

# TEACHING MEDIA

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Teaching production is something that all of us do. Yet, like much of our academic lives, it is often a solitary activity. This issue of the *Journal of Film and Video* seeks to connect production teachers through the publication of thoughtful scholarship on pedagogy; provoking reflection, initiating inquiry, and seeking dialogue. While each article treats one issue facing the field, or highlights one approach to course design and implementation, taken together the essays indicate major questions affecting media arts production education. These are questions that we must answer individually but which we might better discuss collectively.

The American Association for Higher Education working paper, "Making a Place for the New American Scholar," interviewed faculty from across the country about the environment in the academy today. The report found that "an expectation has been created about 'setting your own hours' and 'creating your own classes,'" that is attractive to many faculty. Autonomy is highly valued. "One new faculty member responded to the question [what attracted you to an academic career?] by saying that an academic career gives a person 'the chance to be self-employed without putting up one's own capital.'" This quote could easily come from a faculty member in production who receives access to equipment and facilities as a benefit of her or his teaching post. But this autonomy comes at a price. Isolation is pervasive as the following quote illustrates:

An advanced graduate student in a major New York university, when asked about the lives of the junior faculty, said: "I don't want the loneliness I see among most. They are largely cut off from their colleagues by the competition for advancement, and are reluctant to discuss difficulties they are having, particularly in relation to teaching, for fear of exposing weakness."

As a group we have great freedom, including the freedom to choose what we wish to disclose about our teaching. Often we only talk with our colleagues about our classes when we need to solve problems concerning shared equipment. Sometimes we get together in meetings to coordinate content for a multiple section course. But really, much of the design and implementation of a course is done by oneself. Each of us brings his or her own values, beliefs, and objectives to the class. Sharing information is primarily informal and revolves around incidents and anecdotes. Reports of what is working and what isn't are exchanged (if at all) in fleeting encounters in hallways, around the copy machine, or walking to or from a meeting.

My own experience suggests that the result of this autonomy is that each of us individually develops a "teaching philosophy" in response to the big questions that come up as we reflect on our lives as production teachers. What is the purpose of a media arts education? How do we encourage responsible and ethical representations? How do we support a diverse student population in pro-

duction education? How can we reach out to other disciplines to enrich student experience? Instead of seeking to address these issues collectively, we find our own answers, make our own peace, and get ready for our next class of eager students.

But the students are just passing through. We work with undergraduate students just a few hours each week. We see some students outside of class in brief meetings or when responding to their work. When they complete our course we move on to a new group. Some students may take several classes with us, some we may never see again. Either way, when they leave the institution, most are lost to us forever.

This distance from our students also limits our ability to answer pedagogical questions effectively. Since most of us don't know where our undergraduate students are coming from, and only a bit more about what they graduate to, it is difficult to understand what serves them in our curriculum. Increasingly, a college education is seen as a something that serves the individual rather than the society. A special report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching entitled, *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate* states that "Policy makers, legislators, and the media increasingly view higher education not as an investment in the public good but as a private benefit to the individuals." How shall we, as a field, resolve the tension between parents and incoming students who expect skill education leading to jobs, and the faculty's objective of developing the person—the idea of a liberal education.

This tension is so central to the current state of production education that it is addressed in many of the following articles. The investigation begins with Emily Edwards' article, "To Be Rather Than to Seem: Liberal

Education and Personal Growth Through Documentary Production." Edwards acknowledges that students seek training that will serve their future employment and cites the "growing enrollments in media courses in the 1990's" as evidence that these programs benefit from this desire. Students see training in equipment use as the prerequisite skill needed for a job—the first step in their career. Edwards argues that by "participating in the media production process, students develop critical thinking, leadership and management abilities, aesthetic sensibility, communication, and problem solving skills." As a field, we need to communicate that these are essential vocational skills as well as appropriate liberal arts-oriented outcomes from our courses. These are skills that serve students in their daily lives and in numerous careers.

Students and parents confuse production skills with knowledge of production tools. We must seek to expand this definition to include the full range of critical, conceptual, organizational, managerial, interpersonal, and technical skills—all of them creative—which are required to work effectively in media production. Sometimes production faculty collude in a narrow vocational orientation by rewarding "product" over "process." Edwards argues "Production faculty may unintentionally create classroom environments that reward imitation, producing common programs with a familiar aesthetic." In the case study section of the article, Edwards describes a production project integrated with a historical investigation. The case study is provocative in many ways but I think one passage is especially important. Edwards reports that the project fueled students' self-discovery as they reflected on their own subjectivity, their backgrounds, values, and beliefs. And isn't this a fundamental value of education—to furnish a student with the ability to

reflect on her or his own experience, inviting them to understand their own lives and assumptions about the world in relation to economics, politics, and culture?

