

# 17. The left field of a study tour

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There are two stories from my eventful semester teaching on the Journalism programme at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in 2005. The one involves a young man, who few years earlier, had run away from DUT after just two weeks. “They were damaging me, bru,” was his assessment. It did not stop him claiming front page leads week after week at the Sunday Times. Credible stories. Not cooked up fantasies that the paper had to apologise for in time.

The second story is my own. There was a student who appeared on the register, but never in class. Her assignments were turned in on time, and she diligently sat for the tests. Bumping into me on a polished stairwell at City Campus, she sheepishly apologised for her practised absence. “Not at all,” I gushed, adding that anyone who routinely scored an A+ for her papers should avoid the classroom at all costs. No teacher should have the dubious privilege of inflicting harm on an outstanding student. It turned out that she was holding down a job at a ‘knock-and-drop’, while registered as a full-time student. It should be a lesson for the ‘career’ students who overstay their welcome on our campuses, studiously avoiding both pass marks and getting a job.

The manner of my getting appointed to teach the young woman, and 50 or so others, arose in curious circumstances. As I recall, a lecturer at DUT Journalism left midstream for one or the other reason. I had a job in the university administration, lodged just up the road. In the historic tension between the administration and the academy, there was the (erroneous) assumption that we had our ‘bums in butter’, while academics slogged at the coalface. That is another story for another time. My job did, however, come with the privilege of a rather lovely leather wingback on brass wheels, and a salary package that enabled me to feed my children more than just pap and Kool Aid. Those details have a bearing on this storyline as one will discover.

I recall being cajoled into filling in by a charming ‘full-time’ socialite, academic and an advocate, to boot. The sweetener was that I could lay claim to some paltry *togt* wage that had oppressed legions of slave labour before me, and remains a favoured practice common in both unfettered capitalism and the South African higher education system. “Nah,” said I turning up the nose that was delicately chiselled above my stiff upper lip.

Lest anyone suspect that I was a man of independent means just passing my time in the hallowed portals of the DUT, I spurned both the insult and the few extra bob for good reason. The one was that I had already, from the comfort of my choice seat in the executive offices, been raving about the habit of academics having a side hustle and thereby double dipping. I could not possibly connive in a practice that I was already firmly on the record as opposing. The second was that the additional silver would have created unrealistic expectations among the said children already accustomed to a little more than

smooth maize and toxic beverages. Be that as it may, I plunged head-first into the double-volume lecture hall once graced by the well-fed Duke of Connaught, clicking my bespoke Bruno Maglis and twisting my stifling silk necktie.

At first glance, I was greeted by a sea of 17-year-old faces consumed by sheer boredom. I was later to marvel at the diversity in race, class, gender, ethnicity, faith, age and sexual orientation in the group. On entering the class, I pulled out my painful lecture notes and a PowerPoint presentation. That was the death of them. Were it not for the intermittent whirr of the ancient air conditioners, they would surely have turned into corpses. The topic, as I recall, was ‘Apartheid Destabilisation in Southern Africa’. I flashed slide after slide of heavily-burned soldiers lugging RPG7s, rusty fields and the pockmarked buildings littering Mozambique’s coastal skyline. I droned so eloquently that I too could have knocked myself to sleep. There was not even a restless whimper. From somewhere deep among the smokers on the raised bunks, a polite young woman asked me to spell that. “Have you ever been there?”, I asked. She shook her head in the manner best demonstrated by Bharatanatyam dancers. “Would you like to go to Mozambique to see for yourself how apartheid armies devastated that country?” The slumber miraculously transformed into a high-energy ‘prom committee’ as they excitedly gathered around. They hung onto every word as I quoted from Machel to Mondlane to Tambo to the effervescent Marcellino dos Santos.



*Mozambican flag*

As I described the Costa do Sol and the poolside at the Polana and, of course, the lively clubs that brought everything from kwasa kwasa to kwaito to town, there was wide-eyed wonder. Almost to a person, these students had never been anywhere beyond a few kilometres of their hometowns nor did they have passports. “You have six weeks to get a passport,” I bellowed. A formal organising committee was constituted. I volunteered to raise the funding provided that each was prepared to make a small contribution. The 45 minutes that was originally going to be a whole graveyard shift flew out the window.

