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Voices in the Field

Confessions of a Media Literacy Scholar-Practitioner:
Job Market Advantages, Research Agenda Challenges, and Theory-Driven Production

Christopher Boulton
University of Tampa, Florida USA

Abstract

This essay explores how higher education's instrumentalist move away from the liberal arts tradition of learning by thinking and towards more vocational "experiential" approaches has implications for media literacy educators' career options, scholarly identities, and teaching strategies. Specifically, I consider my own negotiation of increasing administrative and student demands for "hands-on" production courses by confessing both my advantages on the job market and my post-hire challenges in articulating a clear research agenda. I then conclude with a case study of how I repurposed my scholar-practitioner identity and used critical theory to drive production by bringing film students into a cultural studies classroom.

Keywords: *scholar-practitioner, critical theory, video production, media literacy, gay marriage, science fiction, youth media, academic careers, liberal arts, experiential learning, vocational education, cultural studies, ideology, filmmaking*

At the start of my PhD program in Communication back in 2004, one of my colleagues—who, along with me, also intended to research media literacy—wryly predicted that my background in video production would ultimately land me my first academic job. As it turned out, she was both wrong and right. While I had precious little luck with schools explicitly looking for filmmakers, presumably because my modest video output couldn't possibly compete with the productivity of an MFA, I discovered when I went on the market in 2011 that I did fit another even more prevalent job profile: the scholar-practitioner. Every week, Advertising and Communication departments posted announcements looking for candidates with PhDs *plus* significant professional experience in a related industry that would presumably equip them to teach more practical courses. And it would appear that the trend has continued: I recently came across a 2015 call for papers from *Cinema Journal* Teaching Dossier that acknowledged the "perceived need to incorporate production in theory/history courses" and asked, "as more and more job listings stress the desirability of scholar-practitioners who would feel comfortable teaching production elements in their classes, how do we educate ourselves for this kind of market?" (CFP 2015)

So, while yes, in the end, I did individually benefit by securing one of the many positions that, in addition to the doctorate, also required "professional experience" in media, advertising, PR, etc., I nevertheless see this development as problematic for media literacy education as a whole. In this essay, I explore how

higher education's move away from the liberal arts tradition of learning by thinking and towards more vocational and experiential approaches has implications for media literacy educators' career options, scholarly identities, and teaching strategies. Specifically, I consider my own negotiation of increasing administrative and student demands for hands-on production courses by confessing both my advantages on the job market and my post-hire challenges in articulating a clear research agenda. I then conclude with a case study of how I repurposed my scholar-practitioner identity and used critical theory to drive production by bringing film students into a cultural studies classroom.

Literature Review

Participatory action is a strong theme in the media literacy literature. The Core Principles of Media Literacy Education (CPMLE) urges educators to cultivate "informed, reflective and engaged" citizens able to effectively participate in democratic societies (NAMLE 2009) and the last competency of Mihailidis' (2014) "5A's of Media Literacy for the Emerging Citizen" continuum is "action to become part of the dialog" (128, 139-141). Many have operationalized media participation through video production activities and programs (Tyner 2015).[1] Indeed, youth media production has been analyzed in this journal through the varied lenses of historical trajectory (Hobbs and Jensen, 2009; Hobbs and Moore 2014), assessment (Ostenson 2012), ethics (Gibbons 2013), outcomes (Casinghino 2015), and even therapeutic applications (Friesem 2014). But such projects can run the dual risk of either overwhelming our students with assignments that presume pre-existing proficiency in video production techniques or falling into the "technicist trap" of focusing too much on training students to operate the equipment at the expense of the CPMLE's emphasis on critical thinking and active citizenship (Higgins 1999; Hobbs and Jensen 2009; Masterman 1985; NAMLE 2009).

