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‘I don’t know where you learn them’: Skills in Film and TV

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One of the central areas of concern for any industry is the ease, capacity and competence with which the skills necessary for work are developed and reproduced in the next generation of workers. In the film and TV sector, such activities are of particular interest because of the structural changes which have occurred over the last two decades. The institutional bodies, organisational structures and other material conditions that contribute to (or detract from) skills development have undergone dramatic changes, shifting career paths, expectations and skill formation systems in their wake. For TV in particular, British industry has traditionally been dominated by the major broadcasters which catered for every aspect of production from the genesis of ideas to the broadcast of programmes (Saundry 1998; McKinlay and Quinn 1999; Saundry 2001; Langham 1996). Employees were provided with employment security (generally ‘jobs for life’) and strong internal labour markets facilitated skill development. Today, while the large broadcasters still employ significant numbers of workers, an increasing amount of production is outsourced

to smaller, independent companies whose workforces are neither so secure, nor so stable, as those in the old vertically integrated broadcaster bureaucracies. In film this fragmentation happened earlier (Blair 2001). Employment on British film production was never as constant as that in Hollywood under the old studio system, nonetheless studios did provide fixed points of stability and some long term security. The industry is now fragmented and employment often project based, but the demand for skilled workers and the need for skills development continues.

In this chapter we consider the form that skill formation now takes in film and TV and the implications of this shift. That form is unusual in two senses. Firstly because development occurs through the medium of a community of workers. Newcomers learn on the job through observation and discussion with their peers and their entry into a professional network (coupled with the effectiveness of that network) is key to skills development. To a certain extent this seems to follow optimistic predictions of the way expert labour will function in the future (Castells 1996; Albert and Bradley 1997). And research certainly reveals how effective professional communities can be at supporting skills development across formal organisational boundaries (see, for example Finegold 1999; Blair 2001; Piore and Sabel 1984). Clearly this form of development encourages and supports rather different behaviours to those fostered by a skill formation system based on lifetime employment and strong internal labour markets and we might expect technical skills to be combined with strong social skills, impression management and self presentation as opposed to, perhaps, loyalty, independent judgement and rigorous professional standards. Such communities or ‘learning networks’ are still comparatively

understudied so this group of workers are of interest not only because they are in transition (from one form of skills development to another) but also because the form that development now takes is that of a network.

This takes us to the second unusual feature of this research, that the network observed here is a regional one, rather than a cynosure of best practice. Existing research into professional communities tends to concentrate on exceptional areas: Silicon Valley for computers and software, London for film production, and the Emilia-Romagna district of Italy for fashion and design; all geographical concentrations of both organisations and individuals that act as magnets for further development. These studies are rigorous ones and succeed in engaging with both what networks are and the way they work but there are dangers as well as opportunities presented by the self-conscious study of excellence (particularly in the area of skills and training, where there is still a tendency to assume that any training is good training, see, for example Payne 1991). Not all networks are so effective at skills development (Grugulis and Vincent 2005) and not all skills development is confined to centres of excellence areas. In this chapter then, we present research into a mundane, rather than an exceptional network; an area where good practice could be observed, but which also had weaknesses and (perhaps most significantly) an area which was far more likely to lose skilled workers to the glamour and opportunities of London, than it was to attract such professionals from the capital.

Film and TV in Britain

Television in the UK has been a subject to significant changes over the last two decades. A series of legislative reforms in the late 1980s and 1990s led to a transformation of the way the sector was organised, as well as its industrial relations and employment practices (Ursell 2000; Saundry 1998, 2001; McKinlay and Quinn 1999; Saundry, Stuart and Antcliff 2005; Sparks 1994). Sparks (1994) attributes the changes in the organisation of work in television not to the changing technology or institutional factors as others do (Barnatt and Starkey 1994), but to economic and political pressures.

A detailed discussion of the industrial, technological, legislative and industrial relations changes can be found in Saundry (2001), Langham (1996) and Tunstall (1993). In brief, following the establishment of Channel 4 the configuration based on the exclusive presence of the BBC and ITV networks changed. Still, employment was based on permanent jobs and trade unions were very influential. The recommendations of the Peacock Committee in 1986 and their subsequent implementation in the early 1990s led to 25% of the programming being produced by, and purchased from, independent companies. Following this, a series of regulations covering advertising and franchising resulted in financial constraints for the main industry players. Which, in their turn, led to profound changes in the structure of the employment (Saundry 2001). The most significant of these was the rapid and dramatic increase in the number of freelance workers, both in the independent production sector and in contract work to major broadcasters. Typically, freelance labour consisted of staff who had been made redundant

from the large broadcasters and individual workers who set up their own small independent companies. As Saundry notes, this blurring of the distinction between employers and employees further complicated the industry's industrial relations systems. But it did facilitate a relatively smooth shift to a freelance market, because the skills and expertise needed (including organisation-specific knowledge of the major broadcasters) could be supplied without interruption.

