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New world order?: Challenges for screen production education in participatory culture

Abstract:

The continually mediated environment that today's university students exist in often appears surreal to those who remember a time before mobile phones and computers. This paper will consider how best to engage university students in screen media courses, while also examining the challenges of teaching in participatory culture and asking how production academics can utilise new media to educational advantage: encouraging students to 'explor(e) the possibilities of participation... expanding skills at deploying media for one's own ends' (Jenkins 2006a, p. 270. Thereby allowing academics to explore the ways in which to best shift our media production teaching practice in order to best educate this student cohort and prepare them for employment.

Biographical note:

Jennifer Stokes is a Lecturer at the University of South Australia and held the role of ASPERA Secretary from 2008-2009. Jennifer was the co-recipient of a 2008 Australian Learning and Teaching Council citation in recognition of her commitment to Media Arts teaching and student engagement. Alison Wotherspoon is Screen Production Coordinator at Flinders University and on the Executive of the Australian Screen Production, Education and Research Association (ASPERA) and CILECT Asia Pacific Association (CAPA), Alison was a finalist in the 2009 ATOM (Australian Teachers of Media) Awards, and a co-recipient of the Flinders University Faculty of Health Sciences Executive Dean's Teaching Excellence Award 2009 for her work *Come Into My World: How to interact with a Person who has Dementia*. Alison and Jennifer co-convened the 2009 ASPERA Conference "Beyond the Screen".

Keywords:

Screen education – University – Media – Student engagement – Teaching and learning – Participatory culture

The continually mediated environment in which today's university students exist often appears surreal to those who remember a time before mobile phones and computers: '(p)eople just entering their twenties are tech-savvy, swimming in connectivity and mobility, blurring the boundaries between producing and consuming media, gaming, and all the while multi-tasking' (Blau 2006: 6). Screen production academics work at the nexus between the traditional university system and dynamically engaging these students from a new world order to critically participate in producing content for the screens opening around them. The current student cohort presents as a group who constantly access information through new media systems, on multiple screens, from Wikipedia to Facebook. They have grown up in an era where literacy is no longer defined by, or limited to, the written word. McDougall summarised the work of Gunther Kress and the New London Group by noting as a result of 'the multimodal nature of communication practices and the changing nature of the text, arguments have been presented highlighting the need to embrace "multiliteracies" and "new" literacies' (2007: 130). Mediated experience informs the social, political and psychological experiences of contemporary university students, so how can academics best prepare these students as they train to become media professionals? This article will consider how best to engage current university students in screen media courses, while also examining the challenges of teaching in participatory culture and ask how we can utilise new media to educational advantage. As Jenkins poses, how can we encourage students to 'explor(e) the possibilities of participation... expanding skills at deploying media for one's own ends' (Jenkins 2006a: 270). Through considering these issues carefully, this paper aims to identify changes required to media production teaching practice, in order to best educate this student cohort and prepare them for their future careers.

The dominance of media and other information communication technologies in the contemporary student worldview presents both challenges and opportunities for media educators. In first world nations, theorists have defined this generational cohort through their close relationship to technology from an early age – calling them 'Digital Natives' (Prensky 2001) and 'the Net Generation' (Tapscott 1998).¹ While the 'Digital Natives' debate has been extensively critiqued (Selwyn 2009: 364-76), there is still merit in considering the impact of digital technologies on the contemporary student body, as most university students now carry convergent technology with them in the form of mobile phones and laptop computers. The impact of students' ownership of basic digital production and broadcast technology legitimates a rethink of media education pedagogy, particularly given that recent research suggests that technology access will only increase among incumbent student cohorts (Considine, Horton & Moorman 2009). The majority of the current tertiary student cohort has grown up alongside convergent technology, informing generational attributes such as advanced visual literacy, multitasking capability, and limited attention spans, in turn informing preferences for social, participatory and experiential learning (Oblinger & Oblinger 2005: 12-27). Media production educators are advantaged by this new emphasis on visual content and collaborative learning, but must be ready for new challenges, including negotiating digital ethics and an increasing need for critical production knowledge (Jenkins 2006b). The rapid rate of

technological change and diverse student needs mean that traditional pedagogy is currently being—and must continue to be—rethought in order to better maintain student engagement and provide best learning outcomes. Generation Y are ‘constantly connected, with a strong need for immediacy’ (Ramaley & Zia 2005: 108), which means that educators must give additional attention to managing student expectations around contact, information delivery and assessment. Given these generational characteristics, this paper aims to explore how to best teach professional, ethical and critical media production, to this cohort, who have been socialised on and through media practice.

