*Learning From Events*

Ian Frank, Future University Hakodate, Japan

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**Abstract**
What can be learned from the successful production of large-scale real-world arts events that is useful in the classroom? Through practical examples, this paper attempts to make some connections. We start with a short story of how the same software came to be used to deliver university-level classes on AI and also co-ordinate the international artists of a week-long international festival. Next, we present a series of sections with titles drawn from the literature on events management and related fields. Each section suggests parallels to educational practice. Presented themes are "Selection of resources", "Preparation is everything", "A sense of place", "Event (and video) cycles", "The importance of catch", "The interest curve", and "What is a producer?" The discussion is a kind of "reflection-on-practice" linking two fields. The hope is that educators may come away with some new perspectives and concrete ideas for action. With the Corona pandemic channelling much delivery of educational content into the dimensions of a Zoom screen, recent years have presented an impetus to regard class time as a "production", with diverse visual and audio components that can be switched and modified in real-time. Evidence of the effectiveness of teaching "produced" in this way is presented based on student feedback and evaluation of specific aspects of class delivery.


Keywords: Event Production, Dashboards, Low-Code Interface, Resource Selection, Event Cycle, Interest Curve, Design, Video Contents

**Introduction**

This paper is a "reflection-on-practice" (Schön, 1983) of parallel work in the fields of event production and education. Specifically, it discusses one international arts festival and four university classes that were significantly affected at the start of 2020 by the Corona pandemic, and how re-creating the classes in a new online environment was the inspiration to carry over ideas from the world of events. The paper draws on sources from the events literature, especially the authoritative "Special Events" (Goldblatt, 1997).

The classes forming the basis for the educational reflection were delivered to university-level students in Japan in technical subjects related to AI. It was fortunate that the host university afforded educators significant leeway to continue experimenting with fully online classes for a full three years.

By viewing class environments through the lens of event production, we discuss how the pivot to online gave new impetus to consider the opportunities for:

- uniqueness/ceremony and ritual,
- resource use, and
- cyclical growth.

Evidence of the effectiveness of teaching "produced" in this way is presented based on student feedback, and evaluation of specific aspects of class delivery.

The paper starts with some background and motivation from the author's experience in events. Next, it presents a series of sections with themes drawn from the literature on events management and related fields. Each section suggests parallels to educational practice. The extensive possible list of themes was compressed for space considerations to "Selection of resources", "Preparation is everything", "A sense of place", "Event (and video) cycles", "The importance of catch", "The interest curve", and finally "What is a producer?"

**A Story**

In August of 2019, the author was sitting with a friend in a cafe discussing the arts festival that together we had just finished producing. We were tired. The festival was in its 12th year and was experiencing some success. Over 12 years, we had brought over 2,000 artists from more than 50 countries to Japan, and the event had grown to a full-week fixture in the local summer calendar. Working on this as volunteers in addition to our main jobs, the event scale was exceeding our ability to control the logistics.

There are apps for just about everything, and festival management is no exception. Some companies also offer tailored systems, but the attractive interfaces are typically paired with unattractive prices. A further complication was that to support an international user base, we required an environment with extensive support for both English and Japanese.

Developments in cloud computing and low code environments have encouraged a "roll your own" approach, so we attempted to create our own low-cost solution. We were attracted to the online collaboration system "Airtable" by the way it offered both flexible back-ends and also approachable interfaces. For some months, we made promising progress, especially

