

FEAR EATS THE SOUL

Working with Creative Content and Purpose in Media Practice Education

A Paper Presented to the

AMPE Conference, Bournemouth September 2000

By

Erik Knudsen

Abstract

In this paper, I aim to outline the importance of linking personal experience with craft skills and creative expression. I will outline one or two educational approaches that I have sought to practice in my efforts to address this issue. I will argue that any profound learning of media skills and creative expression, can only happen in the context of an awareness of purpose, and that if purpose does not stretch beyond simply getting a job - in what is after all a fickle business - then we will be doing both the moving image medium and it's industry a disservice. I will be suggesting that FE and HE institutions are one of very few contexts in which the student of the medium has the required space and environment to gain access to this critical awareness of their work. I will also suggest that we, as educators, must make sure that we live up to this responsibility. Due to the nature of this subject, my approach is going to be predominantly anecdotal, and the scope of my experience leads me to concentrate on strategies aimed at the postgraduate level.

Teaching and Learning

The French poet, Paul Valery, gets to the heart of the creative process, and the difficulty of teaching it when he states: 'It is more useful to speak of what one has experienced than to pretend to a knowledge that is entirely impersonal, an observation with no observer. In fact, there is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography. I do not pretend to be teaching

you anything at all. I will say nothing that you do not already know...' (1) As a teacher, this is a humbling approach I aim to aspire to. This type of relationship with a student raises interesting questions about the role of the teacher in the process of learning.

Once, after a particularly gruelling day at the Northern Film School, I retreated to a pub in Leeds with a friend. This was a pub near the Law Courts. It was frequented by an ironic mixture of criminals and lawyers, perhaps even judges. Next to us there were three young men who I suspect had just come out of a court hearing. My prejudices were at work when observing their tattoos and manners and I had noticed them making phone calls during which they were arranging for the sale of mobile phones and SIM cards. I concluded that they were on the wrong side of the Law.

One of them struck up a conversation with me. When he discovered that I was a filmmaker, he got very excited. Not the usual reaction I have come across, about how to become a star, or how to get into the film and television business. On the contrary, he had a subject for a film that he thought was absolutely necessary to make; and he wanted me to make it. The theme was about his experiences and a dilemma at the core of his life. He told me that he had done a lot of bad things in his life, to the condemnation of others around him, but deep down in his heart he knew he was good; he insisted that actually he was a very sensitive man, but that somehow this wasn't coming across to society around him. He was quite adamant that I could make a good film about this dilemma.

Later, I reflected that - not withstanding the fact that he was unlikely to have a first degree and thereby qualify for my postgraduate course - this man was potentially an ideal student. He had some essential qualities I find lacking in many UK students I have taught: firstly, he had a profound understanding of a theme and could relate it to his own experience; secondly, he felt it necessary for

this theme to be expressed; thirdly, he had passion for the theme itself and respect for the moving image's ability to get to the heart of his theme. Importantly for me, at no point did he hint that this may be a means for entering the film and television industry. Of course, he lacked one essential ingredient: the language with which to express himself. This is where I, as a teacher, could come in and be of use. However, what about the situation in which the student has little idea of what they want to express or why?

Identifying Purpose

Most of the students I encounter do not possess this type of clarity of purpose and need; they have come to the medium for a different reason. One of the first questions I am asked by many prospective students is: what is your success rate in getting graduates into the industry? Successive governments, in pursuit of quantifiable results and accountability, are also obsessed with this question. I have even heard many educators measure their success almost exclusively on the basis of penetration rate of graduates into the film and television industry. While these measurements can indeed be valid, if considered as one of several measurements, taken on their own, they reveal a worrying trend and highlight a broader question about the purpose of education generally.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable – and perhaps worth repeating - that the moving image is a creative medium first and foremost. It exists for the communication of feelings, emotions and thoughts.

Without this premise, there would be no industry. The consequence of the student arriving without the notion of feelings, emotions and thoughts being foremost in their minds has far reaching consequences. When a media student is focused primarily on their career prospects, a lack of focus on the heart of the creative process hampers not only the product, but their learning. Often they are gripped by a fear: a fear of failure in the eyes of the industry; a fear of not applying the correct routines of the trade; a fear of experimenting and exploring; and, ultimately, a fear of identifying

personally with a product with the resulting sense of ownership and responsibility for it. The consequences of these fears manifest themselves in a number of ways, including, ultimately, the failure to learn anything significant or fundamental. I also notice that in such crucial areas such as developing team working skills, problems arise. Most disputes between students working in teams are routed in these fears - above all, perhaps, the fear of failure in the eyes of the industry.