My next order of business was the protocol of clearing the

matter with the sparkling socialite, academic and advocate. “Robin, you know the tog wages you had offered me, I want to talk to the finance chaps about reprioritising that in the budget, and putting it into a teaching and learning fund.” Being of genial disposition and unwilling to lose his willing slave, the head of department readily agreed. It took some convincing to get the finance chaps to think outside the spreadsheet, but they graciously did, and our Journalism Study Tour of Mozambique was on track.

Every class that followed was a meeting of the ‘prom committee’ with healthy lashings of political theory and comparative politics lobbed in. It was a left field approach to teaching politics to journalism freshers. In an earlier incarnation at another university, I led a small group of third years on a field tour in South East Asia. There, they were introduced to dissidents from countries like Burma, and introduced first-hand to one of the great struggles for democracy of our time. Burma has since degenerated into a bizarre blend of Buddhist extremism cavorting with re clothed soldiers and a hapless Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

## “the slumber miraculously transformed into a high-energy ‘prom committee’ that took care of the logistics”

The experience of that study tour enabled me to craft a programme that was simultaneously educational and entertaining. In planning initiatives of this sort, local information and local contacts are first prize. It was fortuitous that a son of the president of Mozambique was also a student at the university. It also helped that our ambassador in Maputo was introduced via a third party as were several of the embassy staff. Then, there was Madame Graca Machel who had the distinction of having married two African freedom fighters who later turned president. She herself had played a powerful role in the Mozambican freedom struggle, and served as a minister in its first cabinet.

Through another avenue, best not disclosed even now, we made contact with colleagues of the murdered journalist, Carlos Cardoso. There was an Umkhonto weSizwe exile, who having fallen in love and married a Mozambican, remained in that country even after South African liberation. The link was to prove very useful in visiting the site and graves of the 1981 Matola Massacre when 15 MK cadres were killed in a raid by apartheid security forces who had crossed illegally into Mozambique.

An accidental programme came together quite nicely. The

‘prom committee’, even though still teenagers, masterfully developed budgets, checklists, enquired about immigration rules, checked out the accommodation and transport, and a host of other logistics. Those were all learning outcomes not necessarily factored into an ordinary journalism curriculum. A key part of the organising was discipline. Not a soul was left under illusions that the provisions of the liberal South African Constitution, more especially the sections that dealt with corporal punishment, were suspended once we crossed the (then) Swaziland border. The skilful reprioritisation of the budget by the finance chaps enabled the ‘prom committee’ to hire a bus with enough capacity for all of us. The morning of our departure saw legions of parents and guardians descend on the City Campus toting tears and tupperware. The tears were for their treasured toddlers. Needless to say, I had to hug and comfort more than one mother who reminded me of the precious cargo she was entrusting to me. No tupperware was refused, more especially those with piping hot samoosas. Mercifully, the bus was loaded within the hour. Some students brought the kitchen sink, while others suspiciously might not even have bothered to pack a change of underwear. We had barely left the city limits, when it became evident that the beverages were responsible for the bus listing to one side. I pretended to look the other way, while a few lads and not a few lasses rectified that mechanical defect. The problem of the listing bus returned when we stopped at Big Bend in Swaziland ostensibly for a pit stop. Enough said.

The border posts were memorable events to get one’s first stamps in the passport. Promises were babbled about filling up the whole travel document. The driver was an old hand at travelling in Southern Africa, and shepherded us to a backpackers’ lodge in the centre of Maputo with no difficulty. The next morning we were on the road. The first stop was to our mission in Maputo, and a briefing with the High Commissioner. The detailing of the history of African liberation movements, acting in solidarity since the 1950s as well as the impact of such support, proved an eye-opener for those unaware of the background. When we took to the streets of Maputo to visit the bombed buildings and roads, the immense devastation suffered by the people of Mozambique became even more apparent. A visit to the graves of the martyrs of Matola brought tears. A monument was subsequently built and is now a place of pilgrimage.

Armed with classroom study, extensive background readings and the first-hand briefings, the students were able to obtain a fuller picture of apartheid destabilisation in Southern Africa. This unusual methodology, quite unfamiliar in South African classrooms largely due to resource constraints, has without any doubt had a lasting impact on the students who participated in the study tour. The majority of the group remained in journalism careers and have excelled in their spheres of endeavour.

DUT Journalism has long enjoyed a stellar reputation, which was enhanced by the introduction of this left field teaching methodology.



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