Focussing on the Critical: Film Pedagogy in the Modern University

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Abstract
This study is about the problems that arise for film education models once they are drawn back into the processes, systems and norms of higher education and asked to respond to issues around fairness, diversity and power. In our post-1992 UK university, the degree offering included a BA (Hons) Film. Founded by distinguished film scholars and supported by a thriving film and television industry, it operated successfully for many years, attracting large numbers of applicants and students moving successfully into the screen industries. Given its reputation and location graduates continued to be placed in the industry at good rates, and films produced won awards. This was often achieved by moving outside the parameters of acceptable higher education practices, making dubious claims about the industry relevance of organizational arrangements and requiring a disproportionate share of university resources. The admissions arrangements and curriculum design actively discouraged diversity, and the intensity of the programme, conducted without evidence of its efficacy, privileged students from wealthy backgrounds in a way that was not seen as problematic by the course team. This paper examines the reasons for this and how it reflects the perception by staff and students of the film industry. It discusses some of our interventions and flags up considerations for reconciling the culture of film with the conventions of higher education. Our experience is offered as typical rather than exceptional in incorporating this difficult and complex creative practice into a university setting.

Keywords: Film, Film Education, Film Pedagogy, Culture

Introduction

This paper emerges from the experience of the authors' work across the past four years in reforming a well-regarded, long standing film course. Our initial assessment indicated systemic and structural problems: over-intense timetabling, imbalance of assessment tasks, incommensurate student experiences and unsustainable resource demands. The way the course team considered their provision informed a course design replicating the intensity of a 'Film School', without reference to the context in which the course was situated (a large, multi-disciplinary university). The course team considered their provision special in this regard, an idea that flattered students, who enthusiastically endorsed the idea of its exceptionalism.

In sharing our experiences with counterparts elsewhere, it became clear that many of us are dealing with similar issues, especially amongst London providers, given the popularity of undergraduate film courses in the capital. Therefore, whilst our focus here is on aspects of our own provision, we argue that many of the challenges identified are typical of the dissonance between the culture of film and the higher education sector. This is particularly acute for courses situated in post-1992 institutions with their historical commitment to practical learning, for which film should be an easy fit.

This study draws upon quantitative and qualitative data reflecting the state of the programme at Westminster but which we suggest plays out similarly elsewhere. These include standard internal and external statistical data covering student demographics, recruitment and graduate outcomes, statistics for the university overall and equivalence nationally in the sector. Student experience in the UK is measured using the National Student Survey (NSS) issued to students in their final year, and resources are analysed through income/expenditure and staffing costs. Our qualitative assessments are consolidated from a range of sources, including student feedback, quality processes (exploring curriculum design, delivery and assessment processes), our experience of student complaints and disciplinary situations, and informal and formal staff feedback. In practice, this resulted in the production of a critical review document and several supporting papers, which were developed to inform change processes and reform several aspects of recruitment, course identity, curriculum and pedagogical approach.

Structural and Systemic Issues

An important driver of this enquiry was the feeling that we were failing in many quarters to meet the demand for graduates with specific skills during a time of rapid expansion of the film industry. Alongside broadly dismissive industry views of Higher Education film provision (McCaffrey & Healey, 2018), a stream of recent reports provided advice about what we should be doing from bodies responsible for the development of film talent (Wilkes, Carey, & Florisson, 2020), (Howe & Cortvriend, 2022), (British Film Institute, 2022a).

Further reports during this period set out the importance of a more diverse working population in a film industry that is predominately white, middle-class and male (Nwonka & Malik, 2021), (British Film Institute, 2022b, p. 17). We recognised similar issues in student feedback through reports and complaints, which highlighted the perception of inequitable experiences and inequality of opportunity across student cohorts.

These concerns were reinforced by dealing with unhappy, overworked staff, strongly loyal to their subject and its legacy approach to film education, who were often withering about the university's perceived lack of support for a course bringing glory to the university in the form of awards and accolades. This was counterweighted by the internal suspicion from the institution that despite the disproportionate resources allocated to it, there were serious problems arising from a sense of exceptionalism, an ignorance of university processes and procedures and an unwillingness to accept the university as the context of study.

