

The BA in Media, Communication and Culture: Genesis of a Radical Programme Approach

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Introduction

The BA in Media, Communication and Culture (BA MCC) was first presented at the University of Port Elizabeth in 1999 to provide socially relevant training for future media/communication professionals in the information industry. The curriculum attempted to combine inter-disciplinary knowledge and skills in such a way that it would provide students with sufficient career focus without restricting them to narrow vocational training. It also had to satisfy the requirements for programme-based education as set out in the relevant National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) documents.

During the course of 1999 it became clear that the curriculum did address the above in a broad sense, but exploratory research¹ suggested that the following issues should be investigated with a view to possible curriculum revision:

- 1 Horizontal articulation: did the curriculum, that was considered 'radical' (at the time), in comparison to those followed in traditional Departments of Communication/Journalism at other universities, limit the opportunities for students to move and transfer their credits to other institutions?
- 2 A balanced programme focus: student feedback indicated a preference for applied media and communication modules that addressed practical skills, such

as writing, editing and audio-visual materials production, but the academic imperative that informs university education in the Social Sciences favours social critique and cognitive development (moving away from reproductive learning in favour of independent thinking, reasoning, understanding and generation of meaning).

- 3 Limited exposure of students to individual project development and experiential learning: at this point the programme catered for limited practical skills development, providing exposure to practical work through workshops presented by industry professionals in the second semester of the second year of study. At third-year level, students were required to design individual projects comprising 150 notional hours of learning in collaboration with the teaching staff. Successful completion of the project was a prerequisite for the awarding of the degree.
- 4 Media and new media technology: in the light of a possible curriculum transformation that would incorporate a stronger focus on applied/practical skills as contemplated in (2) and (3), a survey of appropriate and essential technologies would have to be undertaken. Due to increased limitations on the financial resources of South African institutions of higher learning, such a survey had to determine:
 - ▶ which *generic* practical skills are considered vital in terms of student development and empowerment within the broad context of the media/communications industry in South Africa; and
 - ▶ which learning areas should be focus areas, bearing in mind the stipulations regarding duplication of training by different tertiary institutions in the same geographical area as set out in the *University of Port Elizabeth Draft Strategy Framework* (2001), read in conjunction with the *Higher Education Act* (No 101 of 1997) and the *University of Port Elizabeth Core Strategic Plan* (1998).

Link with the Ford Foundation Project

The Ford Foundation research grant made it possible to research the above problems as part of a curriculum reform project. This has led to two substantial revisions of the BA MCC curriculum in 2000 and 2001. Currently there is consensus among the academic staff teaching the programme that it satisfies the original goals as set out in the submission for interim registration with SAQA and the Department of Education (November 1998), and that it addresses the concerns identified above.

Scope

This article focuses on the practical difficulties encountered in developing and establishing the curriculum for a degree programme in a field not previously catered for at the University of Port Elizabeth. Although the research project funded by the Ford Foundation allowed the researcher to verify certain initial curriculum assumptions, in particular those regarding the balance between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ training through visits to educational institutions, and meeting with media industry leaders, in particular members of the South African National Editors Forum (October 18 to October 20 in Auckland Park, Johannesburg, 2000), space does not allow for discussion of this very important matter.²

Genesis of the BA MCC at the University of Port Elizabeth

Defining the concept

Broadly speaking, the term ‘programme’ refers to ‘a set of teaching/learning activities in one or more fields of study which culminates in the award of a higher education qualification’ (*Criteria for Programme and Qualification Mix*. Internal draft document, Centre for Academic and Organisational Development, UPE, June 2001). Such a broad definition accommodates a variety of philosophical approaches to curriculum design, ranging from a conventional, discipline-based approach to those which address performance, cognitive development, experiential learning and social critique by adopting an eclectic approach which focuses on trans-disciplinary knowledge and methodologies.³

This broad definition allowed faculties and departments at the University of Port Elizabeth to register their (existing) courses as programmes without significant change in terms of structure, content, delivery mode and assessment strategy. The curriculum ‘reform’ in these instances amounted to packaging conventional curricula into what appears to be a programme format, but which in reality maintains the *status quo*.⁴

