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THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

Chapter:

Constructing Criticism without Crushing Confidence: cultures of feedback in television script development. *Marie Macneill*

This chapter explores the vital relationship between the creative storyteller and the script editor in the story-telling process. An outside eye can help a writer find objectivity, but this process can crush confidence, especially if the feedback is heavy-handed. When is the best time to give notes to inexperienced writers, who can be creatively crushed under the weight of criticism, even when it is obviously constructive and well-intentioned? The chapter draws on the author's own experiences of script development, including simultaneously working on two television series; one broadcast worldwide, and the other eventually dropped and not being made at all; interviews with other practitioners, including Graham Mitchell, a scriptwriter from BBC1's long-running crime drama *Silent Witness* (1996--), George R.R. Martin's book editor, Jane Johnson, who discusses working with successful writers; and a range of cast, crew and mentors from undergraduate and postgraduate screenwriting students who share their thoughts on critique. (151 words)

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Constructing Criticism without Crushing Confidence: Cultures of Feedback in

Television Script Development

Marie Macneill

Introduction

In the 2018 film *Puzzle*, the main character, Agnes (Kelly Macdonald), quizzes Robert (Irrfan Khan) about his obsession with completing jigsaw puzzles.

AGNES

Why do you do these stupid puzzles?

ROBERT

It's a way to control the chaos. Life is messy. It doesn't make any sense. Everything is random. When you complete a puzzle, everything makes a perfect picture.

Experienced writers find the jigsaw pieces that create the whole picture: the right place for the right piece, in a structure that provides the integrity to support the gift of their imagination, and to ignite the imagination of their audience. In short, they order the chaos.

In their early writing years, storytellers, like any other craftsman, need practice. Novice screenwriters can, all too often, put the wrong jigsaw piece in the wrong place. The plot shifts and the story founders. The narrative world is lost, quickly followed by the audience, because the comfort of ordering the chaos and rearranging the random have not been satisfactorily foreshadowed, signposted or resolved. The role of the screenwriting tutor, as a talent-nurturer, deliverer of theory, supporter, sounding-board, and teller-of-experience – not forgetting Goldman's famous quote that 'Nobody knows anything' (1984, p. 39) – is to guide students (as novice writers) towards a variety of tools and story-telling concepts: from the prosaic nature of industry-style formatting, to the overarching inner and outer journey of the protagonist, to identifying and working with their own creative process. Is there also something else at play here?

Can a mentor guide a student towards the appropriate pieces of the puzzle without actually putting it into place? Can screenwriting tutors help fledgling writers take flight without being overtly critical, or reducing their big idea to pre-ordained beats or plot points? Can they teach them without telling them what to change or solving the story problem for them? To build on another adage, can screenwriting tutors, script editors and script consultants show rather than tell their students/writers how to improve? Is it possible to create a safe zone where a screenwriter's confidence remains buoyant and where nurturing can gently guide them to find their own story's path? This is a path John Yorke describes as 'the journey into the woods to

find the dark but life-giving secret within' (2013, p. xviii). A writer needs to feel that it is their 'secret' that is being imparted – their voice telling the tale – and so it becomes important that their tutor, script editor or consultant is there to guide them along the path, not walk the steps for them. In this chapter, then, I reflect on my own experiences as a television writer and screenwriting tutor to understand some of the ways that feedback can be framed to enable productive, positive experiences of script development and screenwriting teaching.

Potential

Will Storr claims that 'We experience our day-to-day lives in story mode. The brain creates a world for us to live in and populates it with allies and villains' (2019, p. 3). This sounds plausible, especially when we read his next thought, that our storytelling 'turns chaos and bleakness of reality into a simple hopeful tale, and at its centre it places its star – wonderful precious me – who it sets on a series of goals that become the plot of our lives' (Storr 2019, p. 3). His final flourish, 'Story is what brain does' (Storr 2019, p.3), creates an assumption that everyone, everywhere, can write, with a little guidance and encouragement, because all the tools we need are innate within us. It is possible to strengthen one's screenwriting muscles and become a stronger and better writer, but only if the bar is not kicked from under a writer, or if their confidence is crushed. It would be appropriate to think that no one does this wittingly, but sometimes the enthusiastic rush to get a project finalised, commissioned or finished in time for the hand-in deadline means that a rash of negative words can have a devastating effect.