We began by thinking this was all very unhealthy and in need of reform and improvement. Our first step was to identify the scale and scope of the problems. This required examination of the students we recruited, staff priorities, curriculum and pedagogy to explore the dissonances. We uncovered issues about student and staff perceptions of the priority given to a concept of industry and the character of study to prepare for participating in it that were far removed from the context and values of Higher Education in the UK. The insights below indicate that, at the very least, we needed to reconcile some of these forces if teaching practical film wasn't simply to shift to the private sector with all its attendant issues about access and demographics, in support of an industry that is trying hard to tackle its shortcomings in the diversity of its workforce. There are structural issues around what students are trained for, with a rapidly expanding industry needing technical expertise and practical skills and an HE sector training for the 'glamour' roles of directors, screenwriters and cinematographers.

Some of these issues are not new. The inability to reconcile the culture and operation of the Film School at the Royal College of Art with the rest of the institution led to its closure in 1997 (Petrie & Stoneman, 2014, p. 153). Since then, like most institutions, our university has become clearer about its values, using them to determine curricula, access and behaviours, which appear increasingly at odds with a notion about what the film industry requires.

The UK HE Environment

British universities can be variously categorised; most pertinent to this discussion is the group of universities referred to as 'Post-1992'. This group was created when the Conservative government of that year changed the designation of institutions known as polytechnics, hitherto administered at a national level by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), to universities (Harvey, 2005). The change devolved degree-awarding powers (which they had not had previously) directly to the new institutions for their courses, which were focussed on industrial and practical processes and production. As polytechnics and then as new universities, the Post-92s have generally survived as teaching institutions that conduct some research, in contrast to the Russell Group of institutions that focus on research and depend far less on student fees.

More recently, the character of these institutions is reflected in publicly stated values, a popular way to explain the role of the university to the public and act as a guide for behaviours and choices. Most UK universities include statements of values on their websites and in their public documents. They often refer to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) as part of the institutional framework, and address social issues like climate change, the UN Social Development Goals (SDGs) or efforts at decolonising the curriculum as well as vocational orientation. Whilst these values vary across institutions, one value is ubiquitous: the universal principle that all students are treated equally. This may be tackled in different ways, but this core principle must be reconciled within the course at least and beyond where

possible. This is partly driven by the idea of higher education as the means of social mobility and meritocracy. It is also a reflection of the fact that all UK domiciled undergraduates pay exactly the same fee, £9250, regardless of the cost to the institution of their provision. So film students, provided with a dedicated infrastructure, specialist facilities, technical support and expensive equipment, pay the same as students on 'chalk and talk' courses where costs are significantly lower. This extends into the 'Learning Outcomes' model of Higher Education that sets out the learning destinations for all students at module and course level in advance and expects them to be able to be met by everyone enrolled on the course with the resources provided.

There are many routes into English HE in a system where 39% of 18-year-olds go to university and approximately 45% of all young people now attend (UCAS, 2022a). The mixture of A-levels, International Baccalaureate and BTEC qualifications are augmented by a range of access programmes, NVQs and more recently T-levels, with overseas qualifications rated against a scale of notional points. Despite efforts, especially from the Post-92 sector, to improve participation rates from economically challenged areas, there remains a sliding scale of applicants against relative affluence. In 2021, the most economically disadvantaged quintile of the UK population by the POLAR4 methodology (HEFCE, 2017) participated in Higher Education at 23.5%, its highest ever rate. For the most affluent quintile this participation rate was 52% (UCAS, 2022b). These benchmarks are notable given the positioning of film in Higher Education in the UK is mostly in Post-92s, which have the strongest commitment to widening participation, admitting an intake from a diversified educational environment where knowledge is represented in ways beyond the intellectual processes associated with A-levels. For Russell Group institutions, A-Levels remain a gold standard. For Post-92s they remain the route for the highest proportion of students, but by no means the only one.