It is worth pointing out briefly that my experience of international students, and students I have worked with in countries like Cuba and Poland is quite different. In these countries, the emphasis on teaching and learning seems firmly routed in personal and creative development in relation to the “art” of the medium. Furthermore, when getting enquiries from international students, who want to study in the UK, the questions they raise suggest an emphasis on getting to grips with the medium, usually because they seem to have a clear educational purpose in mind. An example would be enquiries I have received recently from South America, where students have tended to have a social and political agenda to which they want to utilise the documentary form.

The political, social and cultural reasons for these differences is not a focus here, but merely serves to highlight the nature of the raw material that I, as a teacher, have to work with.

I would suggest that the consequences of the expectations of the UK student - imbedded in the political climate in which we work - is affecting the way that some of us are having to deliver our courses. Increasingly considered a service geared to delivering measurable results, there is undoubtedly a temptation for educators to emphasise certain elements of courses, at the expense of others. For example the relationship between a course and the industry - so often pursued in efforts to legitimise - can lead to reinforcing student fears of failure, thereby hampering their creative development. In these instances, it becomes necessary to more clearly define the relationship

between the education sector and the industrial sector. Many students leave courses with a very narrow theoretical understanding of their medium and I am often shocked about how little interest and knowledge students have of the history of the medium . I am also often disappointed in students lack of ability to analyse a film and understand how the form works. On the technical side, while a student may know how to operate a camera or a digital editing system, how confident are we in their ability to tell a story or rise to creative challenges? However, I do not believe that these problems are the sole responsibility of students.

There are fundamental changes occurring in the moving image industry and its infrastructure, which I shall not address here. Perhaps comparisons could be made to publishing and music, where access to those media has changed considerably. In the media industry there is an erosion of established and standard industrial practices which can simply be taught in the traditional sense, and more plural approaches to working practices, requiring a new breed of people who can originate creatively, adapt to, and lead, new developments. To actively and constructively participate in these developments, I believe that the practitioner must have a deep awareness of the roots of their medium and the subjects they want to express.

Personal Identification

At the heart of truly creative approaches to working with the moving image medium, lies the ability to tap into personal experience and to be able to connect this experience to the work one is doing. Being able to continually return to source, so to speak, will, I believe, equip the practitioner with endless resources to originate ideas, adapt to evolving technology and overcome creative challenges.

Connecting experience to work can happen on many levels and need not be subjected to sophisticated theoretical analysis. Awareness itself can often be enough, and the relationships between personal experience and one's work could range from something literal to something quite abstract. The aim in such identification is, simply, to establish the paradoxical realisation that, on the one hand, there is ultimately no separation between the individual and the life that goes on around them, while, on the other hand, the very value that one can bring to the whole, is exactly that unique perspective and approach that separates us from others. Plurality is what binds us together and moves us forward.

Case Studies

In practical terms, I have numerous examples of successes and failures in my efforts to encourage students to understand the value of their personal experience and perspective in the work that they do. I will here briefly describe three examples which I have chosen because they are straightforward and clear.

One

At the Northern Film School, I supervised a student director's final film (2). As with all NFS films, the script had been written by a screenwriting student on the sister course. This directing student was very keen on this particular script, which we all thought had promise. The director and the screenwriter got on well. While the development process seemed to go relatively smoothly, it also became clearer to me that there were also shortcomings in the way the director was dealing with the material. The story was about a couple who had lost a child in an accident. The woman was becoming increasingly isolated from the world around her and estranged from her husband, believing him, incorrectly as it turned out, to be having an affair.

The production team were happy with how the development and the shooting went, but in editing, and on seeing the final product, everyone was disappointed. Technically the film was accomplished, but, put simply, it lacked depth. Something had not emerged. It was only after the director had completed the course at the NFS, that I learned something important about her: one year before attending the NFS, she had suffered from some sort of nervous breakdown and had been through a period of depression and isolation. After discussing this further, and relating it to the film she had made, it became obvious that had we in development identified and acknowledged this connection - which was clearly at the root of her attraction to the script in the first place - then she would have made different directorial decisions which would have been likely to have improved the film considerably.

