

Guilty of thinking in journalism

I was immensely flattered and excited to receive an invitation to contribute a monthly column for *The THES*. I felt that I had finally made it in the academic world. I had always harboured a secret desire to be a high profile media academic but never quite known how to achieve that. On the other hand, I had also been led to believe that being "pushy" and wanting that kind of public acclaim was inappropriate for me as a "nice Jewish girl". However, all these mixed feelings were set aside on receipt of the letter. I never considered not accepting the offer, although several people asked me later if I still intended to do it. That left me pondering why I felt that writing such a column was the acme of my academic career.

Admittedly, the offer arrived on my desk at a quite harrowing time at work when issues about the nature of academe and the balance between management, teaching and research were at their height. In post-ILEA, corporate and independent status days, management seems to take over at the expense of what most of us social scientists at least consider our "proper" work, namely teaching and research. I have tried vainly to keep up with writing and research and even to reflect on the real nature of academic work. Critical comment on my recent writing and a rejection slip or two for academic work written under pressure weaken one's resolve. The offer of writing a column reconfirmed my commitment to try to grapple with these issues in a fresh and open way.

However, writing academic papers and contributing a journalistic column, on the surface of it, appear to be two very different activities. Certainly, that would be the case for some academic subjects but is it necessarily true for the social sciences? In other words, what are we trying to achieve in the social sciences and in the academic's brief of teaching the social sciences? It naturally goes without saying that being a journalist is more than being a social scientist as is the process of training students in the social sciences different from that of journalists. But

surely a crucial part of our brief is to try to communicate in writing in an accessible way and to try to teach our students those skills. I have always regarded my teaching task, in tutorials and classes, as training students how to be "serious journalists". In my first year tutorials or seminars, at the beginning of each academic session, I require my students to write a book review of a current and controversial social science text. I also suggest that they go and read some model book reviews in periodicals such as *The THES* or, in the past, *New Society*. I have even, on occasion, produced copies of ones that I consider particularly instructive.

The need for students to learn to communicate well in writing is particularly important now at a time when the social sciences are trying to deal with issues that are no longer so fashionable as academic fields of study and are not seen as meriting serious, academic consideration. In particular, social policy, sociology and politics are concerned with current social and political issues that are now highly contentious and need very careful explication. Yet students who arrive at the doors of higher education tend not to have been well versed in the skills of communication so that such training becomes a primary urgent task of social scientists in higher education.

Recently, I was invited to provide a seminar session on writing up a research dissertation and getting published to the British Sociological

Association's annual postgraduate summer school, training research students. Somewhat apologetically I recited a number of homilies about how to write up a thesis, one of which was that, as an author, one needs to consider one's audience. I even suggested that, early on in the process of doing a dissertation, students should discuss with their thesis supervisors the choice of external examiner. This would enable them to write up the thesis with the external examiner in mind as the audience. This provoked two reactions: one was that this was journalism and the other that it was cheating. It may indeed be journalism to think about for whom one is writing but is there anything wrong in so doing? Equally is knowing whom you are writing for cheating? I think not. In all our previous academic hurdles or examinations we know, or our teachers know, for whom we are writing.

In higher education, of course, knowing one's audience or the eventual examiners has always been arguably easier than the traditional GCE O or A levels, given that the teachers are the examiners and will tend only to examine what they have taught. So why should a postgraduate research thesis not be examined by similar criteria? If a research student does not think about the different fields of endeavour and schools of thought and their key exponents before beginning the process of producing a thesis, it is less likely that the thesis will be clear in its exposition and



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more likely that the postgraduate research student will fall foul of the process of examination by not knowing the interests, expertise and foibles of the examiner.

Of course, it could be that it was my use of the term "audience" that was a misnomer and sparked off this rather interesting repartee. It may be a journalistic term and non-academic shorthand for the activity of being alert to the different approaches to one's subject of analysis. It was also intended to ensure that students become familiar with the names of those scholars who work within their field of endeavour or school of thought, and their particular expertise. They will then know who is likely to be in sympathy with, or appreciative of, their own approach and capable of examining the thesis with the care and attention it surely deserves.

The charge of journalism, I think, was intended to be something more than criticism of my use of popular language or shorthand rather than academic jargon. I think it is symptomatic of some kinds of academic snobbery: that journalism is only ephemeral, not really serious and certainly not capable of standing the test of time or rigorous academic scrutiny or analysis. And I, along with other academic social scientists,

am partly responsible for this state of affairs.

The charge of journalism is also used against those academics who try to popularize their views even in the serious press, or in popular book form. I well remember being put down by a colleague when what I considered an academic book of mine was published by Penguin. She told me that she was using it as "bedtime" reading. In fact, I was rather pleased with this attribution.

And if journalism is demeaning or beneath one's academic dignity why is it that so many academics accept offers to appear in the press or on television with such apparent alacrity? The British Association (for the Advancement of Science) never seems to have any difficulty in finding academics who wish to present their work in more popular form, presumably in the hope that it will be publicized in the press. Why? Perhaps it is that the job of an academic is now rather routine and tedious, without surprises and excitement. Instead, it is in all probability replete with hassles. Being in the public eye, fraught though it may be with criticism, may be more stimulating. And, as academics we are thoroughly steeped in notions of individualism, competitiveness and achievement however hard we may try to avoid them or develop alternative more collaborative styles. A clear public measure of achievement, which seems to have better rewards, though not necessarily remunerative, is to be known through the media. Being high on any particular citation index is far less of a public accolade, however ephemeral it might be. On the other hand, a very old friend of mine, now a senior academic, argued that he was "in the posterity stakes" by only writing scholarly works. I am sure he would not shun the glare of publicity through a *Times* editorial or television interview. Which is preferable - immortality or instant notoriety?

Professor David, who is head of social sciences at South Bank Polytechnic, will be writing regularly for The THES.