Westminster's BA Film

After a reorganisation of the institution in 2018, the BA Film programme at Westminster came under the jurisdiction of the Westminster School of Arts. From the external perspective, it demonstrated obvious measures of success:

- Buoyant recruitment: more than 800 applicants for 65-70 places
- High NSS overall satisfaction scores (90+)
- Good retention of students completing the course
- High proportions of 1st Class and 2:1 degrees (more than 90%)
- Regular success at awards and festivals
- Strong student employability

These typical measures of success were in themselves a good example of the potential for datasets to mislead. In the case of the course in question, the direct feedback of students and staff indicated a less happy picture. The course appeared to lurch from crisis to crisis, the demands on staff and students outsized in relation to the tasks at hand, a disregard for the needs of students outside the university regularly reported and incessant demands for resources for unplanned or under-planned activities. This led to us digging deeper to understand what was happening. Certainly some measures were being manipulated – a question was how much these successful outcomes were to do with the students themselves - i.e. what they brought with them as an inherent advantage, and understood to be of advantage to them, regardless of their experience. What were the demographics, entry tariffs, learning

styles, intrinsic motivation, curriculum biases and family connections that produced what were generally thought to be high quality outcomes?

The following table gives an indication of the starting point for many of our students on the BA Film. This gives a comparison at entry for the BA Film cohort with the University of Westminster in general and the national intake for 2018. As is evident, they were more similar to the national picture (with the exception of gender split) than the profile of our particular Post-92. There are many more ways in which they were atypical for Westminster and nationally that we have not included here. But against the national trends as published by UCAS, the body responsible for university admissions in England and Wales, there are some substantial differences.

Table 1: 2018 Undergraduate Population by National/University and Course

2018 %	National %*	Westminster %	Westminster Film %
Gender	F57.3:M42.7	F59:M41	F42.9:M57.1
Ethnicity	White 71:BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) 27.2** (Asian 12.2/ Black 8.5/ Other 6.5)	White 41:BAME 59 (Asian 31/ Black 14.4/ Other 13.7)	White 86.8: BAME 13.2 (Asian 5.3/ Black 0/ Other 7.9)
POLAR 4 Q1	12.6	20.3	10.5
POLAR 4 Q5	29.2	11.1	31.6
EntryTariff Points	135.1	112.9	152.2

*National figures source: (UCAS, 2018a)
**Not all students declared ethnicity

As UCAS notes, the participation of BAME and Q1 students is higher in urban conurbations, especially London, than the national picture. According to UCAS, (UCAS, 2018b) more than 20% of young people in London in 2018 identified as Black and this is the region most Westminster Film students come from. While demographic data was unavailable for unsuccessful applicants to the course, there were more than 800 applicants for 63 places, defining it as a very competitive course to gain entrance to, in a university categorized by UCAS as a 'low-tariff' university, i.e. one requiring lower entry tariff points, and therefore less selective. Tariff points are calculated on the academic prerequisites students with which students apply, from the routes outlined above.

The figures in Table 1 indicate that the BA Film cohort for 2018 was slightly richer, more male, better qualified academically and less ethnically diverse than the national picture of university entrants. However, when the University of Westminster averages are taken into account, this cohort looks like a genuine outlier: a gender imbalance to be sure, but a large enough cohort to expect some national trends (like ethnicity or relative affluence) to align. Instead, the course had half the university average of POLAR4 Q1 students and nearly three times the average number of affluent students from Q5. Of note is the absence of students identifying as Black in a city with a substantial population of young Black people. Tariffs were not the sole criteria for entry, and the average is well above the advertised minimum, and the cohort outperformed the national average tariff by more than 2 full grades at A level.

Film Course Structures and Pedagogical Approaches.

