

Abstract

This article outlines the rationale for and delivery of the pilot Filmmaker in Residence initiative at Falmouth University. The initiative led to the production of an award winning independent feature film made by a professional and student crew from both within and external to the university. By supporting students to learn through an industry based opportunity that took place within their educational setting rather than alongside it, the initiative sought to challenge a perceived practice/theory dichotomy by encouraging the students to engage with practitioners as educators and educators as practitioners. The initiative also sought to expose students to a different model of filmmaking than the high-end studio productions most familiar to them. The article explores the challenges and perceived successes of the initiative and draws on interviews with the students involved to explore their experiences. The article also outlines the key lessons learned, in particular the value of offering industry opportunities to students early on in their film education that can inform and support their own assessment, the culture of the learning environment and their employability post-graduation.

Keywords

Film, Filmmaking, Education, Theory, Practice, Film Education

Introduction

This article discusses the development, delivery and legacy to date of the Filmmaker in Residence (FiR) initiative at the School of Film & Television (SoFT) at Falmouth University. Whilst the legacy to date is multifaceted this article focuses on the pedagogical legacy, specifically how the initiative has functioned as a

professional/industry project that facilitates students to have experiences that can impact their development within their education as opposed to solely in terms of employability post-graduation. The initiative functions as an innovative, educative form of media industry research by engaging students as active crew and participants across the life of a feature film production that allows space for student and practitioner reflection and results in a commercial feature film that occupies a new 'context-specific' (Sharma, 2011) space. The article also explains the rationale behind the FiR initiative in terms of my personal interest in challenging engrained theory/practice divides in film education. The article discusses how the FiR initiative has informed teaching and learning on the course and in the school and how the impact on student learning has been managed and tracked.

The first part of this article introduces the creative, professional, business and pedagogical rationales for the FiR initiative that have underpinned its development and that set it apart from similarly conceived professional/industry projects in film education. Following this, the article looks at the methods employed to capture data that could be used to evaluate the success of the project in terms of student learning and teaching development. Finally, the main section of the article is a discussion and analysis of the results of the project to date looking at the impact on students, educational developments, impact on the course, impact on the school and lessons learned to be carried forward in the development of the initiative.

Into the '*Wilderness*': An Overview of the Filmmaker in Residence Initiative

The FiR initiative was developed at SoFT where I have worked as a lecturer on the BA (Hons) Film and MA Film and Television courses since April 2013, becoming

senior lecturer and course coordinator in mid 2015. My conception of the initiative came out of a desire to integrate my personal filmmaking, my research and my teaching and from a belief that modern universities teaching film could and should be engaged in micro-budget feature film production. SoFT has a history of supporting Cornish independent feature film with low-level but valuable funding that was ostensibly offset by students undertaking work experience or internships on the production. However, the FiR initiative was envisioned as showcasing how a film school or university film department could fund, or co-fund in partnership, the production of a commercial, professional feature film that utilised students in the crew but was not a student or university film. The section that follows shortly will explore the historical, pedagogical and theoretical context for this approach to film education.

Following the completion of my professional doctorate in late 2014, which critically interrogated the delivery of film education in terms of both theory and practice in universities, I was given the opportunity to develop a plan for the production of a feature film funded by SoFT. The funding covered the costs of production and the employment of professional heads of department in the key areas of directing, camera, and editing, though admittedly on lower than industry rates. The initiative was intended to offer the opportunity to make an independent feature film to an experienced filmmaker and to allow students to work on that film along with professional heads of department. As the initiative was uncharted territory and would require a high level of flexibility from the FiR in its first incarnation it was decided that a filmmaker who was experienced in working with student crews and was known to SoFT would be beneficial. As a result, it was agreed that my longtime collaborator Justin John Doherty would direct and co-produce the first feature film to arise from

the initiative. I would write and co-produce the film. As professional filmmakers Justin and I had already written and produced a number of award winning short films that involved student crews with funding from the Regional Film Agency, National Lottery and local authority. I decided that the Spring break holiday in 2016 would be the best time for production as students would still be paying rent as part of their annual attendance at the university and therefore no students would be unduly prejudiced by not being able to afford to stay around to benefit. Also, location costs would be lower than during summer high-season in Cornwall.

With a budget and a production date in mind I set about writing my first feature film. From this set of conditions came the feature film *'Wilderness'*¹. I started the screenplay for *'Wilderness'* in September 2015, finishing it in January 2016. We then entered pre-production in earnest. At this stage the budget needed to be renegotiated as the true cost of the production became clearer.

