

University of Newcastle

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Globalising Australian screen production curricula

Abstract:

Australian media degrees have gained increasing popularity in Southeast Asia. Since 2000, universities have been offering the same media programs delivered on their home campus in Australia to cohorts of Asian students in locations such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Generally, these screen media and screen production curriculums emphasize Western notions of creativity, artistic freedom, collaboration practices, and media regulations, which depart significantly from Asian concepts of academic conformity, collectivism and limited media freedom. While the globalisation of curriculum is not new to the field of education research, there is very little literature exploring the challenges of delivering screen education in an increasingly international university system.

This paper reviews the relevant academic literature currently available in the fields of education, creativity, media literacy and the political economy of the media in order to understand how screen production educators in Australia can revise current curricula to include a wider perspective of global screen production and practices. The review suggests that screen production educators should consider revising curricula content through a variety of teaching practices, such as student self-assessment of their creative and collaborative practices, an appreciation of a wide range of global texts and creativity, an overview of transnational screen economies, and the provision of skills to negotiate these domains of power.

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Keywords:

Screen production – Education – Globalisation

Introduction

Since 2000, an increasing number of Australian universities are offering screen production programs in multi-racial South East Asia, predominantly in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore. In general, these production programs are replicates of the Australian degree in content and quality, ensuring that course objectives, assignments, and general administration are coordinated and audited by academic staff on the home campus. The wholesale transfer of curriculum to offshore locations raises questions about the suitability of delivering region-specific course materials in a global marketplace. Since the introduction of film schools into the Australian university system in the 1970s, the focus has been on the training of film graduates to support and inform the national film industry. However, since the 1990s, technological and economical transformation of the media industries has produced a new transnational environment for filmmakers, which is not always reflected in screen production pedagogy. This paper reviews a diverse range of literature in the fields of education, creative and cultural practice and transnational screen production in order to arrive at an informed position on the subject of delivering an Australian screen production program to international students. The larger objective of this study, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is to recommend how Australian screen educators can move towards a global screen production program that encompasses curricula that goes beyond national content and accommodates the types of creativity, filmmaking styles, and regulatory issues that emerge from the diverse socio-cultural contexts in which the programs are delivered.

Screen Production Educational Studies

In 2009, the *Journal of Film and Video* dedicated a special issue on the nature of screen production education in US universities. The rationale for the special issue was to question, “What is the purpose of a film production education?” (Sabal 2009: 3). The dialogue, which was generated from an informal collaboration between members of The University Film and Video Association, argued for the continued value of production education:

What do we teach in a traditional production class that is of abiding value? Certainly nothing related to physical production, where technology, process, storytelling structures, exhibition, and distribution outlets continue to change rapidly. The enduring value of production classes has to be that as each student develops his or her artistic identity, he or she also comes to a clear and truthful understanding of him or herself, develops an ability to see and appreciate the talents of others, learns to constructively negotiate conflict, and extends this ability to work positively with others into their institution and their community (Sabal 2009: 3).

Hodge (2009), working with students from University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, emphasises the role of recognizing race and class differences in the production classroom in order to fulfill this objective. She argues that differences in “personal outlook, family history, cultural world-views and economic pressures” can positively influence collaborative interactions in the classroom (2009: 26).

Hodge's research shows that understanding one's collaborative style proves beneficial not only to the filmmaker, but it can assist both students and teachers in defining an individual's weaknesses and strengths when working on a team production. She encourages a broader curriculum, with a range of strategies to foster mutually beneficial creative collaboration. The curriculum includes screenings of foreign films and developing an understanding of the film industries in these countries that inform the filmmaking practice. In an accompanying article, Hardin's (2009) study on production classes at Columbia College in Chicago, also notes that by encouraging students to recognize ethnic inequalities early in the production process and developing a curriculum that educates students about the diverse range of global films and filmmakers can have a positive impact on creativity and classroom dynamics. Most importantly, it can lead students to tell their own distinctive stories not only in class projects, but also in their future professional careers (Hardin 2009: 44-47).

In order to recognize and understand distinct patterns of behaviour amongst his students, Hardin (2009) adapts John Bilby's Wheelbook as an instrument for measuring collaboration. The Wheelbook philosophy suggests that the "self is composed of two sides": an upper-active sphere which is defined by mastering qualities such as judgment, rebellion, dictatorial and conniving behaviour; and a lower-passive side which is defined by altruistic behaviours such kindness, helpfulness, and martyrdom. He argues that for successful student film projects, individuals should develop a balance between the two sides of the Wheelbook. Hardin's findings with US students clearly showed that 'most students (48%) chose answers that correspond to the "Teacher/Con Artist" as primary behavior' (2009: 41). 'The Player/Judge' was the 'second most frequent choice at 17 percent [sic]' (2009: 41). These US results from the University of Columbia, displaying individualistic and self-promoting behaviour, stand in direct contradiction to the Asian value of 'collectivism', which is manifested in many parts of the Asian continent through the ideologies of the school system, military service, community and other government based-organisations.