Screen educators must determine how to best prepare students for the demands of indeterminate 21st century media careers. There is increasing recognition that digital literacy and media knowledge represent fundamental 21st century skill sets, with informed media production skills empowering graduates to fully participate in public debate and knowledge construction (Jenkins 2006b). The impact of this digital revolution has been felt across campuses with wide-ranging ramifications. Information and communication technologies are being rapidly integrated across university curricula, with most university lecturers expected to disseminate content via podcasts and web, as well as through traditional teaching formats. Informed educators keep pace with new technology for better student learning outcomes. For example, Duffy advocates moving beyond PowerPoint and simple teaching technologies, towards full integration of Web 2.0 technologies in order to best foster innovation and creativity through student-centered learning (2008). In addition to learning technologies, media educators must aim to keep abreast with industry and professional practice technologies. In 2010, the Strengthening Independent Media Initiative (SIM) highlights Web 3.0 (the semantic web), the ‘Use of ‘Killer Apps’ as Tools for Social Change Movements’ and Transparent Initiatives as technology to watch (2010: 3). Educators face the complex task of negotiating how to best future-proof teaching in preparation for the emergent careers and new capabilities necessitated by this accelerated rate of technological change. Additionally, the move towards a global knowledge economy places increasing demands on the tertiary education sector:

Future careers will require higher levels of education than in the past. That education must enable individuals to discover what they need to know rather than just having static knowledge. Society will need college graduates with mental agility and adaptability (Clayton-Pedersen & O’Neill 2005: 136).

While media production academics have consistently used participatory team learning and application of technology as teaching tools, they must also be cognisant of this new learning environment and future pathways to ensure students are prepared to successfully negotiate the complex terrain of future media careers. Screen production is still a relatively new academic discipline and many academics in university screen departments enter academia directly from industry. Those media educators who have come from a non-teaching background may well be unaware of research outside of their area of expertise.

Contemporary theories on media literacy are many and include those of Cope and

Kalanstziz (2000), Kress (2000); the New London Group (1999), and Garcia, Bartlett, & Kleifgen (2006) (Tyner 2010: 2). Literacy pedagogy, research and developments in teaching and learning, as well as curriculum development, all offer useful insights for tertiary screen education practice.

As the academy moves towards student centered-learning, student engagement has been recognised as increasingly important in facilitating effective knowledge exchange. Supporting recent discussions of neuro-plasticity and its impact on learning preference (Greenfield 2009), contemporary students warm readily towards teaching practice that gives primacy to visual literacy, thereby rewarding their media socialisation (Oblinger & Oblinger 2005). Additionally, these students bring a wealth of cultural capital to the classroom in the form of media/television experience having seen – and increasingly, produced—both video and multimedia content throughout their lives. This student preference for visual learning and ready personal archive of reference material (often complemented through experiential learning pre-university) provides media production educators opportunities to quickly establish rapport and, thereby, facilitate engagement. In this way, educators can capitalise on the immediate relevance of media in students' own lived experience to encourage engagement and application of knowledge, thereby 'increas(ing) the likelihood that students will come to value instructors' subject area expertise as students value the material through their personal construction of application and meaning' (Taylor 2006: 53). To best facilitate this, media educators should maintain close familiarity with emergent media trends and texts, in order to share relevant and cutting-edge discussions with students. Through using media experience as a base from which to engage students and offer relevance to their experience, media educators can best support student-centered learning, opening gateways for students to understand the applicability of lessons across both their professional and private lives. By working to engage students with course material rapidly, educators can lay the foundations for engagement with complex concepts and critical analysis of media texts. Making the initial effort to engage students and personalise teaching, educators can create an environment in which students are motivated to learn and ready to see the application of course material in their own lives.