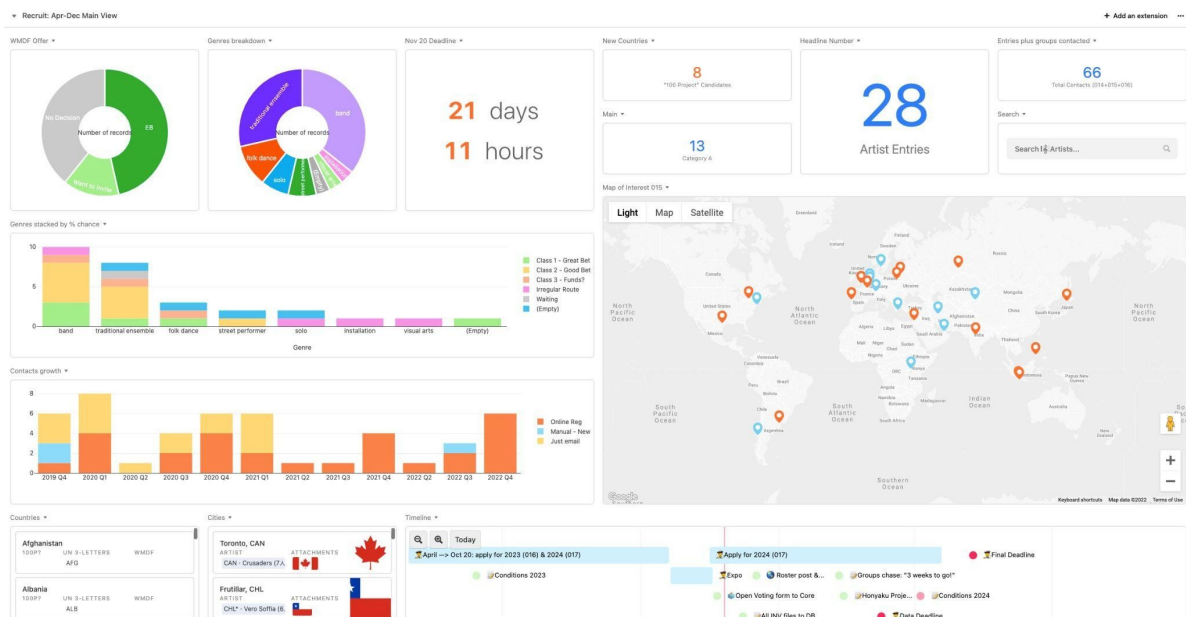making extensive use of the "dashboard" feature, of which Figure 1 shows an actual example from our event.



Figure 1: Screenshot of Airtable dashboard developed for WMDF event (http://wmdf.org)

When the Corona pandemic changed everything in 2020, the arts world entered a period of extreme challenge, and education performed an online pivot. Since the Airtable platform had proved promising and extremely versatile for event management, applying a similar framework to classes presented itself as an obvious extension. Several factors combined to make this jump to a tailored learning system based on Airtable appealing: first, the four courses being taught by the author were outside any LMS environment, so there was no "sunk cost" of invested time: development could start from a blank canvas. Secondly, the one obvious alternative candidate LMS ─ the system deployed by the host university for the classes ─ was due for retirement in one year, with the replacement system undecided. And thirdly, the dashboard functionality in particular had proved very useful in the field of events, yet seemed to be unavailable in other education-focused systems.