Further complicating this picture is higher education's increasing emphasis on practical, hands-on pedagogies that privilege job training over intellectual formation in general and media production over media criticism in particular (Bruni 2015; Roth 2014; Schwartz 2015). For instance, Kimball (2015, 156) recently reviewed four books arguing that academe is entering "an academic bronze age, in which colleges and universities increasingly pursue their financial self-interest at the expense of academic values" by promoting professional degrees with the promise of employability and repositioning the humanities and liberal arts (traditional centers of education) as minimum requirements for well-roundedness rather than subjects worthy of sustained study in their own right—except, perhaps, when pursued within the isolated enclaves of elite institutions. Graduate students in the humanities have reacted to this marginalization by seeking out digital production skills both as a way to stay technically relevant in the emerging economy and get an edge on the academic job market (Cordell et al. 2015). Policy-makers in the UK have pressured media and communications departments to move away from "art for art's sake" (Ramsey and White 2015, 78) and towards a more instrumentalist skills-based approach such that "media education is only any good if it is training people for the creative economy" (Berger and McDougall 2012, 7). This is ironic, given that the short obsolescence cycle of media technologies makes the liberal arts credo of "learning how to learn" more, not less, important. Farr (2014, 1) has even argued that delivering media production courses that teach only technical/practical skills creates a misalignment between student learning and media production companies' hiring criteria emphasizing "softer" and more "transferable" skills like critical thinking. Nevertheless, when I began applying for academic jobs it became quickly apparent that my practitioner side would open more doors than my scholarly one.

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[1] Tyner (2015) found that almost all (93%) of the 65 youth media organizations participating in her report produced digital videos with documentary being the most popular genre and video editing software and recording hardware the most often-used production tools.

Job Market Advantages

Given this climate, I positioned myself in my applications as an experienced veteran and published critic of the media industries who could analyze texts and institutions from both a theoretical and professional perspective.[2] In addition to the standard dossier (cover letter, CV, writing sample, teaching philosophy, and research statement) I edited an updated video demo reel and posted it to a website that I built during graduate school—an effort, I might add, that took a significant amount of time and energy, but has since paid off as an evergreen online CV and digital repository for my scholarly and creative work.[3] Though I can't claim to know which, if any, of these tactics were most beneficial, I did enjoy what my advisor and fellow colleagues on the market that year described as a most unusually successful run: six campus visit invitations and three offers. All were for tenure-track positions and three required a PhD plus the ability to teach both production courses and media studies within a liberal arts framework. I used the multiple offers to negotiate; when a Provost described the starting salary as the "market rate" for newly minted PhDs, I countered that, by hiring me, she was getting two careers (and skill-sets) for the price of one. Indeed, my previous life in video and TV production meant that I was about ten years older than most of my grad school cohort. So, that leverage gave me a bump in salary, but nowhere near enough for me to catch up with my colleagues who went on to graduate school directly after undergrad and thus had the chance to secure tenure-track jobs ten years earlier than me. So, in sum, recalling what my classmate said back in 2004, being a scholar-practitioner did give me a distinct advantage on the job market but, at the same time, my long-term earning potential was now well behind other successful single-career academics in my age bracket.

Research Agenda Challenges

After landing my first job, the euphoria of the search soon wore off. While delighted to be joining a department of supportive colleagues that valued both the creative and critical sides of my research and teaching interests, I quickly realized that by selling myself as "the best of both worlds," I had unwittingly doubled my workload. For all the lip service paid to interdisciplinarity, the academy—and the awarding of tenure—remains structured around the principle of specialization: become an expert at something so you can write about it and teach it; the research informs the classroom and vice-versa. Now I had gotten myself into a situation where I would need to stay up-to-date on production technology *and* techniques *while at the same time* keeping current in media studies and critical theory. Put another way, if I had been hired as an MFA to teach filmmaking, I could have streamlined my teaching and research into a more symbiotic (and efficient) relationship: make a feature, get tenure. A strictly media studies position (and I did have an offer) would have been similarly straightforward: write a book, get tenure. (Indeed, given the apparent decline of the latter, perhaps I should have snatched it up when I had the chance!) My hybrid scholar-practitioner identity also meant that I qualified for twice as many service roles (ranging from curricular design to facility and equipment upgrades) across completely separate majors and so I had to start saying "no" to senior faculty more often than a junior, like me, would prefer.