Within their degrees students make the transition from hopeful amateur to emerging professional. Under the educator's guidance they learn to think critically, use equipment correctly, work safely within OH&S standards, and move from informal to formal workplace practices. University can also provide a space to experiment without fear of failure. The media industries which students are aiming to join can be difficult to access and demanding. An undergraduate degree gives time to make the intellectual and physical transition from novice to practitioner; learning how to present and think of oneself as a professional, making valuable connections by networking with others who will be entering the workforce at the same time, and acquiring a range of transferable skills that makes graduates employable in numerous ways. University screen programs may also be the first time that students find themselves in a class full of like-minded individuals who are there of their own volition and want to work creatively with others. University can provide a safe environment for students to learn the numerous skills required to creatively

collaborate with their peers. This chance to collaborate can be exciting, rewarding and often problematic. The interpersonal aspects of screen production are often much more challenging than the acquisition of technical skills, such as learning a different menu on a digital camera or negotiating the complexities of a new editing system. Many of our students are accustomed to being the lone (or one of a few) media makers in their school. This can result, for some of them, in a perception of themselves as being especially gifted and talented, as they are used to making all the creative decisions on the work they produce. Given the collaborative nature of the screen industries, the ability to work as a peer with others is immensely important. Media educators can assist students in making this conversion by creating a safe and inclusive learning environment, through encouraging respectful behaviour and allowing students to have an identity in the classroom through learning student names ourselves – these gestures help to create a better learning environment wherein students feel understood, known and open to new ideas (Hockings 2010). Once this learning environment has been established, students will have a better opportunity for success, being able to learn effectively, share ideas and collaborate on productions in a professional and mutually beneficial manner.

The traditional hierarchies in the screen and educational industries that informed the working lives of baby boomers have, over the last two decades, undergone considerable change. The world of training on the job has shrunk as technological innovations have led to less people now required to make things work. The days when editing assistants picked up rushes and a dissolve required an optical print and a neg cutter have long gone. In their place, new and rapidly changing multimedia, compositing and animation roles have developed. The relative affordability of production technology today has driven a shift towards independent and amateur filmmaking which impacts on teaching institutions, as Andrew Blau observed in his 2006 report *Deep Focus: The future of independent media*:

The media landscape will be reshaped by the bottom-up energy of media created by amateurs and hobbyists as a matter of course. The resulting output will overrun the institutions and strategies created to organise and navigate an era of great scarcity of media equipment and products. Images, ideas, news, and points of view will come from everywhere and travel along countless new routes to an ever-growing number of places where they can be viewed. This bottom-up energy will radiate enormous energy and creativity, but it will also tear apart some of the categories that organise the lives and work of media makers (Blau 2006: 4).

This new world order offers the opportunity to seriously rethink the power relationship in screen pedagogy and the meaning of expertise. Do media educators need to maintain control and expect to be the experts in all things, or does the convergence of new technologies and knowledge allow the role to be reframed into one of facilitator and mentor? Generation Y's positive response to collaborative, networked and interactive learning environments has underscored a shift in academic roles, moving towards academic as *mediator* rather than *sage* (Osborne 2004). This shift in emphasis still requires screen academics to actively embrace and continue to expand their knowledge of content as well as information sources to maintain their

relevance as educators. Knowledge and teaching based on a traditional screen industry that is no longer recognisable to students, although comfortable for those practitioners now working within universities, will become increasingly dated. There is a great deal that practitioner academics can offer their students. As sophisticated as a student's knowledge of Final Cut Pro and Colour software applications may be, their knowledge of industry, screen history, professional standards, appropriate behaviour, contracts, respectful working relationships and the legal implications of their actions is often embryonic. Media educators have the professional experience, knowledge, networks and contacts to assist students in discovering their future careers. Most media educators have experienced significant changes in their own working lives and their own experiential learning and by sharing this knowledge can help foster and develop resilience, optimism and creative problem solving in their students.