Each day of shooting there would be upwards of 15 people on set, sometimes as high as 25, consisting of professional cast and crew, and student crew. The cost of feeding and transporting this number of people around Cornwall meant that initial beliefs about the cost of the film's production proved unrealistic and had to be renegotiated. Thankfully, as the increased costs were reasonable and attached directly to student experience the new higher cost was agreed and the project moved forward again. Admittedly, part of the rise in the cost was due to the nature of the script. When writing the script, I wanted to set myself impositions that I believed would challenge my creativity but also would mean that the workload could be achieved in addition to

¹ The trailer for the film can be viewed on Vimeo [here](#)

a full time teaching position. Having taught screenwriting for a few years since writing and producing my last short film, *It's Natural to Be Afraid* (2011)², I wanted to return to screenwriting ensuring that I was engaging in my creative practice in a way that reflected the beliefs and practices I had been teaching. As Coral Houtman (2011) writes 'students learn from our example as skilful practitioners of theory and of practice, that filmmaking and contextual thinking are intimately related skills and that each broadens the potential of the other (2011; 171)'. The project allowed students to observe me working as a creative practitioner, reflecting as I went, so they could see how I engaged with creative work and also included theoretical work akin to the kinds of things I ask them to do in the classroom. I set myself the goal of writing a film that was 60 pages and 10 scenes long and involved no more than 5 characters in speaking roles. This goal was influenced by a desire to use limitations to be creative and also by practical considerations. In terms of limitation I subscribe to the musician Jack White's ideas around the liberation of limitation. He says that-

'I've always centered the band [The White Stripes] around the number three. Everything was vocals, guitar and drums or vocals, piano and drums [...] It's all in threes. The whole point of the White Stripes is the liberation of limiting yourself. In my opinion, too much opportunity kills creativity' (2005).

Or, in cinema, as Michael Haneke (2014) puts it 'when I have a thousand options, I actually have none at all'. I knew that my writing time would be fragmented and compartmentalised so I broke the story down into 10 scenes that would, at different lengths due to their role in the story, make up 60 pages and could be written

² The award-winning short film *It's Natural To Be Afraid* can be viewed on Vimeo [here](#)

piecemeal. For example, I knew for one scene it needed to be four pages based on my plan, and therefore I knew I could get that written if I had a good single day of writing. Knowing the schedule of production was set in some kind of stone meant I could attribute timescales accordingly to ensure that a draft of the script would be ready by January 2016³. Practically I also knew that we had a small budget and therefore elaborate casting and location demands were out of the question. However, the rise in the cost of the budget came in part from not wanting to create a chamber piece that used budgetary restrictions to limit the production scope and that rejected the option of setting the film in one or two interior locations in contemporary times. To push the film beyond the creative limitations I had set, some of the key scenes were written in external locations and the film as a whole would be shot as a period piece, with creative discussions between Justin and myself settling on the late 1960s as our milieu of choice. We knew therefore, that we would be travelling to a variety of interior and exterior locations to realise these creative ambitions, but because they were in-line with the overall ambitions of ensuring the film was not an ‘exercise’ or simply a project to give students an opportunity to work on a film but something of creative and artistic value in itself, the increased budget was supported to ensure these ambitions could be met.

‘Watching My work and Watching Me Work’: The Pedagogical Approach of the Initiative

As hopefully has become clear my role in this enterprise was screenwriter and producer, project manager and most importantly in some ways, education coordinator

³ Blogs documenting the writing of the Screenplay can be found on my website [here](#)

and instructor. I thought it would be valuable for my students to see me as a filmmaker in real terms, not just through watching my work, but watching me work. I thought that my teaching would carry more weight if the students could see me create a feature film from scratch, follow the whole process, see the physical outcome and understand the legacies such as film festivals and critical reception. I wanted the FiR initiative to transcend the contentious, oft cited as dichotomy, theory and practice debate. Peter McLuskie (2000) argues that ‘the dichotomy between theory and practice is rife within the industry itself [and] within teaching institutions staff can unwittingly support this dichotomy - [practical tutors] are not adverse to light-hearted suggestions that [academic staff] who have never made a film are not qualified to comment on them’. McLuskie explains that this pervasive attitude filters down to students who often identify more fully with the practical side of the course because of the often-professional industry background of practical tutors who are ‘understood to be professionals who just happen to be teaching, an identity that is cultivated by the tutors themselves [who often] have a dismissive attitude towards education’ (2000; 106).

While this is a common belief it must also be acknowledged that in my experience the existence of practitioners in the academic setting does not guarantee this student response. In contrast, it could be argued that once in university some students see all lecturers as just that and often listen to the same lessons and ideas with more scrutiny, vigour and response if delivered by visiting professionals whose ‘day job’ is professional industry as imagined by those students. However, Marzenna Hiles (2016) writes that “tutors’ personal attributes and knowledge matter to students” and that “some students care deeply about having the opportunity to learn specialist, industry-

based skills”. The environment of the film course at SoFT is somewhat unique in that it is a more balanced course in terms of the focus on theory and practice than might be found at courses where film production sits within a media or communications school and film theory sits in a humanities school. The course at Falmouth requires students to undertake more theoretical modules than practice ones. Lecturers often teach across both strands and the staff is small and collegiate, ensuring that the value of each is not undermined by the other. Brian Winston’s (2011) assertion, valid in many instances, that-