An example of a dashboard from the system resulting from the educational application of Airtable is shown in Figure 2 on the next page (the example is from an actual class, with any details that could identify individuals masked). As with the events dashboard, the interface is itself interactive, allowing functionality such as template-based auto-generation of email windows, initiation of auto-translation scripts (students generally write in their native Japanese for these classes), and automated creation of "portfolio"-style pdf documents for students to use as physical records of their activity history in a class. In general, the use of Airtable provided configurable real-time monitoring and reporting features that allowed class time to become more interactive. For a more detailed presentation of the teaching ideas and rationale behind the interface, and of the overall *koto-tsukuri* educational philosophy motivating the interactive class delivery, see the separate paper "Koto-tsukuri: Education at the Interface" in this Proceedings. The remainder of the current paper uses the staging point of this shared interface as the basis for further reflection on the parallels that can be drawn between a dual perspective on education and events.
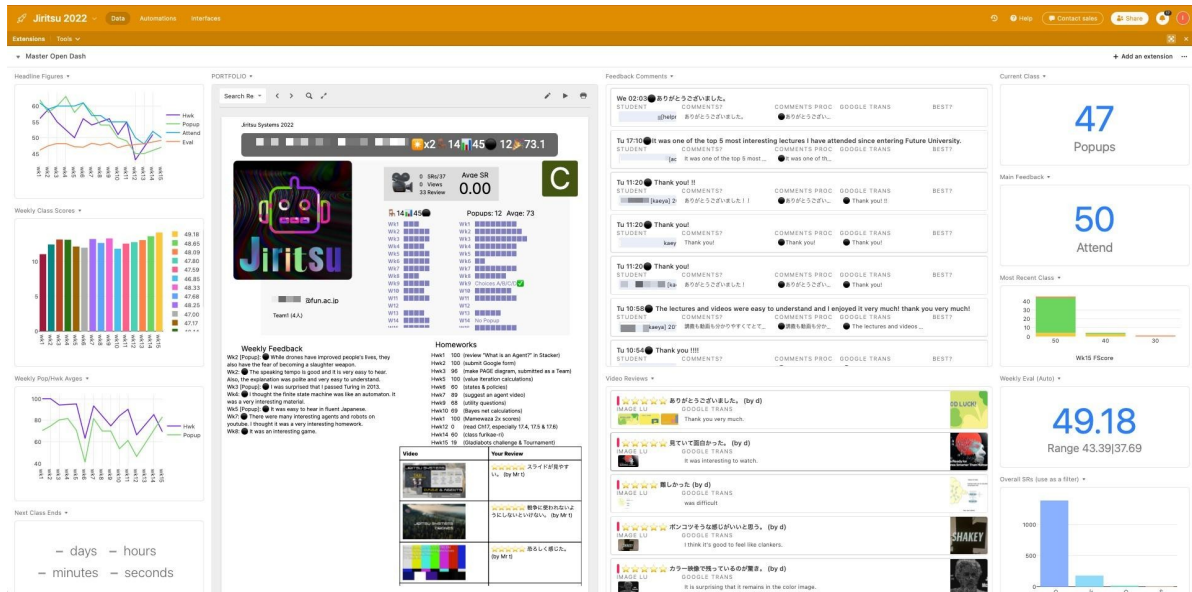
Figure 2: Screenshot of Airtable dashboard developed for class delivery

## What is a Special Event?

To ground our discussion, it's useful to establish some events terminology. The Introduction has already mentioned Goldblatt's excellent source of advice for event managers. The book has the subtitle "Best Practices in Modern Event Management", and presents both practical guidelines and concrete stories from direct experience. At the time Goldblatt produced the first edition, there was no established academic discipline for events, so even a definition of the term "special event" was required. In the tradition of naming and framing that Schön (1983) identifies in the "reflective practitioner", Goldblatt's definition is a good basis for the reflection in this paper:

> *A special event is a unique moment in time celebrated with ceremony and ritual to satisfy specific needs. (ibid, P2)*

Goldblatt credits the work of anthropologist Victor Turner as one of the inspirations for this form of words. If applied to education, most educators could probably point to some aspect of their teaching that falls within the boundaries, such as invited talks by special guest speakers to engage and inspire students, or maybe one-off interactive workshops that provide memorable experiences related to class contents. But to what extent would Goldbatt's definition generally be reflected in day-to-day teaching?

This paper will explore aspects of teaching in the light of Goldblatt's definition, with some emphasis on the online conditions of the last three years. The following sections draw their titles from the world of events, with each section illustrated by a student comment submitted in response to class contents via the Airtable LMS. Note that coincidentally, in his recently published memoirs, Goldblatt himself (2019) describes how in the 1970s he taught a series of classes for a continuing education programme for The Open University of Washington DC, including one called *Teaching as a Performing Art*.

## Selection of Resources

*"I thought it would be interesting if a mini hologram of Professor Ian appeared in front of me and taught the class."*

— *Student feedback, 2022*

This tongue-in-cheek class feedback from a student is technically feasible (for example, Hologauze® is produced by events industry leaders Holotronica), but impractical. Early in Chapter 1 of his book, Goldblatt (1997, p.21) identifies "the rapid changes in available resources" as a key "challenge and opportunity" facing practitioners. The specific prescription for event managers is: "Your challenge is to select those resources that fit... and cultivate them to ensure the highest consistent quality."

