Let me tell you a story - teaching transmedia in HE

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Abstract

*Bolton Storyworld*, a transmedia platform, is a practice based research project at the University of Bolton run by students and staff and supported by a Manchester based transmedia production company, Bellyfeel.   Together we have been interested in discovering the most effective ways to write, produce, and to teach the necessary skills for transmedia, an emerging form of production.  We have run 3 trials of a locally based interactive project as prototypes.   These have helped us make some interesting discoveries about how to write effectively for the form and how to teach it as part of a programme of media production at HE level.  To date we have analysed our work in relation to new media theorists and practices Zaluczkowska & Robinson (2014). This article reports a work in progress that aims to place the outcomes much more firmly in an educational context.

Keywords – transmedia, media education, practitioner researcher, action research.

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*Bolton Storyworld*, a transmedia platform, is a practice based research project at the University of Bolton run by students and staff and supported by a Manchester based transmedia production company, Bellyfeel[i]. Bolton *Storyworld* uses a variety of forms (games, drama, live events, social media, diorama, geotagged maps and email) to tell its stories and these have been experienced through a sequenced delivery for mobile devices such as phones and tablets. Conductrr, software, developed by Robert Pratten of Transmedia Storyteller, has facilitated this sequenced delivery[ii].

The story told in *Bolton Storyworld*, is similar to the *X Files* but instead of the FBI being in the know it is a bunch of university students who are less well equipped and informed. Of course, all is not as it seems at the University of Bolton, and the four students call on the audience's help to uncover and investigate a series of unusual happenings.

Although we consider *Bolton Storyworld* 'transmedia', this term has now become something of a buzzword so we need to be explicit about our usage. We take transmedia to mean stories that are interactive and are delivered across multiple platforms and channels in a way that that is expansive rather than repetitive.  This definition owes a debt to Henry Jenkins who suggests that 'Transmedia storytelling refers to a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence – one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge

communities.'  Jenkins (2006:13)

Following our research into new media theorists such as Rose (2011) and Jenkins (2009), narrotologists such as Murray (2013) and Ryan (2012) and practitioners such as Gomez (2006) and Phillips (2010), we created an immersive opportunity, one that would provide our audience with a variety of ways to enter the drama so that it could be picked up from different formats and places.  We understood that the work would need to use more than 3 platforms, be based on the development of an extensive 'bible' detailing the project and be related to the development of a detailed and convincing storyworld.  Of course as Jenkins points out one of the main attributes of the transmedia form is the relationship it can afford to its audiences and this was to play a big part in student learning.

Through my own research with transmedia company Bellyfeel, Zaluczkowska (2012), I also discovered the need for producers and creative talent to work much more closely together to achieve an integrated story experience for their audiences.  This in turn highlighted the need to create working models of projects that could be realistically tested more widely before being released to the public – a practice we followed on this project.

This desire for an interconnected approach to media industry practice is also reflected in the media education practices we used for the project, something that was widely discussed as a desirable trait in media literacy circles at the 2014 Centre for Excellence in Media Practice Summit in Prague by speakers

such as Professor Divina Frau-Meigs and Andrew Burn.   Both speakers discussed the need for people to work together from different disciplines and to bring different expertise and media skills to projects.  Andrew Burn also talked about the significance of transmedia creativity and the new practices this would bring to education as well as to industry. He stressed the need for 'cross arts collaboration in curriculum design and pedagogic practice' (2014) – something we tried to bring to the Bolton Storyworld project and an aspect that we tried to introduce to the wider academic community at the university of Bolton.

Digital industries and academics alike are keen to find effective ways to teach practice-based subjects in Universities.  Andrew Chitty, MD Illumina Digital in relation to The Manifesto for Media Education (2010) suggested 'That's why we need a new generation of practitioner researchers ..[ ].. Instead of practitioners entering academia to pass on their production skills we need to create opportunities for them to inquire, analyse and reflect on the changing nature of the contemporary media'. Both of these concerns provided the justification for this study; to encourage a reflective, yet experimental approach to creating media content that would come from a cross arts collaboration. We achieved this, in part, by running Bolton Storyworld as an iterative project, so that as students progressed, they could reflect on their successes, discuss their concerns with people from different disciplines, find new solutions and collaborate with newer students with less experience.

In addition to trying to find a model for transmedia production for small scale

projects, trialled by student-practitioners, we decided that *Bolton Storyworld*

offered the ideal opportunity to investigate and develop a pedagogical

approach to teaching transmedia production.   Our intention as lecturers was

to become fully involved in the project as practitioner researchers and

encourage our students to adopt the same approach.  We began by

appointing Jamie Coles as a PhD student in association with the IEC[iii] at the

University to investigate ways of increasing levels of digital literacy. Jamie

was able to take part in *Bolton Storyworld* as a graduate media student and

has continued to analyse its progress as we move through it.