Not all scripts have potential and not all writers have a voice – initially. As Robin Mukherjee puts it, 'Finding your own style, or voice, takes time. It will certainly take some writing. Bear in mind that it isn't something to be contrived but discovered and, thereafter, refined' (2014,

p.236) It is possible for writers to find a voice through practice, exercise and rehearsal and for scripts to change and grow. Nevertheless, it is something of a script-editing challenge to successfully understand a world created by a storyteller, find order and seek clarification without distressing the intention, characterisation, motif, theme, layers and puzzles crafted by its originator. Sometimes editors, producers or tutors do distress and do not fully realise the potential damage they may be causing or the creative paralysis that can ensue because, as Batty and Taylor note, 'in script editing there is a fine line between offering encouragement and showing dissatisfaction with the work' (2020 p. 131). In an attempt to please their mentor, the writer will try to move the pieces of the story puzzle around. The advice they have been given may be appropriate to the story, the plot and what drives the central character. Conversely, it may not. Afterall, Goldman's belief is that 'Nobody knows anything.'

Script Editors

Naturally, there are many script editors who are simply brilliant at their job: intuitive, exacting, nurturing, great company and whose radar is able to pick up when plot is leading character rather than the other way around. Yvonne Grace (2014, p.65), one such script editor, states:

A good, expert, fantastic script editor will be able to give you script notes (some large, some small, some irritating, some illuminating) without you the writer, ever feeling exposed, or unsure, or feeling that your work is being ridiculed, overly criticised or downright changed too much.

Grace sounds like the kind of script editor we would all like to work with, and she has the added kudos of once writing me an excellent rejection letter telling me to keep going and to keep in touch. I will and I should.

I asked a screenwriting undergraduate, ‘As a new creative what is the least helpful in terms of script editing and story feedback?’ Theo responded:

New ideas being offered, and character’s being developed in a way that doesn’t fit them or the story. Having too much input on the way a story could improve with specific events or details isn’t helpful when trying to develop the original story.

Perhaps this aligns with the kind of director who grabs actors by the hand and pulls them into position, while giving them a line reading.

UK Script Development Organisations

When starting out, a stepping-stone that can help beyond measure is a script development organisation. In my case, I came across TAPS (Television Arts Performance Showcase) in 1999, run by the indomitable Jill James:

What we want is an assessment of the Writer’s voice. Pure and simple. We need your subjective view of that writer’s talent. Not your positive or negative reaction to the subject matter but your view about whether this writer has the sheer skill to engage you in the world of his or her drama and take you on a journey you did not expect to be on. And, crucially, can write characters you can understand (not necessarily like) but with whom you can absolutely empathise. (James, 1999c)

James’ passion for new writers attracted industry professionals, who donated time and energy to read, select, nurture and showcase writers. A gala-style, filmed-live performance gave writers an entrée into the industry. There was no magic formula beyond selecting writers who showed promise, then developing and exposing their work. The most instructive part for me was a script meeting and two days of rehearsals prior to the showcase with Baz Taylor. A stalwart director on *My Family*, *Shine on Harvey Moon* and *The Bill*, Baz taught me so much

in so little time, mostly because we were Doing it for Real¹ and he was a generous genius, with a gift for comedy. Baz enthusiastically encouraged me to make changes – ‘Have had a few feeble attempts to play with some jokes. Maybe you’ve also had some second thoughts – just the more the merrier’ (2000) – it was a positive way of saying that we should make my sitcom a little bit funnier. Together we made small but effective dialogue tweaks, set-ups and pay-offs, all totally born out of character, it felt like he was complimenting my work rather than changing it. In this setting, I was treated like a writer rather than a hopeful and ergo – it was so. In the UK today, the equivalent of TAPS is BAFTA Rocliffe’s New Writing Competition, a platform for aspiring screenwriters to have their work showcased. Every year I encourage my soon-to-graduate students to send in drama or comedy scripts to their open-door competitions, as well as to the BBC Writersroom’s script competition windows.