‘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. (2011; 196)

is less prevalent in this instance and therefore provides a suitable environment from which to attempt a project such as being discussed here. Houtman’s (2011) belief that ‘we cannot have a successful student community without a functioning academic body within the discipline as such and within individual institutions [...] the historical dysfunction between film theory and practice and between theoreticians and practitioners can hardly be doing our students any good’ (2011; 178) has representation in the practices of the film school here at Falmouth, which enabled the success of the project. The FiR initiative discussed here was envisaged as a way of giving students an industry based opportunity, with the added benefit of having an experienced tutor on hand to guide the day-to-day learning being undertaken by students in a ‘failure is welcome environment’ where lessons about cultures,

hierarchies and etiquettes could be delivered ‘on the job’ but critiqued in real time. by Clive Myer (2011) writes that ‘industry practitioners have been known to query the relevance and very existence of film schools [...] whose graduates, they fear, will be intent to enter a brittle industry without any experience of what the industry refers to as “the real world”’ (2011; 03). This project helped to provide students with experiences that help answer that query, while ensuring critical and theoretical questions were encountered and addressed. The stakes were high - the film had to be made - but the stakes were not necessarily as high as an external industry project where more money, investment and people’s jobs and livelihoods would be at stake. It’s this understanding that I believe allowed me to ensure multiple objectives for the project could be aimed for. On the project, I was both ‘academic’ and ‘creative’.

I believe it is incumbent on universities to retain a sense of loyalty to the development of critical citizens in all fields, while also acknowledging and indeed finding new ways to address the needs of students to develop skills. FiR was imagined to do this. Mette Hjort (Interview, 2012) says ‘much of the work of film scholars is disconnected from the milieus of practice [...] I would like to see film scholars play a more active role in supporting those milieus of *practice* where thoughtful, creative people with a lot of integrity are trying hard to make films that make a contribution to our societies and communities’. This was another motivating factor in designing FiR as an initiative that supported the production of an independent film that students could work on. Students often value, or are perceived to value, the opportunity to work on high-end commercial studio productions but I believe students can also benefit from a greater understanding of independent filmmaking, both in terms of their assessment, their graduate careers and more widely in terms of broadening the horizons of their

cinematic experience. Aparna Sharma (2011) writes about how professional creative practice in film education environments ‘exceed and critique dominant and mainstream cinematic conventions’ and lead to the emergence of a new type of practice. She claims that ‘while dominant conventions necessitate critique and deconstruction’ students need to see, understand and engage in a diversity of filmmaking and critical practices. *‘Wilderness’* is therefore not a traditional commercial micro-budget film nor a student film but something else. Something that in the words of Sharma is ‘context-specific’ (2011; 167). It is its own thing, a hybrid that is created in a very specific way that shows the validity of the practical approach in its successful completion and also that this type of model can find traditional audiences on the film festival and regional cinema circuit, to date. As a creative product, *‘Wilderness’* exists in a set of contexts that are specific and outside, potentially, the frame of artistic and cultural, knowledge and understanding of the students at the time they joined the project. The project displays a recognised need to engage students in the production of and reflection on different forms of cinema, for example the type of cinema that as Michael K. Gillespie (2017) says-

‘Incites and disrupts, while [is] also responsive to the necessities of a politics of pleasure [...] a cinema devoted to the multitudes, intimacies and intricacies of art, history and culture [...] a cinema of affective encounters, that might compel us to unlearn, and do the work of resistance’.

Russell Sheaffer (Interview, 2012) has also suggested that the practice/theory dichotomy can be beneficially transgressed using the university as a site of resistance and that ‘the university [has] a very active role to play in creating a cinematic frame

of mind from which new creative content can and does emerge'. Houtman (2011) writes that 'by offering our students a choice of conceptual frameworks, a lively and iterated sense of cultural history and theory, we free them from the slavish adherence to models of film-making, models of seeing the world which only allow one perspective, one technology (2011; 171).

This was explicitly part of the mission statement of the '*Wilderness*' project, ideologically speaking. Changes in digital technology both in terms of production and distribution and exhibition have made interventions in production by educational institutions more viable than ever and FiR was designed to exploit such an opportunity. At the same time, it was not merely intended as an exercise in skills development because as Geoff Petty (2001) writes-

'Experience in itself does not guarantee learning. In order to learn from experience we must reflect on our experiences; try to relate them to theory; and then plan how we might do better next time' (2001; 336).