Another major change was the weakening of the trade unions, caused largely by redundancies and workforce reduction by the big broadcasters in the late 1980s, the internal reorganisation of work and outsourcing, and the attitudes of independent producers (Sparks 1994). This had major implications for skill development since possession of a union card had acted as an effective barrier to entry. Extensive on-the-job training and slow progression to higher level work as meant that trainees had numerous opportunities to consolidate their skills, guarded against expensive mistakes on set and helped to act as a guarantor of competence. Taking away the requirement for union membership and firms' obligation to abide by union terms and conditions effectively removed any threat of sanctions or reprisals for not conforming to this model of development.

At the same time, regionalisation, cost pressures, small scale operations and intensified competition all significantly constrained the scope for 'independence' on the part of the independent companies Saundry (1998:156):

Buyer-supplier relations within television were characterized.... by almost total dependence on broadcasting organizations. The main commissioning companies (BBC, ITV and Channel 4) enjoy a high degree of power as monopsonistic customers. In most independent productions, the commissioning company controls cashflow to the independent producer through the life of the project. Each item of the programme budget and schedule is subject to scrutiny. This extends as far as approving the personnel to be used on the production.

With the result that independent production companies which move from commission to commission have very limited resources to allocate to investment and development. Given this, and the fact that most employees are hired by the project and part of a transitory workforce not entirely under the control of the small firms there are strong structural disincentives to invest in formal training.

In film, while individual projects are considerably longer than those in TV, there has been a similar movement towards the casualisation and marketisation of employment (Blair et al, 2003). This industry structure poses considerable challenges to skill development, especially for those in the initial stages of their career. The heavy reliance on on-the-job training in the absence of the supportive institutional structures that characterised the 1970s generates a rather opportunistic form of skills development (Tempest, McKinlay and Starkey 2004). According to Langham (1996:85):

The industry was (and still is) strongly biased towards ‘on-the-job’ training. This was all very well when the industry did take on some training responsibility... Training will still be offered to core staff, but an increasingly large percentage of workers will be freelancers who generally will be expected to have received their training elsewhere.

There seems to be little question that skills development has changed as dramatically as the industry itself (Paterson 2001), but there is still an interest in and an engagement with skills development. Casualisation here has not eliminated training, rather it has changed it.

Community skills

Given the fragmentation of the industry, few small independent companies offer the type of formal training, structured progression and security of employment that characterised the big broadcasters. Instead, people are expected to learn through employment by taking part in various projects, watching others perform tasks, appreciating what production involves and working their way up through simple jobs to high skilled work. Crouch (2002) labels this type of skill formation the ‘community’ model. In it, specialised groups of workers such as university academics or computer software engineers, alliances of small firms involved in specialist areas such as design or innovation, and linked customer supplier networks collaborate (both formally and informally) to develop the knowledge and skills of those who work in the sector. Such knowledge is generally high

level and tacit (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995) and so is very much a part of the individual who exercises it and is not easy to codify. More significantly, as it is passed on it is often developed, taken further and extended, which often makes it difficult to distinguish between 'learning' and 'doing'.

This has implications for the way skills are learned. Lave and Wenger's (1991; Wenger 2005) description of community based learning (among midwives, butchers, tailors and recovering alcoholics) shows how integral doing work is to acquiring skills. Unskilled newcomers start by joining professional groups to assist, a process Lave and Wenger call legitimate peripheral participation. By mixing, socialising and occasionally living with the more established group members they learn occupational norms, valued attitudes and ways of working. And as they progress they are involved in more, and more complex, tasks. So learning to work well and becoming a full, legitimate member of the community are inextricably intertwined: "...it involves becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person." (Lave and Wenger 1991: 53). As Crouch (2002) notes, it is impossible to distinguish between further training and simply doing the job since the process of working itself effectively expands an individual's knowledge base. Indeed, he takes this further (p. 5884):

The creative community therefore represents a skill formation system where most of the distinctions that are normally crucial to the discussion of this topic break down: if the community is strong enough, the distinction between collective and private goods breaks down; distinctions between levels of training disappear; even

that between training and the job itself, and therefore that between the school and the market.