Different approaches to film pedagogy exist within UK HE depending upon the type of institution and the rationale for the course. Generally, career pathway-oriented courses maintain partitions between departments and prevent flexibility for students to move between crew roles and those seeking a career beyond the main roles in filmmaking. Generalist courses at UG level allow students to develop understanding and experience of the full production process alongside a specialism, usually including embedded film theory and sufficient flexibility and choice for a variety of outcomes that students can explore for themselves. For Westminster, historically this choice has been of the status of creative input: directors and writers have been privileged over other disciplines and practical projects are organized against this principle. Students are 'trained into' a hierarchy within film production (necessary for safe and productive working processes, specialisms in each area, and smooth running of productions), with a curriculum dominated by the ideal of large-scale production. Essentially, Westminster's Film course followed the model of a production house, with lecturers at the top acting as executive producers (and crediting themselves in this fashion on student films) and the projects' creative trajectory determined by the allocation of the high-status roles amongst students.

There are several concerns in relation to this, the first being the university's values of equity of experience that are partially in conflict with the hierarchical structures of film. As much as all the roles within a crew are important, some roles are more so than others – and they are the ones that students covet from the outset because projects are decided by who fills these roles. An ongoing problem is how students are selected for roles. This is often done by a pitching process, that favors students with more cultural or social capital – those able to present themselves better, or better able to form social networks that support their claims. As one student complainant put it recently in their anonymous NSS comments;

> Many times, the structure they put us into blocked the opportunity for individual creativity. Their approach on group work was not constructive at all. The system how they give opportunities for students in the student films is really unfair. No quality of work is taken into account….only the people with the biggest friend group get a chance to work in major roles…so many of us felt that they had lots of ideas and creativity which they could not fulfil on the course because we were constantly put into assistant roles in project, which is not something you would need a degree for.

This frustration demonstrates the inequality of experience – students with certain characteristics not always related to their aptitude are favored in terms of their access to specialist roles. There are other inequalities within the system as well in the cost of filmmaking: where the school pays, it is at the expense of other courses, but if students self-fund their productions then it becomes about their ability to raise funds, and that favors more affluent students. Finally, when the timetabling and scheduling is very intensive (as it often is, particularly when based on film school models rather than university norms), students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and in need of part time work or those who have caring responsibilities struggle to participate on an equal basis.

As managers of this provision, our investigations into the reality of student and staff experience and the extent to which it was at odds with the data and the university's values led us to some serious questions. The first was how we could address these structural inequalities that created great tension and were incommensurate with our mission as a university. Second

was whether taking a lead in helping students to understand and challenge unfair power structures within the industry may empower or at least forewarn them. How do we teach this, to help them to understand the power dynamics of an industry that appears to thrive on them?

Who teaches? What do they teach? Why?

Brian Winston, a well-known film practitioner and scholar, posits a traditional dichotomy between theory and practice delivery as the source of dissonance in film schools:

> The practitioners pour scorn on the scholars and hold their analyses to be incomprehensible irrelevances. The academy barely tolerates practitioners and thinks their more abstract musings are inadequate inanities. Students, 'great artists' in the making- are in the middle. (Winston, 2012, p. 196)

Before accepting this as a cause of conflict, it is worth examining some differences between these groups and their priorities.

- **Industry practitioners** often focus on commitment and the development of skills. This is in itself a tricky area given that the skills move on but professional experiences of staff sometimes don't, for reasons discussed in (Mateer, 2019). Practitioners usually have a specialist function, often an HoD role, but as Mateer points out, continuing professional engagement for those in the HE system is made difficult by the demands of teaching and the assumptions of the industry that they are no longer available. This group is often motivated by the validation of their own experience by students. They see themselves as ambassadors for the industry, representing and encouraging working practices from their former profession regardless of context.

- **Academics** work through formal qualification structures and publication routes, often more focussed on research outcomes. For these colleagues teaching is a necessary corollary to a career pathway defined by public outputs not achievable without a teaching post. They sometimes have limited experience of film making, through vicarious or second-hand engagement, but seek validation of the relevance of their knowledge to practitioners. They are often critics of the industry, producing work and representing views that are critical of either what or how film is produced, but often at arm's length from the process itself. Thus, this work carries less authentic weight with students with aspirations to join the industry; the work produced, whilst often insightful, rarely influences how the industry operates.