Specifically, in relation to film education, Jean Pierre Geuens (2000) claims that 'to become aware of theory helps students question what it is they are doing as filmmakers as well as grow as active participants in the cultural debate of their times' (2000; 78). This is not always accepted by students. Winston (2011) says that students 'often simply do not want to know' and that they subscribe to the common belief expounded by filmmakers that creativity and imagination is innate and simply occurs and that simply doing it, sans critical reflection, builds skill and ability. As he says, 'intuition trumps inference' (2011; 195-196). This doesn't bear scrutiny and when

scrutinized reveals complexities. Winston explains of discussing a collaboration he undertook with a filmmaker, where the director of the documentary under question rejected the notion that he was working from theoretical understanding. Winston asserts that the filmmaker ‘has a theory, whether he calls it one or not’ (2011; 193). Writing about jazz, the film critic Otis Ferguson said ‘the best people I have discovered to learn about music from are actual musicians, who would not be found dead in the kind of talk used to describe their work’ (in Bordwell, 2016; 50). As a teacher, I believe that there are critical and theoretical underpinnings to a filmmaker’s creative process even if these are not explicitly admitted or even understood by the filmmakers themselves. The resistance of artists to admit to theoretical thought is common across artistic fields and this is picked up by students entering the academy to study those artistic fields and the university can act as a site of deconstruction of this and other myths. Abbas Kiarostami claims that ‘ [QUOTE]. While the textual analysis of a filmmaker’s work may be something best left to academic scholars, analysis of process and how this is informed is often best learned from filmmakers themselves. *‘Wilderness’* was a chance for students to see the artistic process build, develop and be completed and question the decisions and choices made as they were happening.

How this was attempted in terms of student learning will be addressed in the methodologies and analysis sections of the article. I thought it was important to open up the process of the making of the film to students as widely as possible. The script development and casting aspects of pre-production were relayed to the wider student cohort as they were happening through Masterclasses and as the later section discusses, my role as teacher was most intense during the on-set production. The

opening up of the process, the regular discussions about influences and music and the planning period that we had were also part of an attempt to ensure that the project was minimally impacted by an equipment fetishism I had witnessed, particularly but not exclusively in male students, since starting to teach film in higher education. This is also known as ‘gadget love’. Tiago Baptista (2013) and Geuens (2000) have both written on the importance of not fixating on equipment and camera gear and filmmaker Alex Cox (2008) sums it up when he says ‘just because you have a camera and editing software doesn’t make you a DP or an editor’ (2008; 295). Working in a film practice education environment that seeks to be analytical, reflective, cinephilic and theory driven is difficult, indeed could more closely be defined as an act of resistance given the skills driven agenda of government and industry bodies in terms of educational ideology. Adrian Wootton (Interview, 2012) argues that universities should focus on ‘equipping graduates with the skills required to fulfill the burgeoning job vacancies that will be created over the next few years’. This kind of mindset is prominent in Skillset dominated British higher education where a focus on skills and professional development is valued above all else. What it ignores is the possibility for filmmaking in a wider context, as an activity of collaboration undertaken for artistic endeavour and not merely as the site of employment. This is a view consolidated by Duncan Petrie and Rod Stoneman (2014; 07-08) regarding the 2003 Skillset strategy *A Bigger Future* and the ‘total lack of any acknowledgement, let alone discussion, of the potential of education and training beyond the narrow and instrumental acquisition of skills to serve industry’. The sidelining of creative educational attributes for the sake of ‘skills’ has been keenly felt. Erik Knudsen (2000) claims that it is ‘undeniable – and perhaps worth repeating – that the moving image is a creative medium first and foremost [...] Without this premise, there would

be no industry'. It was these kinds of discussions that I hoped the project would inspire. Through necessity of time and budget we would embark on creating a type of independent film that is often created using the same fundamental practices as an 'industry film' but that artistically and ideologically sits outside. One of my most personal aims was to introduce students to the idea that there is not a singular way to make a film and also there is not a singular way to gain access to experience and climb the ladder to professional success. Prior to the final stages of pre-production I shared an 'influence pack' with the student crew⁴. This was a list of films, music and literature that served as reference points during the writing of the film and in the discussions that Justin and I had held as we worked towards filming. In retrospect, I would like to have scheduled time to screen one of the films, *Opening Night* (Cassavetes, 1977) as it was clear as we progressed through the shoot that not only had the students not watched any of the films but they had no idea who the director of *Opening Night* John Cassavetes was, and by association, the kind of film we were seeking to emulate in some way.

The next section discusses the methods that have been deployed to track the learning and experience gained by the students who applied and were successful in gaining a place working on the production of the feature film '*Wilderness*'.

Materials and Methods

The FiR project was conceived as a long-term initiative that involved students to varying degrees across the lifecycle of the film's production. While a significant

⁴ The music playlist that was sent to students can be found on Spotify [here](#)

number of students would benefit directly from being involved in the pre-production, production and post-production stages the project was visible and open from before the script was written and different stages were made available for students to engage with and understand through talks and masterclasses with Justin as director, myself as writer, and both of us as producers. The project was launched in May 2015 in front of students who were informed of the timeline and opportunities to get involved – applying to work on the film or simply observing via general talks and masterclasses when Justin visited the campus or when I delivered some open teaching around different milestones such as script completion. Alongside the desire to open up the process to as many students as possible, not just those successful in their applications, was the understanding that the demands of the shoot itself would result in reduced opportunities to be critical, reflective and discursive with students about the choices and direction of the production. As Bill Nichols (2011) says ‘the ideal time to attempt an integration of theory and practice is in pre-production. This is when everything is up for grabs, when the very topic and approach, theme and tone, structure and effect of a film is the precise subject of discussion’ (2011; xv). I knew that discussions around influences, script decisions, creative collaboration, would have more space in the build-up to production than production itself, from experience.