So training is indistinguishable from work and work involves social participation in a community of fellows. The scientist extends her knowledge by conducting an experiment, the designer is prompted to new and innovative activity by observing the designs of others and the doctor learns morally appropriate behaviour by listening to the discussion and reactions of his peers. Participation involves more than performing a specific task, it is the way that people learn the function of the whole enterprise, which (Lave and Wenger 1991:95):

might include who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners. It includes an increasing understanding of how, when, and about what old-timers collaborate, collude, and collide, and what they enjoy, dislike, respect, and admire. In particular, it offers exemplars (which are grounds and motivation for learning activity), including masters, finished products, and more advanced apprentices in the process of becoming full practitioners.

In this model newcomers are not just taught how to do a job, they are socialised into a way of life with its own particular values, priorities and forms of behaviour.

Research Methods

This chapter is taken from an ongoing study of work and skills in the film and TV industry which concentrates primarily on freelance workers and those involved in small, independent companies. The focus of our analysis is sectoral. Clearly, we would not claim that the sector is the only influence on what skills development an individual receives nor that such an influence is deterministic. Nonetheless many material constraints and accepted norms will remain reasonably consistent, perhaps the more so here because the labour force is a mobile one and practices, ideas and assumptions are unlikely to be confined to organisational boundaries. According to Smith, Child and Rowlinson (1990) sectoral investigations can reveal insights at three levels: the 'objective conditions' of market structures and technology; the 'cognitive area' where ideas about 'accepted' and 'best' practices are generated; and the 'collaborative network' which offers formal and informal opportunities to acquire and diffuse knowledge (see also Arrowsmith and Sisson 1999). In our study, our concern was not only with the practices adopted by organisations but also with the effect they had on individuals. Accordingly, detailed case study data was combined with semi-biographical interviews to provide both a means of triangulating information as well as additional perspectives on practice.

To date the project has involved some 46 interviews with industry professionals, trade unions and official and professional bodies as well as three months of participant observation by the researcher in a small production company. The majority of the

industry professionals and the small production company were based in the north of England (with some additional interviewees from the south west). This was significant since both film and TV work in Britain is concentrated in and around London where the majority of companies, freelancers and commissioning organisations are located (a concentration that becomes even sharper round Soho). Regional film and TV production does exist and is officially encouraged with various locally based government quangos providing limited match funding for projects in the hope of securing stable, creative jobs for their area; but while some individuals, specialisms or companies do remain regional (nature programmes, horse racing, certain popular soap operas), on most contracts and for many workers, companies are in competition with London.

The fact that this research focussed on communities of practice outside London had implications for skill development. As noted above, much of the literature on communities of practice and learning networks concentrates on groups that have reasonably tight spatial boundaries or are centres of excellence. Many of Lave and Wenger's (1991) workers physically lived together; the collaborative networks of small firms in the Emilia-Romagna district in Italy rely heavily on trust, a sense of community and a shared Catholicism (Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; Piore and Sabel 1984); and the strong customer-supplier networks that characterise Japanese firms compensate for geographical dispersion by regular communications and strong social links (Fruin 1997; Ray 2002). Our networks were neither so strong nor so stable. The region was the focus of companies and workers but unlike the Emilia-Romagna few there were confident of retaining skilled workers or of attracting others in. It was, without wishing to condemn

our respondents, an ‘ordinary’ network rather than an exceptional one. Yet, in consequence, it may have far more interesting lessons to offer other locations and labour markets than the sites of best practice. This is a community of professionals who worked in an area which was not an automatic magnet for their peers. It is skill development among mobile and insecure workers who co-operated on individual projects but who might also choose to relocate (generally to London) for more, or more interesting, work opportunities. If, as some authors claim, professional community networks really are to become a key source of skills, then such groups are likely to be far more typical of the experience of the majority of workers than the cutting edge glamour of either Silicon Valley or Hollywood. This chapter focuses particularly on the first few years of individuals’ professional careers. It considers the way they entered the industry, opportunities they had to learn and the way that work and employment were organised.