Reasons for change

Curriculum reform may arise from attempts to address problems in integrating theory and practice, incorporating new knowledge and best practice, as well as a host of other reasons ‘internal’ to the discipline or profession. External factors, however, often exert a much stronger influence on curriculum reform. Within the South African Higher Education context, change is strongly influenced by political

and economic reform. In this regard the *National Plan for Higher Education* (NPHE) (March 2001) proposes a differentiated funding formula in conjunction with approved qualification and programme mixes intended to steer reform in institutions of higher learning. As such, the NPHE lends impetus to the reform of qualifications set out in various documents pertaining to the South African Qualifications Authority and the National Qualifications Framework (1995; 1998; 1999 & 2000).

In this regard the South African situation is not unique, and one should take cognisance of the fact that the international higher education landscape has irrevocably changed in the wake of dramatic political and economic changes on a global scale. In this regard, Toohey (1999: 45) states:

Overwhelmingly, over the past decade, higher education has been described in terms of its role in economic competition. It must 'produce new graduates who will lead ... industry to victory in the worldwide technological competition' (Spring, quoted in Hart, 1992: 69). Education is promoted by university leaders as a product whose sale may improve the balance of payments, and governments are encouraged to continue funding on that basis.

Ensor (2002: 283) adds another, more mundane reason for curricular transformation in the South African higher education context: the need for downsizing of institutions due to a far lower than expected student number growth. In the light of this, 'academic programme planning offered itself as a rational means to downsize', while there is also evidence that 'some programmes were fashioned in such a way as to protect those departments and faculty members most vulnerable to possible retrenchment because of falling student numbers'. This certainly played a role in the curriculum design of the BA MCC, and the resultant skewing of the *initial* curriculum content due to the inclusion of some modules for the sake of survival rather than intellectual coherence.

Some academics object to external factors playing a role in curriculum reform and argue that reform is authentic only if it addresses changes internal to the discipline and/or profession, and if such changes serve to expand or enhance the body of knowledge associated with the discipline, or contribute to satisfy 'best practice' requirements. During the past three years this point of view has often been expressed by academics at the University of Port Elizabeth who argue that a radical programme approach will eventually erode disciplines to the extent that academics and researchers will no longer be produced in the field concerned (see Booyens, 1997; 2000). As already stated, this sentiment is not limited to the South African context, as is evident from a letter to *The Guardian* (in the UK), as quoted by Boccock (1994: 120):

I am not a teacher. I am not employed as a teacher and I do not wish to be a teacher, I am a lecturer and in my naivety I thought my job was to know my 'field', contribute to it by research and to lecture in my specialism.

This quote exemplifies a conventional, discipline-based perspective on academia and the role of the academic. Implicitly, it views knowledge as existing independently as a body of theory, developed and tested over time and contributed to through research governed by the scientific principles and methodologies subscribed to by the discipline. In reality, these scientific principles are conventions which are paradigmatically validated and which can be considered to be a *Gestalt* (Kuhn, 1970).

Reactions to change

In the Faculty of Arts of the University of Port Elizabeth, advocates of a discipline-based curriculum have implicitly and, to some extent, explicitly rejected a radical programme approach on the grounds that it amounts to a pastiche of individual units or modules that are not sufficiently integrated and therefore do not form a coherent whole. Such a stance is more often than not ideologically motivated⁵ and ignores the fact that several alternative approaches to curriculum design are possible (Posner, 1995; Eisner, 1994; Kemmis et al., 1983), the most prominent being those which are performance- or systems-based (known locally as 'outcomes-based' learning), those which focus on learner relevance (experiential learning), and those approaches which either focus on cognitive development (moving away from reproductive learning in favour of thinking, reasoning, understanding and meaning generation) or social critique. Any one of these approaches can form the basis of an effective curriculum, but more often a combination of them forms the basis for a radical programme approach. Toohey (1999), writing about higher education curriculum reform in the United Kingdom, quotes a number of examples of highly successful curricula, which have been deliberately designed to encompass the best features of a number of these approaches.