Students were invited to apply to form the crew, working with the professional heads of department. Director Justin, who also acted as cinematographer and editor Steven Worsley interviewed the applicants and made the decisions on who to accept. A professional gaffer/camera operator was brought in to ensure the smooth running of the camera department. The sound department was headed up by film school technician and former industry professional Jem Mackay. He was not involved in

student recruitment and neither was I, to ensure no accusations of bias could be levelled. Applications from students to crew the film were invited in December 2015 in the hope that students with paid or voluntary work commitments outside of university would have sufficient opportunity to try to make other arrangements. Students were invited from all across the school of film and television, so film, television, animation undergraduate courses and the MA film & television. The process was inclusive and as mentioned, no university staff were involved in interviewing or decisions so favouritism or other prejudices would not be an issue. I put together with Justin the application structure – a written or filmed application stating why the student felt they should be given the opportunity – but the interviews were conducted by Justin and the project’s professional editor, Steven Worsley. No one from the School was involved as I felt this could lead to accusations of bias or prejudice by those who were unsuccessful. In the end that fear was misguided as only 20 students out of the school’s 600+ cohort across film, television, animation and vfx, and MA film and television, applied, for the project.

The crew list was built to enable up to 25 students to benefit across the duration of the production. Some of these would be interviewed as production assistants and were invited from the first year of the film and television cohorts. Others would be assistants in departments and these would come from the specific modules on the BA (Hons) Film course that related to their studies and career progression aims. This means that camera assistants were interviewed from the Cinematography pathway cohort, the same for sound, production and post-production. Documentary students were interviewed to make a behind the scenes film of the making of the film.

Mentoring on the project took several forms. With a small, manageable crew in place, Justin was able to engage with student crew members to a considerable degree. Having experience of creating work in this way previously meant he was used to finding time to talk over his process, answer questions and invite close observation. A professional gaffer/camera operator oversaw the camera assistants, editor Steven Worsley oversaw the post-production and sound recordist Jem Mackay oversaw sound. These professionals and the technician Jem worked closely day by day with their departmental assistants in the immediate run up to and the duration of the shooting of *'Wilderness'*. In my role as lecturer and project convener the mentoring of students was my main priority alongside on set producing as the project ended pre-production and was being shot. I made sure I was always available to students to answer questions and ensured I observed their work and behavior as much as possible, offering guidance and support in areas where they did things well that showed initiative and good understanding as well as when they did things that may have caused them problems in what might crudely be termed a 'real world' environment. I then ensured that they were praised when they showed a 'positive' change in behavior. The quotation marks are used because in truth the project was created in a real-world environment and the production was conducted in the positive, independent manner of previous films created in this way by the production team. However, it was also important to impart lessons that reflected the hierarchical nature of film industry productions and to increase awareness of the time sensitivities of all film production. The need to fall into an organizational structure that ensures the work is not slowed but also leaves room for discussion and reflection so creative opportunities in the moment was attempted to be maximized so that students felt included but also knew

the limitations of their involvement and learned when questions and observations were appropriate to be aired.

The scope of the project could have been very different. There are multiple ways of approaching production with students involved. In truth, this project was one where creative student involvement was relatively low but student labour and 'learning by doing' was relatively high. Considering the complex, practical demands of working with a student crew with low to no experience on the creation of a feature film the aim was to create an environment that would result in a finished film project but also an environment that involved students in high quality film production. The project enabled them the chance to gain crucial production experience where mistakes could be safely made and lessons of hierarchy, communication and responsibility could be learned and reflected upon without failings resulting in embarrassment or expulsion from the set and project. Another, not inconsiderable aim was to use the project to increase student awareness of modes of production and modes of cinema that added to their existing, formative knowledge of 'Hollywood' production. Through practice and practical engagement the project sought to introduce students more directly to concepts of independent film and cinema and the methods of production that run counter and in addition to ideological modes of film production that still dominate student and indeed wider cultural understandings of filmmaking practice. The intense, communal nature of independent film production allows students to access experience of the fundamental processes of filmmaking in a more hands-on way than merely observing large-scale productions. Part of the intention of the project was to highlight the different, more multi-task and multi-role based approach that is symptomatic of independent film production in the hope it opened up ideas of how to make films in