Getting a foot in the door

In order to learn from a community of workers it is first necessary to join that community and this proved a major stumbling block for many people. Film and TV have a reputation as a glamorous industry and every small company we interviewed spoke of being inundated with calls, e-mails and CVs from potential newcomers requesting work. All those that participated in this study did take people on placements, observations or for (invariably short term) entry level work but none could either cater for or even meaningfully sift through the applications they received. Realistically, there were three ways that an aspiring worker could secure experience. The first was simple serendipity,

their request (or repeated requests) could arrive at the moment a project started or some aspect of their previous experience could match a project particularly well (as in the case of a science graduate, hired as a researcher for a science-based documentary). The second was contacts. This was particularly important since at all levels the industry operated on personal contacts; information was regularly sought from co-workers and colleagues about an individual's competence, reliability and expertise and the impression someone created or the friendships they cultivated could make the difference between winning or losing a contract (Blair 2001). The third way was by effectively starting their own apprenticeships themselves. Much of the technology required to produce short films is within the reach (at least temporarily) of many young people and there were numerous examples of amateur activities which materially assisted initial job prospects. One aspirant director persuaded his (affluent) father to fund him and a team of friends with ambitions in lighting, camerawork, acting and design, to make a short film. Another produced his first film by borrowing money from his uncle and harnessing his mother's expertise in accounting. A third made music videos for a friend in a band then turned to designing websites and invited numerous media companies and the press to the launch of one.

For many these self- or un-funded projects were a consistent feature of working life and part of building experience. Amrita, a young director, recognised that one of the ways she was able to obtain work was by doing a great many projects for free and even established professionals might be persuaded into working unpaid on an interesting project run by someone who wanted to break into the industry. For others, these extra

activities were ways of skill building in their existing job. Sam, a sound recordist specialising in wildlife, recalled his early days at work:

Alongside that, in parallel, one of the methods of escape that I used from the studio was to take portable recording equipment out with me at week-ends and just go out into [the countryside] where I grew up and just use this equipment out of doors, and again just by practical experience, got to find out what worked and what didn't. There was very little published information about it. In fact, there is a society that's still going called a Wildlife sound recording society and I joined that in the end of the 1970s And so there was a wealth of actual experience there from about 300 members worldwide who were very free with information exchange. So I learnt a lot through that. Just... although it's a very isolated activity just through exchange of views, and magazines and circulating tapes, I sort of learned a lot of basics that way. But the best thing about it was actually getting out there on my own and doing it, and finding what works out and what didn't.

Once in, most people's first job was that of 'runner', the fixer, organiser, ideas person and general factotum who deals with everything from arranging interview and filming schedules, to fetching tea, to ensuring that somehow a herd of cows is available in the background on the dawn shoot the next day. To a certain extent this mirrors the experience of our older respondents who entered the industry in a range of capacities and worked their way up to professional roles: from post boy to cameraman, tea boy to sound recordist and typist to producer-director. But there were also important differences

between these occupational generations. Our older respondents may have undertaken lowly tasks, but their work was paid and the community they joined was both stable and structured.

Work was very different for the younger interviewees. Many of these entry level jobs were unpaid and all were short term, limited to the life of a particular project. The companies we interviewed accepted people on these free placements on a regular, if *ad hoc* basis and said that they only ever accepted people who they might be interested in hiring, so that the placement effectively acted as an extended interview with the trainee learning about the industry and hopefully gaining paid work on the next project. However not all firms were so unwilling to sign up long term free labour and there were numerous tales of young workers employed for months without pay. Moreover, even when the placement was intended to introduce a potential employee to a potential employer, given the fragmented nature of the sector and the erratic levels of work undertaken by small producers, good workers were unlikely to move directly into a job. Instead many moved from one unpaid placement to another.

Learning on the job: legitimate peripheral participation

Once hired (whether or not they were paid) the young workers became peripheral members of the community, supporting preparation, filming and production through a range of generally simple tasks. Entry was, after all, access to a low level job. It guaranteed neither a chance of being trained nor an opportunity to learn. Novices

answered telephones, cleaned camera lenses, took continuity notes, held booms, fetched, carried and arranged aspects of the shoot. The people we spoke to all thought that such involvement with work was the best way to learn the trade:

I think you'll find that most professional film makers will always say to you the best kind of training is to start as a trainee attached to a crew. You won't ever find better training than that. There is no training like it. (Christopher, cameraman)

In a nutshell, most people learn on the job. It's not something you can really... study for. You have to be involved in the process, pick up your skills while you're working, really. (Matthew, cameraman)

It's just experience, really, of how people work and how a film is shot and put together... It's just experience that you can only get on the shop floor, I think... you know... They can't teach you that in a classroom, I don't think. (Edward, sound recordist)

