

Journalism Trainers and Newspapers Editors Agree on Internship as a Weak Link in Journalism Training in Nigeria

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Abstract

There have been growing concerns among mass communication scholars and professionals on how to improve media practice and professionalism in Nigeria. These stakeholders think that a good starting point is an examination of the training systems that produce the personnel that man the industry. This study examined internship as a vital component of journalism and mass communication training that needs to be strengthened in order to produce better trained manpower for the Nigeria media industry. The study sampled media training institutions and newspaper organisations in the six states of the South-West geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The study employed the reflective practice theory as a theoretical background. It equally used the quantitative and qualitative methods of research, using questionnaires and personal interviews as instruments. Two population groups: journalism trainers; and editors of daily and weekly newspapers, chosen through the total enumeration sampling technique responded to two similar, 28-item questionnaires. Ten editors and ten trainers were equally chosen for interview through the available sampling method to elicit qualitative data. The study covered 22 out of the 28 journalism training institutions, and 16 out of the 19 daily and weekly newspapers in South-West Nigeria. The study found that both editors and trainers see internship as a major area that requires improvement in journalism education. However, whereas trainers do not support advanced internship for themselves, editors think that journalism trainers should do advanced internships.

Keyword: Journalism training, Trainers, Internships, Editors, Reflective Practice, Nigeria

Introduction

The provision of news and information is one of the core functions of the mass media. The effective performance of this function often leads to improvement in several facets of the society. Effective performance is however a function of effective training. Installing appropriate mechanisms in the journalism training process would ensure well-trained journalists for the society.

Statement of the Problem

Nigerian journalists are not performing at their optimum, though they can. Several concerned stakeholders have advanced probable reasons for this state of affairs. Much of these reasons have at best been products of guesswork and hunches. Several factors converge to produce efficient and effective journalists. This study sought to find out the perceptions of journalism trainers and newspaper editors (two major stakeholders in journalism training and practice) on what areas of journalism are in need of improvement in order to produce more efficient journalists.

Objectives of the Study

The study had the following objectives:

1. To find out areas in journalism training requiring improvement in order to produce better journalists.
2. To find out the perceptions of journalism trainers and newspaper editors on advanced internships for journalism trainers.

Research Questions

1. What areas in journalism training require improvement in order to produce better journalists?

2. What are the perceptions of journalism trainers and newspaper editors on advanced internships for journalism trainers.

Theory and Literature Review

Reflective Practice

Literature on journalism education and practice reveals pressure to develop more critical educators and practitioners and to address rapid technological change. It also addresses the need for a balance in theory and practice towards ensuring improved performance of journalists and the journalism industry. Literature search on journalism education shows a profound dependence by scholars on reflective practice as a key concept around which theoretical framework on the subject is built. This section examines this concept and its place in journalism education and practice.

Defining Reflective Practice

A few authors have defined reflective practice. Thompson (2002) states that “reflective practice is an active process of constructing solutions, rather than a passive process of following procedures or guidelines.” (p.235). Schön (1996), in Ferraro, (2000) defined it as “thoughtfully considering one’s own experience in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline.” In the view of Bolton (2007), “reflective practice is a process of learning and developing through examining our own practice, opening our practice to scrutiny by others and studying texts from the wider sphere.” (p.4).

From the standpoint of education, reflective practice is the process of the educator studying his or her own teaching methods and determining what works best for the students. From the angle of the practitioner, Ferguson (2011) speaks of the necessity for practitioners in any environment to consider how best to refresh their practice, to get better at what they do, to benefit from good practice that they may have seen in others or to avoid aspects of their own practice that students or others have told them need correction.

In other words, the reflective practitioner is flexible in his approach to practice. He relies on the gains obtained through experience in previous jobs to improve on the next task by looking into what went wrong and what worked right with the aim to achieve better performance. At the core of reflection is the thought “if you always do what you always did, then you will always get what you always got.” Thus, the reflective practitioner asks “How can I improve my practice?”

The place of reflective practice becomes important to journalism practice when we appreciate the link of theory and practice in journalism. Theory is the basis of practice and practice is the explanation of theory. The interrelationship between both underscores the need for journalism teachers and practitioners to work together towards enabling journalism graduates appreciate and imbibe both ends.

Burns (1997), cited in Burns (2004), stresses this point by noting that:

Critical self-reflection is the cognitive bridge between journalism theory and professional practice. It is through critical self-reflection that journalists develop self-reliance, confidence, problem solving, cooperation and adaptability, while simultaneously gaining knowledge. Perhaps more importantly, it develops in students a sense of professional efficiency in their ability to negotiate the dilemmas and complexities that are inherent in their practice. Reflection is also the process by which journalists learn to recognize their own assumptions and understand their place in the wider social context. (p.6).