At the level of an event, it's usual to interpret the "fit" of resources in terms of finances, time pressure, logistics, available manpower, and the simple market demand of the local audiences and supply possibilities for artists. For a class, the factors to consider might include the size and composition of the class, the different learning objectives, different teaching styles and methodologies, in addition to budget, materials, and technology. It may be common practice to seek feedback from students and other stakeholders to ensure that the resources being used are effective in supporting student learning, but an aspiration to "ensure the highest consistent quality" sets a high bar, and the degree to which resources may be deemed to "fit" may vary greatly among educators, even teaching similar courses at the same institution.

Let's take an example from education that is an extreme outlier: the work of Prof David Malan at Harvard University. A New Yorker article (Orbey 2020) gives an accessible account of the CS50 (Computer Science) course that Malan teaches. The article describes how a team of production technologists works with Malan to "film, edit, and upload not only the course's lectures, office hours, and how-to videos but also a slew of ancillary entertainment". The lectures are filmed in 4K high resolution, and Malan has written that the course's high production value is "part of its pedagogy". The course often employs up to a hundred teaching assistants, and Malan estimates that even just the "human side" of the cost "amounts to at least two hundred thousand dollars a semester."

The article summarises that "CS50's size and privileged status have rankled some at Harvard" citing one student comment "What sort of a class sells merchandise? And how can they afford t shirts for 800 people, along with stress balls, sunglasses, and more? Where is this money coming from?" An event organiser might answer "Maybe, it's quite good classes that have merchandise…", but it's obviously far beyond most teachers to take production to the level of a CS50.

In many education institutions it will be up to individual teachers to establish the limits on time and resources to deliver the "highest" quality. However, for the special case of video, it could be argued that the switch to online presented some compelling reasons in favour of at least some video content. First, there is the way that video makes use of the learning environment: multimedia elements such as images, animation, and audio are a natural fit for engaging students in an immersive way through a Zoom screen. Second, the robustness of video delivery lends the flexibility to adapt to online or hybrid classes, and gives reliability even when unexpected situations occur. Thirdly, videos can be watched at the student's own pace and can be accessed at any time, making them a useful tool for catering to students who learn best in different ways, even when direct observation of the students becomes more

challenging. Finally, videos can be "curated" from third-party sources as well as created specifically for a class. Whatever the provenance, one key in resource selection is offered by Brame (2015): "Make sure the material feels like it is for *these* students in *this* class."

Moving classes online, especially employing videos to present main content, is time-consuming work. The New Yorker article reports that Malan can offset some of the expenses of delivering CS50 classes as "R&D", and this may be a solution available to some portion of educators. Access to financial resources can make it possible for individual educators to save on time (for example, by outsourcing some production requirements) and institutionally, there is the possibility for leveraging economies of scale by introducing central organisations such as "Content Creation Centers" that have the tools and the potential to support educators in the creation of digital contents. The following section details some approaches that were possible without significant financial resources, or the benefit of centralised support. Again, the presentation is framed from the perspective of events management.

## Preparation is Everything

> **"***I'm surprised that Zoom goes down. Sometimes, my PC also goes down, and breaks some files…*"**
>
> — *Student feedback, 2020*

The phrase "preparation is everything" is a core refrain for event staff. It embodies the philosophy that everything possible should be done before the gates open. The goal during the event itself should be to just ensure that the schedule is unfolding as it should, and making adjustments or dealing with problems or unexpected opportunities as they arise.

One place to see the effects of preparation in education is in class evaluation. The graph of Figure 3 shows students' class evaluations of 3 years of the author's online classes using a simple 5-point scale evaluation. The Japanese university calendar is split into two semesters, and this data represents student evaluations from four distinct sole-taught classes, two in the first semester and two in the second (a total of over 6,000 unique student evaluations).

The feedback instrument for this data collection is the straightforward question shown in the figure, administered via an Airtable form included at the end of each week's class materials. Students are required to submit a form each week to record their attendance, and the graph represents the data numerically by assigning a score of "100" to the top answer and "20" to the lowest answer, as indicated in the figure.

The graph indicates an overall trend of increasing satisfaction year-on-year and across classes, as well as from the start of a term to the end. For perspective, an average of 95 on this graph equates to three out of every four students selecting the top evaluation and the remaining students selecting the second evaluation. Any student selecting "OK" or below quickly reduces the overall average value.

