

**Paper presented at the JEANZ conference, 8-9 December, 2008, in Christchurch, New Zealand.**

I'd like to begin by briefly putting my topic into context. Today I will be talking about my PhD thesis, recently completed, passed and final amendments almost complete.

It's called *The Making of a Journalist: The New Zealand Way*.

It's a first of its kind in New Zealand – the first in-depth investigation of New Zealand journalism education.

Like many of you, here today I have spent the greatest part of my working life as a journalist, and also as an editor and managing editor of community newspapers. During my 20 years of writing for and running these papers my chief interest was the power of the written word – to inform, educate, appeal and interest readers. I wrote a lot of the stories myself and would help young staff improve their writing by subbing or shaping their stories so that they both appealed and informed. I didn't come from an academic background but a practical one that was orientated to the written word.

I came to AUT to teach the subject I knew best: journalism. Like all journalism educators I continued to subedit stories believing that was the acceptable and only way to teach students to learn to write news. I had been involved with the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation and believed in their unit standards and learning the skills of journalism. I was a late developer...it wasn't until I did a masters degree in adult and tertiary studies at Auckland University that I began to see there were different ways of learning. I started to realise the benefits of reflection, self-evaluation and self-regulatory strategies that would help students develop independence and initiative.

This thesis, *The Making of a Journalist: The New Zealand Way*, was born out of the desire to explore New Zealand journalism education: to find out how exactly students learn to become journalists. The three questions I posed were how do students learn to become journalists? What are the influences on them? And is reform necessary?

I wanted to find out not only how they learnt to make me a better teacher but also whether their learning was setting them up to work as critical thinking and independent journalists who could work skilfully in the media industry.

I first needed to find out some basic information about New Zealand journalism education. And so I did a preliminary survey of all the heads of journalism schools about the number of students and staff they had and how they basically taught journalism. I found the method of teaching was fairly uniform throughout New Zealand. Most schools were teaching to the requirements of the NZ Journalists Training Organisation and their unit standards. Students were instructed on the basics of writing mainly in the inverted pyramid form, and then they learnt by doing it, writing about 20 stories in the year.

I planned the study carefully. In 2003, 265 students were studying journalism at the 11 New Zealand schools, much the same number as at present. For the main research project, 20 students volunteered from two different journalism schools, one a university and one a polytechnic in very different cities. The students who volunteered were aged under 20 to over 40. Fourteen were female and six were male. While this was not a precise sample, I felt it covered the spectrum of age, gender and experience represented in New Zealand journalism schools. I was particularly careful in designing the study as it was important that it would be seen by you, my colleagues and others in the field as realistic. I chose to use two different methods, discourse analysis and retrospective protocol analysis to also provide greater validity.

I was fortunate: at AUT there was an expert in the discourse field so I first devised a model based on Bell's work and also van Dijk's. Their work on the inverted pyramid news story describes the various strategies used by journalists to produce informative and appealing stories in the inverted pyramid model. The intro or lead sentence produces the theme or proposition of the entire story, by enhancing the various elements that make it newsworthy. Other sentences back up this theme. Factual elements and authoritative sources give it credibility while other less favourable sources are played down.

I collected the news stories the students wrote at three points during the year, the beginning, middle and the end of the year. These were not special stories written for the study – they were the usual news stories the students were writing for their class requirements. I then asked a professional journalist to correct or subedit them so they

would be to publication standard, using a similar method to the one we all use to correct students' work. She changed many of the first sentences as well as the structure, added stronger words and made the writing more direct. I knew that this was only one person's opinion and might be open to question, but I felt confident that the remodelled stories would be similar to that done by any journalist and would allow me to marry the theories of van Dyk and Bell with the practice of what students were learning and writing .

I also wanted to find out what the students thought about their writing, as this would allow me to gain some important insights so each student tape-recorded their reflections about their own writing after they had written their stories. I analysed the resulting protocols which added what Fairclough calls the interpretative processes to the resulting picture ... I was not only looking at the text, but the learning environment, and the socio and cultural influences on New Zealand journalism education.