It seems to me that this must be the ascendant value of a production education in light of the fascinating statistics contained in the personal essay, "Streetwise: Rethinking Motion Picture Arts Education," by Sandra Lee Sheffield. Sheffield reports that there are "over 110,000 students currently enrolled in [the 650 college and university] motion picture arts academic programs." Sheffield goes on to mention that "60% of all people working in the industry are self-employed and work on a freelance, contract, or part-time basis...[and that] the majority...report that they are unable to earn a living solely from their film/television related work." Sheffield asks the question that the field must begin to investigate "what are 'we' educating motion picture arts production students to do?" I would add, what are we allowing prospective students and their parents to believe about the value and orientation of a media arts education? Sheffield contends, "it is not unreasonable for students to assume that institutions of higher learning are knowledgeable about career outcomes and take such information into account when designing new programs and admitting students into fields of study." Perhaps this assumption is unreasonable. If it is, then it is our duty to accurately describe to our constituents the pedagogical motives that infuse our programs. In our departments and in our professional organizations we must begin to find ways to acknowledge the tension between the student's vocational aspirations and faculty's focus on more enduring educational values. I think it is important for the field to engage in a constructive dialogue about the role of vocational training within the context of broader educational objectives instead of

arrogantly dismissing it as "something we don't do." Clearly our programs represent a range of orientations, some with a liberal arts focus, some with a pre-professional focus, and some that concentrate unapologetically on teaching skills.

Having the intention of "being well-off financially," reported by 73.4% of the 1999 freshman class (as stated in Sheffield's article) doesn't mean that students enter media arts programs with a desire for financial security as their primary motivation. David Franklin's article, "The Professor as Censor: Creative Limitation and Film Production Pedagogy," quotes the guide to graduate film programs, *Film School Confidential*, which supplies another motive students bring to their media arts classes, "If you are going to film school, you probably want to be a director." [See what it takes to teach and learn directing in Tom Kingdon's article, "Directing Actors for the Screen" in this issue.] Being the "director" is understood by a student to mean having an individual authorial role in the film or television work. Here the impulse is to "express a uniquely personal vision of the world." Franklin states, "The belief that art consists of pure self-expression is central to many students' reasons for studying film in the first place. They believe it is the teacher's job to teach them how to say it. It is not the teacher's job to challenge what they have to say or help to shape it in any way."

Franklin describes the experience familiar to many of us who teach production; that our students want to produce work in the same style and on the same subject matter as they see in mainstream film and television—the same thing that other students have produced in other classes, year in and year out. Franklin asks an appropriate question, how can students be coached into doing work that is less clichéd? There are many possible approach-

es. A concept development course is the direction we are taking at Emerson College using the *Developing Story Ideas* textbook authored by Michael Rabiger and used successfully at Columbia College in Chicago. This course asks students to generate project ideas based on a recognition of their own artistic identity. Franklin chooses to impose a set of content parameters in his classes.

The result of this imposition has been an outcry by students against what they see as a professor censoring their free expression. In response, Franklin provides an analysis of the notion of authorship concluding that, "students who conceive of themselves exclusively as free-thinking, independent creative agents are misunderstanding the nature of creative work and subscribing to a theory of art which has been roundly criticized by contemporary theorists on the subject." The article points out that the ascendant position of free-expression devalues the role of the professor, who, in the student's opinion is there to teach the equipment and get out of the way.

Franklin reminds the reader that technical restrictions are an accepted part of a production course's structure. Students are not threatened by these formal parameters and yet there is widespread agreement among media art teachers that content is indivisible from form. Why is it acceptable to disallow the use of color film stock, for example, and unacceptable to prohibit images of guns? The article provides a detailed discussion of the effect of technical limitations vs. content limitations. Structuring a student's production experience by setting limits on subject areas, technical factors, and formal elements, as a means to foster creativity is a persuasive argument. Ironically, by imposing both technical and content limitations, we may mitigate against the prevailing expectation that media arts programs are

principally about learning tools. Without engaging and evaluating the students' ideas, how can we argue that we are doing more than that? Perhaps the emphasis needs to shift away from helping students "discover their unique voice" (something Franklin finds in educational institution's promotional materials) toward teaching them to engage in an "artistic approach." This "approach" will allow them to acknowledge the historical, ideological, commercial, and technological constraints on their work as they choose subject matter appropriate to a formal and stylistic system that will satisfy their communicative intent.