As a result of my TAPS exposure, I was given my first broadcast commission. I was recommended by someone I had invited to the showcase. He asked me to submit a speculative script to Harry Duffin, a story consultant at Cloud 9, an international, independent television production company. I got the job. *The Tribe*, a post-apocalyptic drama series, written in the UK and shot in New Zealand, had already run for three seasons when I joined the team. We worked collectively in a writers’ room to storyline a batch of episodes and then independently to hone a script. I was the only woman, and my fellow writers were talented, erudite, friendly, blue and hard-working. My story consultants and script editors were also writers on the series and their notes were constructive and helpful. I flourished, became more confident and worked hard. I learnt how to write for younger actors, discovered how less is more, show don’t tell, and that reaction was just as important as action. There were six

¹ Doing it for Real is a current Falmouth University (my employer) mantra which encourages students to study in industry-style situations.

months of intensive writing followed by six months of calm while the show was shot and edited. Then we would go again. Praise was generous and critiques were only about the business of making the story better. My very first script notes ran like this: ‘Why nervous? This is great stuff. You’ve got a good sense of the characters coming through, nice touches of humour, and you’re playing the scenes off each other to good effect ... It’s just right’ (David Richard-Fox 2001). David went on to tell me what I needed to do to improve the script, but kindly.

Eighteen months later we were writing Season Five and I was still on board. Harry Duffin (2002) wrote in one note: ‘This is your best first draft to date. The scenes are more focussed and generally less “domestic” in the wrong sort of way. Not many notes at all, but one or two biggish ones that need a bit of a rethink.’ The email went onto to give me the two biggish notes, and 11 little ones. Written on a Wednesday, it was signed off, ‘That’s it. Monday, please. Thanks, Harry.’ This was perfect. Some praise, some help, a to-do list, a deadline and a thank you. There was nothing missing from this elegant critique.

Notes

This sort of feedback is vital when working with writing students. There was definitely a criticism in Harry’s notes, but it was couched in such a way that it came across as a positive. By putting in the word ‘generally’, it made me go back over what I had written and enabled me to rewrite the ‘wrong sort’ of domestic without losing face. At the time, I had a tendency to overwrite what was know as ‘toothbrush moments,’ which Harry knew had the potential of halting the drama or slowing down the storytelling. This was masterful feedback. It was honest and it was kind.

In 2000, I created an idea for an original, six-part television drama series and sent it to Baz in the hope he might want to direct it. He did and very quickly we had an offer from a regional broadcaster and a network commission. I was assigned a script editor, a role whose abilities are summed up by Karol Griffiths: ‘A good script editor will simplify the process, helping the writer improve their script with minimal confusion or stress, and also, hopefully make it a gratifying experience’ (2015, p.13). My script editor nodded support, smiled enthusiastically and gently unpacked muddled thoughts with light questions that enabled me to discover for myself the crass excuses for plot turns. It was a shared experience that buoyed me up rather than put me down. I have worked with a script development consultant since who only asked questions, such as, ‘And what is our character feeling now?’ She would simply lean back and allow me to freewheel, as I imagine a client might in a psychologist’s chair. I found the answers she had guided me towards, and we both felt satisfied with different jobs well done.

