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Professionalising Media Education: Curriculum is the Key

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Abstract

A formal academic discourse for the communication and media specialists happens to be a perplexing and debated issue for the media experts globally. As the very nature of the profession, formal education degrees have never been a prerequisite for achieving glory in these unconventional domains. However, the ever growing necessity and demands for a more furnished communication and media education has led various Higher Education Institutions to start academic discourses which are in synced with industry exposure and professional trainings incepted by other setups and institutions. It has been observed that academic programs have been a sort of intangible resources whereas training programs at industries have turned out to be hollow in terms of idea generation. Both can be termed as failure in terms of meeting the requirement apart from being expensive to avail. In this postmodern era, like everything media is more professional than ever and scale of professionalism is in motion without a pause along with rising queries for improvement. The contributing factors are essentially wide expansion of New Media Technologies, growing denationalization and off course Globalisation. Meanwhile, conveyance of professional media education by Higher Education Institutions has extended many folds and is subsequently amplified by newer means. The probability of development of professional skills and capabilities at an individual level has magnified greatly. The present paper reasons for a new methodology of curriculum that fosters the professional aspect of media education for the communication and media specialists by highlighting on various facets what is to be learned, who has to learn it and in which context to do the same.

Key Words: Professional competence, media and communication, curriculum.

Introduction: Curriculum or the organised arrangement of discourse is undoubtedly one of the most debated and talked after issues when it comes to framing and then phase wise up gradation of the same for the people who earn their bread and butter through the profession of media. Simply putting, this issue is a global one for the media professionals. The very nature of the problem arises from the divergent views and perplexities that centre on the profession itself. Many eyebrows are raised so as to question the legitimacy of areas such as Public Relation, Video Production, Multimedia, and Photography and so on being called as professions even. In addition, the essences of professionalism in such professions are also contested. Putting those apart, questions are also being asked such as whether experts in those fields are born or crafted with perfection. As per Dictionary definition, upbringing is a sort of refinement through developing the sought after skills and sharpening them through intensive training. Another question that is frequently brainstormed in the realm of media is that natural instinct is a prerequisite to be a successful professional or these

qualities can be learnt to outdo the hurdles. To sum all these complexities, how the successful media experts are groomed, what are taught to them and by whom?

Most of the communication and media skills can be acquired “from the inside out, not from outside in” (Carey, 1998). What does it mean actually? Does it required pursuing a course which is oriented more professionally towards the profession or a general degree at undergraduate level is enough? Or, in hands training by getting oneself absorbed in a media platform and learn as they go along will do it for them? Culture plays a pivotal role in curriculum and the values, beliefs and outlook help us to respond in a particular situation. To be precise spatial and time considerations are also to be accounted for. Although curriculum still assumed to be an institutional property. In the ivory towers of academia curriculum is defined as an aggregate of things that are be done in order to learn something. From an individualistic aspect, curriculum is a Venusian term to define as yet. However, all media practitioners cannot do without an individual Curriculum Vitae (CV) which stands as a replica of one’s professional affiliations, achievements and methodology for the same. The CV houses the professional skills that had been executed in line with the plan of action. It is placed for review and scrutiny whenever we are seeking a job, promotion or financial assistance.

People, Content and Context: Weaver (1998) studied people employed with news industry globally, asserts that media people converge only on two facets of journalism: protection of their sources and being agile to report the happenings. There are debates centred on peoples’ participation in media. However, no concrete convergence regarding issues relating being entertaining or objectively putting facts. Analytical reporting and tracking corporates, big business, governments and others also come under the scanner of arguments. Matters relating to paid news, using material without prior consent, manhandling sources, deceiving or using lie or cheat to access information are also widely talked matters in the realm of media profession. “No country with a monopoly on professionalism among journalists” (Weaver, 1998, p479). Thus also the concept of a single global journalism is non-existent. Hence there can be a curriculum for journalism globally. The local culture and environment decide what media professionals ought to learn. Thus to enforce a global approach like that of western notion of investigative journalism ‘the media as a watchdog’ holds little value. Lao journalists and broadcasters, their government and their people completely agree on the maxim of media to ‘link the party, the state and the masses’ and media persons should “understand clearly what they can and cannot cover” (Morgan and Loo, 2000). Beasley (1998) argued the necessity of a compulsory course in History for students pursuing Mass Communication and Journalism. What is more important to learn, the content or the method of following the content.