We did at the time have a programme of study (Foundation in Media

Production) that tried to bring together a range of disciplines in

transmedia/multi-platform form under the umbrella of Media Production. There

was also a validated research degree known as Inter-disciplinary Inquiry-

Based Learning (IDIBL)[iv] that could act as a model of practice for the research

orientated education that we planned to deliver. These would have provided

ideal teaching structures to accommodate the project but unfortunately

changes in University policy were to overtake us as the project developed and

we had to work under a standard 20 credit module constraint that demanded

less flexible assessment outcomes.

Given our aims, our methodology has rested firmly on participatory action

research (PAR), which lets all parties have equal authority both supporting

and encouraging collaboration.  As Herr and Anderson (2005: 9-10) stress,

'PAR tempers this expert knowledge with expertise of locals about their own

problems and solutions.'  In this instance we wanted our students to be able to make discoveries about transmedia practice from their own use of new technological applications and suggest new avenues of exploration. As McIntyre (2008:1) suggests the aims of PAR are achieved through a 'cyclical process' and this is what we were keen to establish in the transmedia context – a way in which students could explore, gain knowledge, build new ideas and practices and then take action to re-form or change the work they were creating. At the centre of our plan was the desire to put all students, staff and industry players on the same footing. This decision was influenced in part by the ideas of Janet Murray (2012) who suggests that transmedia is an evolving medium for which there is no standard model, no formalised or standard screenplay format, no standard production and development processes and no standard mechanisms for audience engagement. *Bolton Storyworld* is therefore something of an experiment or design exploration for the digital medium and a contribution to the discussion that Murray has started. Our educational objectives are also influenced by those of Freire's (1970) an approach that diminishes the student-teacher dichotomy and, in this instance, the teacher-industry dichotomy and student-industry dichotomies.  Indeed industry, in the form of Bellyfeel were quite keen to engage with students who they felt could bring new ideas to production. We have applied this approach to both the production work and to the analysis and research aspects of this project.

The project started with a small survey in 2011.  We had an enthusiastic response but there were very few surprises.  We found that Facebook was the

most visited and liked site for students, that they wanted to contribute to online portfolios and that 75% of them owned an internet enabled mobile phone that put a geo location device at their finger tips.  These discoveries helped us to plan a product that would have a life on Facebook but would ultimately become primarily available through mobile phone technology and be place specific.

In production terms we have discovered that many of the large scale practices of transmedia production apply to small scale projects.   Our writing group built an extensive, full scale 'bible' for the project as advised by Geoff Gomez (2012) in his lectures.  This 'bible' was stored on a Google drive and every writer/ participant had access to it to make changes. We really did break down the barriers between industry, tutors and students as everyone contributed publicly to the product and each contribution was attributed. As one writing student pointed out 'I now feel better about feedback and being flexible to change. Having to go through the collaborative process makes me understand and want to write even more.' And another who suggested that 'I learned to just get words down and not be afraid to write rubbish and then polish rather than being a perfectionist. I've learned to relax a bit more.'

Students built in the transmedia elements from the very start of the project with many days spent scheduling and experimenting with the aim of reaching a staggered play out that could be made as and when money and materials were available. This hands on reflective approach to learning was really beneficial to some of the students. They learned about Transmedia in an

immersive, creative manner that would be hard to replicate in a traditional, didactic teaching situation. Students discovered that storylines had to be flexible to accommodate unforeseen changes and circumstances 'People need to be briefed to be more flexible.' This valuable experience improved student employability and has meant that students have gone on to work for the industry, take up freelance roles or continue their education seeking higher qualifications.

Just as it was a learning process for students, many of the staff were having to learn about it, whilst on the job 'It was really exciting; sometimes it was also really difficult as well. I think initially staff were quite resistant. That changed near the end when I felt as if they got a shape of it but it took a lot of work to try and make people feel as if they belonged to it.' At times this lead to the imposition of tried and tested filmmaking practices on an evolving medium that such practices didn't suit.

To build confidence we decided to post content together and, through Facebook, pretended to be real people engaging online with real students and inviting them to real events that were run by fictional characters. This work generated good immersion from audiences but also much concern on the part of the university who tried to put a stop to it. Students became involved in a protracted ethics debate, one that became the most effective way for students to really understand the ethical issues involved. The learning encountered was much broader than the initial media objectives that we had set.