Most members of the film and TV community are happy to accept the trainees and greet new faces on set or in the office by finding out who they are, what sort of experience they have had, what their function is and offering to help by answering questions. Indeed, it is this social acceptance of developmental conversation that is the cornerstone of skill formation since traineeships and placements are irregular, of varying lengths and unstructured. Trainees are given tasks to do and may get involved with any aspect of

production on top of their set roles. They are encouraged to ask questions and most of the people they deal with are happy to answer. This process can work well. A combination of observation; accepting job roles, making mistakes and learning what should be done; and getting on with co-workers can guide the trainee in what is expected and how they should do it:

The whole shoot lasted for 6 weeks Just from the day I started to the day I finished, all the mistakes in the world, I made them Within, like, 30 minutes the director knew that I didn't know anything He trained me He sat me down, and we had a coffee And, of course, I didn't write down whether it was overcast, or whether it was sunny, or whether it was windy The director had made a note of it, he knew, but asked me deliberately that was so useful.

(Amrita, director)

And there I was on my very first day and not knowing a thing about how to work as a clapper loader. So it was a very, very steep learning curve. The first time I ever put a clapper board on was with ...[name] and the first thing he said to me after the take was "Daniel, don't do that again" 'cause obviously it was much too loud and much too close to his face. So, I never did that again. So you learn very quickly. (Daniel, cameraman)

But it did rely very heavily on individual trainees being prepared to take the initiative, ask questions, participate in tasks beyond their immediate jobs, stay late and get involved in every aspect of work. Initiative was vital and, as one employer pointed out, if you were

shy, this sector was not the place to be. Those bold or inquisitive enough to engage learned a great deal:

When I knew something was going on I'd say 'Can I stay in?' can I sit in and just listen? And when they were there with client just to learn how to talk to them, or when they're cutting I'd say can I just come and watch it? And I'd learn, and they'd be very open, and help you out like that. So, that's how I learned, really.
(Oliver, executive producer)

Occasionally more formal training was provided in the form of bringing in a specialist for the trainee to talk to or sending them on a brief course, but this was rare and on-the-job training formed the core of skills development. Observation in particular could be valuable. Filming involves a whole series of inter-related tasks and everyone on set needs to be aware of what others are doing and adjust their activities accordingly. Takes can be ruined by poor continuity between scenes, unexpected noises or movements or lack of co-ordination between various activities. Peripheral participation not only allows newcomers to undertake a range of roles on set, learning from experience what each one does and how it fits into the whole, it also enables them to learn appropriate behaviours and note the frenetic and confusing activities before they have to do work that might suffer from that confusion. According to Oliver:

It was like watching ... surgery, in a way You've got different people shouting and everybody knows what the other person's doing at one point, and they're

talking about things that you have no idea what they are. And that's how it was like....I didn't know what was going on, who was doing what, who was in charge of who and ... so you just, kind of, stand and observe, make sure you're not in the way, and try to get a feel for... for who's doing what, really...., and what you should be doing, what you shouldn't be doing, when you should be quiet, when you should step back and when you can, kind of, ask questions. And from there I just, kind of, really stick to the grips...All I did on my first day was hold an umbrella above the camera, that's all I did, but, you're, kind of, watching stuff there.

Knowing another person's job could also help the inexperienced worker perform their own tasks better. Abigail was training to be a director and found editing work both helpful and illuminating:

And then in the edit room they gave me an editor who works with first time directors, who was very patient and basically did it all for me....I didn't really know what I was doing, but I did learn, you take a lot in. And I also learned a lot of things I shot were wrong, or I needed extra things, because I didn't know, I couldn't... like when I was actually directing it I didn't know how to shoot for the edit, so I'd learn kind of what I'd need next time I shot stuff.... It was quite revealing.

Most pointed out that the tasks they learned and the experience they acquired were “not rocket science” and often this was true, with common sense and thought many people

would be able to perform the technical aspects of the work our trainees learned. However, mistakes were almost universal and were certainly expected. It might be more accurate to note that while these tasks mainly required common sense that common sense was context dependent and our trainees learned it just as they learned about the way people worked on set and one task related to another. This knowledge was not complicated, but neither was it 'natural'.

Clearly individual projects were not intended primarily as vehicles for learning and often conditions were not ideal. Limited budgets and small production teams meant not only that there were fewer experienced workers around to ask questions of, but also that those who were there were likely to be hard-pressed and not necessarily willing to take time out to explain things to a new worker. It had not always been so. According to Emma, a researcher and writer:

the cameraman had a camera assistant, the sound man had a sound assistant, and the editor had an editing assistant. And it was a fantastic way for people to learn the trade, as there was, this, the skill.

