is PNG’s newest daily newspaper with a circulation of 22,615 copies (as at the end of June 2002). Established in 1993, it is Malaysian-owned with a subsidiary of timber company Rimbunan Hijau holding a majority shareholding.

The Independent, formerly the Times of Papua New Guinea and then the Saturday Independent, folded in June 2003. It was the only English language national weekly in PNG and was owned by Word Publishing through Media Holdings Ltd. Its shareholders were the mainstream churches in PNG.

The company continues to publish the weekly Wantok, first published in 1970, and the only national newspaper in the Tok Pisin language, which has its strongest readership in the northern half of the country. The paper launched at the request of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference when Tok Pisin specialist Fr Frank Mihalic SVD was assigned the project from Italy (Mihalic, 1999: 213-216). The paper faces continual commercial hardship because of its small circulation and the reluctance of European business managers to support media delivered in the Tok Pisin language, which are not read by the country’s decision makers. The Wantok was originally distributed through missions but began to attract a circulation in the run up to the country’s self-government in 1975 when it explained the role of independence and the operating of the voting system. The Wantok has a circulation of about 8,000
but it is claimed that every copy is read by on average seven people.  

*The Eastern Star,* established in 1991, is PNG’s only provincial newspaper and has a circulation estimated at 2,500. It is published fortnightly around Alota, Milne Bay.

The one television station in PNG, *Em-TV,* is owned by an Australian company (*Nine Network*) and generates only a small proportion of its coverage locally. Broadcasting started in 1987 (Foster, 1998: 54). In 2003, 16 years after its launch the channel is still not available across the country.

There are five national radio stations in PNG. The government-funded public broadcaster, the National Broadcasting Commission, dominates the sector and, theoretically, can reach about four million people. The state-owned NBC radio has been consistently neglected and starved of funding by governments and even the advanced technology used by commercial broadcasters does not reach the rural areas (Eggins, 1999: 149-152).

Privately-owned regional commercial radio stations broadcasting in the three main languages of the country - *Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu* and English - have become more important in recent years. They tend to broadcast entertainment programmes and have little commitment to journalism.

Solomon, until 2002 the group editor-in-chief of *Word Publishing,* reported that although there was a free press in PNG newspapers were heavily dependent on government advertising. This can place the press in a difficult financial position if it tries to protect the public against bad government: Solomon (1995: 121).

Kolma, a former editor of the *National,* identifies self-censorship among journalists as a problem. His reporters were reluctant to write stories about logging because a major shareholder of the *National* was a logging company. They felt this would not meet the approval of their editors. He felt journalists at *Word Publishing* had similar problems reporting the churches. The *National* lost advertising when a client objected to being criticised in the news columns of the paper. With such a small market for advertising in PNG even the loss of one client can make a big impact. This means editorial decision makers must now judge news items on their content, worth, accuracy, fairness and also whether it will cause an advertiser to pull out (Kolma, 1999: 125-126).

Solomon believes threats from advertising clients is a “common experience shared by the media in the country” (Solomon, 1999: 26). The geographical isolation of much of PNG makes it difficult for journalists to cover stories. Many news media operate in a vacuum and journalists have no idea what is
happening in most of the country, especially areas outside the towns (Solomon, 1995: 124). During the 2002 National Elections FM100 radio advertised on air for local stringers to volunteer themselves to cover the campaign and counts.

Pamba believes that in rural areas people no longer have access to newspapers from urban centres while Em-TV and radio stations are beyond the reach of people (Pamba, 2002a: 19). The majority of people do not have access to free media. People in some areas of the highlands are unable to receive radio.

Access to news pages is not open to all. The sources of the overwhelming majority of news reports in the newspapers are organised events, such as parliamentary sittings, public conferences and conventions and events put on especially for the media. There are very few stories about ordinary people unless they have been victims of misfortune or have appeared in court. This raises questions about the way the government dominates and who else within PNG is allowed to communicate through the news media. The newspapers circulate to urban areas and although information on readerships is not publicly available it is a reasonable assumption to make that the newspapers are generally read by educated elites (Rooney, 2002).

The news media appears unrepresentative. Togolo, of PNG’s Transparency International, believes responsible media need to be representative and attempt to be fair to all other views not only the vocal ones (Togolo, 1999: 118).