The low starting values of the 2020 semester reflect the gulf between preparation and requirements at the onset of online classes, and the gradual upward evaluation trend shows that remedies were largely incremental. Detailing all the resources brought to bear over three years is beyond the scope of a short paper, but the illustration of Figure 4 gives an overview that focuses on software and other content services.
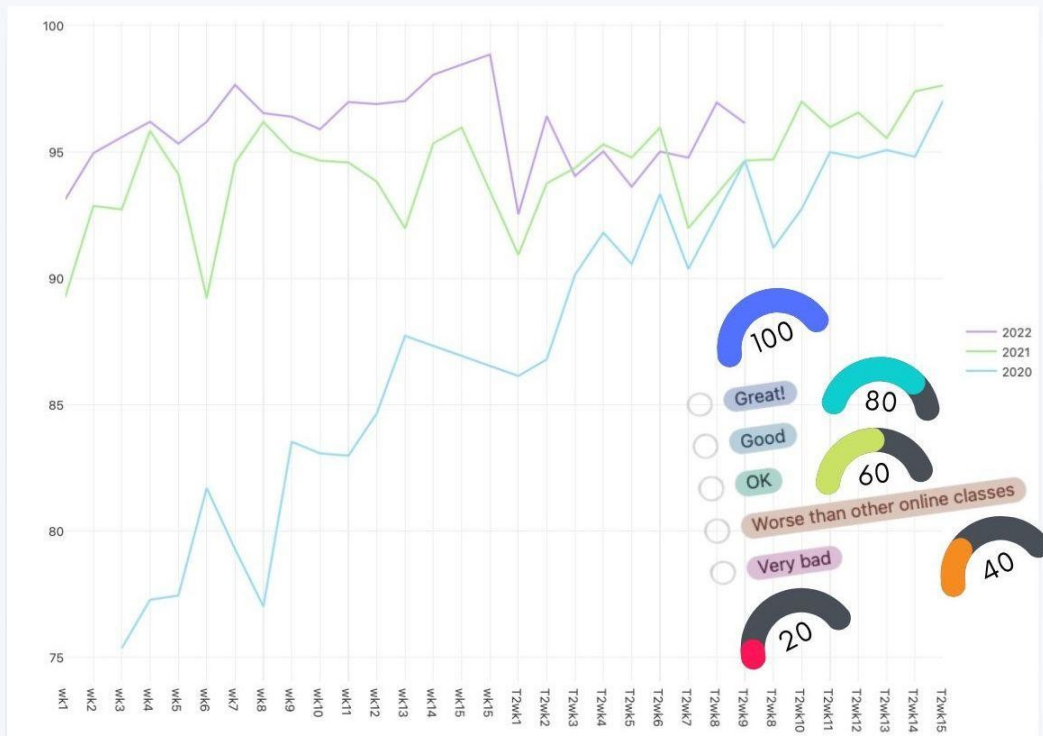
Figure 3: Weekly class evaluation results of 15-week courses, from the start of Corona
(2022 classes not yet completed at the time of writing)



Figure 4: Resources deployed over the course of 3 years of online class development

A large amount of preparation time was given to the creation of video resources that brought

the flexibility to "chunk" class time into segments with distinct character. In general, any content of a technically difficult nature was given priority for video conversion, as such content is often "preparation-heavy". Having compact, pre-prepared video for this content can enable students to study and to review the essential aspects of a class at their own pace. The relative ease of presenting other contents (homework reviews, class administration, responding to student written questions) made them the logical choice for "live" presentation, where recovery from errors or glitches is less critical to the successful delivery of the class as an "event."

**A Sense of Place**

> *"The way the class started was so cool that I want the countdown to continue."*
> — *Student feedback, 2022*

This quote is a recent student reaction to the "splash screens" that were introduced during the second year of online teaching to welcome students who join class Zoom sessions early. Each 15-week course has its own background screen designed to convey the mood of the class, as well as individual background music, and a series of small animation "flourishes" that depict contents covered in the class (e.g, an animated steam engine that recalls class contents on programming train networks).