Smaller teams also meant that experienced operatives had fewer opportunities to discuss work with other professionals during production. One older cameraman noted with regret that he no longer had an apprentice to discuss individual takes with and felt that the quality and creativity of the end product suffered as a result.

Some established professionals took on trainees themselves. Most of these master-apprentice relations were informal. Some lasted only the length of one individual project, as with Abigail, a director, who spoke of being taken up by an engineer to be taught the techniques and technicalities of sound recording. Others were of longer duration. One sound recordist we interviewed had a ‘trainee’ with him who followed him from project to project to learn the trade (terms and conditions were negotiated by the experienced sound recordist). Such relationships could also materially benefit the trainer. Sophie, a location manager spoke of being trained for her first few years in work by a more experienced professional. He taught her how to do the work, recommended her to friends and for projects he could not do, assisted her with queries and took a proportion of her fee.

Occasionally limited budgets created opportunities for less experienced workers or those with ambitions to move from one role to another. Such progression was often difficult since, in the absence of any form of structured career path the way any individual got a better job was quite simply by being hired to do it, a risky choice for any small company when a badly made product could mean contacts would be reluctant to commission future work. As George, a director and employer commented:

People come to us and say ‘I want to be an editor’, and you say ‘well, I can’t throw you at the deep end – you’ve got no experience. And they say, ‘well, where do I get it from?’ You say, ‘I don’t know, really.’ But I can’t take a risk with a network

programme So you tend to rely on the people that you do know, who are trusted.

However when budgets were tight, as they almost invariably were, and in the regions where the pool of skilled labour was narrow, compromises could be made. Sometimes these took the form of structured work experience, such as allowing someone to have a day's experience of directing under supervision during a reasonably long project. On other occasions people who had never directed or edited or produced before were hired for those roles for the whole project. When this happened the independent production companies took steps to ensure their risks were limited, staffing every other position with experienced workers who, although notionally doing other jobs, were knowledgeable and skilled enough to provide direction and support for their less experienced colleague. Indeed Amrita, a director, described how, in the first film that she notionally directed, most of the time she simply watched while the experienced cameraman put her ideas into practice.

Of course, not all sets and not all workers welcomed trainees. Since these new entrants represented either current or future competition for work in a sector where employment was insecure there were tensions between the older and younger employees (Lave and Wenger 1991). Daniel's first job on set had been as a clapper loader, holding up clapper boards with scene and take numbers before each shoot to help the editorial process. However, his "old school" camera operator neither told him that the boards were out of frame nor made any attempt to move the camera so the relevant information could be

recorded so Daniel did not learn about his errors until the end of filming, eight to ten weeks later, while travelling home with the more sympathetic producer.

Moreover the brevity of most projects also limited learning. Each production could be very different, staffed by different people and requiring different types of subject knowledge in terms of content so that skills were not so much built up from a structured foundation as assembled, pick and mix style from a wide range of different options. Indeed one owner-producer described success in entry level positions as largely “serendipity”, pointing out that a researcher or trainee who had failed abysmally on one project might shine on the next. His willingness to forgive failures by entry level workers may have a structural foundation since his firm tended to take on trainee researchers for a period of several months rather than an individual project and during such placements he became accustomed to observing both triumphs and disasters. Blair’s (2001) research suggests that tolerance is far more limited further up the hierarchy where a disaster on one project can materially affect an individual’s chances of finding work elsewhere.

The lack of any form of structured progression also presented problems. For earlier generations a combination of formal apprenticeships, barriers to entry and official union structures meant that most spent a great deal of time learning the ropes and acquired a great deal of knowledge in the process. One worked as a warehouseman at a site supplying cameras to the film industry to gain his union card, by which time he knew a great deal about the equipment needed on set. Another spent his first two years cleaning equipment before being allowed to touch a camera. Under this system, long periods of

learning and time served in jobs were a publicly accepted part of progression. New entrants knew what to expect and were provided with secure employment while working their way up the ladder and acquiring skills. According to Alexander, a producer-director:

There used to be... it wasn't exactly a formal structure but we used to say that, you know, most people who start as a researcher, say as a junior researcher, we'd expect them to do probably three years as a researcher, you know, working a way to become a senior researcher. You need three years to, kind of, understand what you're doing. Then, once they were really good at.... And you know, we would give people opportunities [to develop] on simple things. . . . And then, once they could do that and they've been an assistant producer for a few more years, probably you get another three years, then we would think about making them into producers.