Two

Following the cohort of the above student, I introduced a module which would more formally provide a forum for student and tutor to explore the experiences of the student in relation to the work they were embarking on. One German camera student went through some initial tutorials with me in the context of this module (described below). We studied her previous work; while competent, it nevertheless always tended to look the same, even whether fiction or documentary. This was particularly in composition. While this could in some circumstances be defined as a style, particularly if a consequence of an identifiable development, it nevertheless felt to both of us as a groove in which she was stuck. In our efforts to get to the bottom of this, I discovered that she had grown up in a particular German town which had been completely rebuilt after the war and had a particular architecture which she had always been captivated by. When discussing the architecture of the town further, it emerged that there was a strong relationship between this and her compositional tendencies with film. Compounding this, was the fact that she was genuinely interested in architecture. So much so that she had, at one point, considered studying this subject

instead of film. But at no point had she made the connection between her interest in architecture and her interest in cinematic imagery. She found this realisation extremely liberating. We were able to identify other camera people, directors, painters and photographers that she could go and study in further detail with this in mind. All of this could then be fashioned into a personal project which would allow her to develop her technique and skills.

Three

A documentary director from my current course at the University of Salford was faced with having to make a documentary which was on a subject which was not of his choosing. The subject was house clearances; a topic which many TV documentaries had already covered. It was imposed on him by the producer and circumstances. A very real situation. Since no unique new perspective on the work of house clearers had been identified, this was the first task. And where better than to start with the question: What in your personal experience do you see connecting to this subject and how does it relate? Emerging from this question were personal experiences, the details of which I did not need to know. All I needed to establish was that they related to how personal possessions one moment could be charged with the presence of a living person and their whole life, while in the next moment, they could be treated as impersonal objects. While on the one hand he had some lively house clearers going about their job, on the other he suddenly had a dimension that would provide him with an underlying theme and a narrative purpose. He largely succeeded in making a fine documentary (3) which managed to give us a fresh inroad into a familiar subject.

Possible Strategies

A recurring pattern of approach to teaching emerges out of these examples: namely that the teacher needs to have some sort of personal understanding of the student. Perhaps needless to say that a professional relationship also needs to be maintained and that some formal structures are therefore

needed. Existing tutorial approaches may be sufficient. However, at the Northern Film School, I found it necessary to introduce a particular module in order to build on what tutorials could provide in this regard, partly to ensure that the students were aware of, and understood, what I was trying to achieve.

The module was simply called Theory and Practice and incorporated the development of a learning agreement. The learning agreement would be written by the student following tutorial guidance from the tutor. In this agreement, the student would give a summary of where they felt they were at in terms of their skill level and educational level, what they thought to be their strengths and weaknesses, where they thought their development over the next year should be focused and what strategies they intended to employ to achieve their learning aims. Each student had to identify particular areas of exploration - as, for example the German camera student mentioned earlier - and this would lead to a personal exploratory practical project about which the student would have to write a short reflexive essay. The agreed aims and objectives were incorporated in the learning agreement, which then became a critical element of assessment. This agreement would be signed off by the tutor, who would add their comments. At the end of semester one and semester two, further formal tutorials would be held to reflect critically on progress and outcomes. While it may be relatively straight forward to evaluate identifiable technical skills and competencies, how does one evaluate creative achievement? I believe this is only possible in the context of joint aims and objectives being identified by each student and tutor, which will inevitably involve what one can only call personal development.

The Theory and Practice module also consisted of some lectures and seminars in which practitioner/teachers would illustrate how they had related self-reflective theory with practice.

Other approaches may involve groups of students. At the University of Salford, I take a group approach to the development of ideas for documentaries, though the objectives remain the same in terms of getting the students to develop the self reflexive skills necessary to identify personal experience with the ideas they will eventually generate. Coming up with concrete ideas can often be the biggest problem for any creative person, but the problems are often rooted in the separation of the individual's interests, concerns or passions from the topic or subject being looked at. I have had students scouring the internet and newspapers for ideas, usually coming up with nothing, simply because, in theory, everything is a potential idea.