For the student journalist, reflective practice skills make the student vacate the conventional position of the passive receiver of a body of knowledge that the teacher selects, to an active processor of useful and applicable knowledge. Thus, the student distils and absorbs that knowledge that is useful for problem-solving both on training and professional tasks. Indeed, it is the on-the-job process of problem-solving that characterizes the practitioner. This way, learners are able to engage in the active role of solving the problems that confront them with situations that reflect the real world. Engaging students in problem-solving at training prepares them to do it more easily on the job. Burns (2004) speaks thus "By emphasizing the process used to complete a task or make a professional decision, students are encouraged to learn in a self-directed way. The thinking skills required by the graduate practitioner are identified, prescribed, practiced and evaluated." (p.7).

Journalism educators must value the opportunities provided by institutional environments to expose students to learning by doing as knowledge and skills obtained through such means provide good foundation for better productive working life. It is pedagogically risky not to allow students to engage in such activities as internship, campus newspapering, reporting and editing, campus radio and television activities. These opportunities provide students with experiential learning settings similar to those they would have in a real life work place.

Reflection can be informal or formal. Informal reflection involves self-questioning and develops our awareness of our own assumptions. It is also the basis of other forms of reflection. Formal reflection on the other hand draws on research and theory and equally provides guidance and framework for practice. Whereas informal reflection may be done sometimes unconsciously, formal reflection is deliberate and goal-oriented. It is equally task-based because it aims at resolving a critical issue.

David Schön (1987), cited in Allen and Miller (1997) suggests a strategy for placing what he called “reflective practicum” at the centre of the work of professional schools as a way of creating a bridge between the world of practice and the world of academy. This way, in his view, it is possible to move towards resolving some of the conflicts between the academic and vocational dimensions of the professional schools. Schön believes you can reflect-in-practice or on-practice. Reflection-in-practice occurs when you reflect right and when you are engaged in the activity. This involves you thinking on your feet and responding immediately to a situation. Reflection-on-practice is when you reflect afterwards. It involves thinking about your experience and learning from it for improved results. According to Schön, “when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case.” (p.59). Schön’s point here is that the process of reflecting-in-practice creates an awareness of better ways to accomplish a unique task rather than following known ways, especially if the known ways have not provided useful solutions.

Ortiz (2006) describes both types of reflections thus;

Reflection-in-action is a heightened awareness of what one is doing at the time of activity. Consider for example, a neurosurgeon thoroughly manoeuvring a surgical saw during cranial reconstruction, highly mindful about the action and analyzing results in order to make necessary adaptations during the procedure. By contrast, reflection-on-action is the reflection you do after the event: thinking through, and often discussing the incident with a colleague or supervisor. In this *post hoc* reflection, the learner understands complex experiences, applies theory to them and is able to solve problems and improve practice.

To optimize the gains of reflection therefore, there is the need to go beyond formal reflection to reflection on action, a process that allows various parties to journalism education and practice to address the issues dispassionately.

Review of Literature

In the face of the vital need for practical, hands-on experience in journalism training, coupled with the near-total absence of appropriate equipment and environment to enable students gain the required experience, internships provides an important means in journalism curricula and training programme to plug the gaps created by deficiencies in the training system. The importance of internship is better appreciated in the light of the criticisms by professionals about the quality of journalism and mass communication graduates, especially the extreme tilt towards theory rather than practical in their knowledge of the field.

Internships have been advocated as a veritable means to achieving experiential learning by journalism students and they have a positive relationship to early employment. With the current trend by organizations to reduce training costs, graduates who are prepared to work with minimal supervision are of immense value. Production of such graduates is however hinged on a well-planned internship programme.

What precisely constitutes an internship varies somewhat from programme to programme. There are also differences among programmes on methods of assessment, degree of faculty involvement, number of institutional credit hours attached, as well as quality control mechanisms and reward expectations. Journalism and mass communication internships have tripartite beneficiaries namely; the student, the training institution and the employer, a situation described by Mason (1990) as “win-win-win”.

The student learns valuable skills which might not come easy within the classroom setting, the institution enhances its reputation for training people who can function effectively in the workplace and the employer is provided with a pool of talent from which to draw temporary or permanent staff (Little, 1981).

Hanson, (1984), notes that the benefits of internships do not accrue only to students, but also to their employers and institutions. According to him, internships give students a chance to see what realities await them before they find themselves competing for jobs in areas in which they have little or no practical understanding or experience.