The skills needed for the more senior roles were still the same but workers' expectations had dramatically changed, partly because the fragmented nature of the industry now made progression opaque and partly in line with other social trends. Small production companies spoke of new graduates arriving and expecting to direct or researchers with only six months experience asking to be moved up the hierarchy. This had positive aspects: Christopher, a cameraman noted with approbation that it was no longer possible for the union to prevent someone working because they had no union card and the 'system' itself was certainly flexible enough to accommodate any amount of creativity

and innovation but it did heighten the risk for small employers and goes some way to explaining their reliance on word of mouth and reputation in preference to previous job title in recruitment decisions. Their caution might also be explained by the fact that the ambitions of entrants were also built in to the system. The two aspects of work that each individual negotiated for at the start of a project were pay and ‘credits’, the way their name appeared at the end of the feature and the job title they were credited with. This was far from being a simple matter of individual ego and prestige since future job offers and standing in both the community and the union depended on such credits. When budgets were limited, small companies often kept their hired help happy by offering “grandiose” job titles (Tempest et al. 2004:1536). In the production observed as part of this research almost all the office staff were credited with something. It was a welcome and much appreciated gesture but it further distorted the already blurred line between job titles and skills.

Discussion and Conclusions

In some respects this system of training has advantages. Film and TV is an area where technology has changed quite dramatically and a flexible approach to skills development has the capacity to capture these changes and leave individuals room to innovate. Moreover this is an industry in which on-the-job training has always been favoured and where qualifications are (at best) only an indirect means of entry to the profession. In Langham’s (1996:75) words, this industry “... certainly includes an obsessive fascination with film and a willingness to work long hours. In a world of fanatics, academic degrees

and even vocational qualifications were (and still are to a large extent) beside the point.” This is not to say that qualifications were not used and useful. Our interviewees included engineers who praised their degrees and the skills they had gained, claiming to use them every day in work, as well as company owners who owed their break into the industry or had founded their company on the basis of friendship groups formed at university. But all agreed that the most valuable skills were those they had acquired on the job.

The flexibility of this form of development was further extended to the type of people who had access to it. In the absence of the closed shop and the need for a union card the various occupations were (at least theoretically) open to all. However, in practice, we found no evidence that this freedom effectively increased diversity. On the contrary, although our research was conducted in a region with a large ethnic minority population, few were represented here. Skills agencies from several regions expressed concern at this and special events were held to encourage black and minority ethnic workers into the industry. Other barriers were also apparent. Lengthy unpaid placements, a history of amateur activities prior to entry and access to work through friends and contacts may well have ensured that this sector stayed a middle class preserve. While one union respondent noted with alarm the increasing homogeneity and gender stereotyping of job roles that had run parallel with the fragmentation of the industry. He argued that the large broadcasters had employed ‘atypical’ apprentices – men in makeup and women in cameras or engineering – but that subverting such gender roles was almost unheard of in smaller companies. In this instance it seems that flexibility did not bring diversity.

But flexibility is not necessarily the optimal criterion to seek in skills development and the community model of gaining expertise has some fairly obvious limitations. In particular, structuring a learning experience around the novice questioning the master places considerable responsibility on both parties to ask the right questions, observe the right activities and respond with the right answers. Learning through freelance work was, as Robert remarked, a “hit and miss” process. Even when the questioning went well there were no formal structures to ensure that the learning was understood or could be successfully applied next time. In addition to this, those answering the questions or supporting learning might be in competition for jobs, now or in the future, with the trainees. The incentives to provide disinformation or simply not answer were quite significant and under the circumstances it is surprising, not that we found some resistance to trainees, but that we did not find more. It may have been that their status as real workers helped, that the culture militated against such practices, or simply that most workers in the industry were too generous too stoop to petty misinformation. Nonetheless, insecurity and community make uneasy bedfellows and the behaviours encouraged by one are more than likely to disrupt the smooth functioning of the other. More fundamentally for this industry, while researchers had traditionally been involved in every aspect of production from preliminary ideas to final edit, and while this was seen as the key element of learning the trade, budget pressures in small firms meant that they might only be hired for the minimum length of time and many finished their work before filming even started. Even when junior employees did have access to the set their access to learning could be limited. As Tempest et al. (2004:1535) note:

The quality of experiential on-the-job learning depends on the challenge and diversity of the production role offered. The most challenging jobs tend to be concentrated in the hands of those with established reputations, creating important issues of exclusion from access to learning opportunities for many workers.