Journalistic endeavour is weak. Reporters tend to receive information from a single source and re-present it unquestioningly in reports. Reporters make little attempt to gather additional information, not even to get a “balancing” quote in the case of a story about a matter of controversy. Nor do journalists tend to give background information to the stories, even those running from day to day. Journalists in PNG seem to have no institutional memory and seem unable to draw on information from their own archives to put stories into context (Rooney, 2002).

News stories are presented at face value. Reporters tend not to ask questions that require people in positions of power to justify their statements or actions.

The media in PNG is very vocal against corruption, but journalists only report what they have heard and there is a lack of initiative to conduct investigations and publish their findings (Mellam and Aloi, 2003: 35, 78).

There is an emerging consensus in PNG that journalists need to be better trained and educated. It is less clear what needs to be done. Skate, when Prime Minister of PNG, lamented the failure of
overseas media companies to train journalists in PNG. He wanted to get PNG a “good press” abroad to give a good “image” of PNG in order to attract investment and tourist dollars (Skate, 1999: 44-45).

Eggins, director of news and current affairs at Em-TV, believes the future of the news media in PNG is only as good and as strong as the calibre of journalists, producers, editors and industry owners. He wants the state to provide the training of journalists because there is little or no capacity in PNG for this to be done by the private sector (Eggins, 1999: 149-151).

The then leader of the Opposition, Narokobi, identified poor pay for journalists as contributing to the problem of low quality news media. It also encouraged journalists to accept government contracts or even bribes to supplement their income (Narokobi, 1999: 154-155).

Training journalists in PNG is not easy. Weber identified many of the difficulties. People who want to work in the news media had little exposure to the range and variety of newspapers, magazines, radio and television programs that people elsewhere would and had little understanding of the media and often only slight knowledge of the outside world or how PNG itself works (Weber, 1999: 10).

The experience of educators in the developed world suggests that it is not an easy task to agree on the contents of a journalism programme. Journalism educators are engaged in a continuous debate about the purpose of journalism education in universities. The debates fall into three broad camps: journalism education must be craft based with an emphasis on acquiring skills through practice; journalism education must be a mix of skill acquisition and traditional liberal education; and journalism education must include a critical engagement about the place of the journalist in society (Henningham 1999; Hargreaves 2002; Thomas 2000; Johansen, 2001; Adam 2001; Skinner et. al. 2001).

In Australia, PNG’s near neighbour, a debate continues between the classical and critical schools which has created a wide division between empirical journalists (more inclined towards the classical perspectives) and those who are more inclined towards the critical (Frankfurt-Marxist) approach (Henningham 1999, Starck 1994, Meadows 1998, Stockwell 1999, Morgan 1999).

Elsewhere, Johansen et. al. demonstrate that in the US there is a common approach among journalism programs taught at university (Johansen et. al., 2001: 473). The curricula include production practices, media’s historic place in social and political life and liberal education across academic disciplines. Many programs have expanded their mission beyond training students to be working journalists and now offer classes in more general
Adam believes that the coordinates of a good journalism education comprise a fundamental concern with ‘news’ and a corresponding concern with the acquisition of complex methods of knowing, representation and analysis (Adam, 2001: 317).

Adam’s ideal curriculum would promote the capacity to make wise judgements on the significance of events and ideas as they occur and draw appropriate attention to them (Adam, 2001: 325).

Skinner et. al. point out that journalism schools often find themselves with conflicting objectives. On one hand they are asked to satisfy the demands of news organisations by providing a steady stream of graduates ready for the newsroom, and on the other, their institutional administrations want them to meet the standards of university’s that perceive post-secondary education as something more than vocational training (Skinner et. al., 2001: 343).

This has resonance in PNG where the purpose of journalism should be to mould competent practitioners but also to help to produce a group of graduates capable of thinking in wider terms about what the country needs from the media. All graduates in PNG are regarded as leaders in the making (Moore, 1995: 65).

Skinner et. al. believe the curriculum needs to be more flexible while recognising that students want to build portfolios for potential employers. This drives them to try to emulate work found in the mainstream media (whether good or bad) (Skinner et. al., 2001: 355).