Internships are a microcosm of actual world of work experience as they allow the intern to link theory with practice and assess their readiness for full paid employment. According to Hatala (1979), in Getz (2002),

Internships allow students to put theory into practice, permit faculty members to observe students' actual performances and to judge the students' learning by means other than tests and papers and cast professionals into the role of field supervisors, giving them an opportunity to provide instruction, monitoring, and judgment on the quality of students work. (p. 333).

Whitlow (1992), in Ojomo (2007) observes that internships permit students to

...step out of the academic cocoon and into a professional arena where they refine knowledge and skill and learn new perspectives and different ways of doing things. They also ensure that students get a taste of no excuse-entertained deadlines. And they let students bump into the delicacies of maintaining healthy work relationships. (p. 50).

With specific reference to the mass communication and journalism professions in Nigeria and the daunting challenge of the lack of training facilities, internships ought to be well-planned into the curricula such that the gaps created by the lack of equipment are well plugged by a well-run internship programme. Thus, it would not be out of place to overhaul the present curricula to allow journalism and mass communication students to do internship for twice or more during a four-year programme. This point was reiterated by Ojomo (2007) thus "not minding the skills acquired by students in school, internships provide a means for honing such skills, reinforcing technical competencies and improving analytical skills."(p.51). This point is more relevant when we concede to the fact that most departments of mass communication are lacking in up-to-date equipment available in the media organizations for which the students are being trained.

Relevant as it is to journalism and mass communication training, internships have their flip sides many of which are largely under-reported. For instance, it is known that several interns do not get engaged in the line of jobs for which they are trained and thus end up engaged in activities which do not have direct bearings on their curricula. It is also known that some interns are used as cheap labour by organizations. Such organizations detail interns to make coffee, handle courier and run errands, thus leading to a waste of the internship period. Due to poor record keeping and poor regulation of the process, the activities of the intern are often unavailable for assessment where credit points are needed to be awarded for them. Poor regulation also creates situations where supposed interns engage in unrelated activities in the internship period but get letters or other documents from family relations stating that they have done internship.

Although there are three important parties to an internship programme, the student or intern is the major target. Getz (2002) sought to find out the perceptions of journalism students of the value of internship. Using a method of phenomenological enquiry, the study examined the value that students place on their internship within the framework of their college education by probing first person narratives written by students at the conclusion of their internships covering a five- year period from 1996 through 2000 at a Midwestern public university. The study found that students' attitude towards their completed internships was overwhelmingly positive. In general, the aspects of the internship experience interns perceived most favourable were those in which they felt they were given some measure of responsibility. The interns described as 'fun' or 'exciting job duties requiring a meaningful contribution to the product or service on the part of the student. The interns' perceptions had very little negatives. The aspects of the experience perceived least favourable by interns were those in which they felt their duties were tedious or of little importance.

An important aspect of Getz's study is the value students placed on their internships in the context of their course work. Specifically, he expected to find students reporting that they learned more on the job in three months than in classrooms in three years. Contrary to his expectation however, he found students reporting the value of their course work to their internship experience.

According to him, While students placed a high value on the learning aspects of their internship duties, they also made frequent reference -some directly and some by implication- to the high level of internship preparation afforded by their class learning. (p. 22).

These findings underscore the need for administrators of journalism and mass communication training institutions to align the curricula of their institutions with the demands and trends in the industry in order to achieve a convergence of interest and knowledge. Very often, some organizations have turned down the applications of several interns due to the unpleasant experiences they have had with past interns. Although there are no known studies to this author of reasons for this development, feedbacks from the field indicate that interns from such institutions have had little or no contributions to the organization, neither are they prepared enough to learn the practical lessons which internships are meant to provide.

Another issue of concern in journalism and mass communication internship is “how much internships are enough?” Responses to that question differ among institutions depending on the stipulations of their curricula. It is important to note however that no amount of practical experience is too much for a student. The more interaction a student has through experiential learning, the broader the depth of his knowledge.

Horowitz (1996) examined the value of multiple internships for journalism majors and their effects on three parts of the job search: number of job offers, amount of time spent looking for a job, and starting salary. Using the survey method of research, he distributed 233 questionnaires of which 112 were returned for a response rate of 48%, he found that having an internship did not result in a greater number of job offers. He also discovered that the assumption that having an internship will lessen the amount of time spent looking for a job was not directly supported, although the more semesters graduates spent interning, the less time they spent looking for employment. The study also made two other findings namely: having an internship predicts high starting salaries, and a college education alone no longer guarantees a job.

