

A COVENTRY CONVERSATION WITH STUDENTS AND WITH OTHERS; AN IPED PAPER

John Mair Senior Lecturer, Journalism, CSAD

Most learning takes place outside the classroom; especially in a public subject like media. We all watch tv, listen to the radio, read papers and magazines and use the internet. Or at least we should if we are studying media and journalism. We all 'know' -if only virtually- those who practice in the media in front of and behind the camera but do we?

How do we educate modern students to engage in the modern media, modern media issues and modern media debates? Is/are the media a subject or object? Is media 'out there' an artefact in the language of the cultural studies commissariat to be inspected dissected, analysed and too often reviled. or is so much part of the everyday experience that it needs to be real, vital and interactive.

I am of the latter school. Firmly

Students studying media in Cov had precious little opportunity to meet practitioners and pioneers. In 2003-2004 there were two outside speakers. The 'Coventry Conversations' started in Jan 2005 offer just that opportunity. Over the last three years. 150 (one hundred and fifty!!) movers and shakers (of differing importance of moving and shaking) have come to Coventry to Converse with me, students and some real people. They are all free and open to the public. That is a golden rule. The public come to each and every one.

The Conversationalists have talked about their work , their careers and their advice to ingénues to live audiences ranging from 20 to 200. They are part of a very informal, yet formal ,education process where Cov Uni Media students are asked to engage-almost by osmosis-with the modern media world and big issues within it. They hardly realize they are learning about these big questions.

They have had the opportunity to see and hear the Director General of the BBC-Mark Thompson, The Founding father of Channel Four-Sir Jeremy Isaacs and the current boss-Kevin Lygo ,BBC Heads of News,Sport,England and more, at least two Oscar Winners, several Bafta and RTS winners, big on screen names such as Jeremy Paxman, Jon Snow, Roger Cook, Paul Gambaccini, Donal Macintyre, Nick Owen and many many more

The Conversations have engaged in the big media debates de nos jours-Is the BBC too big and not local enough/What is Channel Four for? Is ITV Dying-if so why? What is privacy and restraint? Are traditional newspaper business models defunct? Was the Madeleine Mccann campaign a success or failure? What place do morals and ethics have in the modern media? Is African fairly reported? Is modern journalism just 'churnalism' as Nick Davies dubbed it and more

The live audience is just the start. New media see to that. Most of the Conversations have been podcast on the University site and now on i-tunesU. Some are very popular being down-loaded 2000 times(ADD) or viewed 7000 plus times on Youtube(Jon Gaunt). Cov I tunes generated 100,000 Coventry Conversations downloads in the first three weeks in existence. Some were hit 2000 times a day worldwide.

The audience is there inside and outside the academe for intelligent and regular media talk even in a sleepy hollow like Coventry University. The cyber audience is intelligent, sassy and, armed with a search engine and tag, they will find content of interest to them. Coventry was a no name university. It and the Coventry Conversations have made it now a strong brand name university. Profile is all in the modern world,

The Conversations are extra curricular yet vital to learning. Students with resolve and a genuine desire to work in the media come regularly, pick up tips and many report them in a variety of media within and without the university-vide cutoday.wordpress.com .The very astute get an email or other contact from the mover and shaker to pursue. Work experience flows from that in More4 News, In Mercia Radio, in the BBC, in Autocar in visits to the BBC and Central in Birmingham and in many other media companies.

If each media/journalism student attended all forty plus Conversations in a year, they would be near pitch perfect literate in modern media matters. Their formal learning would become secondary.

Students are firmly encouraged to report the Conversations in their weekly newsletter 'The Buzz'(which a student edits) and the on line e-newsletter Cutoday.wordpress.com (another student edits that). Both have been major successes with Cutoday attracting near 30,000 plus hits since March. Without nursery slopes you cannot get good skiers.

Students are also encouraged to build portfolio with outside published pieces on the Conversations. Some do and have made a small living from this freelance

work. Pieces are regularly published in journalism.co.uk, ukpressgazette, Broadcast Now, Hold the Front Page, Media Guardian, etc. Attending and reporting the Conversations are the kicking off point for the whole journalistic learning experience. At least two former Editors of the Buzz have entered journalism as a career since University.

The feedback from students has been almost universally positive. I have in the past administered questionnaires which demonstrate of appreciation of the calibre range and quality of the Conversationalists. They appreciated mainly the career advice and the first hand experience passed on..

There's also formal feedback from a senior member of another faculty who observed a Conversation for my PG Cert. He called them 'unique and memorable and irreplaceable in that students are getting a series of one off exposures to national and even world class figures. We are not talking about a conventional learning experience'

Without indulging in hyperbole, the Coventry Conversations are the most important and innovative learning tool currently available within Media and Communication and within the University itself. M&C has gone from zero to hero in terms of attractiveness for potential students. This upcoming academic year it was oversubscribed for the first time in its history of over two decades. No accident.

In terms of replication of this initiative elsewhere, my advice is simple 'be brave, ambitious and hold your nerve. Jealous colleagues will try to abort them at or close to birth. Mine have. They have failed. Simply make important friends. The Conversations are described by Coventry VC Madeleine Atkins as 'marvellous' and 'just what Coventry should be doing'. Bang that drum! Get them known. I have calculated that the Conversations generate up to £1 million in AVE-Advertising Value Equivalent-for the University each year. Free PR in English

Have faith in this form of learning and drive it forward on all platforms. It is the future. There is nothing culturally specific to the United Kingdom in the Conversations either-all societies have media movers and shakers. They will come if you ask them. Sometimes you have to be persistent. All you need is a good contacts book, chutzpah and the secret of any good TV production-a story to tell, good research, good people upfront and an attractive 'sexy' way to tell it. Not the science of propulsion or pedagogy.

Professor Richard Keeble the Chief External Examiner for Journalism at Coventry describes them as **‘the best speaker programme in any British University’**.

There is very little one can add to that

John Mair is a senior lecturer in broadcasting/journalism. He writes extensively on the modern media in the Guardian, the Media Guardian, the Independent, Broadcast, Journalism.co.uk, Ethical Space etc. He is a former TV producer and director for the BBC, ITV and Channel Four. He is Events Director for the (national) Media Society and on the advisory council of the Royal Television Society. He is the new Chairman of ICE-the Institute for Communication Ethics. He is well wired in to the contemporary British media scene. His book on the Reporting the Great Crash-edited with Richard Keeble- ‘Playing Footsie with the FTSE’ is published by Abramis on September 28th

**You can listen to the ConVersations at www.coventry.ac.uk/itnuesu
or <http://coventryuniversity.podbeam.com/coventryconversations>**