

# Producing a critical newspaper

*Ivan Said*

**W**hile reading the January/February 1999 edition of the *Columbia Journalism Review* I met with a stimulating article which inspired me to write this contribution. The experience, with many deep educational - and pedagogical - implications, could be easily emulated by any Maltese school - or journalist - of any social standing. Thus I thought worth sharing this experience with the readers of the *Education 2000* journal and add some of my thoughts on the matter and give some suggestions. The compelling story started four years ago when Leslie Seifert, an opinion editor for *Newsday* and an adjunct professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, approached the 500-student Middle College High in New York City, a school for children in danger of becoming dropouts, and proposed starting a school newspaper, free from censorship by the principal and staff.

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“My idea was to publish a school newspaper that students would write, that I would edit, that the school would fund, and the principal and teachers would see only after it hit the hallways”, Seifert writes in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. “The newspaper’s relationship to the principal and faculty would mirror that of an independent daily to the local mayor and his administration. There would be no censorship. Anyone who found an article inappropriate was welcome to respond in writing or stage protests. No one was required to grant interviews or supply information,” Seifert adds in his contribution to the CJR.

“Honest, uncensored journalism,” Seifert quotes himself as saying to the school staff, “might bring kids to school, make them feel involved, connect them to writing, give them a voice.”

Now let us focus on the four loose targets of Seifert’s ‘honest, uncensored journalism’. But before we proceed I ought to say that there is an important prerequisite - the person responsible for the project must be a good leader. He should fit Paulo Freire’s description of “revolutionary educator” which we find in his “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”: “(His or Her) Efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them.”

Ideally the person/s taking up this challenge should be an independent minded journalist. He or she must have the basic principle of the profession embedded in his soul, i.e. of selling fair and unbiased information to readers. Such principle should be thoroughly explained to prospective students joining the newspaper and they should be asked to commit themselves to some sort of a code of ethics. Journalism is a profession and has its own ethics and no one who enters the profession - not even school journalists - should abdicate from their ethical and legal obligations.

- **Might bring kids to school.** This may attract social dropouts. It might make them aware of the advantages and disadvantages and of the merits and the demerits of the school they attend. “So school is not just books!” they might argue. “After all we have a say at school,” they might admit and see the benefits of attending classes.

- **Make them feel involved.** The setting up of such a newspaper helps students to build a community spirit. The exercise can present them with alternative models of communication and representation as it is widely believed that the mass media offer audiences not a window of the world, but a filter that selectively builds a new reality. This is an opportunity for them to see authentic media representations of their own communities that speak to their concerns.

- **Connect them to writing.** The sky is the limit for the students’ imagination. Moreover, the environment may stimulate them. Motivation is the key to writing and an uncensored newspaper should motivate them infinitely.

- **Give them a voice.** Having the liberty to speak and your ideas realised is the basis of democracy. It is useless that you speak with no chance of having listeners or your ideas being implemented.

The newspaper must be a means of dialogue not just for the school community but also for the project players. “Dialogue” writes Freire in his ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, “further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all). Faith in people is an a priori requirement for dialogue; the ‘dialogical man’ believes in others even before he meets them face to face. His faith, however, is not naïve. The ‘dialogical man’ is critical and knows that although it is within the power of humans to create and transform, in a concrete situation of alienation individuals may be impaired in the use of that power.”

Before embarking on a project like this the project leader must:

- Explain to the school principal and staff the idea of having a school newspaper critical of, funded by but editorially independent of, the school. Editorial independence is of the utmost importance. State clearly the objectives of the project to school students.

- Explain to prospective “school journalists” the basic principles of journalism and the ethical and legal implications. (The Malta Press Club “Code of Ethics for Journalists” and the Press Act come handy here.)

- Write a one year business/development plan.

- Plan and put up an editorial setup defining clearly each role and task. According to Seifert, up to the January/February 1999 issue of the CJR, his school newspaper remained uncensored and articles led to concrete changes. The journalist gives the following list: “the redesign of a disagreeable cafeteria space, repairs to ceilings and walls, the revival of a moribund boys’ basketball team and several clubs, and promises of a cheerleading squad.”

He also writes: “The newspaper reported on a graffiti problem inside a diner next door and the vandalism stopped. School dances, which frequently were canceled because of insufficient tickets sales and poor planning, now usually succeed, the organizers having been shamed by reports on their past failures.”

Perhaps I am dreaming but I am raring to see such an engaging activity in one of our schools.



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