Literature on journalism and mass communication training equally shows that there is somewhat of an agreement between educators and practitioners on the usefulness of internships to the overall goal of the programme. Fisher’s (1978) study on *Broadcast Journalists’ Perceptions of Appropriate Career Preparations* reveals the value placed on internships by broadcast journalists. When asked to rate the relevance of selected professional skills training for career preparation, 90 news broadcasters who took part in the survey revealed their feelings thus: 0% said internship is definitely unnecessary, 0% said it is probably unnecessary, 18% felt it should be optional, 30% said it is probably unnecessary, while 52% thought it is definitely necessary. This compares with an earlier study conducted in 1971 by John Hulteng. The study, which was commissioned and funded by the America Newspaper Publishers Association sought to know what editors and journalism educators expect from journalism education. Responses were received from 182 editors and 164 educators. Among other items, respondents were surveyed on how much importance they attached to providing students with internship experience. On a three option response, editors and educators gave 22.5% and 29.2% respectively to “very great and great”, 40.1% and 42.7% respectively to “moderate” and 28.1% and 28.1% respectively to “little or very little”. In all, a general survey of studies on internship reveals more positive attitudes to its relevance and importance to journalism and mass communication training.

Often, the point of divergence is the format and implementation. Questions that have been asked include: at what point does a student go on internship? How long and how often should an internship run? In this regard, while some contend that an ideal internship should run for a year, others think a six month or three month period would do. While some argue that a one-time internship is enough for a four-year university programme, others advocate a multiple internship format. There are also issues around supervision from the intern’s school, record keeping and regulating internship. Added to these is the important question of internship remuneration. Contentious as these issues may seem, they do not take away from the fact that internships play vital roles in journalism and mass communication training and a closer attention to it could be a panacea to some of the problems of journalism training.

Results

Table 1: Areas Requiring Improvement in order to Produce Better Journalists

	Trainers		Editors	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Admission processes	31	27	22	17
Curriculum	42	36	50	39
Quality of faculty	25	21	35	27
Internship	80	68	68	53
Collaboration between industry and training institutions	1	1	0	0
Self development	1	1	0	0
Made to go to NIJ after graduation	0	0	3	2
Totals of questionnaires	117	100% (N=117)	128	100% (N=128)

Totals refer to sums of respondents. Figures in frequency and percent do not add up to 100 because respondents were asked to pick more than one option where appropriate.

Table 1 shows areas that require improvement in order to produce better trained journalists. Here, trainers and editors agreed that the internship process needs to be strengthened. This was the view of 68 percent of trainers and 53 percent of editors. Internships have become one of the most important ways for journalism students to receive initial professional experience and also break into the field. With the insufficiency of modern equipment to ensure hands-on experience in the various journalism schools in Nigeria, the internship process provides a major window for journalism students to get the required experience needed to equip them for the demands of the world of work.

As enunciated by Becker, *et al*, "experiences"--including media internships--do seem to help predict a graduate's success in the field: "... the specialized training of the universities and the provision of opportunities for role playing in the job through college media outlets and internships generally do seem to have a payoff for the student" (Becker, Kosicki, Engleman, & Viswanath, 1991, p. 19).

The benefits of internships are numerous. While some observers think that the student needs it as a launch pad into the field of practice, one editor thinks "Internship training will close-up gaps envisaged by dearth of experts/professionals." Indeed, where it is well planned and implemented, internship can serve as a process of socialization for the student. This is similar to the observation of Hanna and Sanders (2008) when they noted:

self-selection, including choice of a route through education, is an element of professional socialization in any career. By the time journalism students arrive for this education, they already have formed ideas and views about news media roles, perhaps influenced by internships spent with journalists. (p. 1).

Sander's views are supported by those of a trainer who suggests that "the student journalist should be given the opportunity of longer internship training in core media areas to make them well grounded in practical experience." Interestingly, the value of internship is not only appreciated by trainers and editors alone. In a 2002 study on *Journalism Students' Perceptions of the Value of Internships* by John E. Getz, he found that "students perceive the value of internships as highly valuable in their education and in their development as productive citizens." (p.365). The subject of internships cannot be over flogged in a discussion on journalism training. This is because all parties to the total process of journalism education and practice gain when it is wholesomely planned and executed. Moreover, the lack of it may largely be a major factor in the several challenges that confront the system. One of the high points of the study by Mills, Harvey and Warnick (1980) was that:

Some news executives, disappointed at the quality of journalism graduates, are turning to people from other majors to fill their editorial positions. To reduce this trend might require J-schools to provide better basic training: more specialized training on VDTs, photography, and production areas; tougher entrance or graduation requirements; and more in-field experience through internships, perhaps even multiple internships (p.19).