The accessible and powerful digital tools media production schools now use have worked to speed the breakdown of traditional top-down power relationships in university education. Educators' learning relationship with students is now one that encourages them to speak up, question and discuss their work and opinions openly. There is a sharing of knowledge that is often mutual and multidirectional, with a genuine shift towards participatory learning. Often students expose academics to diverse content from different interest areas, meaning that educators can actively learn from students as well. Teachers can build on these connections to contextualise content production, guiding students through screen history, theory and culture. The educator acts as a knowledgeable and interactive archive connecting students to the films, videos and screen objects from the past that will help guide their learning journey. The students come to realise that DVD stores are not film libraries and that much screen culture and films of significance are not easily accessible. The educator's role in introducing students to the filmic canon is critical in students discovering which cinema traditions informed the films they love, what they want to make and in teaching them the conventions in narrative and storytelling so that they can go forth and break them. The ideal experience for students is the opportunity to engage with a mix of staff that have different skills, ranging from highly specialised technical knowledge, to the creative and organisational. Media educators' collective stories, knowledge and experience allow them to engage, inspire and guide students. University then becomes a place of collaborative knowledge production. The power structure flattens and democratic exchange of ideas and creation of work is more possible now than it was in the not so distant past.

The new digital world, in all its screen forms, is an ethical minefield. While media educators have spent decades impressing the importance of responsible filmmaking on students, the online context presents new challenges. Enthusiastic and naïve participation online has a range of pitfalls. Educators must help students develop a more sophisticated understanding of the need for ethical awareness within the Network Society. A superb example of media pedagogy is the work of Virginia Kuhn. Her work *Filmic Texts and the Fifth Estate* can be viewed online (at <http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/kuhn/digital-pedagogy>).

University expectations and assessments often require students to use public fora,

such as chat rooms and blogs. In doing so, students are not always aware of the need to be respectful to other participants who may have different values. Educators responsible for these shared spaces must establish explicit guidelines about appropriate behaviour online, and engage in ongoing monitoring, in order to prevent students from making public, embarrassing and hurtful mistakes.

The appropriation of material and use of others' work is also an area of naïvety for many students. Just as the cutting and pasting of slabs of information from Wikipedia is deemed acceptable in middle school but becomes plagiarism in university, there is a need for us to guide students through the often complex world of audiovisual copyright within a university and professional context. The use of others' work may be homage, Creative Commons or piracy and the need for developing the skills to decide which it is often rests with the media educator. Given the rise in popularity of Internet piracy, educators must strive to instill in students respect for the artists behind the original product and the need for appropriate recognition, whether that be monetary, credits, or both.

While new technology and student requirements have changed universities and teaching practice over time, there are desirable tertiary skills that all university graduates are expected to embody. These generic tertiary skills include critical thinking, intellectual adaptability, professionalism within an historic and global context, and ethical practice. These skills speak to aspirations for enlightened societies, preparing students 'for lives of creativity, citizenship, and social responsibility' (Ramaley & Zia 2005: 106). For the media professional, the ability to think critically about texts and fully understand the ethical implications of one's actions allows for innovation and creativity within responsible production. In order to foster these skill sets, media educators must help students to navigate through a saturated media landscape, to find inspirational and quality texts. The university media classroom should offer students time to develop their craft and personal strengths, providing a safe space to learn, experiment and grow, amid an informed community of peers and mentors. By encouraging critical interpretation, contextual understanding and further passion for mediated forms of intellectual and creative expression, screen academics will actively prepare quality media production graduates who will, in turn, go on to create informed, quality media content.

University film schools need to be preparing students to be creative, energetic, entrepreneurial and resilient for jobs and industries that are yet to be imagined; however, this is not a new situation, for teachers and students. We live in times that are similar to those decades and societies that witnessed the impact of the invention of the printing press, radio, motion pictures, television and computers. So in this new world order we, like our students, need to be prepared to adapt and change to be relevant to the workforce. The challenge for media educators is to embrace the new digital landscape, advance new production models, engage with the scholarly works being written in fields not traditionally read or known to screen practitioners, and further develop a practice-based screen pedagogy that is directly applicable to students and colleagues—one which accurately reflects the participatory screen culture of the twenty first century.

Notes

¹ It is worth noting that there is significant disparity in access between different socio-economic groups, however, this paper will focus on students with regular access to technology.

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