Anne Orwin and Adrienne Carageorge remind us that there is a great deal at stake in our work as media arts educators. In the introduction of their paper, "The Education of Women in Film Production," the authors assert that "the filmmakers of the future will both reflect and create the world we live in." It is essential that this world is open to work created by women. While there are highly visible and successful women in the entertainment industries, media production remains male dominated as does the constitution of many media arts departments. With a disproportionately large number of men teaching production courses and a predominance of men moving through the curriculum, it is critical to reaffirm the field's commitment to the education of women. While I have not encountered any evidence that documents the attrition rate of women students in undergraduate media arts programs, there is a shared observation across the profession that, while an equal number of male and female students enter production course sequences, advanced classes are constituted almost entirely by male students. This attrition must be attributed in part to what Orwin and Carageorge report, that "women were profoundly unhappy in an environment they perceived as hostile and overly male

dominated...[that] they felt treated like second class citizens.” Insight into the experience of women students is essential in order to maintain diversity in our programs. We must reinvent our teaching so that it engages and supports all of our students as we seek to foster a departmental culture of inclusion, access, and mutual respect. As the authors point out, “Taking into account women’s needs in education is only the first step towards recreating the educational process to promote diversity and creativity for all students and eventually to broaden the media that we all watch.”

Orwin’s and Carageorge’s study begins with a review of the literature on learning styles of men and women. Drawing from research in education and psychology, the authors discuss the acquisition and application of knowledge, questions of standards and evaluation, and teaching approaches that encourage “creative connectivity.” Within this context, the paper describes the experience of women students in production courses. Focusing on questions of creativity, technical skills, and the collaborative process, the paper explains the unique challenges facing women in production: female/male working relationships; the pervasive attitude that women are less sophisticated users of technology; the preponderance of films by men about men being used as classroom examples; student projects that contain material offensive to women students; and differences in men’s and women’s use of and response to criticism. In each area, the authors outline specific recommendations that will support women students and transform a hostile environment into one more open to varied ways of working and knowing. If, as a field, we are truly committed to the education of all students, then Orwin’s and Carageorge’s conclusion is persuasive, “Women...have different needs and approaches to learning that should be

acknowledged and addressed in the classroom situation. Awareness of these differences and alternative ways of teaching will assist teachers in providing an environment that encourages women to participate fully in their educational experience.”

Producing media is an activity that connects disciplines. But rigid institutional barriers often prevent the integration of production with other areas of study. The last two essays provide specific examples of different interdisciplinary methods. Tom Kingdon’s “Directing Actors for the Screen,” details an approach that joins performing arts students with media arts students so they each can learn about the collaborative work of acting and directing in film and television. To many students, being the director is an attractive role because it is associated with power and prestige. Students equate directing with having principal creative control and program authorship. A course in directing helps students understand that developing skills in collaborative work is an essential component of a media arts education. They also learn that collaboration in this environment means supporting the work of others (actors, designers, composers) engaged in the creative process. Kingdon points out, “a director is a ‘primus inter pares,’ a reliable co-worker and standard-setter who employs all possible means (rational argument, humor, praise, and on rare occasions, disapproval) to achieve a common goal.”

In the final article in this issue, Beverly Seckinger outlines an effort to “create [an] interdisciplinary course integrating the critical studies of ‘isms’ (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) with video production” at the University of Arizona. Her course file, “Crossing Boundaries: Diversity and Representation” describes a year-long team-taught class which investigates these

"isms" through theoretical analysis, group processing/reflection, and individual and group video production projects.

The course is in some ways an answer to many of the pedagogical questions addressed in this *Journal* and suggests a design for future integrated studies/production courses. The course incorporates Paolo Freire's notion of an active experiential education as part of a "learning community," as recommended in Orwin's and Carageorge's article on the "Education of Women in Production." One can understand how a course like this one, with its focus on identity, difference, and power, would be an excellent venue for women to learn in their own ways and to participate equally in the course. Franklin's concern, that students discover meaningful subject matter for their work is addressed by the "Crossing Boundaries" course as well. Instead of setting limits, the course engages the matter as the principal subject of investigation by providing a "framework for discussing the power dynamics among producers, subjects, and audiences through media texts: who makes what for whom and how?" In this way, representation is analyzed within the context of the commercial media industry and dominant culture. Finally, through the production of personal diary video projects and collaborative activist projects, students are led on a remarkable journey of self discovery.

I would like to thank Suzanne Regan for her willingness to devote an entire issue of the *Journal* to Production Pedagogy. Thanks also to the editorial board who read and responded to the numerous papers submitted for this special issue. There is great dedication among media production teachers but little opportunity to discuss concerns and approaches formally with the intention of

developing a collective understanding that can provide direction for the field. It is my hope that we can begin to communicate our teaching philosophies so that we can accurately communicate the meaning and purpose of a production education to our students, prospective students, parents, and administrators within our institutions. It is also my hope that the *Journal* will continue to publish articles on pedagogy. Often the only way that our teaching is assessed is through student course evaluations and class visits by our peers. As a field we need to argue for an expanded notion of scholarship that includes thoughtful and innovative approaches to teaching. For faculty seeking tenure and promotion, publishing about teaching will validate pioneering approaches to production education. Henry Giroux writes, "As an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimation of social life, a liberal arts education always presupposes a vision of the future." As teachers our pedagogy shapes this vision. I look forward to forthcoming issues of the *Journal* devoted to production pedagogy as we seek to serve our students and our society.

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