different ways. However, they are still arguably lacking the skills and experience to take on roles on the production at a higher level – for example as heads of department or being involved in more creative decisions about storytelling due to the fact that they are in the early stages of their filmmaking and film study careers. While it was pertinent to ensure they were involved in the making of the film in a direct way as active crew members it was also a project that brought together the world of film education and micro-budget independent film production where the goal was to make a commercially viable, professional feature film, something that may have been out of the reach of the students. For example two students expressed an interest in being heavily involved in production design, which was welcomed. However, they didn't respond to invitations to visit potential sources of props and costumes with the director and producers and missed deadlines for their participation to be included. This was not problematic because they were not expected to deliver, only invited to. Their lack of experience of the importance of deadlines and watching experienced filmmakers manage this area of the production was not vital to the delivery of the project and allowed for the opportunity to learn, by doing or in this case not doing. Superficially, it could be argued that this kind of project is merely a means of accessing free labour and resources for filmmakers. However, this argument fails to understand the labour demands placed on filmmakers to both deliver the creative project and also educate and teach students who are learning on the job in significant numbers in a highly pressurized period of time. It is not an easy thing to make a film in this way. Already intense situations are not eased by an inexperienced student crew, they are if anything exacerbated. However, the result is a production where the completed film feels hard won but with an additional layer of achievement attached, that of empowering students to take charge of their own future filmmaking through

exposure to independent filmmaking practices. *Wilderness* is a film that has multiple purposes. It is a standalone piece of professional, creative art created in a unique way. The unique way serves as a flagship project for the film school that raises awareness within the industry and also attracts student applications to the film course, in particular. It is also a high quality teaching project that invites students to witness and engage with independent filmmaking practice that is more directly relevant to the work they create for assessment and will likely embark on post-graduation than the high-end, mainstream productions they may be familiar with upon entry to the film school. The project was designed to hit all those markers through careful planning and dedicated management to create an environment and outcome that is mutually benefit to students, staff and the school.

To track the experience and learning of students on FiR and to capture the process itself the following steps were undertaken. There were two behind the scenes stills photographers. One was a professional stills photographer who also shot the promotional stills for *Wilderness* and the other was an MA student who was working on set as the first assistant director. A behind the scenes film was shot and edited by two Level 5 undergraduate film students who had just undertaken the documentary filmmaking module on the BA (Hons) Film degrees⁵.

In addition to this, I captured on-set reactions from students through a daily blog written each day by one of the student crew⁶. I have also been documenting the whole

⁵ The behind the scenes film created by students on *Wilderness* can be viewed [here](#).

⁶ The daily blogs written by students during the production of *Wilderness* can be found [here](#)

process from development of the FiR model, through script development, production, post-production and now festivals and academic outputs on my own blog.

In order to ascertain specific ways in which involvement in FiR may have impacted students' work I held a series of interviews with participants a year after the production of *'Wilderness'* in May 2017. The next section analyses different experiences of the project and draws out the learning and other experiences of students and staff on the project and its legacies.

Production Lessons: Student Perspectives

Then

Firstly, I will analyse some of the lessons students learned as they were working on the project. The information is pulled from the 'Wilderness Film Project' Blog I set up to capture student responses in the moment. Each day a different student crew member would reflect on their experiences and what they had learned, and the blog would be put online by me accompanied by a photograph from the student crew member also taking behind the scenes images. Over the course of the production fourteen blogs were posted – one for each day of our eleven-day principal photography shoot, a pre-production blog on location shooting and two bonus blogs by student crew members to try and get as diverse a response at the time as possible.

What is interesting in the responses at the time are the generalities rather than specifics. On the whole, the most common responses are on the broad, fundamental and cultural aspects of filmmaking that the students witnessed and engaged with

rather than specifics about gear or equipment. There were a number of critically engaged responses that used specific events or moments to discuss broader ideas.

There were a number of things that came up across the responses and it could be argued that they represent the core fundamental elements of both filmmaking in general and the aims of this project. Of the 14 blogs, half of them explicitly reference the opportunity and experience afforded by *'Wilderness'*, half of them explicitly reference the importance of the 'team' and 'team work'. Three of the blogs discussed hierarchies and etiquette on set, four discussed problem solving and five mentioned the long hours. However, the topics that the majority of blogs discussed were around three key areas, with eight of the blogs explicitly referencing the director and directing, professionalism and fun. The focus on the director and watching Justin direct and the role of the director on set is representative of the practical importance but also the cultural reputation of the director as the focus of the creative act. Student Jonah wrote that 'being present while Justin discussed the scenes with the actors and Neil was extraordinarily beneficial to my learning. I arrived at a deeper understanding of how to interact with others'. The fact that over half the blogs mentioned professionalism, being professional and/or being on a professional set suggests that FiR fulfilled in part its remit to give students a particular level of experience and be seen as a singular entity and professional filmmaking environment even though it originated within SoFT. Student Stine wrote:

'Working with editor Steven Worsley has really given me more knowledge about the whole post-production process in the real industry and why things are done in a certain way during shooting time and afterwards in the actual

edit. It is great to be able to work with someone who is professional and get the chance to ask questions that pop up during the project’.