Profession and professionalism: Scholars namely Sarfatti Larsen (1977) and Glasser (1992) studied the proposition put forwarded by George Bernard Shaw “all professions are conspiracies against the laity”. From their criticism any of the profession should serve the masses. Both professional authority and autonomy rely on the trust of the laypeople. The trust should be achieved by sacrificing own interests to those of others and especially the ‘common good’ (Christians, 1999; Freidson, 1994; Gans, 1979; Schon, 1983; Torstendahl and Burrage, 1990). To establish their testimony as true professionals, media persons should be able to carry forward the trust. When it comes to political and moral grounds, they should not join the bandwagon of prevailing ideologies. Nevertheless, they should know and be sensitive towards the dominant values in one’s culture. So it turns out be a judgemental paradox than anything else. The matters of economic effectiveness and democracy , state and a free media are not only to restricted in developing countries but also have been a bedrock of debates in journalism practised in West since the time Burke and Paine reasoned over whether to advocate stability or radical activism .(Altschull, 1991).

The practice of communication and media can be called as professional for many reasons. It is “specialised, esoteric, complex and discretionary, (and) requires theoretical knowledge, skill and judgement that ordinary people do not possess, may not comprehend and cannot readily evaluate” (Freidson, 1994, p200). The profession necessitates its practitioners to develop the continued capability to antagonise and “make strategic judgements about individual cases which they have never confronted before and for which there are no exhaustive rules dictating the decisions to be made” (Scheffler, 1965, p103). Professionalism, coupled with authority and autonomy paves in obvious accountability towards decision making and the act thereafter. Doing nothing is also an act. If media professionals cannot research their way out to information that is required to agree to what is to be done, there is only way out to make ‘a informed best guess’ relying on their experiences. The nuances will be varied in line with the time and spatial considerations, but these facets of professionalism drive in the ingredients to be incorporated in a curriculum which is aimed at bringing out skilled and resourceful soldiers for the communication and media business. They also prove that practice of profession is nothing but a learning activity.

Erudition through doing: John Dewey (1938, p13) lamented that “all genuine education comes through experience”, which off course, does not mean experience is the sole way to achieve education. Negative experiences can inhibit the growth and can lead people to darker fringes. Video production classes and creative writing exercises can be hold up here as classic case studies where students are left at their own to come up with the output. They keep on producing the same old recipes and in different appearances, which is no creativity at all. Educational practices drive towards the growing of “ever widening and deeper experiences” (Merriam, 1994, p18). Learning is nothing but blending the bygone experiences with the current encounters to build a platform of rationality in which future can be dealt with neatly. Kolb (1984) put forwarded following suggestions in light of value of experience in the realm of learning. According to him learning through experiences become streamlined when one possesses:

1. Candidness and readiness to accept new skills (concrete experience);
2. Observational and contemplative abilities so as to be flexible towards new experiences and assess them from an array of vivid perceptions (reflective observation);
3. Diagnostic aptitudes so that integrative concepts and notions can be created from observations (abstract conceptualisation);
4. Decision-making and problem-solving skills so as to apply the new ideas and concepts in real grounds. (Active experimentation).

Kolb referred the process as a cyclic process. The application of learnt skills which ends a cycle becomes the experience which germinates the next cycle.

Tracing professional competence: Professional competence is much more than professional practice and theories and technical lessons (Schon, 1983; Cervero, 1988; Peters, 1991). The idea, however, doesn’t undermine the fundamentally theoretic nature of professional practice. But affirms it. Professional practitioners are not very good at putting their knowledge into words (Schon, 1983, p49-51; Torstendahl and Burrage, 1990, p70; Glasser, 1991). It would be an uphill task to pen down that knowledge in concrete fashion and construct significant learning ideas, forget about applying those ideas at a global level. Professionals need to learn to replicate and retort at a local level and be specific, whenever needed.