The fact that much of this research was undertaken in a region may have increased the fragility of the network. As noted above, most of the research into communities of practice has been conducted in stable work groups, some very stable as participants were born, grew up and died in the communities in which they worked (Lave and Wenger 1991; Orr 1996). By contrast here, ‘community’ groups were very temporary, short-lived, often under extreme pressures of work and existed only as long as the projects lasted. A process exacerbated by the tendency of ambitious freelancers to relocate to London in search of more or better work. Certainly, groups of friends often re-formed on other projects and regional or specialist gossip tightened links between members but no matter how welcoming these groups were, opportunities to watch, participate and learn were restricted. Such mobility seems to contrast with Blair’s (2001) conclusions on the existence of semi-permanent work groups where professionals at all levels would be consistently re-hired by a head of department and moving from one work group to another might endanger an individual’s chances of regular work. But Blair’s research was specifically focused on the film industry and (from the references in it to exceptionally well known box office hits), to the upper end of that industry, where budgets are rather more generous. Many of our participants would have welcomed the opportunity to either hire or work in such semi-permanent groups since these not only

made labour easier to organise, they also offered a sort of collective guarantee of the quality of the finished product. But in our study, when monies were spent hiring experienced workers for one stage of filming it was generally at the expense of another. Senior workers tried to bring in trusted colleagues and often succeeded, as when NAME, a director, hired a cameraman he had worked with before, whose skills he trusted, but here such recruitment was something to be negotiated. In exchange for this, NAME agreed to do WHATEVER himself.

The impact of restricted development opportunities was, perhaps, most clearly marked on the technical side of the work. Changes in technology meant that operating most of the systems was far simpler than it had been. Camera and sound were often combined, cameras were far more mobile than they had been (many were hand held) and editing software could be mastered in a few days. As a result the numbers of video journalists and multi-skilled operators increased and it became common, particularly on low budget productions for crew members (including directors) to take on additional functions. But this did not mean that the skills needed to use these technologies had disappeared entirely and most people also pointed out that one of the major contributory factors making these skills easier to learn was everyone's willingness to accept much lower standards. Robert, a producer-director commented wryly after finishing filming, "Technically it was crap, but it's telly – no one will notice". Quality standards for feature films were still high but for the regular short documentaries, comedies, news features, human interest, current affairs and cookery programmes which formed the staple diet of the independent companies a more pragmatic approach was taken.

What this effectively meant was that the returns available for technical skills were often limited. Technology had made tasks much simpler, most people saw much of the skilled work as ‘common sense’ and small companies were prepared to compromise on product quality so for some jobs, particularly camera work, so standards and salaries fell. Several people noted this with regret. Technological innovation could have provided a basis for raising standards. Moreover, the story-telling on which film and television relies, often rests on a great deal of technical expertise, the knowledge of how an effect will appear on screen or the impact a sequence of shots will have on viewers. Without this sort of experience, without the practiced eye and the ability to create a certain image on screen it was felt that creativity would suffer. Other technical skills were both valued and much needed but the fragmented nature of the industry mitigated against any developmental activities. Studio directing in particular was an area of expertise regularly sought by the broadcasters but since few directors now worked in-house the old internal and expensive training programmes were no longer run: individual directors felt that the expense and time would be too great to commit to, the broadcasters that the risks of putting on a course for independent workers would be too high.

Our final comment on the efficacy of learning through communities of practice in this industry is the one that is most speculative and that is on the wastage of human talent involved. The people we interviewed were, by definition, the ones who had just entered or who had remained in the industry. We have no means of knowing, and it is no-one’s business to collate figures on, those who do not stay. The system of placements, short-

term and temporary work assignments, and paid and unpaid work means that turnover is rapid and firms often have little idea what happens to an individual worker once a project has finished. Some succeed, at least in the sense that they gain work regularly enough to support themselves; others accept very sporadic contracts or unpaid assignments to maintain their images of themselves as film and TV professionals, supporting themselves with other (less glamorous) forms of paid employment or through state schemes; many drop out entirely.

These shifting communities of practice do provide opportunities for skill formation but for both employees and employers such experiences are varied and variable. Challenging jobs, as noted elsewhere, are one of the most effective means of learning (Finegold 1999). But challenging, changeable, insecure jobs in fluid groups where little consensus exists on activities, quality levels or standards may be taking flexibility one step too far.

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