When staging real-world events, Goldblatt argues that creating a sense of place is essential in creating a feeling of community and belonging among the attendees. He notes that a strong sense of place can be achieved by highlighting and embracing the unique characteristics of the event's location. For real-world events, there are obvious possibilities such as BGM, balloon arches at entrances, physical decorations and eye-catching signage (searchlights placed at four corners of an outdoor event can bring curious locals from miles around). Turnaround times in regular face-to-face classrooms make the design of space a challenge (some levels of education get this more right, with homeroom systems where students that use the same classroom often, and can decorate a space to make it their "own" over the course of an extended period of time). This was one area where, with the mindset of creating uniqueness and some ceremony or ritual, online classes more readily lent themselves to the creation of an experience that had something of the character of an event.

Other more general design considerations such as Goldblatt's explicit directions to consider "all five senses", and a full discussion of the issues surrounding visual identity deserve their own sections. The notion of a sense of place is used here as a representative of one pathway towards Goldblatt's definition of an event, and one that felt like a significant piece in the puzzle of teaching online. One further illustrative example is interesting for the way it grew out of the presence of a constraint. At the start of the switch to online, incorporating a live video feed of the class's host university was considered, as a way of generating atmosphere and maintaining some link to "normal" school life. But, the absence of any webcam (due to privacy concerns) meant that a practice of showing the live camera of the nearest park was started, and this slowly grew into sharing other locations around town, and then around the world, via associations with class contents (the bears of Katmai National Park in Alaska became exemplars of "intelligent agents"). This example of serendipity suggests how, with some attention, a "sense of place" can actually be expanded online, where it no longer needs to be limited by physical location.

**Event (and Video) Cycles**

*"I want to watch it over and over"*

*— Student feedback, 2021*

There is no shortage in the literature of multi-stage models for managing and promoting systemic improvement over time. Examples from education include the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, the ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) more common in instructional design, and the Kirkpatrick Model, which is a four-level evaluation model that assesses the effectiveness of training (level one, reaction, measures learners' reactions to a training, while level two, learning, assesses what was learned, level three, behaviour, measures changes in learners' behaviour or performance and finally, level four, results, addresses the impact of a training on an organisation).

Goldblatt's "event management process" is a five-step model similar to the ADDIE steps, but with variations in naming: "Research, Design, Planning, Coordination, Evaluation" (Goldblatt, p52). Although not differing in its general concept, the "Event Cycle" of Aleksi Kaunisto (2021) is notable for the way it conflates the first four steps of the ADDIE or Goldblatt model into just "plan, organise", and then dedicates a full three steps for the "evaluation", splitting it into "measure, analyse, share" (see Figure 5).
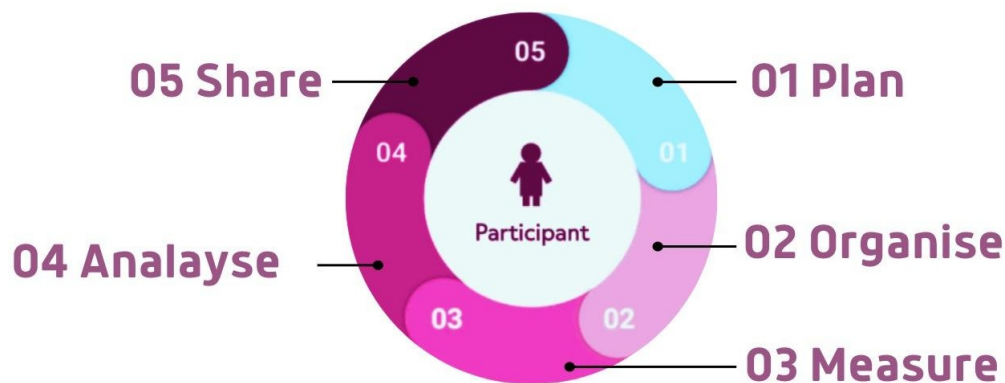


Figure 5: Event cycle with emphasis on evaluative steps, after (Kaunisto, 2021)

One way to explain this changed emphasis is that many events generate an abundance of review material such as photos and videos, and may be supported by audiences only too willing to volunteer feedback. Additional reviews and reactions provided by print media and social media can further enrich the evaluation process. Organisers have a wealth of material to tailor an event to specific audience needs and preferences, leading to more satisfied attendees, who are more likely to return to future editions of the event.