They criticise journalism schools that principally teach journalism as a craft, as this presents journalism uncritically as “the way it is” and the study of ideological dimensions of news values is considered secondary to skills acquisition. Students are taught a way of seeing and presenting the world without fully understanding the reasons why they are employing a particular method or the impact that they have (Skinner et. al., 2001: 345).

Not all journalism education needs to take place at universities. A number of short workshops for journalists have been taking place in the Pacific in recent years, with the PNG Media Council playing a leading role, but their value is disputed. Morgan (1999) discovered short course industry training programs worldwide were generally considered to be bereft of new ideas, bound by custom and replicated old knowledge.

University students in PNG face a number of challenges which make it difficult to conduct education at degree level. Their previous schooling makes them unsuited for tertiary education. Traditional education is centred on village life, with the young learner informally observing and imitating elders at work and then...
practising by personal trial and error (McLaughlin, 1997: 1). The influence of elders and the respect for established authority does not encourage questions or a questioning of authority. At no point are young learners encouraged to question or innovate. Analytical thinking and deep approaches to learning are at variance with the student’s experience of traditional culture (Ramsden as cited in McLaughlin, 1996a: 108).

None of this makes for a suitable grounding in journalism. A significant amount of remedial / preparatory work is needed to get students to a level where they can begin degree studies. Remedial intervention at tertiary level may be too late and issues of deep learning need to be addressed at primary and secondary level. Current resources are not available to remedy the situation.

Then there is the problem with the English language. Moore identified the poor level of fluency in written or spoken English as the most formidable problem facing the teacher and journalism student. English can be the student’s second, third or fourth language. He estimated that students entering the University of Papua New Guinea had a recognition vocabulary of about 5,000 words, compared to 40,000 words for a native English speaker (Moore, 1995: 66-70).

Institutions such as DWU rely heavily on expatriate expertise. The majority of teachers on the DWU programmes since 1999 have been expatriates and a high proportion of them have been volunteers (mostly from England and Australia) or from Catholic orders in Europe and Australia. Most of them have little or no experience in teaching, but many have worked as journalists in their home countries.

The predominance of expatriate lecturers on university courses makes it difficult for culturally relevant approaches to learning to be met (McLaughlin, 1996b: 287). This could be especially the case with journalism educators who transfer Western news values to the often unsuitable PNG environment as Jefferson did.

Roth has identified how the media can facilitate greater access to people lacking a voice. Media output needs to be of high quality, relevant and useful to the audience while allowing the expression of a full range of opinions and matters of public concern. Access to information is the first requirement of engaged, participative democracy (Roth, 2001: 22-23).

To meet these obligations journalism students need craft skills, but the DWU curriculum needs to move away from the trade school approach to include critical evaluation (rather than description), political philosophy, jurisprudence and PNG cultural
issues. In the developing curriculum at DWU, a student completing the four-year degree programme should be able to take courses in print, radio, television and Internet practical skills. The range of subjects available of a more academic nature include family and social issues in PNG, and separate courses on political, media law and ethical issues. There are also courses on “questioning the media” and the role of the media in a developing country.

A student should be able to tackle a range of topics in these courses including the procedures of legal institutions, constraints on freedom of expression, political, economic and social theories and perspectives, political governance and professional ideologies. There are opportunities to examine specific social issues including HIV/AIDS, gender inequality, drug and alcohol misuse and corruption.

The challenge is to move learning beyond the acquisition of knowledge to include intellectual skills, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and problem solving. Historically these have been underdeveloped areas in students’ learning in Papua New Guinea, even at tertiary level. There are a number of specific areas that the curriculum still needs to address.

**a) Language**

The reliance on expatriate lecturers has obscured an important issue in journalism education: should classes be in English? There is an assumption that all journalism in PNG is in English and this therefore privileges the newspapers read by expatriates. The journalist writes in English even though the majority of the population cannot read it so reports do not reach many of those who would wish to know what is being said. Hester argues that compelling journalists to think in English (not their first language) creates its own ways of thinking which are not expressive of the original cultures of PNG (Hesterm 1987: 20).