We therefore start from within. Initially, we start with a couple of seminars exploring the very nature of creativity and purpose of expression. We start with such big questions as 'Why do we as humans create? What for? Why do we want to communicate? What do we want to communicate about? – gradually leading the discussion to being more specific by sneaking in you instead of we. It usually loosens the debate up and allows students to be more open with each other. We also look quite specifically at what is meant by a creative act.

At this point, students are introduced to an exercise which seeks to develop their ability to come up with cinematic imagery that evokes the feelings, thoughts and emotions they have identified from a particular experience. A discussion is had about the effectiveness of this imagery and suggestions and contributions are made as to how to most effectively use the language to achieve the effect. A key objective of this exercise, is to help the student understand that to deal with a subject which has personal relevance does not mean it has to be autobiographical in content or context.

To further develop this notion, I invite students to discuss things that are on their mind; no matter how abstract, no matter how banal. This could be things that interest them, have attracted their curiosity or things that concern them. We explore connections between things that a particular student may be saying in an effort to identify common strands and themes and then interrogate their observations with questions that lead us to external factors and influences. When did you first start thinking/feeling this? What made you think/feel this? What have you seen recently around you that enhances these feelings/thoughts? And so on. In this way we arrive at a number of events, people, situations which the student can see has a direct connection to what they are thinking or feeling. It also makes students realise that the best subjects not only come from within, but their manifestation is usually right under their noses.

With these self-reflexive tools, the student will be much better equipped to take on creative and technical challenges. They will be better able to marry form and content. We have arrived in an era, where almost anything is technically possible, but this can be very confusing if one is not able to focus one's efforts on the basis of an awareness of purpose. The most common problem I come across in the development of a student project, is the student having lost sight of what it is they are trying to do and why. A practitioner who can always return to source, so to speak, will always be the stronger for it.

The Art and its Industry

Why are these self-reflexive abilities important for the art of the moving image and it's industry? I for one love this very young art form and want to see it continually evolve and develop. It needs to do that to reflect all the complexities of life. Likewise the industry - which is, of course inextricably linked to the art - needs to continually renew itself and reflect the plurality of modern life. To achieve this, new voices need to be emerging constantly and these voices need to be ones that can

continually adapt to, and challenge, the industrial mainstream. New evolutionary directions are likely to originate at the fringes of the mainstream, driven by people who are able to see things and solve problems with fresh eyes – their own eyes.

I feel that this gives us in the HE sector unique responsibilities. Responsibilities that go beyond the short term needs to most expediently dispatch labour into the industry. There are very few spaces and contexts where the student can properly learn about the medium and their relationship to it, and the HE institution has the opportunity to firmly establish that as its role and remit within the broader industrial sector. Perhaps such differentiation would help the HE graduate earn more respect from the incumbent industry. If we are about more than training and effectively developers of talent and creativity, then I would suggest there are aspects of our approach to teaching and learning that we must protect and nurture. Perhaps there is a need for the media education sector to be politically proactive in the debate on these issues.

Fear Eats the Soul

I return to my potential student in the Leeds pub. I may never meet him again. Perhaps since I saw him, he has gone to prison. He could even be like one of those prisoners I met while doing a workshop for a screenwriting class at Garth prison, who throughout their lives have had their self esteem beaten out of them. For them the possibility of creating a film was such a distant prospect it didn't even warrant dreaming about. Having won over their confidence, I found many powerful and necessary stories, but with no language to express them. At least I was able to encourage them and remind them of the words of Robert Bresson: 'A small subject can provide the pretext for many profound combinations. Avoid subjects that are too vast or too remote, in which nothing warns you are going astray. Or else take from them only what can be mingled with your life and belongs to your experience.' (4)

How strange that many who are free to express themselves are imprisoned by fear; fear of failure to succeed, fear of failure to conform, fear of personal ownership of what one creates. If we do not help students to have courage to overcome these fears, what kind of media culture will we be helping to create?

References:

(1) The Seamless Web (Burnshaw, Stanley; Penguin 1970)

(1) The Art of Poetry (Valery, Paul; Pantheon 1958)

(2) The Secret (Northern Film School 1998)

(3) House Clearances (University of Salford 2000)

(4) Notes On Cinematography (Bresson, Robert; Urizen 1977)