

Being curious, asking questions and taking notes are natural skills for journalists, writers and editors, but apparently, they are quite difficult for many students in Uganda. During short practical lessons, I asked students at three Ugandan schools to interview each other briefly. They visibly struggled with the task I gave them. Who would have thought this would be so difficult? asks Tefke Van Dijk.

First, let me say, I was not supposed to teach at schools at all. I travelled with former teacher Edward Wolfs from The Netherlands. The founder of the Experi-box foundation, Wolfs was visiting nine schools to train teachers how to conduct science experiments. My goal was to watch him work, take notes and photos for a journalistic story. Because that is what I do – write. To get input, I interview many people. By telephone or face-to-face. I take notes, elaborate, submit, edit and finalise. That is my daily work in a nutshell.

When the headteacher of the first school heard on the first day that I was a Dutch journalist, he found that very interesting. He said he wanted to start a school magazine. Could I, perhaps, give his students a short lesson in journalism? Of course, I immediately replied. That should be easy. Telling them about my work, giving tips, answering questions. No problem. Right?

Will I do this?

I woke up in the middle of the night thinking – tomorrow I am going to give a journalism lesson at a school in Uganda. Wait a second. Really? It seems like a strange dream! But in the morning, I was sure again – I am really going to do this. Before I went to sleep, I had listed what I wanted to tell the students – Start with the five Ws and the H: who, what, where, when, why and how. Then something about the types of articles you can write, give them an exercise and finally a plea for curiosity and creativity.

Armed with a bag of notebooks, sticky notes and pens, I enter the half-finished classroom that afternoon. The literature teacher has neatly organised 19 selected students on the school desks. Nineteen boys and girls from Senior Three and Four look at me expectantly. Okay, where do I start? I grab the first block of sticky notes. "Please write your name here and stick the paper on your chest."

The students find it weird, but they do what I ask them to do. Great, now I can see who I have in front of me. Now I can address them by their first names. After freshening up the knowledge of the five W and the H and discussing the types of articles, I decide it is time for action. I tell them that I want them to briefly interview each other. They look at me with glassy eyes. Don't they understand what I mean? Come on, get started! The teacher helps to make duos and slowly, some students get up. The bravest student approaches me and asks what exactly it is that I want them to do. I explain it again and many students come to hear what



Tefke interacting with some of the pupils she was teaching



Tefke during her lesson.
Photos by Geraldine Kauma

How Dutch journalist became a teacher in Uganda



Some of the students Tefke got an opportunity to teach doing an exercise she set for them

I ask them simple questions. Do you know someone's favourite colour? Or favourite subject in school? Why does anyone want to become an engineer? They are not used to asking further questions out of pure curiosity.

I have to say. Then they seem to get started. When I look around, they are all talking to each other. But wait. Nobody is taking notes! Oh yes, I brought notebooks. Please, come back, grab a notebook and carry on. It seems to be going reasonably well. They ask each other questions and write down the answers.

Do not stop: ask, ask, ask

At the schools where I attend during

the two weeks of my visit in Uganda, more students are having trouble with interviewing. They do not speak to each other, but shift the notebook with questions. Or they write down their own answers, as if it were a test. It is apparently not clear that they must collect information about the other person. You want to write a story about the other person, don't you? Sometimes they get no further than the five Ws, stand in front of me and say

they are ready.

I ask them simple questions. Do you know someone's favourite colour? Or favourite subject in school? Why does anyone want to become an engineer? They are not used to asking further questions out of pure curiosity. Teachers ask questions and you answer them. That is how it works, often with 50 to 100 students in a class.

Project education, exploratory and investigative learning, differentiating – are educational innovations that seem not to have reached Uganda. With many things, I go back in time 40 to 50 years, including education and teaching methods. That makes what I do in class here so strange. For instance, I make an inventory of ideas for articles and possible newspaper names by having everyone write a suggestion on a sticky note and then group it on the blackboard.

I collect all ideas, including the ones of the shier students. Teachers look

with interest at my Dutch teaching method, which I also just knew from theory by the way – since I am used to writing articles about teaching, not teaching in practice myself.

Dream big, work hard

After my first lesson, student Naome comes to me. She says she found my lesson very inspiring and asks how she can become a journalist, just like me. I feel that she is looking up at me. Am I a role model for her? What can I say? Our lives cannot be compared. It is not easy to become a journalist in The Netherlands, but what is it like for a Ugandan girl like Naome? How much chance does she have at a rural school in a poor region? I feel I only have empty one-liners for her. 'Dream big', work hard, 'do not give up' and 'you will achieve what you want'. I give her my business card with address. As a kind of time capsule, because for the time being, she does not have Internet access.

In the evening, I lie awake and think of my daughter, who also has to work hard at school in The Netherlands, but has lots of opportunities in her future. At least more than Naome, I expect. Before I know it, my cheeks are wet. This seems so unfair.

Every lesson I ended with my new theory: BALL. What do you need as a journalist, editor or writer? Be curious, Ask questions, Look around, Listen good. Skills that are not only important for journalists, I find out at the end of my trip at the National Curriculum Development Centre in Kampala. These are social skills for life, says a senior curriculum specialist after listening to my experiences at the schools.

She is curious about my ideas and wants to know more. I promise to send her more information about my lesson. Imagine that all students in Uganda will ever learn this at school. And what does that do to them? Personally, I would love it. Like I said to Naome, dream big and never give up.