However, there are always concepts that, in remembrance, elucidate why one way of undertaking things is better or worse than another. The hook is that these concepts generally only become

apparent after the event and the unanticipated nature of the future refuses them much prophetic power. This simply reflects the insufficiency of both old-fashioned industry training and academic discourse of communication and media as ways of concocting forthcoming experts. There is undoubtedly a need for technical knowledge (or Know-how) and propositional knowledge (knowing that). But these are not adequate, either discretely or collected. Competence necessitates a supplementary collection of personal qualities namely perseverance, suppleness, inventiveness, resourcefulness, mind's eye and worldly wisdom (Scheffler, 1965; Ryle, 1990; Morgan, 1995), all of which are personified in Schon's notion of reflective practice (Schon, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1996; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Writing about the specialized education of historians, Dening (1999) argues that "the humanities are the great unsilencing art" and that one key to breaking the silence is to fine tune students' imagination. Building on Paul Valery's proposition that "silence is the active presence of absent things", Dening says.

"We catch the contingency of silence in our imagination. Not our fantasies. Our imagination. Imagination is the ability to see the fine-lined and faint webs of significance. Imagination is hearing the silence because we have heard some of the sounds. Imagination is seeing the absent things because we have seen so much else. That is its dream-like quality. It is built on re-arranged experience." (Dening, 1999, p441)

He educated them the past by first requiring them to describe their own present. They were made known not to reject history but how uphill it is to define the present. It was also revealed that whatever they had discovered was already the subject matter of someone else's philosophical homily. The more they stressed on the originality of their own personal understanding, they were opposed more and more by the plagiarism of their intelligence. This is similar for others too including communication and media experts, journalists, film makers and so on.

Reflexive practices: Reflective practice exemplifies both the largely diagnostic process of "reflection-on-action", which includes thoughtful passage through a condition after it has happened to see what could have been done more efficaciously, and "reflection-in-action" which entails "keeping your wits about you", "thinking on your feet" and "trimming your sails" as you go. For Schon, reflection-in-action among specialised practitioners is generated by the amazement of the new. We realise that old information and old methods will not work, or are not working. We think critically and urgently on how we have got hooked on our present situation, and how we might come out of it. Some call this "the adrenalin theory of inspiration". "Reflection gives rise to on-the-spot experiment" (Schon, 1987, p28). Schon's vision is particularly fertile for professional media instructors. It recognises the professional nature of both media practice and media education, and provides an extremely important problem-solving approach for the learner and the teacher (or curriculum designer) alike. It makes three assumptions:

1. Those involved are committed to both problem finding and problem solving. Problems encountered in exercise are often shadowy and poorly defined. Need for openness to ascertain new problems or different ways of looking at old problems.
2. That people will make judgements about what action to take in particular situations. Because these actions involve modification in oneself, others or systems, there is always an ethical dimension to reflective practice.
3. That people will take action, even if that action is a measured choice not to change practice. Without a commitment to action, reflective practice collapses into an annoying and unfertile futility.

Reminding Knowles' reflection that adults are self-directed learners, ready to learn what they believe they need to improve their own professional performances, a crucial question arises in the conception of curriculum activities. That is the question of authenticity. Problem-based learning can fall into the trap of "simulated" or "pretending" problems. Reflective practice initiates learners into "authentic practices" that "embody activity and social interaction in a way similar to that evident – and evidently successful – in craft apprenticeship" (Brown et al, 1989, p37). On that basis, it would be better for students to produce programmes for public broadcasting stations rather than student stations, and to write for wider publics than those reached by student papers. Not at least because the media are already all too susceptible to "talking to themselves".

The essential elements in implementing these "cognitive apprenticeships" are selecting appropriate real-world situations or tasks that are grounded in the learners' needs, finding the right person or persons to do the modelling and facilitating the learning process (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p243-5). Facilitation includes having both the models and the learners "express the essence of what they are thinking as they perform the task", regulating the difficulty of the task (not throwing learners in "at the deep end") and coaching the learners. All of which provides a constructive framework for the design of production projects and professional internships. It also puts a new perspective on the old question of whether the teacher has to "know more than the learner". Experience as a professional practitioner is essential for a media educator, provided that it is well-considered experience.

Coaching: Media educators and curriculum developers need not to be outstanding practitioners themselves but they do have to be professionally proficient. Above all, they have to be professionally proficient educators. This means having a thoughtful approach to experience and a stranded understanding of, and compassion for, gifted professional media practice. Coaches also understand and flourish on the comprehension that human advancement depends on people doing what none has done before, going where none has gone before and learning what none has known before. The communication and media professions too have insatiable appetites for originality and innovation.