In discussing the effects of the pandemic on the events industry, Garcia (2021) has pointed out that large-scale cancellations "both imposed and enabled much needed time to take perspective and revisit dominant practices". In education, on the other hand, many may have found that already limited time was further challenged to almost impossible extents. Nevertheless, one almost inevitable side-effect of a move to online is an increase in the volume and types of materials that remain as a reference after teaching a class. Pressing 'record' on Zoom is a much simpler operation than videoing a face-to-face session, and especially for classes electing to make use of (short) video resources as we discussed above, the opportunity for review and sharing is increased drastically. Hirsch (2015) uses the phrase "next generation" to describe videos made with the benefit of extensive reflection on

previous experience, and summarises his journey of producing over 100 videos in the context of flipped learning as follows: "Over time, I honed my message, my delivery, and my coverage areas". The topic of "Teamwork" is deserving of its own section when discussing the lessons that can be learned from events, but one concrete yet straightforward recommendation that can be made is the cultivation of a network of supporters willing to help speed this kind of improvement process by providing critical evaluation and honest feedback on both plans and materials.

**The Importance of Catch**

> *"No AI, No FUN Life"*
>
> *— Student feedback, 2021*

In Japan, event producers and others in creative industries will be familiar with the term "catch copy". It is an example of a loan word created from English that has no direct English equivalent (the term for this is *wasei-eigo[1]*). The closest translation for "catch copy" may be "advertising copy", but that has a solely commercial feel. The "catch" that event producers in Japan are used to thinking about is more closely connected with the thought of how the text will be presented and the overall design of the message delivery.

The British advertising tycoon David Ogilvy, known as the "Father of Advertising", pointed out that "people do read lengthy advertisements if they are skillfully written". This need for skilful writing is a constant presence in the creation of events. Everything, from group profiles to fliers, websites and social media, even signage, are opportunities to pass on information and feelings in specific ways. It can be disheartening to craft long profiles for artists only to have few people read them, so the natural progression is towards shorter "catch copy", presented in more creative ways.

The carry-over from event experience to class materials is best demonstrated here with a concrete example of the banners created to share student comments and act as a springboard for feedback and discussion in following weeks' classes (see Figure 6). Each week's class materials usually feature several of these designs. With the aid of mixing design and feedback in this way, a single week's class contents can be constructed in one web page, avoiding issues of students becoming unable to follow link trails as a class progresses.



Figure 6: Example Q&A banner for presenting selected student comments

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[1] https://eikaiwa.weblio.jp/column/knowledge/unnatural_english/catch-copy-is-japlish

**The Interest Curve**

> *"I was very surprised that the class production was wonderful. I am looking forward to the weekly lectures."*
>
> — *Student feedback, 2021*

The field of computer gaming has a growing intersection with events due to the growth of online gaming, and valuable ideas for online classes can be found in the output of the enormous number of streamers who share their gameplay online. This section makes a more concrete borrowing from computer games in the form of the discussion of "interest curves" provided by Schell (2019) in "The Art of Game Design". Although Schell's book is a design manual organised around principles and rules of thumb that he and other game designers have come to rely on in their practice, the understanding of interest is an important part of events, and the treatment by Schell is an engaging one. We can only give the flavour here, through the example of Figure 7.
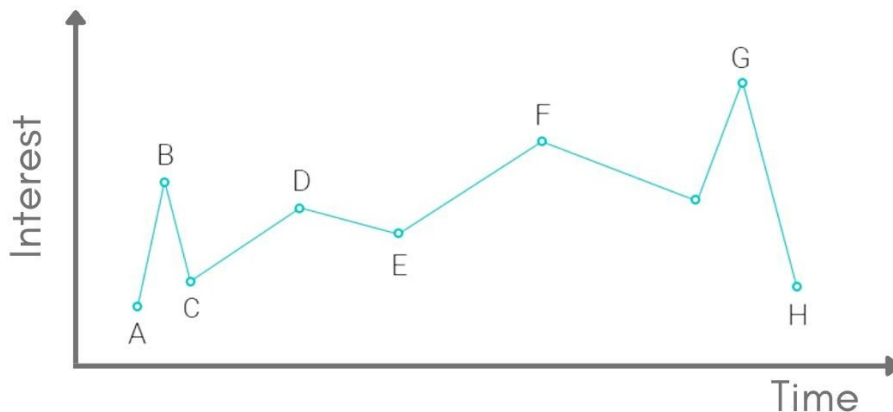


