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The practical side of educating future journalists

KEY WORDS

journalist, practice, job training, practical skills

ABSTRACT

There has been an ongoing debate concerning the education of future journalists since this discipline was first introduced at our universities over 100 years ago. The issue discussed is whether future journalists should be taught more theory or more practical aspects. There are advocates of both concepts and numerous significant arguments for and against. This article presents journalism and social communication studies academic teachers' point of view on aspects of practical dimension of educating future journalists in Poland.

Since the beginning of journalism studies¹, or even more broadly – media studies, there has been an ongoing debate regarding whether there should be more focus on theoretical or practical aspects. The basic question is – should such studies prepare students more practically for the profession and leave theory until the last phase of studies or marginalize it altogether?²

In daily academic practice, the dilemma is determining the right proportion between the two spheres. Chapter 1 of the Act on higher education³ states that first degree studies (bachelor level) should be treated as vocational studies, enabling people to obtain knowledge and skills in specific areas and preparing them for work in the field of study. The focus of studies then should be on practical training. Master degree studies are to enable students to

¹ In Poland, journalism studies were launched in 1917 by the Academic Courses Association. Somewhat later, the Political Sciences School created a Journalism Faculty. In 1927, created was Journalism Higher School of Education. For more see M. Szczepanik, *Wyższy kurs dziennikarski w Poznaniu*, [in:] *Kształcenie dziennikarzy w Polsce. Wybrane problemy*, prepared by dr. T. Wallas, Poznań 1997.

² The importance of theory in journalist education was addressed by Jacek Sobczak in his article *Struktura kształcenia dziennikarzy*, [in:] *Kształcenie dziennikarzy...*, he states that one can do various professions (including journalism) without theoretical background but it is “faking” professionalism and cannot be successful in the long run. In his opinion, practical training is very important but theory is indispensable.

³ Act from July 27, 2005 on higher education, Dz.U. 2005, No. 164, pos. 1365, 2006, No. 46, pos. 328.

obtain specialist knowledge within a specific sphere and to prepare them for creative work in the field – that is they are to be more theoretical. In solving this dilemma, helpful are also education standards developed for the field “journalism and social communication” which state that there is a necessity for bachelor level students to undergo 6 weeks of practical training. At the same time, there is no mention of such training for master level studies.

The practical side of training is not just about practical training. The academic unit offering studies in these fields is to determine the different ways students can be exposed to and obtain practical knowledge, i.e. they can hire practitioner educationalists who will convey specialist knowledge and teach practical skills, without too much focus on theory⁴.

There is a certain degree of freedom which is advantageous. Academic units can structure studies as they see fit, basing on their own experience and on topical information, i.e. regarding market demand for specialists in various media fields. At the same time, there is an array of threats, especially regarding the quality of education. Schools which are not prepared as well and with less knowledgeable staff will only meet minimum standards set and will produce lower quality journalists⁵.

In the context of the above notes and taking into consideration some external determinants⁶ influencing student education in Poland justifiable seems to be a broader debate on the role of practical training of journalists. This article will present academic teachers in this field point of view on this matter.

The analysed and presented here empirical material was obtained as a result of research carried out between April and June of 2009 with the use of an Internet survey, as part of the project *Educating journalists in Poland. New needs – new standards*⁷ in which 87 academic teachers took part.

⁴ For more on journalist education see *Kształcenie dziennikarzy...*, however the issues it discusses are several years old due to which it requires actualization and an extension. In the context of this article, particularly useful would be the text by R. Bartoszcze *Czy teoria jest potrzebna?*

⁵ For more on journalist education as well as issues, dilemmas and challenges in journalism see No. 3 (2001) of “*Studia Medioznawcze*”, also see in No. 3 (2004) an interesting article by Z. Bauer and A. Wojnach, *Kształcenie dziennikarzy czy edukacja medialna? Technologie – poznanie – komunikacja*, in which the authors ponder the issue of the value of journalist education.

