



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

1-1-2001

# Workplace training at SBS radio

L. Simons

*Special Broadcasting Services Radio, Sydney*

---

### Recommended Citation

Simons, L., Workplace training at SBS radio, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 10, 2001, 49-53.

Available at:<http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss10/7>

# Workplace Training At SBS Radio

Is a tertiary qualification in journalism sufficient to equip graduates with all the skills they need on the job? Opinions vary. Undisputed, however, is that new recruits to journalism need to have a clear understanding of the philosophical approaches and practical expectations of their employer.

Lynette Simons

Special Broadcasting Services Radio, Sydney

At Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) Radio ([www.sbs.com.au](http://www.sbs.com.au)) workplace training is an essential requirement for on-air staff but a degree in journalism or communications is an enormous advantage. University graduates, especially those with degrees in journalism, are generally the most responsive students we have. By the time they join us they have already grappled with a range of theories on the power and privilege of the media; are comfortable with the latest postmodernist discourse on news reporting; have written an essay or two on broadcast law and are technologically sophisticated. They are the first broadcaster/journalists (BJs) to roll up to inhouse training workshops, the first to answer the questions and the first to enter any debate. As trainers, our task is to introduce them to their work requirements, their workstations, the studios, the resource centre, the equipment, the software, the SBS culture and the SBS vision.

SBS is a national multicultural and multilingual public broadcaster. It was born 26 years ago out of a need to provide news, information and entertainment to new migrants in their own languages. Since then, the initial four hours of programs a day has grown into a five-band network which broadcasts 650 hours of programming a week in 68 languages.

In 1999 SBS Radio became the first broadcaster in Australia to be accredited by the New South Wales Vocational Education and Training Advisory Board (VETAB) to deliver training, conduct assessments and issue qualifications in the Certificates III and IV in Radio Broadcasting. The competency-based modules accredited by VETAB had previously been taught in-house for more than a decade in response to clearly defined needs.

In the early days, contract journalists specialised in the production and presentation of news and current affairs. In the late eighties a decision was made to restructure SBS Radio which led to

©AsiaPacific  
MediaEducator  
Issue No.10  
January-June 2001

the creation of permanent positions. Those contract broadcasters and journalists who succeeded in applying for these positions became known as broadcaster/journalists or BJs.

Many were not successful and a wave of new recruits of all ages, many with no background in radio, were appointed.

A training needs analysis was carried out and work began on developing competency-based modules in journalism and broadcasting. As a result of the restructuring, two 16-hour workshops known as Radio Journalism and Broadcasting Skills were designed and developed for former broadcasters and journalists who needed to multiskill. An orientation module, now entitled Ethics & Standards, was also developed with the aim of ensuring that each BJ understood and accepted the importance of adhering to the fundamentals of broadcast law and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance's (MEAA) Code of Ethics. Within four years, the University of Wollongong (UOW) had recognised three SBS training modules as being the equivalent of one of four subjects in the Graduate Certificate in Multicultural Journalism. Lectures in the other three subjects were conducted at SBS in Sydney and Melbourne and this project culminated in the graduation of a total of 25 BJs in 1997.

There are two main differences between new recruits to suburban newspapers and SBS Radio. The most essential criterion for employment as a BJ at SBS is proficiency in a language other than English. And large numbers of new BJs are mature-aged. Becoming a broadcaster at mid-life can be daunting. During one orientation training session several years ago a newcomer who had worked as a sub-editor for an Australian weekly magazine for more than 20 years innocently declared that he seldom listened to the airwaves. After three weeks he resigned - the complexity of the tasks demanded of a radio journalist proved too much of a challenge for a middle-aged print professional who ultimately chose to return to the certainty and security of the written word. He was, however, a rare exception. All BJs at SBS support the argument that age is no barrier to intellectual growth.

The first BJ at SBS Radio to be awarded the Certificate IV in Radio Broadcasting was Majida Abboud-Saab, the Head of the Arabic Language Program. Majida joined the organisation 26 years ago. Even though she studied communications at the University of Technology in Sydney, Majida has consistently supported in-house training at SBS. Since 1992 she has successfully completed the following modules in addition to attending a wide range of lunchtime lectures and updating her knowledge of new software programs:

- Certificate III in Radio Broadcasting
- Ethics & Standards

- Broadcasting Skills
- Recording & Editing
- Voice Presentation Skills
- Interviewing Skills
- Radio Journalism
- Broadcast Law
- Studio Operations
- Certificate IV in Radio Broadcasting
- Radio Journalism 2
- Documentary and Feature Making
- Outside Broadcasts
- Team Leadership
- Broadcast Management
- Train the Trainer
- Conflict Resolution

The purpose of the 76-hour module Broadcasting Skills, which, like Radio Journalism, comprises a nominal duration of 16 hours in the classroom, 10 hours of self-study and 50 hours of practical work, is to enable the learner to prepare a short pre-recorded broadcast-quality report from new and existing materials. Its aims are to give participants the skills to prepare for, conduct and record a face-to-face interview using all technologies available on site, including our new digital system, Netia; log interviews in preparation for editing; edit logged interviews; write, announce and record diverse narrative links; mix a report to achieve clear and informative communication and maintain studio housekeeping administration and teamwork requirements.