Figure 7: An interest curve for part of a game, after (Schell, 2019, p.301)

This curve starts with a certain degree of starting interest at point A, and then goes to point B, which is an example of a "hook". Both A and B give hints to the future development and help keep attention during the section from C to F. Point G represents a kind of climax before point H, which is the end.

A crucial message from this curve is that the points of high interest are only high because they are contrasted against points of lower interest. This is an easy message to overlook when planning events, or classes. With so many educators faced with balancing the time and resource demands of moving contents online, yet also now with some years of experience to draw upon, it may be that education has reached a stage where research on the pace of classes, courses, and student timetables could be profitable in helping individuals and institutions to better understand how to create effective and engaging online classes, especially in this era of "Zoom fatigue" (see Bailenson, 2021).

**What is a Producer?**

> *"I'm sad it's almost over"*
>
> — *Student feedback, penultimate class, 2021*

There are many possible emotions that students can experience when completing a course. The above feedback comment provides a point of departure to look at the nature of what it

means to be a "producer". If we again turn to Goldblatt (1997, p224-225), we find the summary that you need to "research, design, and plan, but also must coordinate all of the event elements" and "must never allow your own taste to be compromised" as you "...challenge to produce the very finest......with the time and the logistical and financial resources that may be allocated." The emphasis on resources and quality were encountered already above, but here Goldblatt provides the additional logic that "your next opportunity to present an event is directly tied to the one you produce today" (*ibid)*.

The experience from events is that this link between performance and future opportunity is keenly felt (the show business maxim is "leave them wanting more"). In contrast, there may be areas of education where some instead feel there is disincentive to teaching well. Rather than better pay or new opportunities, high performance may be more correlated with larger class sizes and more students. Additionally, in a system where funding is tied to student enrollment, institutions may feel pressure to focus on recruiting and retaining students rather than improving the quality of their instruction. This can lead to a situation where educators are rewarded for quantity over quality, which may not be in the best interest of students or the education system as a whole.

In the past, it may have been that educational job security and advancement were often tied to student performance, but educators now may be evaluated based on a variety of factors, such as their ability to implement new teaching methods, their ability to integrate technology into the classroom, and their ability to collaborate with other educators. This shift may also have resulted in a disconnect between an educator's performance and their job security and advancement.

But while such shifts may have brought about new challenges for educators, they have also opened up opportunities to explore new methods of teaching, to experiment with new technologies and to develop new skills. The period of the pandemic since 2020 has coincidentally been a time of rapid progress in the field of AI, with the ChatGPT release falling during the ACE conference, and a growing awareness that machine learning systems will be able to significantly alleviate some of the time costs that to date have inevitably accompanied core production requirements such as text, design and even video. One student's expression of hope for the future may be a good way to close:

> *I think ChatGPT will pioneer a new kind of education, one that will require more creative thinking, assuming AI tools are used.*
> — *Student feedback, January 2023.*

**Conclusion**

From a starting point of the experience of using Airtable to create databases and dashboard visualisations, we have looked at some possible crossovers between the fields of event management and education. Although not so commonly considered together, both are practices that require a high degree of organisation, attention to detail, and the ability to adapt to unexpected challenges. Additionally, both require a deep understanding of the audience and the ability to engage and meet their needs. We looked at the role played by selecting resources to fit circumstances, preparation and a sense of place, cycles of improvement for sustaining or developing quality, and the notion of what it means to be a "producer". Overall, if there is something here that can aid in framing, understanding and navigating the rapidly

changing landscape of education, especially online, we may look forward to raising the curtain on the following acts with a refreshed cast of characters.

**Acknowledgements**

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**Contact email:** ianf@fun.ac.jp