⁶ I have in mind here the Bologna process which has had a significant influence on the system of higher education in Poland.

⁷ The project *Kształcenie dziennikarzy w Polsce. Nowe potrzeby – nowe standardy (Journalist education in Poland. New needs – new standards)* was carried out by Sławomir Gawronski and employees at the Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania in Rzeszów, with support from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, via

In order to better determine academic teachers' stances regarding the analysed issue, the obtained results were correlated with independent variables, such as the respondents' academic title, type of school where they work, subject taught as well as whether or not they cooperate with media.

Theory vs. practice – legitimacy of present proportions

The first question (“How do you rate the present proportions of theoretical to practical classes in the fields of journalism and social communication”) was answered by 73 people. One third of respondents stated that there is “rather” too much theory and too little practice. The same amount of people said that there is “definitely” too much theory. All in all, two thirds of academic teachers were of the opinion that there is too little practical training. The present state of affairs is accepted by one out of four teachers who consider that the current proportions are appropriate and that change is unnecessary .

Among those of the opinion that there is too much theory, the majority have master's degrees (79% of this group answered “rather” or “definitely”). Another group which thinks that there is too little practice were people with post-doctoral degrees (67% of this group thought so). Following were doctors and professors (62% of this group, with “definitely” being the more popular answer). On the other hand, 6 out of 11 professors, 4 out of 12 habilitated doctors and 8 out of 12 doctors were of the opinion that existing proportions are appropriate. However, no master's degree lecturer answered this way.

Respondents were asked to indicate at what type of school they work (in case they worked for more than one place, to mark their main place of work). Proposed was also a division into public and non-public institutions.

Correlating answers with places of employment allowed us to determine some differences between the respondents. It turned out that a large majority of those surveyed (26 out of 32) working for non-public schools were of the opinion that there is “rather” or “definitely” too much theory taught. Among those working for public institutions, only half of the respondents were of this opinion and one third accepted the present state of affairs stating

subsidies from European Economic Area Financial Mechanism and Norway's Financial Mechanism part of the Education and Internship Fund. For more see: *Kształcenie dziennikarzy w Polsce. Opinie i oczekiwania środowiska naukowo-dydaktycznego*, S. Gawroński et al., Rzeszów 2009.

that the proportions are suitable. Among non-public teachers, only one fifth accepted the current proportions.

Interesting were also results obtained for the type of subject taught. The surveyed were divided into three groups: 1) those mostly or only teaching theory, 2) those teaching practical subjects, c) those teaching both. The results were as follows. One third of theoreticians accepted the existing proportions while only one fifth of practitioners, part of the other two groups, did so. The largest percentage of those of the opinion that there is “rather” or “definitely” too much theory are those who teach practical subjects (54.5% – “definitely”, 27.3% – “rather”). The following group were those teaching both (31.6% and 36.8% correspondingly) and in last place were theoreticians (23.5% and 29.4% correspondingly).

Surprising results were obtained after respondents were divided according to whether they were professionally tied to media or not. A larger percentage of those who were not connected to media thought that there was too much theory (75% of total), while among those involved with the mass media a little over half answered this way, (10 people said “definitely” and 4 people said “rather” too much theory).

Practical training as part of programme of studies

The next question regarded opinions about practical training as part of the programme of studies. Once again, 75 people responded of which 65 were of the opinion that such was indispensable and only 10 thought that we could do without it. This result shows that in general practical training is an integral and essential part of studies. Again, just like before, results were correlated with independent variables.

It turns out that supportive of practical training were all surveyed doctors (23 people), and all professors (21 people) as well as a large majority of habilitated doctors. What is interesting, the least support for it was found among master’s degree lecturers, 11 out of 19 thought that it was indispensable. The difference between master level lecturers and others is so large that in the future separate research should be carried out in order to determine why such differences of opinion occur.

There is somewhat greater support for practical training among public school academic teachers in comparison to non-public ones; 39 out of 43 respondents stated that such training is essential, while 26 out of 32 private academics thought so.