Eastern and Western Creativity

Research confirms that Eastern and Western cultures do not share identical notions of creativity. Niu and Sternberg (2006) identify characteristics such as 'individual', 'usefulness' and 'novelty' as Western, and 'nature', 'moral goodness', and 'everlasting renovation' as Eastern (2006: 19). In summation, Eastern societies are more likely to favour the social and moral value view of creativity while a Western society favours a more individualistic concept of creativity (Niu and Sternberg 2006: 18). However, their discussion shows that modern Eastern views on creativity have been influenced by contemporary Western culture and now embody Western features of individualism and novelty. Creativity theorists such as Keith Sawyer emphasise the significant functions that individualistic and collectivist cultures serve in the collaborative and creative process (2006: 143-153). Sawyer also traces the concept of creativity as not universal but constantly in flux, believing that 'these changing

conceptions of creativity aren't random and unpredictable, they can be logically derived from the broader properties of society' (2006: 32). He outlines the role of the global economy and the rapid mechanisation of art in breaking with our traditional notions of Eastern and Western creativity (2006: 32-33).

With this shift towards a global arts economy, notions of creative production need to be carefully considered. Creative approaches to media production in Australia and media production in Singapore operate in different cultural fields of powers (which include government policies, regulations and global capital). Media practitioners operating in these locations have their own specific reflexive and embodied knowledge of the culture, which 'delimit what meanings and ideas are available' to them (Schirato and Webb 2002: online). In their discussion of cultural literacy, Schirato and Webb define the media as a culture that has its own 'discourses, imperatives, values, logics, technologies and cultural capital' (2002: online). They also argue that in intercultural situations students are required to read and make sense of a 'new meaning situation' (2002: online). For example, students in Singapore enrolled in University of Newcastle classes are required to operate according to both the local media within its own structures of power and the confines of an Australian curriculum. The authors believe that this knowledge of the media culture provides practitioners or agents operating within this field with a field-specific literacy that allows them to make sense of what is happening around them, and to make strategic decisions as to how that field should be negotiated (in other words, what practices, genres or discourses are appropriate in certain circumstances) (Schirato and Webb 2002: online). Therefore, in cross-cultural contexts, especially where the 'rules of the game' of communication and filmmaking are unfamiliar, students develop a 'media literacy' that enables them 'to read and make use of, the various meaning systems (and the practices that inhabit them) that characterize the various cultural fields of a society or societies' (Schirato and Webb 2002: online).

Global Creative Production

Schirato and Webb believe global technologies have played a further role in tightening the relationship of media production and the 'vicissitudes of global capital' (2002: online). Josephi (2002) illustrates these intersections in her study of graduate journalists who are working at *The Straits Times* in Singapore. She described how Singapore graduates negotiated their Western media education and the organizational structures of Eastern media censorship in their professional media practice. The young journalists spoke openly about their experience of entering the newsroom, volunteering remarks such as that they "self-censor" (2002: 131) in order to balance the boundaries between the individual creative expression that they were taught through a Western style education and the tight regulatory controls of the local press system in which now worked.

However, Margison and Mollis (2001) warn against a global notion of creativity. They urge educationalists not to 'fall into a universalistic "globalization" that loses locality, contingency and cultural context' (2001: 596). This neo-liberal view of globalised education rejects arguments of homogenization, and seeks to foreground

differences (2001: 597). The authors argue that education policies in Anglo-American countries tend to favour homogenization. Margison and Mollis believe there is a need to incorporate a ‘novel and plural approach’ to education (2001: 601). These authors favor ‘self-determining identity, including the cultivation and expression of national and regional differences’ (2001: 603). They suggest ‘hybrid subjectivities among mobile students’, providing new responsibilities for global media educators (Margison and Mollison 2001: 612). The recognition of hybrid subjectivities within a global education system is essential to maintain the social, cultural and creative contributions that a foreign student can bring to their production process. In his study of knowledge creation and learning in the new age of global capitalism, Florida debates the important function of regions as “collectors and repositories of knowledge and ideas” which facilitate the “flow of global knowledge, ideas and learning” (2005: 528).