We consider this a perfectly normal tension between approaches, motivations and intentions. It is seen in many creative subjects where university is both vocational and academic pursuit, though we note as experienced managers that the lines are often drawn more sharply and the behaviours represented in Mateer, 2019 are redolent in higher education environments. However, these alternative views of the shape of higher education don't provide an explanation for the phenomena that generated our enquiry. They explain some aspects of staff behaviour, and the attractiveness of a particular account of film, but less about the motivations of students who choose to pursue a career in film.

The Culture of Film in the Culture of Higher Education

For the authors, the real problems arise when the culture of film meets the culture of Higher Education. It does this in a variety of ways, and our own observation is that much is changing in the culture of film production that is not represented in the way film courses operate, nor are some of the features of film culture properly explored and discussed at undergraduate level.

Film production pedagogy is based on two key features – simulation and collaboration. Simulation is ostensibly justified by the need for authentic assessment (a consistent theme is higher education for practical subjects) and the demand from students that, as a precursor to joining the industry, they should understand and experience the workflows and the responsibility of production roles.

Simulation processes aim to replicate industry practices as closely as possible, to train students to be 'industry ready', therefore are seen as an authentic form of learning. However, the industry practice being pursued and authenticated by lecturing staff on behalf of students is not only expensive but inflexibly hierarchical. It is, effectively, a power game and a class game where cultural capital secures the resources and opportunities and closeness to leadership and like-mindness supports a claim to participate. It is also designed around the intensity of the production process, advantaging those who will not struggle to put aside the time for their projects ahead of those who have other demands on them beyond their experience at university. This is problematic for a higher education environment driven by equality of opportunity because they place students in a state of continual competition with each other and can lead them to gaming or abusing power structures, desiring those roles that allow for influence on a production, like directing or scriptwriting. This is often counterposed by the foregrounding of collaboration by lecturers, in which it is suggested that the entire film is the vision of the entire crew and that all have a creative input. Students are unconvinced by this and often justifiably resentful about being side-lined, especially when the prerequisite for taking a directorial role for a final project is previous experience of directing. Staff themselves can be poor at collaborating on academic processes, noting that many 'production' staff reinforce the competitive culture of the industry and 'academic' staff often prefer to work in lone environments. We have concluded that the collaboration process more often reflects the hierarchical structure of the industry than an equitable educational experience, with its need to support the top creative jobs rather than genuine collaboration on creative ideas at all levels. Some students end up serving the vision of others rather than actively collaborating, and the insistence of lecturers that this is not so is not credible. This lack of opportunity and fairness is encouraged by an emphasis in demanding broadcast quality products that command recognition and awards. Effectively, students become the workforce of a production house preoccupied with reputation rather than students pursuing an undergraduate degree. The inequalities extant and competition inherent in the simulation and collaboration processes result in issues at an organisational level, which colleagues and advantaged students can be reluctant to disentangle and address.

Symptoms of these overarching tensions manifest as behavioural issues within and outside sessions: students complain about unequal access to resources or roles and perceived favouritism for certain students, especially if given more access to staff and resources like equipment and finance. Compliance with university conventions – due to a combination of a lack of motivation or time to engage in HE processes, combine with the culture of exceptionalism to be observed in the breach. This is not the only disciplinary area that

prioritises what is seen as vocationally necessary above what is educationally acceptable in our experience. Conversely, institutions often do not adapt to or understand the needs or requirements of primarily practical courses either. Part of our challenge is to reconcile these forces in the interests of all parties.

Student Expectations and Consequences.

To understand the consequences, it is worth examining student expectations. When recruiting students from a relatively narrow demographic in a manner that correlates cultural capital with socio-economic status, our data suggests that students will do well and expect to be rewarded for their sophistication. This is not necessarily a conscious process, but an assumption that their participation will, in and of itself, create excellent results. This is a dubious proposition at best, but our own examination of cohorts at Westminster suggests it is a reasonable hypothesis for students from higher socio-economic bands to emerge with a 1st or a 2:1, the highest classification of degree available in the UK system.[1] The question for us is why this doesn't happen to the less advantaged students?