The final area, fun, is the most personally rewarding area to see reflected in student experience as running a fun and enjoyable set is key to the filmmaking approach Justin and I adopt. We believe filmmaking, despite being an incredibly difficult endeavour - as one of the students Damon said in his blog: ‘filmmaking is a hard thing to do’ - should be fun and enjoyable. Anecdotally, I see the pressures of assessment and the difficulties of adjusting to university life and particularly on the course I teach, the adjustment of working so intensely in groups, having an impact on students where they do not enjoy being creative and making films. The making of *‘Wilderness’* actively ensured that despite the difficult conditions afforded by budget and time restraints it would be as fun and enjoyable as possible with camaraderie and teamwork at the fore. As one of the students Enrico said in his blog:

‘I learned the importance of kindness and, once again, team work. I never felt looked down on on set, no matter how small my role was in the scope of the production. This prompted me to do more on set and never let my morale drop low [...] a note I want to make to myself for all productions I work on: keep everyone’s energy high and communication will happen smoothly and tiredness will have less effect on people’.

Later

A year after the filming of *‘Wilderness’* took place, in May 2017, I conducted short interviews with some of the student crew involved to gauge and discuss how they felt

about their involvement a year later and more directly how they had taken what they had learned and applied it to their own student film projects on their course. I invited all students to participate in the interviews and seven students out of the twenty-five who worked on the film responded. I interviewed six of these students on video as they could make a day of interviews I had scheduled. One student could not make this date so I sent the questions via email and they responded in that form.

All of the students on video highlighted the value they placed on the opportunity and experience and how they had tried to take lessons around hierarchies and etiquette with them as they worked on their own projects. What was notable was how some students could trace specifics in terms of their process and behavior back to what they had learned on the '*Wilderness*' set, replacing some of the generalities that came up, because they could not have been anything but general, at that time of their on-set experience. Student Enrico discussed ensuring his actors were kept warm on his set when they were filming on the moors in Cornwall. Keeping actors warm through holding coats and refiling hot water bottles was one of Enrico's tasks on '*Wilderness*' as a production assistant. Student Stine discussed how her approach to workflow as an editor was completely changed by being on '*Wilderness*' and how she approached working on her final year projects as an editor using what she had learned in her planning for working with directors, cinematographers and sound designers. She said '*Wilderness*' gave her the confidence to implement a professional workflow on student projects because:

‘You know that this is what [you are] going to be doing after uni[versity] anyway so therefore you are more confident to do it this way right away, now, better to start now, no time to lose, get into the rhythm’.

Maybe most gratifying in terms of being a producer was student Damon discussing spreadsheets and the value and importance, even though it is admittedly not fun, of planning and preparation in executing a successful production. He said that what he learned most, practically, was regarding production procedures:

‘Call sheets [...] all that sort of paperwork, all the excel spreadsheets. I know that feels like common sense but [‘*Wilderness*’] did show me how it’s done. Those basics are important. It’s one of those things you have to learn by being shown it [...] that professionalism I think I’ve carried on to my other projects’.

The idea of learning by being shown, and doing, is reflected upon more in the next section where I discuss what I learned by doing ‘*Wilderness*’.

The email response from Oliver was thoughtful and detailed. For the most part it was positive but also contained the most critical responses that I collected. I think this may have something to do with the slight distance afforded by email as opposed to the intimacy of video and me being the interviewer. His response made me think about how the project had been framed for students and whether I had done enough to preface the experience in the right terms so the students knew what the aims were and what we were trying to accomplish. I know there is a danger in responding too

intensely to one reflection, but the importance of reflection and criticality to the future development of the project is key. For example, Oliver said:

Is the door to more creative student integration open? The experience is first valuable *because* of a visiting practitioner, but on the flipside there felt less at stake for the student to make a visiting film-makers film [...] Free labour exchanged for experience, or creative collaboration: both are good things but it was one or the other, for the future, both intertwined could amplify the experience [...] what if a visiting filmmaker is replaced by a student filmmaker [...] What if students pitch themselves or stories to the school on a hands-semi-off but on, funded by the school/students annual film project purely by cohort? Well, I cannot begin to imagine how unfeasible it might be, but anyway...’.

I’m unsure whether Oliver simply misunderstood the parameters of the project, elsewhere in his responses and in his on-set blog he is eloquent about the project and his role in it, or whether the project could have been more clearly framed in terms of its aims as a creative endeavour but also in terms of why it was structured as it was for the benefit of the students and their learning. This response definitely gave me things to think about in terms of doing something similar in the future. I wouldn’t change the project and while I understand Oliver’s criticisms I think what he is discussing misses the point of this particular type of project but I am sure that I could have discussed with students in more detail why we were making the film in the way we were. There is definitely a space for projects similar to what Oliver alludes to

above and hopefully I will oversee them in the future but *'Wilderness'*, as outlined at the start and throughout this piece, is something different.