Research: Previous curricula took research only as a way to recognize the most fitting subject-matter content for courses – the syllabus. Learners were anticipated to value what was taught; what was taught was what was valued most highly (by the teachers). It was often a closed coil. Curricula that are designed around contemplative exercise are themselves more open research projects. Just as professional practice is fundamentally all about dealing with the murky unknown, learning to be a capable practitioner necessarily means learning how to explore and see through that murk. The notions of "learning by doing" (Dewey, 1938), "reflective practice" (Schon, 1983) and "cognitive apprenticeship" (Brown et al, 1989) all provide strong reasons for building curricula around "real-world" problems and the pursuit of real-world projects. And for publishing the products of these endeavours. Equally, it is important that media educators maintain themselves as media practitioners, not only continually exploring the actualities of current professional practice but also documenting them for others.

Curriculum as a method: There is continual debate among the educationalists about whether a curriculum is the course itself or its strategy or design. However, it is important to realise that a curriculum is not like a computer program which can predict the actuality of a course precisely to the last digit. Rather it is a road map that guides what is to be done and other ways of doing it. Most precisely, however, is Stenhouse's (1975) imagination of curriculum as recipe. "Like a recipe in

cooking, a curriculum is first imagined as a possibility, then as a subject for experiment; it is always practical; and within limits, it can be varied according to taste and the availability of ingredients” (Stenhouse, 1975, pp4-5). Also like a recipe, a curriculum is both doctrinaire (a plan of what will happen) and imaginative (a report of what does happen). As technologies have become more and more reachable at global level, and academic epitomes like universities are trying to form strategic agreements with media establishments, the openings for (and intimidations to) curriculum improvement for the communication and media professions will only expand manifolds.

The globalisation of communication and media has contributed to strengthening the place of the local (Appadurai, 1996; Morgan, 1994, 1999). It has, likewise, increased the demand for high quality professional practice at the local and national level (Gaunt, 1992; Morgan, 1995; Weaver 1998). The demand for high class curriculum to prepare and upgrade professional media and communication practitioners must be addressed both at local and national level. Acclaimed global projects like *jourNet* (the global network for professional education in journalism and media, launched by UNESCO in 1999), is there provide the methods and components with which local and national organizations (even personages) can create their own discourses. The curriculum for professional media education should include-

1. A comprehensive and detailed understanding of the economic, social, political, technological and cultural environment in which curriculums are to be offered (can be achievable in consultation with the locals);
2. A clear attribution and understanding of the individuals who will carry out this curriculum (possible by consultation);
3. A clear demarcation of the learning contents in terms of not only “abstract knowledge and technical skill” but in terms of professional competence. Curriculum should be designed in such a way that it gives the individuals freedom to design their own courses toward professional exercise in this field of media and communication, without stressing much on formal academic qualifications.

However, university level syllabus need to provide-

1. Related discourses on communication and media;
2. Professional lessons in communication and media;
3. In-depth studies in a field of content such as science, economics, law, politics and so on.

Degrees which are having professional focus on media and communication i.e major in communication and media will be more desirable compared general undergraduate programs. The programs should be having contents aiming at cognitive knowledge rather than intellectual skill. Traditional subject disciplines are inadequate and inappropriate (Grossberg, et al, 1998). For similar reasons, there is a strong need for starting professional communication and media programs in graduate schools. These discourses should be accessible and open to students in the optional range of subjects. Success of such discourses lies more in method rather than content alone, the key to success. Practical oriented are to be developed with intense method. To reconnoitre the connexion between journalism and the persuasive arts of propaganda, advertising and public relations, projects can be developed, construction of media releases that are then swapped over and reviewed journalistically. The scope and possibilities are endless. Subsequent examination and assessment can then enlighten and rationalise what the students have learnt.

Conclusion: UNESCO, in its early days mandated that communication is central to the idea of ensuring lasting peace and the improvement of human life. For most of humankind, that ideal

remains a Venesian concept. There is clearly no magic solution to the worldwide problems of inequity, injustice, illness, hunger, poverty and war. Nevertheless, more capable communication and media practitioners would help to solve those (Christians, 1999). Better curricula for communication and media professionals would help those practitioners “become more reflective about their own individual actions” (Cervero, 1991, p29). Such curricula would really then be key to success, professionalising media education in any context.

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