Our analysis suggests correlation between student expectations and consequences, but less so when it comes to the practical work. There is a measurable gap in results in all types of coursework assignments between UK students from affluent backgrounds and all others, but this gap increases substantially for written work or presentation skills. A disproportionate weight given to essays or social skills underwrites this success. Students feel they should be guaranteed to do well if fluent at writing or speaking, regardless of relevance or effectiveness, and challenge their marks more aggressively if this is not the case.

This reflects how students and lecturers imagine and reinforce the culture of the film industry. The most advantaged students understand and embrace hierarchies, see interventions as counter-productive, resist change to the status quo, seek to exploit their existing advantages and are quick to get into conflict over the loss of privilege. Low levels of expertise required for working knowledge of film process (the basic skills of production) means high levels of focus and significant energy directed at the advantage that cultural capital can supply. We have directly experienced organised opposition from students to attempts to diversify the course, spread resources more broadly or implement university policies (like anonymous marking or balancing of assessment tasks) that articulate and motivated students feel would disadvantage them, regardless of obvious inequities or barriers to opportunity the existing arrangements may have.

Conclusion

Several questions remain from this close examination of a course whose dynamics are undoubtedly replicated in institutions across the country and possibly the film making world. Does this reflect the culture of the UK film industry, the culture of film education, or just the culture of Westminster?

We argue that one of the roles of HE, is to produce graduates who can critically challenge industry practices to engender positive change. Assumptions about the culture of film by

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[1] For BA Film across the past four years, 99% of POLAR4 Q5 students achieved 1st or 2:1 (55 students overall). Three Q1 students completed at the same level.

lecturers and students appear to prevent change within the culture of UK film education. As researchers we are not qualified to discuss the existing arrangements in the film industry's workforce, but note recent reports in the UK seeking to address issues of its diversity, the mental and physical health of its workers and accessibility of opportunity, all of which are reflected in our microcosmic environment. Our students, a well-educated and wealthy group, come to study with the understanding that film is a creative undertaking requiring significant commitment. They also understand that it is a game of power and class, that dominating and demanding is rewarded and that collusion with like-minded peers is advantageous. Their cultural capital can be utilized to valuable effect. Some also understand that their economic advantage has practical implications in damaging their competition if they can afford to over-commit in ways that poorer students cannot. The task for university-based film programmes is drawing this into the open, helping students understand power structures and their negative consequences, elucidating discriminations inherent in the system and to be clear to staff and students that the university values aren't negotiable. Properly understood, this protects the experience of everyone on the course, producing graduates who begin their working life with a commitment to respecting the potential of others.

On our journey we have expressed as clearly as we can the values of our institution, but beyond this, our experience demonstrated the importance of taking action as leaders and managers. This meant changing the admissions process, removing a heavily intellectual questionnaire designed to deter students whose interest might be more visual, replacing it with interviews based on the work students have produced for themselves. We have reduced the emphasis on UCAS tariff points as the determinant for entry. We have hired new staff of color, diverse sexuality and gender identity, improved the academic qualifications of practical staff and emphasized continuing professional development for those not engaged directly in industry. We have introduced new modules exploring student cultural identities in critical ways and on understanding the business models and processes of industry practice rather than leaving this to mythmaking. As a London-based provider of film graduates, we are responding to the pleas of the industry for more diverse graduates and for those graduates to have a better understanding of the pressures in the industry. We would actively encourage all film educators to similarly ask questions about how cultures can, where not tempered by leadership, replicate themselves in a harmful way.

We have shared our experiences with similar programmes in the UK, and London especially, and note comparable problems. It often comes down to how we, in Higher Education, promote the courses to prospective students. No course will remain empty if it promises students that they will be film directors, but this encourages the approaches we have been discussing. The reality is that entry level to the industry isn't like this for most, and that satisfying and creative careers in film are found right across the spectrum of its activities. Indeed the booming industry in the UK needs a diverse range of skills in many areas. As providers of quality higher education, we would do well to recognize the importance of our role in the journey of students. It is not merely a rite of passage, but a time when values can be shaped, practice can be developed, and futures formed.

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