Regarding results when compared with the type of subject taught, an interesting situation occurred, comparable to results obtained for the first question. All theoreticians (17 out of 68) were of the opinion that it is necessary to have practical training as part of the programme. Similar are results among those who teach both, theory and practical subjects. In this group (40 people total) only 4 people stated that we could do without practical training while 36 thought it was indispensable. On the other hand, different were answers provided by practical teachers. In this group, 6 out of 11 thought that it is not essential and 5 thought that it should be part of studies.

As far as results correlated with whether academics are professionally involved with media, there were no significant differences between those employed only at schools and those also cooperating with media.

The next section of research asked respondents to determine what percentage of all classes should be devoted to practical training. More than 1 out of 4, or 18 people, were of the opinion that it should take up over 30% of the programme. Even more popular was the idea that practical training should make up from 21–30% of the programme as almost one third (20 people) chose this option. However, the most popular answer was that practical training should take up from 11–20% of classes, with 34 people marking this option. Only three people thought that it should take up less than 10% of studies.

Of all professional groups, professors would like to see the largest percentage of practical training as part of studies, 1 out of 3 thinks it should make up a third of the curriculum. Habilitated doctors were predominantly for training to take up between 21–30% of the programme while doctors were mostly in favour of it taking up between 11–20%.

Varied answers were obtained when they were correlated with the type of school where the respondent is employed. Supportive of the middle percentage (21–30%) were 16 out of 19 public school employees and only 4 out of 26 private school ones. In favour of practical training between 11–20% of studies was one fourth of public institution academics and twice as many working for non-public schools. However, regarding the highest (above 30%) and lowest (below 10%) percentage amounts, there were no significant differences noted between the two types of employees. On average, 1 out of 20 marked the lowest bracket and 1 out of 4 chose the highest one.

The largest number of theoreticians would like practical training to take up over 30% of all programme hours. This is the highest support of all groups, nearly half the respondents

from this group. The other two groups' support was noted at about 20%. Half the respondents who are both theoreticians and practitioners indicated that the right amount of practical training is between 11-20%. This group also rather evenly marked the other two remaining levels. Among practitioners, 2 out of 5 stated that practical training between 11–20% and 21–30% is suitable.

After correlating results with the independent variable regarding media connections, it turns out that people involved with media see lesser of a need for practical training as part of studies than the other group.

Desirable practical skills

Respondents were asked what kind of practical skills should students obtain during the course of their studies. People surveyed could choose from three proposed options or offer their own.

Among the answers, the most often selected one was the ability to write articles, as 63 respondents noted. In second place was the skill of collection of materials for journalistic publications (51 responses) and in third – public speaking skills (49 responses). Further down mentioned were: use of promotion tools and graphic design preparation for media purposes.

Among skills proposed by respondents there were: media language analysis, analytical thinking, voice projection, pronunciation skills (for radio and TV specializations), camera operation, microphone speaking skills as well as research material collection and preparation with the use of advanced technology.

Interesting difference were noted when the results were correlated with respondents' academic titles. Those with master's degrees mostly valued the ability to write articles and public speaking skills. Among doctors, of importance were article writing skills and, in second place, the ability to collect materials for journalistic publications. This skill was also most valued among habilitated doctors, along with public speaking skills which they consider equally valuable. To professors, on the other hand, most significant was the ability to collect research materials and article writing skills. The least popular was the ability to prepare graphic materials.

Academic teachers employed at non-public schools most value those skills which are considered "traditional". One out of four marked the ability to collect research materials while 1 out of 5 public school academics chose this option. The comparison is similar when it comes to the ability to write articles – 1 out of 3 private school teachers and 1 out of 4 public

school ones. Skills such as the use of promotion tools and public speaking were chosen by roughly the same number of teachers from both groups. The first ability was chosen by 1 out of 6 respondents and the second – by 1 out of 5 of those surveyed.