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[2] At that point, I had published four articles in peer-reviewed journals and had helped co-produce a documentary. This excerpt from one of my application letters demonstrates how I sought to reconcile my scholar-practitioner identity: "My pedagogy and research agenda are informed by my dual role as academic critic and veteran of the media industries. I began my professional career as a production assistant at Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, then went on to write and field produce programming for Discovery Channel, Court TV (now truTV), and Travel Channel. Along the way, I experienced both the cultural cache of a creative identity and the structural pressures of dubious client requests, long hours, precarious employment, and low pay. I understand that many communication students aspire to work in these media industries. As an experienced teacher of both video production and media studies, I now seek to prepare them to think critically and act ethically every step of the way, whether they find industry jobs or remain active consumers of media products."

[3] http://www.chrisboulton.org/documentary/demo.html Thankfully, since 2011, sites like LinkedIn.com and Academia.edu have made online CV/digital repositories simpler, cheaper, and much less labor-intensive.

While I love my job and wouldn't trade it for the world, I chronicle these challenges as a warning to future colleagues. If you are a media literacy educator in graduate school, know that learning production tools may help you get a job, but the initial advantages can turn into a bait and switch: a jack-of-all-trades can never be king. And second career academics with professional backgrounds will enjoy similar advantages and face parallel challenges when determining, defining, and pursuing their individual research trajectory. In trumpeting my own scholar-practitioner status as a job candidate, I internalized the logic of what sells/impresses parents on campus visits without a proper consideration of how doubling down would lead to longer hours and a life balance tilting heavily towards the office. And now that I'm on the other side, I've sat on search committees that use the Phd+Professional requirement as an insanely narrow Venn diagram to screen candidates; we only had five viable applicants for a tenure-track multimedia journalism line!

Such a scholar-practitioner/dual career hiring policy not only devalues the stand-alone worth of a PhD, but also jeopardizes tenure lines by bringing on junior faculty that will face difficult choices about where and how to publish given their job's requirement of two separate specialties/modes of scholarship generation. On my campus, such tensions are further exacerbated by our current roll-out of a 5-year "Quality Enhancement Plan" emphasizing "Learning by Doing: Inquiry-based Experiential Education." While prioritizing "hands-on" instruction may be popular with students and provide great vocationally-oriented optics for publicity and recruitment materials, it also risks marginalizing the liberal arts tradition of "learning by *thinking*"—a critical and theoretical approach favored by many of us in the field of media literacy education.

Theory-Driven Production

While the term scholar-practitioner is often used to describe second career academics (like me) who, having grown weary of the corporate grind, now seek to parlay their professional experience into an ostensibly more rewarding, though usually less lucrative, job in higher education (updating the old canard from "those who can do; those who can't teach" to "those that did now teach"), I prefer Jenlink's (2005) more rigorous definition, which reframes the term as an approach to intellectual work rather than a description of pedigree. In other words, by focusing on the pedagogy of theorizing with practical intent, Jenlink's notion looks forward to what scholar-practitioners ask their students to do (practice) with knowledge rather than backward to any given professor's previous accomplishments and/or current "real world" skill sets (5). For Jenlink's scholar-practitioner, mere doing is not enough; theorized action must be political, cultural, *and* ethical; by challenging students to question the necessity and sufficiency of current social and institutional arrangements, the scholar-practitioner can then help them imagine, and even try to create, alternatives (6, 8). But what would this look like in a media-literacy-oriented classroom?

I began to discuss and share with my colleagues various tricks and tips for incorporating video essays into film history and theory classes by using provocative prompts and simple/self-explanatory digital capture and editing tools. This was initially helpful, but, over time, I began to wonder if ginning up theory classes with production exercises was actually contributing to the anti-intellectual climate described above that only considers knowledge useful if it results in the acquisition of some sort of marketable/technical skill. Were my good intentions, by suggesting that thinking alone isn't enough, undermining the intrinsic value of the liberal arts? So, I reversed the question. Instead of asking could I make theory more practical, I began to ask: *How could I make production more theoretical?* And by this I did not mean making documentaries about theory per se—like putting Žižek on a boat in Bodega Bay (where "The Birds" was filmed) or following Derrida around with a hand-held camera (Holden 2009; Mitchell 2002). Instead, I wanted to see if critical theory, in the tradition of Marx's (1845) *camera obscura*,[4] has the potential to open up creative outlets for students to turn

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[4] "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process" (Marx 1845, section 4 paragraph 3).

their world upside down and undress the ideologies that dance all around them, masquerading as just the way things are.