Next to internship according to them is curriculum, which has 36 percent from the trainers and 39 percent from editors. The value of the curriculum in the overall process of journalism education is immense. The curriculum determines the content of the body of knowledge to be imparted into the students by the trainers.

It equally guides the direction of the overall teaching process. Thus, time must be invested in the process of building a robust curriculum that meets present day realities. An important consideration in curriculum design must be the integration of theory and practice such that the graduates of journalism training institutions are not lopsided in their orientation and knowledge. The curriculum must reflect the world view of various subjects and equip the student with the capacity to reflectively discuss these views. In this regard, Wilkins (1998,) in McDevit (2000) observes that while journalism students are typically required to take courses such as mass media ethics and public opinion, "Whether these courses are sufficient to induce reflective thinking about journalism itself is continual fodder for debate in curriculum committees." Integration of theory with practice in the same course provides an opportunity to apply a conceptual framework in the design of a news writing project. Such a course might also boost journalism's standing in academia. (p.40+).

One editor says:

We need to constantly update our curriculum to ensure students are properly trained. Curriculum should focus on the essential ingredients for producing well-rounded journalism graduates. The curriculum should be widened to ensure versatility. In other words mass communication undergraduates should offer electives in different areas, even beyond their faculty.

An interesting observation here is the comment of three editors that journalism graduates "should be made to go to NIJ". NIJ- the Nigerian Institute of Journalism, is a specialized J-school established in 1971. It is credited with producing several journalists that operate the Nigerian journalism industry. Some graduates of the institute often (though informally) express the view that prospective journalists' training is not complete until they have attended NIJ, even after they have graduated from any other school of journalism.

One editor of a Nigerian newspaper reacted to the issues this way “There is no doubt that journalism standards have fallen not just in the South-West but also in Nigeria. Recruiting good hands now is becoming increasingly difficult for employers. Most new reporters find it difficult to get exclusive investigative reports. Some of them are highly deficient in grammar.” The choice of inadequate experience by trainers could be an indirect indictment of the weak internship process in most journalism training institutions in Nigeria, a process which has turned the internship exercise into a mere formality. With good packaging and implementation however, internships could be one of the major means for training journalists to acquire the experience that would be needed on the job.

Table 2: Extent of Agreement or Otherwise on the Need for Trainers to do Professional Internship

	Trainers		Editors	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Strongly agree	10	9	52	41
Agree	49	42	68	53
Undecided	7	6	5	4
Disagree	36	31	1	1
Strongly disagree	15	13	1	1
Totals of questionnaires	117	100% (N=117)	128	100% (N=128)

Totals refer to sums of respondents. Figures in frequency and percent do not add up to 100 because respondents were asked to pick more than one option where appropriate.

Table 2 was derived from a questionnaire item that sought the views of respondents on the relevance of professional internships or advanced internships for trainers as a way of acquiring or honing the practical knowledge required for improving the quality of their products. Of interest is the unwillingness of trainers of a reasonable percentage to do internship as 44 percent of them (31%+13%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed, however, 51% of them agreed or strongly agreed (9% + 42%). A good number of the editors are however in support of professional internships for trainers as 94 percent of them (41%+53%) think that trainers need to get some practical experience from the industry. One editor of a Nigerian newspaper observed that “Lecturers should go for internship. Many lecturers are not committed to teaching when it comes to practical courses; they pursue their interests instead of helping the obviously ill-prepared students.”

Recommendations

One of the major findings of this study is the concern of both trainers and editors on the need for better, well-planned internship programmes. To assert that the current internship programme of most journalism training institutions is poorly implemented is an understatement. The journalism profession is a practical-oriented one. Therefore, there is the need for a heavy dose of practical work through a well-designed and implemented internship programme. The primary goal of internships is to prepare the intern for the challenges of the world of work. To achieve this goal, the process must be attractive and rewarding to all parties involved in it. Every stakeholder must be concerned and interested in its success. It must be moved from the backstage to the front burner in journalism education. The process must involve internship exercise every year of the student's programme in school or alternatively, a whole year of internship after the programme.

The above point gives vent to the next recommendation which is a call to make mass communication programmes in universities to run for five years. The fifth year should be devoted absolutely to intensive internship during which the student is exposed to various aspects of practical training. This way, students are also able to interact with practicing journalists who could mentor them. Another merit of the one year internship is that the intern could use this period to decide on his or her ability to cope with the heat of the profession. Passion and self-motivation are essential ingredients that sustain interest in any career. Where these are absent for the journalist, the result is lack of commitment to professional practice. The one year period of internship could offer the intern the required experience needed to decide whether to remain in the profession or join another profession.

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