By the end of the year, I had a vast amount of data. Out of the 20 students who had started, 15 remained I had three news stories from each student, plus the professional journalist's versions, amounting to something like 104 news stories to do a word by word, sentence by sentence analysis. The average length of a transcript from the students' tape recordings was about 1300 words so that amounted to about 700 thousand words ...a formidable task.

The research found that journalism education in New Zealand, controlled by the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation still resembles that of 20 years ago despite increasing numbers of students learning as part of degree programmes. Students are trained for the media through a method described as "learning by doing". They receive basic instruction and are expected to perfect their skills by practising their writing and to learn the conventions and routines of the media industry through work experience and socialisation.

I found that learning by doing did not always provide the skills young journalists need to work in the media industry. In the first half of the year, the students developed

some skills in writing the traditional inverted-pyramid stories. However by the end of the year their news writing was showing some technical signs of regression.

Work experience was valuable in socialising them into the culture and routines of the media industry. But the students were not writing in a succinct clear fashion, emphasising newsworthiness or news values. Their stories were often dull and lacked interest. What I realised was that journalism educators see themselves as journalists and they were teaching the students in the same way as they had learnt themselves. Journalists know intrinsically what makes a good story. There's a tendency to assume an understanding of newsworthiness just happens. They do not believe in discussing formal codes of newsworthiness that can be identified as news values. Yet the aim of the inverted pyramid is very different. It aims to tell the story and make it interesting if not compelling through enhancing the news values used in the introductory sentence, through the words that are chosen to convey the message or theme and through the structure.

Secondly, while the students had gained in confidence they had been inadequately trained in writing outside the inverted-pyramid. Community newspapers, in particular, use popular soft intros and conversational language to make them different. But the students who easily fell into the way of writing these "hybrid" stories wrote stories that tended towards being promotional. The examples of this varied from the occasional sentence: Phone, so and so for more details, to stories that were totally aimed at selling a product. There were some disturbing examples of writing that could be classified as being intended to sell or promote a product of service rather than news.

Thirdly there the practice of subediting. Its benefits are that the students receives individual attention but how many people here today can honestly say they are not under a growing pressure from their institution because of the time that this practice takes? This method is increasingly being replaced by using the "track changes" mechanism on the computer. There is another problem with the practice of subediting. It means that the students are not encouraged to monitor their own writing or rely on their own judgement. This means that they fail to develop some attributes

that are especially beneficial in the media industry – to be independent thinkers and writers.

The students' tape recorded reflections confirmed these findings. The students revealed the gaps in their knowledge by what they failed to mention – in particular news values showing that though they often thought they were writing news in an appropriate fashion, they had not gained an understanding of their writing and were making little attempt to self-monitor or evaluate it for themselves. They also showed signs of stress and disillusionment, blaming their failures on the pressures of the course, the deadlines and the high volume of stories they were expected to write rather than showing any determination to overcome these impediments. The concentration on teaching job skills and the emphasis on gaining a job coupled with a lack of knowledge, discussion and debate gave the students an incomplete understanding of the media industry they were entering.

The study is just a start. Things are beginning to change in journalism education, not least through new people and new ideas with different educational views. The study recommends more debate about journalism education as well as more research about different methods and models. It also recommends a move away from learning by doing as the sole method of journalism education to encompass a more critical, reflective approach. I believe that students still require training in the skills of journalism but this must be coupled with a broad social knowledge and an understanding of how journalism contributes to the production and circulation of meaning in society.

There have been some advantages in the time this thesis has taken. Teaching at the same time has allowed me to study the students and to realise my research remains relevant today. In fact the difficult conditions New Zealand is beginning to experience makes it even more relevant. The multinational ownership of media companies is resulting in new practices such as convergence, when journalists are expected to not only write their stories for print but work on different platforms such as television. A tightening of conditions and many redundancies is also leading to a smaller number of journalists being expected to do more. The development of critical thinking and

independence is essential in these circumstances. Thus we need debate, discussion and a fresh look at the training the journalists of tomorrow.

DISCOURSE: Social action and interaction, people interacting together in real social situations. “A discourse is the language used in representing a given social practice from a particular point of view” Fairclough.