Indeed, there is a long tradition of generating creative, and entertaining, television and (later film) storylines by refracting social relations through the prism of science fiction. The Twilight Zone's meditations on bigotry and conformity helped pave the way for Star Trek's bold commentaries on sexism, racism, and militarism. More recently, we've seen a broad range of dystopian thrillers critique militarism (Avatar), immigration (Children of Men), apartheid (District 9), social class (The Hunger Games), and, yes, even environmental apocalypse wrought by a media-driven consumer culture (WALL•E). So, if Hollywood can do it, why can't we? I now turn to my own experiment with this approach—a project that used critical theory to inspire a short film taking a moral (and hopefully entertaining) stance on gay marriage.

In the Spring of 2015, I taught an upper-level Communication and Cultural Studies course at the University of Tampa and used the opportunity to test out an application of the CPMLE that would emphasize theory as a "habit of inquiry" capable of creating "critical" and "effective" media interventions (NAMLE 2009). Grounding my approach in the Birmingham School, some of my key learning objectives were to (1) question the inevitability or "natural nature" of "common sense" in society, (2) recognize how ideology is just a story we tell ourselves about power relations, and (3) experience how cultural hegemony might be structured differently (Hall 1990). Thus, I wanted my students to not only wrestle with the determinations of political economy but also imagine how media might help us critique the present and imagine alternate futures. Since one of our main objects of analysis during the superstructure section of the course was popular film and television, I wanted to build in a way for my students to engage with media production. However, I was not willing to set aside the necessary class time for either story development or technical training in shooting/editing. On the contrary, my Communication and Cultural Studies class only met once a week for four hours over the course of the whole semester, so I wanted to contain this exercise to one class session. So, to avoid overwhelming my students and crowding my curriculum, I outsourced the production by recruiting two film students to work with me outside of class to develop a script based on one of three quotes, shown on Table 1 that evoked the Birmingham School's critical perspective on power relations in society.

Table 1

Exploring Power Relations through Media Production: Three Quotes to Inspire Scriptwriting

> ➢ "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas…the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas" (Marx 1845)
> ➢ "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx 1994)
> ➢ "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce" (Marx 1978)

Given that gay marriage had just been legalized in Florida, but was under threat of possibly being overturned, we decided to write a short film that would try to *change* the "ruling ideas" of heteronormativity through farce. Again, returning to the CPMLE, the goal was to back-engineer a media text that could act as an "agent of socialization" working against dominant ideologies around sexuality and inspire viewers to act in an "informed, reflective and engaged" manner when participating in contemporary debates about social mores in a democratic society (NAMLE 2009).

Over a series of conversations, I worked with my filmmaker students to build a *Twilight Zone* style parallel universe that inverted our contemporary taken-for-granted notions of marriage and sexuality. Then, in the spirit of DIY practicality and the Dogme Collective's preference for convenient locations, hand-held camerawork, and natural light (Trischak 1999), I challenged the scriptwriters to work within the constraints of what was available—namely one 2-hour shoot on the set of a college classroom. Together, we came up with a short film about a cultural studies professor with a mysterious past who challenges his students to question

their assumptions about sexuality, gender roles, and the nature of morality in a world where gay rights are the norm and straight rights are deviant. After 2-3 meetings and script revisions, we were ready to bring the "Straightforward" script to class.