Collection of materials for journalistic publications is an ability valued rather equally (1 out of 4) by those who teach theoretical subjects and those who teach both, theory and practice. Practitioners value this skill the least. Another ability, article writing, is valued similarly by all. The same is true regarding preparation of graphic materials, only somewhat more often chosen by those teaching practical subjects.

Practical subject teachers more than other groups value the ability to use promotion tools. As far as public speaking skills public speaking skills, the situation is just the opposite – this answer was more often chosen by those who teach theory or both – theory and practical subjects.

There are also more apparent differences when we compare answers provided by those professionally involved with media and those who are not. Collection of materials is more valued by those not working for media, 1 out of 4 from the first group chose this option and 1 out of 5 from the other group. Graphic design was chosen by 11% and 9% correspondingly, the use of promotion materials – by 19% and 14% likewise and public speaking – by about 21%.

Effectiveness of different classes

Journalism is a field which encompasses various forms of activities and classes. Determining the right proportions between them is often the key to success, that is to greater effectiveness. People surveyed were asked to mark which form of practical training they consider most effective. Among 71 respondents who answered this question, 28 thought that workshops are most valuable and slightly less (23 people) chose practical exercise classes. Further down the line marked were laboratory classes and project work (roughly 10 responses for each).

Workshops are most highly valued by professors and master degree lecturers. Among the latter, popular were also practical exercise classes (1/3 of answers) while less effective considered was laboratory and project work (chosen by 1/10 respondents from this group). The situation presents itself differently when it comes to the group of doctors. They chose workshops in first place, then project work and exercise classes in third. Among habilitated doctors, 4 chose exercises, 4 – laboratory and 2 – project work. This group, then, does not

favour any specific form of practical learning. Among professors, on the other hand, 50% marked workshops and 25% – exercises. One out of ten chose laboratory work while project work did not gain hardly any support.

Academics working for non-public institutions value exercises, 4 out of 10 respondents chose this option as most effective in comparison to 25% of public school teachers. The situation is similar when it comes to workshops. Half of private school lecturers consider them effective and close to 1/3 of those who teach at public institutions.

As far as laboratory classes, 1 out of 5 public school teachers considered it effective and only 1 out of 20 private school ones. The difference is even greater when it comes to project work; it was chosen by 1 out of 4 public school employees and none among non-public school ones.

Among theoreticians, most popular are practical exercise classes, as indicated by three fourths of respondents from this group, others in this group chose project work. No one from this group marked workshop or laboratory work. Exercise classes as most practical were chosen by one third of practitioners and one sixth of those teaching both. Workshop was most frequently chosen (nearly by 2/3) by practitioners and those teaching both types of subjects (half the respondents). One out of five respondents chose laboratory work as most practical and one out six marked project work.

Those who are tied to media professionally considered exercise classes as most practical (nearly half) and then – workshop (1/3). Laboratory and project work were considered a lot less effective. These two were also last on the list among academic teachers not working for the media, although they chose these answers more often.

Usefulness of knowledge in the “real world”

The last question in the survey regarded opinions about the need to have some classes in the “real world”. The survey provided some sample places but there was also the option for respondents to write their own answers.

The most common places chosen to have practical classes at were: radio station, editorial/press agency and a TV studio. Less popular were advertising and public relations agencies. Among places mentioned by respondents most often were: the KRRiT, media laboratories and Internet portals including news services and student websites.

The idea to have some practical training in a TV studio was chosen by all professors, 8 out of 12 habilitated doctors, 6/21 doctors and 13/19 master degree lecturers. The radio station was also picked by all professors and master's degree lecturers, 19/21 doctors and $\frac{3}{4}$ habilitated doctors. The press agency was supported by $\frac{3}{4}$ habilitated doctors, 19/21 professors, 17/19 masters and 17/21 doctors. The need to have practical training at a PR or advertising agency gained less support, with professors choosing this option most often of all the professional groups.

