

The UKZN Griot Of Doing and Grooming



A decade ago, a study conducted by a journalism professor revealed that journalism students don't read newspapers, media students don't watch TV and film students don't go to the movies.

WORDS: KEYAN G TOMASELLI

Well, he left the academy in disgust and took tourists white water rafting. The river froth was exhilarating rather than irritating as is the froth in the academy.

Knowing how to do is just as important as learning what needs to be known. That's what I tell my often disbelieving students. Many think that a certificate is proof enough to get a job. But often, they do not know how to do, what to do, or why they are doing it. Many just learn reams of jargon which they spew back uncomprehendingly in exam papers and essays. Filling up paper is the objective rather than constructing, arguing, analysing.

'Doing' it, is however what employers look for. The certificate simply signifies that graduates have done time, paid their fees and somehow manoeuvred through a degree. This has been a long standing problem for the academy. Philosopher Gilbert Ryle argued in the 1940s that *knowing how* is conceptually distinct from *knowing that*. The object of his argument was the standing of Cartesian ontology. If the good philosopher were to observe students at UKZN today, he would find living proof that his contention was absolutely true.

So, I got a real kick when I

read the March 2011 edition of *NUX* (*Natal University Campus Chronicles*, the first ever SA student newspaper, publishing since 1934). Here are students actually making media. Simphiwe Ngwane, a now regular contributor to my Centre's own magazine, *SUBtext*, had read one of my Griot columns and responded to it. Reading, doing, knowing how, now there's a recipe for success.

The last time that HC's student newspaper, *Dome*, appeared, was about 10 years ago. Its producers were very proud of their achievement, making the point that not a single media student had been involved in its production. What were the media students doing the editor wanted to know? He never got a response because they were not reading it; "knowing that" had supplanted knowing how.

Doing, building experience, developing a portfolio is rarely on the minds of Humanities students. When I taught first year I would ask a new class of 300 why they were studying media. The answers were revealing: some wanted to be journalists. They had mistakenly assumed that this declining sector in the media industry was well paid. Others wanted the glamour of TV exposure. Little did they realise

that the average production day is 10 hours of exhausting work. None had a camera, even if their uncles did, or had even made a home movie. The remainder mentioned advertising. None believed me that this sector is the most demanding and that such is the stress and work load that 18 hour days are the norm. They wanted high salaries without actually having to do the work. Students got sullen when I told them that it was my job to prepare them for the unrelenting demands of the profession. I have been there – but then what do I really know?

So, what were these students doing in my classroom? They believed that the lecturer's job is to shovel knowledge down their throats, they themselves not actually taking responsibility for their own learning, let alone career planning. So we push, pull, cajole and encourage students to get involved in campus media, off-and on-campus internships, to actually meet the industry. For us, that's the hard work. Getting the degree conferred is relatively easy.

I've just finished editing a textbook. The publisher warned us that students nowadays can't concentrate for long periods, are narcissistic and self-absorbed. They don't read, they can't write, and they are unable to think

critically. The publisher provided us with published case studies analysing this kind of helpless self-centred student. This was our readership, we were told at a workshop. 'Find the formula to connect with this generation of lost souls and the book will be published.' This is the stuff of multiple PhDs. Some of the book was written by graduate students. By reducing the generation gap we hoped to encourage reading of our book by the atomistic ipod/ipad/iphone generation.

In Ryle's terms, what do UKZN students do, if they're not actually doing? According to one of *NUX*'s correspondents Daphney Etienne, an international student, the girls especially are grooming, parading, dressing up. Fashionistas all, they don't look or behave like students, she observes: makeup is flawless, hairdos and outfits stunning. Indeed, fashionistas is the cover story of the April *Wits Review*. Students don't even other themselves as students anymore. It's the disruptive rent-a-crowd that cause campus closures who pretend to be students. It is the latter who have a mission, where the former simply have fashion. They preen and strut about as if the much practiced unnatural laid-back modelling walk on Fashion TV is natural. Like platform models,

however, they are going nowhere. The fashionistas would appear to be a microcosm of the broader society where conspicuous consumption and flaunting of wealth – or just the image of it – has become the norm.

Ngwane – as did I in a previous column – compared the campuses – and moreover the bus ride in between. Thobani Khumalo asks questions about chemistry, but is *doing* in media studies; Ngwane coined a new term, "Quad'ology", while Etienne reluctantly went with the flow to the mall. Lungani Zondi writes about accommodation woes and as a journalist found Student Housing wanting. Read this and more in your student newspaper – the one from PMB that is. The newspaper's design is rough and ready but it's there. The centrefold photo spread is of real students – *not* the fashionistas. *NUX* is about doing, compiling a portfolio, and getting a job. "UKZN ... is back in the BUZZ..." is the front page heading. Way to go

Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He's just buzzing at the moment.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.

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