My Learning: Then and Later

Before *'Wilderness'* my last time on a film set and as an active producer was with *It's Natural To Be Afraid* in 2010 and 2011. Since 2013 I have been teaching film practice and film theory. A core part of my teaching of film practice is the theory of practice and how filmmaking is actually practiced by practitioners, plus also what I believe is a positive approach to film practice in terms of cultures of respect and collaboration. Beyond the differences between short and feature film production there were a number of things specific to this project and its process that I learned or more specifically in some cases, relearned, that directly impacted my teaching in the following academic year.

The most important aspect I believe I relearned was that filmmaking is problem solving and how every day worked on a project from scriptwriting, through pre-production and production to post-production and completion is working through a list of problems that are specific to this film and this day. I realized that the idea that one of the core ways to learn filmmaking is in the doing is not abstract, or rooted in a privileging of practice over theory, but one rooted in objective realities of the filmmaking process. This is not to say theory does not have its place but being back on set, working to get my script produced, and solving the daily problems of things such as weather, crew illness, locations, travel, catering, props and rewrites amongst others, made me remember that so much of filmmaking is in the moment of the

making and that the ability to solve problems comes from a combination of experience (the doing) and planning (the theory of practice).

I realised that I do not adequately discuss in my teaching of filmmaking practice the importance and role of problem solving and how good preparation allows for the ability to problem solve and also be creative. I talked about preparation as key but the following academic year believe I articulated better the relationship between problem solving and planning using examples from my own practice but also from film professionals along different parts of the professional spectrum.

It was intensely gratifying to teach students on set about cultures of production, hierarchies and etiquette but I was reminded by the inability or refusal by some students to respond to moments of learning that failure is such an important part of the learning process. Some students repeatedly broke protocol and rank and procedure despite intervention from me or Justin and I believe it would have been of value to have been able to remove repeat offenders from the production, as this is what would have occurred on a professional film set outside of this setting. I also believe it is the only way they would have learned in a significant way. However, because I did not set this as a condition or possibility from the outset it felt unfair to introduce it midway through the production.

It was with great pride that I observed participants on '*Wilderness*' as they embarked on their assessments in the aftermath of FiR. There definitely seemed to be a shift in professionalism and etiquette in how they managed their crews and in terms of hierarchy there seemed to be real trust and respect between departments with student

practitioners in a role allowed and encouraged to undertake that role, rather than the director or producer constantly butting in and taking over. As student David noted at the time:

‘I would say that the most valuable thing that has been learned during the past two weeks is the decorum that must be upheld when on set at all times. When working on an assessed university project with your friends it is easy to fall into bad habits of unprofessionalism or laziness’.

Conclusion

One of the key lessons I have learned from this initiative is the benefit of trusting students from the early stages of undergraduate study to represent their education institution in terms of attitude and work ethic on placements and on professional/industry projects that can benefit the quality of assessed work undertaken by those students later in their degree and also the work of student peers who they come into contact with on their return from placements and projects. Currently, in the majority of cases, placements take place in a student’s final year of study and the benefit of that learning is carried with them as graduates but has little impact on the course they are studying and the culture of the school. This type of initiative brings this element of professional development forward and allows for the student to reflect on and implement their learning in a less intense environment than the ‘workplace’. It allows them to apply their learning during their studies and as part of their assessments on the course, building on their experiences whilst still at university rather than when they enter post-graduation employment and sharing their learning and experiences through their own practice with peers.

This kind of initiative could provide opportunities for students to learn about different types of film production and funding models, specifically independent micro-budget feature filmmaking, outside of a lecture setting where fundamental skills shared in the production processes of the kinds of films students desire to work upon can also be learned. This kind of initiative provides institutions the opportunity to engage students directly with forms of filmmaking that they will be closer to in terms of ambition and achievement upon graduation than the high-end studio blockbusters they arguably tend to enter an institution craving access to and exposes them to different models of filmmaking.

Initiatives such as FiR can also provide the opportunity to transcend and transgress the practice/theory divide by having educators/lecturers on set working with students and creating an environment and culture of self-reflection, a space where the theory of practice can be viewed, implemented and deconstructed, where conversations about creative influence and film style can take place and where students can work and reflect on their own practice and create links to the theory they study in the classroom. Through working on an independent film with professionals who are reflective practitioners taking the time to teach through their practice, students can be encouraged to recognise that the theory/practice divide they might encounter or perceive within their courses is at least to some extent artificial and certainly more complex than might initially be assumed.

Since premiering at the esteemed independent film festival Cinequest in San Jose in March 2017, *'Wilderness'* has played 16 festivals including Cambridge, Indie

Memphis and Oaxaca, winning 11 awards including Best Actress (x3), Best Screenplay (x2) and Best International Feature (x2). The film has also received praise from amongst critics including Ryan Gilbey (The New Statesman, The Guardian), Violet Lucca (Film Comment, Sight & Sound), Sam Fragoso (Vanity Fair) and Tom Shone (The Sunday Times). It is hoped that discussions held to date will result in the film receiving a physical and online release across DVD, Bluray and various on demand platforms in 2018.

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