Radio Journalism, on the other hand, was designed to enable learners to compile balanced news bulletins. The content includes defining and identifying news; writing and sub-editing news stories

and putting the bulletin together. As any group of 10 BJs is likely to be representative of 10 languages and/or countries, topics are explored in the context of the needs of participants. Every session begins with an exercise in prioritising the top news stories of the day and week - according to the needs of listeners.

Arabic language broadcasters, for example, may wish to lead the Arabic bulletin with news breaking in any one of 22 countries in the Middle East; a breakout from an Australian refugee detention centre or an air disaster in Africa. The Portuguese BJ would be required to weigh up the relative importance of events in Brazil, Guinea Bissau, East Timor and Portugal and the Cantonese BJ would be called upon to consider the particular interests of their listeners - whose relatives may be living in most parts of the world.

Each module is conducted on the same day over a period of weeks. Radio Journalism, for example, might be run over four Wednesday mornings in July. Those BJs who are unable to attend sessions on Wednesday mornings because this day coincides with their day of broadcast, will be placed on the waiting list for the next round of Radio Journalism classes to be conducted on Thursdays. Flexibility in the content, scheduling and delivery of training is therefore paramount.

For those delivering the training, the multicultural mix in each workshop presents a wide range of philosophical, political and religious experiences and beliefs. Classroom debate is lively, which requires a high degree of interpersonal skills on the part of our trainers. Most modules are conducted by in-house professionals in Sydney and Melbourne who are familiar with the internal resources and expectations of management. External training consultants who are called in because of their specialist expertise have learned the ropes over many years. Some, like former Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) broadcaster Arch McKirdy, have been teaching voice presentation skills with tremendous success at SBS Radio since 1992. In this environment ongoing requests for further training are welcomed - the more our broadcasters know, the better the programs will sound. Even subjects like Conflict Resolution, which may not, on the surface, appear to be directly related to broadcasting, prove to be invaluable for those who are required to deal with a community fractured by political or religious conflict.

Skills relating to the exercise of assertiveness also come in handy to BJs. Some of those cadets have taken to their studies with such vigour that they have used the training to leapfrog into new careers. These include a refugee who arrived at SBS with a Law degree and five languages to his credit and left three years later with the Certificate III in Radio Broadcasting, the Graduate Certificate in Multicultural Journalism and a Masters in International Relations to take up a career

as a diplomat for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

He was last seen heading for a posting in Warsaw. Other broadcasters have moved on to senior positions with the ABC's Radio National - yet another is working for Radio Netherlands in Amsterdam. In recent years an increasing number of overseas students from all parts of the world, especially West European countries, have sought casual work with SBS Radio while undertaking postgraduate study in Australia.

These students jump at the opportunity to undertake training modules offered by SBS. This floating population of migrant students imports a dynamic energy into the organisation in terms of new ideas and an update of their language to a stable mass of permanent fulltimers and part-timers.

SBS Radio has a strong community focus but its newsmakers and decision makers are representatives of an ethnic, rather than suburban, community. For this reason national and international news is included in every SBS Radio program. BJs are required to gather material from a variety of sources. This includes making direct contact with community leaders, acting upon relevant media releases, screening wire copy, writing stories in the language of broadcast, compiling the bulletin and putting it to air, generally without the approval of an editor or sub-editor. With nobody around to check their copy, broadcasters quickly learn the importance of self-reliance which embraces accuracy and objectivity.

The success of SBS Radio training is in many respects a tribute to those universities all over the world which have provided our broadcasters with keen analytical skills and a broad knowledge of the ways of the world. It is this background which makes it possible for our BJs to make sense of the detail embedded in each media release as well as the hidden agenda of each newsmaker in front of them.

LYNETTE SIMONS is broadcaster and trainer at SBS Radio in Sydney. She has conducted numerous workshops on media relations in Australia and overseas. Email: [lsimons@bigpond.com](mailto:lsimons@bigpond.com)