When can a programme be labelled 'radical'? Primarily when it engenders flexibility in terms of curriculum structure, teaching methodology, methods of assessment and the learning paths that students can choose. As such, a radical learning programme:

- does not adhere to a strict discipline-based approach to learning and its programme structure is therefore not (solely) determined by the structural conventions of traditional 'subjects' or disciplines;

- ▀ discards the notion that knowledge exists independently within the boundaries of disciplines and instead focuses on the inter-relatedness of knowledge and the importance of context in the generation of meanings;
- ▀ does not single out a single philosophical approach to learning to inform its structure, content, teaching methodology and assessment criteria, but instead employs the best features of a number of philosophical approaches to learning;
- ▀ does not follow the traditional discipline-based (undergraduate) degree structure prevalent at South African universities prior to 1999 (two subjects followed up to third year level plus a number of ‘filler’ subjects). Nevertheless it is not a pastiche, or a collage of units or modules which can be randomly accessed by students without regard for the various levels of competence described in various taxonomies, in particular those of Bloom (1956) and more recently Biggs and Collis (1982).

The integration of diverse bodies of knowledge, not as self-contained units, but as inter-related and mutually complementary opportunities to explore new synergies, is perhaps the central theme of a radical programme approach. In a sense, then, a radical approach does not detract from the discipline-based curriculum’s goal of guiding students to a holistic understanding of the ‘subject’ concerned, *but extends the quest for cohesion beyond the traditional boundaries of disciplines*. Although she never uses the term ‘radical programme’, to my mind the following quote from Toohey (1999: 1) articulates this key aspect of a radical programme approach:

An integrated curriculum provides students with the opportunity to explore key concepts and develop essential skills in the contexts provided by different units. For this reason I have emphasised the design of the programme of study as a whole. This may seem an anachronism with the advent of modular courses. *But ceding more responsibility to students for structuring their own education requires greater clarity about what each module can offer and how they may be linked together to form a coherent whole.* (Author’s emphasis)

BA MCC programme design (1998–1999)

The logical, linear model of the design process as *inter alia* proposed by Diamond (1989: 7), has lost some ground in the wake of the realisation that the design process seldom consists of a series of logical-sequential steps. Logical systems, presented in a number of configurations as design flow charts, attain their attraction through providing a sense of direction, and, most importantly, a sense of security for those who undertake curriculum design. In reality, however, it is very seldom possible to

follow such a set course. It is therefore not only possible to deviate from a linear process, it is in some cases more effective to adopt a more simple, flexible model. Also, within the South African context, highly sophisticated and complex models may impede progress because of the demands they generate in terms of human resources in a system where academics are already overburdened.

External factors that influenced the design of the BA MCC curriculum

During the second term of 1998, the University of Port Elizabeth's Joint Planning Group held a week-long strategic planning exercise aimed at implementing a cost-centre model which would form the basis of a cost-effective management system for the university. Although it was stressed that it would only be used as a management tool to inform strategic direction, many feared that it was a crude and one-dimensional mechanism for assessing faculties and other units in terms of their financial viability. Although the model accepted the principle of cross-subsidisation, it inevitably followed that a divide manifested itself between 'financially viable' faculties and those that were subsidised. The Faculty of Arts fell into this latter category and it soon became clear that a rapid organisational restructuring of the faculty, combined with a comprehensive review of its learning programmes was inevitable.⁶ The 14 existing academic departments which constituted the faculty were disbanded and the disciplines housed in those departments subsumed under three schools that would in future offer degree programmes instead of subject-based qualifications. At the time few realised how this would impact on group dynamics, and to what extent it would influence programme design and implementation.

Needs analysis

The Faculty of Arts commissioned a market research survey on the employability of BA graduates in 1998, following a linear course design process similar to that propagated by Diamond (1989: 7). The results of this survey, debated during a two-day faculty curriculum reform workshop, clearly indicated a market need for professionals in the field of media and communication. It was agreed that the viability of introducing such a degree programme be investigated, with the proviso that any resulting programme would be developed and implemented using existing staff expertise, with the option of a limited 'buying in' of outside expertise, and without incurring significant costs in terms of technological infrastructure.⁷