Universities play a crucial role in educating future generations of artists to these new technological and economic models of globalization (Petrie 1991: 11-12). Petrie refers to Raymond Williams’ model of artistic production that has ‘an affinity with the dominant aesthetic mode’ of cinema, which communicates contemporary social, cultural and political experience (1991: 11-12). Boden agrees with the need to move beyond the concept of the work of the artist as not ‘integrated into the capitalist relations and the domination of the market’ (Boden 2004: 17). Sawyer’s exploration of creativity and culture concludes that creative production has to be ‘contextualized within an explanation of society and culture...in many cases, artworks can be explained by the economic system’ (2006: 153). Sawyer believes that an explanation of creativity ‘must not only include these contextualist approaches...we must begin with them’ (2006: 153). Livingstone agrees that we are in a process of changing literacies due to technological determinism and she argues that media education cannot ‘focus solely on questions of skill or ability’ as it ‘neglects the textuality and technology that mediates communication’ (2004: 8). It follows that the education of creative media production must be contextualized not only in the socio-cultural and economic systems of an increasingly globalised industry, but also within an understanding of a global political ideology.

Creativity and Cultural Production Theories

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988, 1996, 1999) work on creativity is useful in understanding how this global ideology is evolving and defining what is considered ‘creatively’ valued in a global context. Csikszentmihalyi, in his systems model of creativity (1999), argues that for creativity to occur, a body of knowledge or an accessible set of symbol systems must be existent. A body of cultural knowledge is called a domain. It follows that diverse cultural locations have both symbol systems that are unique to the culture in which it exists, as well universal or global symbol systems, which make up this domain. Here, it can be argued that in a region-based curriculum, such as the Australian screen education curriculum, the domain remains associated with the signs and symbols of the Australian regional industry in which it is based. Those who hold the knowledge, in this case the Australian-based academic staff and film

professionals, have the background to make judgments to what is creatively ‘unique’. This social group is called a field (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Although the Australian curriculum delivered to the students in South-East Asia may be delivered by a locally based lecturer and infused with some localism, the guidelines for the content of screen production assessments and the quality control of these assignments are the responsibility of academic staff based in Australia. The delivery of Australian university curriculum off-shore, both the creation of innovative content and the judgment of this innovation, is predicated on a field which has its basis in another society. Therefore the social and cultural capital and individual academic’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1993: 5) in this context, are based on Western notions of creativity, content and screen production practice.

Using Csikszentmihalyi’s system model of creativity, researchers have explained the complex relationship between creative practices and how education nurtures creativity and media literacy (Kerrigan and McIntyre, 2010, McIntyre 2007). Kerrigan and McIntyre (2010), in their mapping of the aspiring documentary maker’s professional development, outline the important role that tertiary education plays in transmitting the rules and knowledge of the creative domain of documentary production practices, so that subtle yet important details can be implicitly understood by the student (Kerrigan and McIntyre 2010: 121). They suggest that this knowledge of the domain can be fostered by watching and studying key-works in the domain and ‘a diversity of others’, allowing the aspiring documentary maker to ‘discuss their informed opinions’ with other members from the same cultural and creative field (2010: 121). This process allows the graduate filmmaker potential membership into the creative field of the media industry, empowering the graduate to become a ‘more respected and experienced field member’ (Kerrigan and McIntyre 2010: 121). It is assumed, then, that the screen production education plays a role in the internalisation of the rules and conventions of the domain and an understanding of how the social organization known as the field makes its decisions (Kerrigan and McIntyre 2010: 122).

Likewise, an aspiring Asian filmmaker, undertaking a screen production program from an Australian university, may be originally attracted to the study of screen production through a ‘personal experience’ initiated by the local Asian film milieu. This ‘personal experience’ is enhanced by a tertiary education that cements the Asian student’s knowledge of the domain. Given that the student’s experience is initiated in an Asian context, and that the student may enter a global industry, this curriculum should offer components that build on the student’s knowledge of both an Asian and Western screen domain. Hence, the role of screen production educators is to provide the necessary curriculum components for a student to operate in a domain that requires not only the knowledge of the Western and Eastern media, but also the complexities of the globalised screen production industry.