The day of the shoot, I brought copies of the script for each student. The filmmakers explained the concept, went over the script, assigned lines to all students who wanted speaking roles, and then ran a few read-throughs before removing the scripts and distributing topic cards so students wouldn't have to memorize lines. After all, they weren't actors! Instead, we shot the classroom scenes in chronological order as a series of short takes, using improvised lines that the students put in their own words for a more natural feel. Along the way, I occasionally paused the shoot so we could repeat takes, tweak performances, collectively brainstorm script revisions, and define specific technical and narrative techniques. Thus, despite not touching any equipment, my students were able to actively participate first-hand and "behind-the-scenes" on a narrative film set.

While not as technically hands-on as a typical media literacy style documentary or PSA video project, this approach combines a potentially more popular and engaging format (fiction) with a more pragmatic method for exposing students to media production experiences. This activity aligns well with the CPMLE's emphasis on learning "skills of expression" used by "effective communicators" (NAMLE 2009). Moreover, it is also something that even a scholar without a background in media production could pull off by outsourcing the practitioner role.

After the classroom shoot, the filmmakers shot an additional scene with me on the street and another with two friends in a dorm. The filmmakers did the editing on their own time, and went through three rounds of revision based on my feedback. When editing was complete, I screened the film in class and facilitated a discussion of the students' reactions—both to the process of making it and the end result—before prompting them to write a short reflection on how the project demonstrated course concepts.

Students offered reflections that demonstrated that real learning had occurred. Some wrote that the time and effort required to shoot such a short scene helped them to grasp why media companies tend to invest in known properties, reliable crowd-pleasing devices like sex and violence, bankable stars, happy endings, etc. Others noted how the theoretically-driven sci-fi reversal got them to question how culture is only one ideological explanation for the natural order of things. For example, by constructing an alternative system for gender roles, based on the Bible, that condemned the traditional nuclear family, the "Straightforward" film project demonstrated—through both an experiential learning process and spreadable final media product[5]—that the structure of society is not inevitable, but rather the result of an ongoing ideological struggle over what constitutes common sense—which both recognizes media's "function as agents of socialization" and viewers' ability to "construct their own meanings from media messages" (NAMLE 2009). Furthermore, the classroom experiment proved that critical theory does not just offer an alternative way of seeing the World, but can also tell a compelling story that entertains while it expands the mind by challenging current arrangements. Moreover, this project may have allowed my students to "learn by doing" but all the doing was ultimately driven by a significant amount of critical and theoretical thinking.

Conclusion

At its best, media literacy is a liberal art that not only helps students to understand their contemporary surround but also invites them to imagine and create alternative futures. In my experience, this perspective complements critical cultural studies theory and methodologies that oppose training workers for today's tasks and instead supports preparing citizens to deconstruct ideologies and construct counterhegemonic texts, cultures, and institutions. So, yes, students can and should learn the production techniques that enable creative expression and distribution of original video content. And this training should include access to, and instruction in, the proper hardware, software, and narrative devices. But a classroom informed by the CPMLE

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[5] Straightforward can be viewed and freely shared here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgP-Q9EHlVw

(NAMLE 2009) should work hard to avoid Masterman's (1985) "technicist trap" of letting the "how" supersede the "why." Indeed, the great irony of the current push to vocationalize universities is that job training may give graduates an initial edge in the job market, but today's marketable skill is tomorrow's anachronism and those who haven't learned how to think—and how to learn—will ultimately be left behind. Similarly, while graduate students researching media literacy who hope to someday land a tenure track job might be wise to learn how to teach video production—after all, the assumption that active citizens must be prepared to create and communicate are central tenets of the CPMLE (NAMLE 2009)—this preliminary advantage on the job market will also be short-lived. I, having only just begun to walk along the narrow path of a tenure track, know all too well that, in the long run, both the quality and security of my *identity* as a scholar-practitioner depend on my ability to reconcile my production practice and theoretical training into a coherent research agenda. It is, in short, more work not to specialize in one or the other; I constantly have to rethink and relearn as I go. But it's also more fun. Lucky for me, my own liberal arts education continues to pay-off and the CPMLE (ibid.) provides me with just the right kind of robust theoretical framework and pedagogical rationale to justify my ongoing efforts to use Jenlink's (2005) scholar-practitioner *orientation* to imagine a different World—both within academe and beyond.

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