From a curriculum development perspective this was a less than ideal route to take, for it paved the way for vested departmental and personal interests to significantly influence curriculum structure and content. The ‘academic audit’ which was conducted in order to plot the existing staff expertise therefore informed programme focus as much as, if not more than, all other factors. Furthermore, staff members consciously or otherwise, promoted their particular fields of expertise as focal points in the new programmes, perhaps to the detriment of intellectual coherence.⁸

Programme structure (macro-curriculum)

An open invitation was extended to staff members of the three schools to form a programme development working group. In view of the importance ascribed to competence in information and communication technology as an indicator of the employability of graduates, it was resolved that, while the programme would focus on cognitive development, provision should also be made to equip students with information and communication technology skills. It was agreed that an eclectic approach to curriculum design would be followed, combining the best aspects of the five already mentioned philosophical approaches.⁹ In spite of this, the resulting ‘twin core tracks’ structure of the initial BA MCC curriculum is testimony to the strong influence of group members’ affinity to a conventional, discipline-based curriculum. In spite of this, the programme matrix provided common ground, and during the next two months and over the course of six workshops, the following programme structure was agreed to:

UPE year level one: ¹⁰	4 fundamental modules (60 notional hours each) 8 core modules (60 notional hours each) 8 elective modules (60 notional hours each)
UPE year level two:	8 core modules (100 notional hours each) 4 elective modules (100 notional hours each)
UPE year level three:	4 core modules (150 notional hours each) 4 elective modules (150 notional hours each) 2 ‘exit fundamentals’ (150 notional hours each)

As a compromise between a conventional and radical programme structure, it was agreed that the programme would have two core tracks, consisting of compulsory modules. Core ‘A’ would consist of 12 language modules spread evenly over UPE levels one, two and three (in essence retaining the conventional language curricula),¹¹ while core ‘B’ would consist of 12 modules which, although

transcending disciplinary boundaries, would nevertheless attempt to satisfy the principle that a learning programme should integrate diverse bodies of knowledge, not as self-contained units, but as inter-related and mutually complementary opportunities to explore new synergies. At the micro-curricular level, the modules did not in every instance promote programme cohesion, due to the fact that the actual learning content of a number of them was still primarily determined by discipline-specific considerations. Within the context of the cost-centre model, 'threatened' disciplines sought to attach themselves to (potentially) viable programmes by 're-packing' conventional learning material in deference to the stated programme goals, while still forming part of conventional, discipline-specific curricula. In essence, core 'B' consisted of modules taken from Sociology and Anthropology, plus a number of newly developed modules in Media Studies, Communication Studies and Information Technology.

The programme for Media, Communication and Culture had its first intake of students in January 1999, and in terms of enrolments, established itself as one of two viable undergraduate programmes in the Faculty of Arts,¹² attracting 33 full-time students and seven 'occasional'¹³ students. In 2000, a total of 54 full-time first year students enrolled, while 84 enrolled in 2001. Student retention was excellent, and 14 of the original enrolment of 33 first-year students graduated in April 2002.

Conclusion

Although the initial curriculum was flawed in some respects, it did provide an inherently sound macro-(programme) structure. During the subsequent curriculum revisions in 2000 and 2001, substantial structural reform was therefore not necessary, allowing the programme members the opportunity to reflect on module content within the context of programme cohesion, and to adjust the curriculum at micro-(modular) level. Subsequently, several newly designed modules in the field of applied media/communication have been introduced in order to attain a balance between 'academic' and 'vocational' elements of the curriculum. This matter, however, will remain on the curriculum agenda for the next two to three years in view of the fairly contentious proposals contained in the Council on Higher Education discussion document *A New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education* (December 2001), referred to above.

Curriculum development is an ongoing process, and it is envisaged that a cyclical review process will be implemented in the Faculty of Arts, with specific attention to

quality assurance. Particularly important in this regard, is the establishment of quality assurance criteria for modules which will address modes of delivery, teaching methodology, assessment strategies and performance appraisal.

From the perspective of University Management, the BA programme in Media, Communication and Culture is one of the most successful programmes introduced. If growing student numbers and viable student/lecturer ratios were guarantors of quality, one could concur with such a view. The real proof of success, however, can only be measured in terms of the kind of graduate the programme delivers, and the reputation those students generate for the programme through success in their chosen professions. The final words on the University of Port Elizabeth's radical programme in Media, Communication and Culture will therefore only be written in time.