120 students were involved in creating content from a variety of skill centres. This wasn't always easy for students 'The development and collaboration was very new to me. It felt more professional and industry linked. That was hard to get used to at first.' Added to that, as is common with all student work, the content was of varying quality and the disappointment was evident. This was a huge learning point for the majority of students. Together we decided to reshoot a range of material – a decision that was not popular with some members of the team but one that others came to realise was essential 'We weren't good enough when we started but we all learned so much.' – A true example of reflective, iterative practice.

At this mid point we realised we had a strong team of dedicated students who could take the project forward.  They were happy to work with audience feedback and could reflect on their learning relating it to a broader industry concerns. 'A lot of things that I wasn't grasping before have clicked with me this year.' said one writer.  'Now I feel ready to take on any of those roles and the project has taught me so much.' said a filmmaker.

An article based on a 3rd year undergraduate student dissertation written by Lee Robinson was published in the *Journal of Media Practice* (2014) and is an example of how important critical thinking is in our investigations.  As Professor Divina Frau - Meigs suggested at the CEMP conference, media literacy and policy related to that, is not just a question of technology or new technological practice - 'there is no coding without decoding' (2014).  So we have also tried to ensure that students play an integral part in presentations at

conferences and symposiums[v] (although sadly this wasn't possible at 2014 CEMP Summit) to ensure that they become part of that critical debate. We expect that through this project students and staff will continue to produce this form of collaborative analysis.

And in support of the importance of transmedia creative practices to pedagogic practice that Andrew Burn highlights CEMP (2014), Jamie has adopted our transmedia storytelling approach to assessment in the broader university setting. He maintains that storytelling reflects a constructionist pedagogical approach, as storytelling is a constructionist activity. Constructionism includes, but also expands upon Piaget's (1972) "constructivism". It is an approach that recognises the prior knowledge students can bring to their assessments presenting them as a university story within a real world environment that creates meaning for the work beyond the artificial construct of the assessment: Papert (1991). In this way Jamie has taught non media staff and students to use transmedia digital methods to promote and strengthen their employability skills.

Despite being well supported by the university we were unable to facilitate changes to the curriculum that would have been beneficial to this project. It is clear that we needed a more flexible inquiry based educational structure – one like the IDIBL framework. Despite good intentions, the University applied universal cost saving approaches that rendered this impossible. Furthermore, the collaborative, practitioner-researcher approach to learning is difficult to fit into a modular structure such as the one that has been adopted

at the University.  Nonetheless the process still continues. The difference now is students can work for Bellyfeel and be paid for their contributions due to HEIF funding for the project. There is still an opportunity to work in a collaborative, student centred, democratic fashion but that is now situated outside the context of the university.  This has made us reflect on why it is so difficult for universities to simulate workplace interaction suggesting that partnerships with industry could provide ideal opportunities to develop practitioner research approaches if constructed in a supportive fashion. At *Bolton Storyworld* we are not offering internships or apprenticeships but something much more interactive – knowledge exchange partnerships perhaps where both parties bring something new to the table.  In this way as Andrew Chitty has advised we are encouraging staff, industry professionals and new entrants to the industry to inquire, analyse and reflect on the changing nature of contemporary media. We have found that using a PAR model has facilitated small changes in industry practices and has improved the practice of students not only in the transmedia field but in traditional education as well.  'Learning about something whilst doing it is harder than learning it beforehand. It didn't really hinder us though.'

Student attainment over this period was slightly higher in general; students showed an increased percentage in their employability rate and (although this is a subjective measurement) students appeared to be more self-confident. 'We've pushed the limits of what we can achieve with multiplatform storytelling and on no budget.' Further research is needed to really establish the benefits.

[i] Information on Bellyfeel can be found at http://www.bellyfeel.co.ukation

[ii] "Development of Conducttr started in Spring 2010 by Robert Pratten and Alexey Ossikine. The transmedia experience was delivered as a 10 episode web series, an ARG, a 12 chapter blog series and a novella."

[iii] IEC – Institute for Educational Cybernetics aims to understand how information and communications technologies affect the organization of learning of education from individual learning to the global system.

[iv] IBIBL – ' developing new inter-disciplinary, inquiry-based courses delivered through online communities of inquiry. See more at http://idibl.bolton.ac.uk

[v] Conferences that students, staff and Bellyfeel have attended
2014 University of Bolton R & I Conference.
2014 York University *TFTV: Exploring Conceptual and Creative Practices*
2013 *Salford Media Festival*, Media City
2012 University of Bolton R & I Conference – Bolton
2012 *Creative Hive,* University of Salford

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