

## Essay

Marcel Franze

# The hybrid university system needs a nuanced reward culture

Using advanced training in teaching as currency

**Abstract:** Universities of all kinds are institutions of teaching and research. As a result, disciplines like journalism studies straddle two fields: academia on the one hand, and professional preparation and qualification on the other. This balancing act becomes particularly obvious when it comes to the way theory and practice can be integrated. University staff receive too little attention in this context. Those who invest resources in teaching and teaching expertise see little reward: The hard currency is academic publications and third party funded projects. This text makes the case for a more nuanced system of rewards.

Universities of all kinds are institutions of teaching and research. They straddle two competing fields: the academic discipline on the one hand, and professional preparation and qualification on the other. One of the core questions facing journalism studies as a discipline in this context is the integration of theory and practice – integration that is described by Bergmann and Pörksen as »the crucial education and training promise of journalism studies« (Bergmann/Pörksen 2007: 18) and has been one of the objectives of university-based journalism training from the very beginning (cf. Altmeppen 2005: 144). This discussion really began to take off in Germany in the 1970s, when a commission formed of academics, publishing houses, journalist trade unions, and representatives of the state published their »New Memorandum,« calling for, among other demands, a four-year degree program and curricula that combined practical journalism studies with general education in social sciences (cf. Deutscher Presserat 1973). The idea behind the reform was essentially to stop publishing house owners holding full control over journalism training (cf. Knoche 1975: 145; see also

Aufermann/Elitz 1975). The »New Memorandum« provided key impetus for the further development and organization of journalism studies (cf. Hömberg 2010), triggering important discussions on how to integrate theory and practice, including how to teach skills (cf. e.g. Weischenberg 1990), developing quality models (cf. e.g. Nowak 2007), didactics (cf. e.g. Dernbach/Loosen 2012), working on definitions (cf. e.g. Blöbaum 2000; Streitböcker 2014) and how exactly integrative teaching should look (cf. e.g. Blöbaum 2008; Haller 2012).

### University staff walk a tightrope

It is noticeable how rarely university staff arise in these discussions. Talking about universities of applied sciences and their power in training journalists, Nowak mentions the importance of teaching staff and professors updating their own knowledge. However, »there have been no investigations into the facilities, staffing structures or training performance of state universities of applied sciences, so no more detailed assertions can be made here« (Nowak 2019: 114). There has at least been an effectiveness analysis, which shows that universities of applied sciences are generally in a good position to cover all journalistic skill areas in training, although they differ in the way they integrate theory and practice (cf. *ibid.* 115f). In relation to Media and Communication Studies as a subject, Klaus et al. argue that more practical application is generally desirable in a degree program, but that students, teaching staff, graduates, and employers all have a different understanding of what this practical basis should look like (cf. Klaus et al. 2015: 163).

Considering the question of how a lesson can be designed in order to integrate theory and practice in the most effective way possible, Blöbaum calls for practical media projects that combine projects, practical exercises, and experiments as forms of learning, focus on working in teams, and involve a high level of interaction between students and teaching staff (cf. Blöbaum 2008: 659). Haller argues for editorial offices within the teaching environment that produce a media product with sufficient frequency for readers, listeners, and/or viewers and test it constantly on the audience market (cf. Haller 2012: 52).

In order to offer teaching like this, teaching staff need to invest enormous resources and have a broad skillset that is kept up to date. Unfortunately, the hybrid system offers little intrinsic incentive for this, providing insufficient reward for those who invest time and effort in designing courses and developing the skills needed. In the hybrid system, staff walk a tightrope between teaching and research institutions. The majority of staff, from research assistants to specialist teaching staff and professors, conduct both teaching and research. Given the desire to integrate theory and practice, this should be an advantage. Yet the

two roles do not receive equal reward. It is academic publications and acquisition of third-party funding that act as hard currency for recognition, funding, and career advancement. Staff have a constant incentive – indeed are under constant pressure – to put as little work as possible into preparing and designing their teaching and developing their didactic and pedagogic skills, so that maximum resources can be invested in research. In addition, mid-level staff often have temporary, part-time contracts, creating further time pressure.

### Proposed solution for advanced training

Journalism studies – alongside many other disciplines – must ask itself this question: Surely what is needed is the establishment of a nuanced system of incentives and rewards that fairly reflects the balancing act between teaching and research, i.e. the academic discipline and professional preparation? Surely it is in the interest of the discipline to recognize dedication to teaching and academic performance equally, for example in the application process? Yet teaching does not have currency in the same way that academic publications do. A few small steps have already been taken. Student evaluations of teaching and the award of teaching prizes, for example, provide incentives. But it is not enough.

The world of business offers one potential solution. Here, certified advanced training is standard in many sectors, and even a requirement in some. At universities, advanced training should not become an entry requirement for the profession, but it should be systematically encouraged and rewarded in journalism studies. The foundation for this is already in place. Staff at almost every university are offered advanced training on developing and organizing teaching, pedagogy, and didactics. Organizations like Hochschulübergreifende Weiterbildung Niedersachsen [Cross-University Advanced Training Lower Saxony, HüW] also develop advanced training courses centrally and offer them to universities. What is lacking is standardization and certification of the courses on offer across Germany, which would help to create a culture of recognition. It may also be worth considering the development of specific courses for individual disciplines, such as journalism studies. The expansion of e-learning and self-learning courses, which large and even medium-sized companies have offered for many years, should be further promoted in this context. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped to drive progress in this sector.

## Summation

I call for certified advanced training in teaching to be recognized and rewarded at an equal level to academic publications and third-party funding acquisition, specifically in recruitment processes and career paths. Comprehensive introduction of this third »currency« is difficult and can only succeed through collaboration between universities of all kinds and professional associations at a national level. But it will be worth the effort. In the long term, rewarding spending resources in teaching would improve quality. And it would help journalism studies to better implement this crucial integration of theory and practice, and the many good ideas that have resulted from these discussions since the 1970s. A hybrid university system should have a nuanced culture of reward.

## About the author

**Marcel Franze** (\*1991), is a research assistant at the Institute of Public Communication at Ostfalia University of Applied Sciences Braunschweig/Wolfenbüttel and a postgraduate student at the Institute of Communication Studies at Otto Friedrich University Bamberg. His teaching and research are dedicated to practical journalism and journalism research. Contact: [m.franze@ostfalia.de](mailto:m.franze@ostfalia.de)

*Translation: Sophie Costella*

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