Endnotes

- 1 Interviews were conducted with various communication/media professionals during the *Highway Africa '99* Conference hosted by Rhodes University (Grahamstown, September, 1999). Two workshops on the establishment of a Communication Standards Generating Body for Universities and Technikons (held at UNISA and RAU during the course of 1999) provided the opportunity to discuss curriculum change with colleagues from a number of universities, while valuable suggestions were made by representatives of the *M-Net EDIT* (Emerging Dynamics In Television) initiative (Randburg, March 2000).
- 2 In terms of the differentiation between general (academic) and vocational qualifications proposed in the Council on Higher Education discussion document *A New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education* (December 2001), this aspect warrants special attention.
- 3 According to Ensor (2002: 278), the 1996 NCHE report, by incorporating both 'credit exchange' and 'disciplinary discourses', gave rise to widely divergent readings of the policy texts. This is certainly true when curriculum transformation in UPE's Faculty of Arts is compared to that in the Faculty of Science.
- 4 Ensor (2002: 286) correctly classifies the Faculty of Science programmes at UPE as belonging to 'Type A' (core consisting of two primary, strongly classified vertical subject sequences), while she classifies those in the Faculty of Arts belonging to 'Type D' (the compulsory programme core comprises a cluster of strongly classified modules drawn from different disciplines).
- 5 The power of ideology to regulate perceptions and beliefs stands in direct relation to its 'invisibility', or as Althusser (1977) puts it '... that is why those who are in ideology

believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denigration of the ideological character of ideology.' Toohey (1999: 44) touches on what Althusser calls the obviousness of ideology when she states: 'The conceptions on which beliefs are based may be so long-standing, and so commonly held in the discipline, that they are accepted without question. Those who hold them may never realise how their own beliefs have been shaped.'

- 6 During 1998 the Principal met twice with senior members of the Faculty. During the first meeting members were told in no uncertain terms that the Faculty of Arts had a limited window of opportunity and that efforts to delay fundamental change would not be tolerated. At a special meeting of the Board of the Faculty of Arts staff members were told that the faculty had to restructure before the end of the year. It was a case of 'shape up or ship out'.
- 7 In some ways this presented the developers with a 'catch 22' situation which was the result of a particular interpretation of the cost-centre mode. This model allocated physical and technological resources to 'growth areas' on the basis of a proven track record regarding student enrolment, attrition and throughput rates.
- 8 Case study research by Ensor (2001) confirms the lack of intellectual coherence of some 'Type D' programmes, leading her to the conclusion that the exploration of common ground between the credit exchange and disciplinary discourses offers a possible solution: 'We need to find ways of enabling both; of combining articulation and flexibility with vertical coherence and learning in depth' (2002: 292).
- 9 These approaches are: conventional, discipline-based; performance-based; cognitive; experiential, and socially critical.
- 10 The conventional year levels one, two and three, which respectively correspond with NQF levels 5, 6 and 7, were retained as they provided staff and students with familiar reference points amidst a host of new, potentially alienating terms and concepts.
- 11 During the final stages of the design process, it was agreed that core 'A' would only make the study of a language compulsory up to second year level, allowing students to choose alternative modules at the discretion of the programme leader, provided that such modules were consistent with the overall purpose of the programme as stated in the programme submission to SAQA (application for interim registration, December 1998). Unpublished University of Port Elizabeth Academic Planning Committee Submission document.
- 12 In its report to Senate of a meeting of the Academic Planning Committee held on 26 July 2001, it was recommended to Senate (and subsequently approved on 31 July 2001), that four undergraduate programmes of the Faculty of Arts be discontinued, namely the BA (Politics), BSocSc (Geography); BSocSc (Sociology) and the BSocSc (Anthropology).

Subsequently it was proposed that a further two programmes be discontinued, namely the BA (Languages and Linguistics) and the BA (Applied Language Studies) because they failed to attract a viable number of students. (Approved at Senate meeting on 4 September 2001).

- 13 Although the programme is not offered on a part-time basis, students are allowed to register for individual modules as 'occasional' students. Eventually such students may register for the degree and receive credit for completed modules.

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