Interestingly, there was little correlation between the chosen places for practical training and the type of school where the respondents were employed.

Among all those who answered this question, 55 people were of the opinion that practical training should take place in a TV studio; of those 4/17 were theoreticians, 9/11 were practitioners and 32/38 who taught both types of subjects. The idea for the radio station was approved by all practitioners and all those who teach theory and practical subjects and 15/17 theoreticians. Classes at a press agency were supported by all practitioners, 34/38 of those teaching both types of classes and 13/17 theoreticians.

When comparing the answers with the recipients' professional situation, among those also working for the media 24 were of the opinion that practical training should take place at a TV station, 26 – at a radio station, 22 – at a press agency, 12 – at a PR agency and 10 – at an advertising agency. Among respondents who do not work for the media, 31 chose a TV station, 38 – radio, 36 – press agency, 24 – PR agency and 20 – advertising agency.

Conclusion

Based on the presented survey results and their analysis, we can propose some conclusions.

Academics teaching journalism and social communication are generally of the opinion that there is too much theory being taught in these fields and that there should be more practical training introduced. Those working for non-public institutions are more inclined to practical training. They would also like to see a bigger percentage of practical training classes as part of the programme of studies, treating theory as a supplementary necessity. As expected, the results also show that if someone teaches only theory, they are more supportive of theoretical rather than practical classes, and vice-versa – practitioners were more in favour of an increased amount of practical classes.

Moreover, what was found was an interesting and even surprising dependency. Those working only at academic institutions see more of a need for practical training than those who also for the media. This may suggest that when encountered with professional experience more visible is the lack of theoretical knowledge. Answers to subsequent questions support this dependency as well. Academic teachers only would like to see more practical training while practitioners would prefer to see more theory.

All teachers see a necessity of practical training as part of the programme of studies. This is regardless the type of school they work for or whether they are only employed at a school or also work for the media. Additionally, academics are of the opinion that practical training should make up a considerable percentage of overall classes. Noted here, however, was a correlation between the teacher's title or academic degree and the amount of practical training considered essential. The higher the degree obtained by a teacher, the higher the percentage of practical training advisable. Additionally, it should be noted that the higher the amount of practical training, the less differentiation there was between the groups of respondents and their titles. It means that practical training was generally valued by everyone, with master degree respondents showing least support for it. It turns out that it is generally this group which is chosen to supervise practical training. It can be inferred that their attitudes are affected by real life scenarios in which trainees during the internships are predominantly used to make coffee and Xerox copies instead of acquiring real skills.

According to academics, students should be able to learn practical skills directly related to their future work and the journalist profession. They should, first of all, learn how to write articles and how to select useful materials and information for their work. Additionally, helpful considered were public speaking skills. Other skills were mentioned much less often. There were some differences noted between the types of answers provided and respondent characteristics. Interestingly, those also working for the media were more skeptical toward practical skills. They were probably under the impression that one cannot really learn those skills at school as they are acquired when necessary in the real world.

As far as the type of classes during which one can learn practical skills, laboratory work and practical exercise classes were considered most effective. They are valued differently by various respondent groups but they are more popular than other options. Surprisingly, noted was relatively little support for project work. It could be related to the specificity of this type of work which is generally carried out by students themselves. This

means that academics may feel that they do not fully control the work of a student and, therefore, his progress.

Teachers definitely favoured the idea of having some practical training in the “real world”, i.e. in TV and radio stations, at press agencies, etc. Radio station was the most commonly chosen option while advertising and PR agencies were considered much less popular. The above answers suggest that academics are mainly in favour of traditional skills which should be obtained during studies in these fields. Other places, even if they become the students’ future work places, should play less of a role during studies.

Practical aspects of education, the proportion of practice and theory as well as the form and shape of practical classes are all issues to which devoted should be an in-depth discussion and study. As a result, developed could be more than one useful to higher education institutions model of educating future journalists, so that studies can be carried out on a high level and so that they correspond to the dynamically changing market.