**Tok Pisin** has become the most commonly used language in PNG. Although it began in the nineteenth century as means of communication between White bosses and their National workers, its spread owes much to the Catholic church which adopted it as the language of evangelism and taught it in its schools (Mihalic, 1999: 286-293). In a country with more than 850 distinct local languages, Tok Pisin is today the preferred language of mass communication between Whites and Nationals as well as between different local language groups. To some Tok Pisin is seen as a “unifying factor” in polyglot PNG, yet English remains the official language of education throughout the country (Mihalic (1999:293). The spread of provincial radio throughout PNG has allowed Tok Pisin to penetrate even the remotest areas of the country.

If DWU is serious in its aim to promote and enhance
communications between the diverse elements of society within PNG and the Pacific region it must abandon the exclusive use of English. To increase access to information journalism should be in Tok Pisin or a vernacular language. This may also indicate a need to move away from journalism in print toward radio.

b) Voice for the voiceless

A free flow of information can act as a powerful force for empowerment. Treatment of information should be information led and not source driven. This assumes the starting point is where the audience is not what the source or the practitioner knows (Roth, 2001: 27).

If the curriculum is to encourage change it needs to concentrate more on rural journalism. Most of the important stories are taking place outside the urban areas, missed by journalists because they have a narrow definition of interest. Journalism should reflect the concerns and activities of the society it serves and mirror society as a whole and not just that part of society which has gained political office or come to the attention of the police. More than 80 per cent of people in PNG live in rural areas and that is where the stories are likely to be found. It is in rural areas where trends and events that will have major impact on cities later are likely to be found.

We must discover ways to empower the people in rural areas by communicating other than through the news media and relying on top down mediation: Pamba (2002b: 13). The challenge is to find ways of facilitating this flow of information. It suggests that the best method may be through radio communication, clearly targeting rural population groups and their specific needs.

c) Critical thinking

Students need to move through the phases of describing things accurately, defining things clearly and analysing things succinctly. As Withnall identifies analysing, evaluating and applying information includes a sceptical questioning of evidence, authority and interpretation. To do this requires specialist reporters who can understand and explain complex topics. With specialist subject knowledge and critical thinking skills journalists can evaluate the credibility or reliability of a source, question assumptions, synthesise ideas and analyse stories (Withnall, 1996: 108-111).

d) Interviewing

Students need to think about who to interview, how to interview and why to interview. PNG journalism does not engage with power or confront establishment thinkers. As Skinner et al. remind us that interviews offer the chance to challenge the people who produce and reproduce conventional wisdom (Skinner et.
al., 2001: 353-354). This is especially challenging to journalists in the PNG context where people are taught to accept the wisdom of their elders unchallenging. One way to do this would be to introduce the discussion interview, completely lacking in PNG broadcasting, in which a neutral journalist chairs a debate between people of opposing views.

e) Research

Scholarly research should underpin the entire curriculum. There is a lack of research into PNG media and cultural and political issues that impact on the media. There is almost no information about how people in PNG use the media.

There is a growing movement across developing countries to redress this situation. Academics in developing countries have identified a dearth of self-criticism and critical appreciation of the media and a need for MPhil and Ph.D courses to attract the brightest students alongside a requirement for faculty members to possess research-based qualifications (Dalal (1997: 102; Behera 1994: 140). At university level journalism education should encompass liberal arts and an interdisciplinary approach allowing students to develop the ability to analyse new situations and come to reasonable conclusions for action (Hukill, 1994: 201.)

It is important to update the knowledge and competency of the faculty at DWU. In common with communications departments across the world, faculty staff should be required not only to have professional work experience and publications but should also possess research-based qualifications in fields of communications (Behera, 1994:141).

To improve the situation there should be refresher courses in journalism and mass communications for teachers, teachers should do short term work placements, produce instructional materials in local languages and initiate research courses leading to MPhil and Ph.D degrees.

University should provide students with the opportunity to reflect on the media itself to allow students to begin their careers imbued with positive notions of responsibility and understanding of the media, as well as to develop the ability to analyse new situations and come to reasonable conclusions for action (Hukill, 1994: 201).

Conclusion

Divine Word University has set itself the challenge to revitalise its journalism education. It’s commitment to social justice and the need to provide voice for the voiceless, while holding the powerful to account, is aspirational. A curriculum that retains the best teaching in craft skills but also embraces the wider needs of professional journalists needs is being created. The challenge is to
move learning beyond the acquisition of knowledge to include intellectual skills, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and problem solving, all within a PNG context.

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