

Michael Butscher

Freelance Journalist

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Can you tell us a bit about your career to date?

I have been a journalist for nearly 30 years working in Liberia, Sierra Leone and the UK. For the last four years I have been working freelance as Associate Editor for “Calabash Magazine” in London as well as providing feature stories for various other publications.

I am also working on two books - a memoir called Creole/ Congau Journalist in London and “Two Countries, One Destiny” about my life and experiences as a journalist and teacher in Liberia and Sierra Leone. My second book is an account of historical similarities, civil wars in both countries, socio-economic challenges, conflicts in the region, Ebola and corrupt governments, the culture and environment issues. When my writing on polluted politics and FGM brought me into conflict with the authorities, I was forced to seek refuge in the UK.

I am the founder of the PEN International centre in Freetown, Sierra Leone. I am also a former Board Member of PEN International.

What do you like most about your work? Why is it so satisfying?

When I am writing a good story, and I've got information from all sides, I get very excited to see it completed and in print or broadcast. This is especially true when I know it will be an exclusive story or interview. I did a lot of broadcasting, training young university graduates as news reporters and news readers and hosted a talk show programme in Liberia called One Step Beyond while I worked as Executive Producer for Search for Common Ground in Liberia. The NGO was a radio production house producing peacebuilding programmes by bringing conflicting parties together. These programmes were broadcast on main radio stations in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Even after 30 years, the passion has never waned. I just love the thrill of a good story.

Have you added new work/skills to your portfolio over time? What prompted you to do this?

I taught English in Liberia at a Catholic University for two years. I initially visited the University to persuade them to open a Pen Centre for Pen International, an organisation that promotes freedom of expression and literature, something I am very committed to. I was a member of the Pen International board for three years (2004 to 2007) promoting literature and supporting writers. As well as launching Pen Centre in Monrovia, I got inspired to teach there as my own way of giving back to a country I love.

Teaching in that environment was tough as it was not long after civil war in Liberia ended. People were traumatised and the infrastructure was destroyed. This created many challenges. You had to win over the student confidence and then nurture their interest to learn, when many people were still trying to address basic human needs. I am pleased to say that I am still in communication with many of my students from that time.

As a demonstration of my interest in teaching, I recently graduated with an OCNLR Level 3 Award in Education and Training from the Open College Network London Region.

In Liberia I also managed a Media project for Liberia



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Media Centre assessing the quality of output of radio and newspapers, using measures on layout, grammar, use of English and neutrality of story. My remit was to identify, recruit and build a team to implement the media monitoring project. I had to assess the performance of 12 outlets on a regular basis and report on their performance. These are fulfilling achievements that I believe helped build the capacity of media personnel in Liberia.

What is the biggest challenge of learning the skills that you need?

The biggest challenge was to get accepted and given an opportunity to do what I wanted to do.

What FEU Training courses have you attended?

- Write that book and get it published
- Blogging for creative freelancers
- Finance for freelancers
- Build your confidence

What are the most important things that you've learned? How have you used what you have learnt in your work and how has it helped?

The workshops I have attended have all been really useful. *Write that book* particularly helped me make a plan for my book. Prior to that I had been jotting down ideas and thoughts in an unstructured way. This plan has helped me think more clearly and generate new ideas for the project.

The *blogging* workshop gave me some great ideas for little steps in the absence of funding for setting up a News Agency Website to report on what is happening in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast (Mano River Region). There is a lot to report there, between bad governance, corruption and exploration of the many rich resources of oil and iron ore that exist there. The workshop gave me a clear vision on how I can start in a meaningful way.

What has encouraged you to attend FEU training sessions?

The workshops provide a place to interact with an interesting range of professional people from all the four

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unions. It is so good to meet, connect, share experiences and learn from each other. I've got a lot from the people I have met there.

The workshop topics have all been relevant, useful and appropriate to me. They are an enriching experience, well thought out and delivered by experienced people. I have found them all of immense value and always come away feeling more inspired, motivated and confident.

By attending, I have been challenged to get out of my comfort zone and try new things, so much so that I recently got involved in a medical study looking at high blood pressure in ethnic minorities called "Aim Hy Inform". My role includes promoting the study and helping to recruit volunteers. I also speak on behalf of the patients.

All in all, this is a wonderful resource and of immense value to us freelancers.

Do you know any other organisation that offers business skills courses for creative?

No, FEU Training is unique.