Educational theorists, Olson and Kroeger (2001), provide useful pedagogical techniques to address the global mobility and hybrid subjectivities in the higher education sector. In line with Hodge (2009) and Hardin (2009) work with US film programs, they believe that students need to be ‘conversant in global dynamics, knowledge of concepts, and methods that describe, and possibly predict transnational

change' (2001: 118). The authors advocate for the development of global competencies to 'effectively address these urgent global intercultural matters' (2001: 117) and recommend classroom strategies that expose students to multiple perspectives and promote awareness of their own attitudes, values and behaviours' (Olson and Kroeger 2001: 134). They regard curriculum transformation as an integral component in instigating change, suggesting 'international content' as teaching material within courses, instigating global studies programs, and including intercultural studies as a general elective (Olson and Kroeger 2001: 134). Leask (2001) in her study on the globalisation of university programs also sees curricula change as a powerful and practical way of including and valuing the contribution of international students (2001: 101). She argues for a broader scope in subject areas to include cross-cultural and intercultural approaches and integrating 'international issues, standards, and practices' and 'international examples and perspectives' of the discipline or professional area (2001: 108). Australian screen production educators may draw on the large body of global media issues and practices for course content as well as creative exercises that allow students to share their intercultural experiences and explore ways that these cultural ideas can be produced within the nexus of technology and global capital.

Proposed Research

The literature broadly reviews the current areas of thought in creativity, collaboration and global economies relevant to screen production curriculum. These three key areas – collaboration, creativity, and political economies of production – will be explored in a pilot study at the University of Newcastle's Bachelor of Communication programs in Newcastle and Singapore. This Australian-Singapore study seeks the importance of understanding socio-cultural dynamics in production classes, and the usefulness of "conscious activities" that will encourage students to tell their own cultural stories within new systems of global relations. The existing research on film production classes conducted by Hodge (2009) and Hardin (2009), the theoretical underpinnings of the systems of creativity (Czikszenmihalyi, 1999; Schirato and Webb, 2002; Sawyer, 2006; Niu and Steenberg, 2006; McIntyre and Kerrigan, 2010); and fieldwork on globalizing the classroom (Leask 2001; Olson and Kroeger 2001) have lead to the formulation of the following hypothesis for the pilot study: the globalisation of the University of Newcastle's Bachelor of Communication program requires a revision of its content, its processes, and new understandings of the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts in multiple delivery locations (Newcastle and Singapore). In order to explore this hypothesis, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: How do student collaboration styles differ according to the locations in which the production curriculum is delivered?

RQ2: What are the differences in creativity according to the location in which the production curriculum is delivered?

RQ3: What is the role of the regulatory and economic systems of the society on the creative works in the location in which the production curriculum is delivered?

In order to explore these research questions, a survey, a content analysis and semi-structured interviews will provide a triangulated approach to seek information on the collaboration style, the characteristics of creativity, and regulatory systems on creative works and professional behaviour in the Australian and in Singapore cohorts.

In order to test the first research question that student collaboration styles are different in Newcastle Australia and PSB Academy Singapore, an online questionnaire (adapted from Hardin's survey (2009)) will be administered to media students in Newcastle and in Singapore who have undertaken screen production courses in the Bachelor of Communication program. The results of the survey questionnaire will be analyzed in relation to the literature to determine if there is a difference in the student collaboration styles in the two locations and how these may be addressed in a unified curriculum. To assess the second research question on the differences in creativity, a comparative content analysis of the screen productions produced in the two locations in common courses will be conducted, using coding variables that identify cultural values which the particular society define as "creatively" valued (Niu and Sternberg 2006). The third research question on the impact of the regulatory and economic systems of the society will be explored primarily through semi-structured interviews querying the extent in which students and graduates from the two locations inculcate the regulatory structures of their society in the creative works (Joseph 2002, Schirato and Webb 2002).

This paper is an entrée for further research. It acknowledges that there are current challenges in adapting Australian curriculum for an Asian student-base, and uses this starting point to investigate a more utilitarian approach to globalise screen production curriculum. The literature review recognizes there has been some formative work in the fields of education, creativity and political economy that provide a foundation for further fieldwork and analysis. The research cited provides tools and strategies that can be used to investigate these goals, but it is paramount that the creative cultural competencies unique to both locations are not homogenized. This requires careful recognition of the cultural values, the differences and similarities, through a triangulated approach of research methodologies. Only when features of Eastern and Western concepts of creativity (Niu and Steenberg, 2006) are applied and the cultural domain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) in which students operate are carefully investigated that new strategies, contents, and skills can be implemented into the curricula. While the global education of creative screen production must be contextualized within the cultural and economic systems of an increasingly transnational industry, it must not come at the expense of diminishing regional notions of creativity. Initially, the study will be applied to the Singapore-Newcastle program, but it is hoped that the transformation of screen production curricula may be applied more extensively in the Asia-Pacific.

Notes

¹ The researchers are currently conducting a pilot study at the University of Newcastle based on the key issues raised in this literature. The study comprises of content analysis of student productions and surveys and interviews with students in screen production course at the Newcastle and Singapore campuses with a view to proposing changes that will address issues of globalising screen production.

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