The development process for my six-part series was beginning to take shape as I explored the various small documents (logline, synopsis, character breakdown, episode outlines) that made up the series bible with my script editor. The decision was made about where it would be filmed and I was taken around a number of locations. I adjusted the script and delivered the final draft for episode one. It was greeted with enthusiasm and signed off by the head of drama. Baz and I were also busy with casting suggestions. The series was on its way. Then the head of drama was called away and replaced on the project by another producer. We had a meeting. In London. In a plush hotel. He introduced himself and then told me that he had 124 notes.’ I shrank. What did he mean? The script had been signed-off. What notes? He proceeded to take me through them. One after the other. Blow by blow. Bullet by bullet. Griffith states that “Note-giving is a delicate job, and it is important that you do it with respect and care” (2015, p.123). This was not a delicate job and somewhere on the Langham

Hotel battlefield I became confused and punch-drunk. I could no longer see my story and I felt like a failure, hurt by the bombardment of too much information, and upset that he delivered his thoughts in such a didactic and unsympathetic way.

Griffiths tells us that script editors (and presumably producers) ‘will provide well-thought-through notes in a respectful, practical and attentive way, without involving their egos, keeping the writer and the story their top priority’ (2015, p.13). Or, as Batty and Waldeback state, ‘an occasional problem is that producers are not adapt enough at analysing scripts, and provide false or unhelpful solutions. It is thus the job of the writer to pick their way through the morass of comments and find the truth behind them’ (2019, p. 132). At the time I was not experienced enough to know this nor did I realise that ‘rather than follow the notes blindly, it is important to discern what they are really saying.’ (2019, p.104) In an attempt to be professional, and despite feeling upset, I agreed to address his concerns. My agent backed my decision to make the necessary changes, feeling that, as a writer fairly new to television, it would be in my best interest to be amenable, flexible and no prima donna.

Screenwriting agent, Julian Friedmann wrote in 2004 (p.5):

I don’t actually agree with William Goldman’s dictum that ‘No one (*sic*) knows anything.’ Just knowing that you know nothing is evidence that you do know something. The trouble starts when someone is convinced that they know everything. Of course they cannot know everything so the goalposts are moved and the writer has to make changes to their treatment or (worse) to their script either because it really didn’t work, or because the reader thought that it didn’t work.

The problem, I see with hindsight, was the producer’s approach. I had had a creative idea, that was potentially six-hours of original television drama. Important people had enthused about that idea and commissioned it. It was an incredible opportunity. Then I met someone

who had over a hundred notes on something that we believed to be working well. It knocked my confidence. I started to doubt my abilities. I began to tinker with the story beyond the notes. I changed adjectives, character names, verbs, settings, scenes, anything that I thought I could do to somehow address concerns. This fruitless rewriting was compounded by the loss of my script editor, who was moved upstairs to the role of producer on another project.

At my next script meeting, with the note-giving producer and a new script editor, whom I had not even met, but who had read the rewrites, I found myself defending my work and being asked if I could beef up the dramatic situation of an important character to beyond what I considered to be the pale of her motivation. ‘A script editor will examine the script and provide an analytical overview of the work. This will identify any problem areas and assess where the script is working and where and why it is not; and they aim to help the writer get on, stay on track’ Griffiths (2015, p.13). My script was veering off track and in danger of straying into cliché and soap opera, and I was desperately trying to pull it back from the brink. It had been commissioned as a drama for network television and I wanted to stay true to my original concept. However, I was only the writer. Only the creator of the characters, and this producer was either trying to make a mark by bending my story into a different shape or trying to new-broom sweep me out of the development door. Furthermore, his script editor felt more like his hench-woman than my constructively critical friend. My six-part drama, idiomatically, fell off the map. I was paid for the work I had done but the series never got made.

If I look at this scenario with more experienced eyes, I begin to understand what was at play here. And how I might have reacted differently if the concerns had been presented differently. Perhaps the producer genuinely wanted to make my script work but believed that the

storylines were muddled and needed clarification. Perhaps the themes, central message, and character motivation were only clear to me and it lost something in its translation to the page. Perhaps it was not good enough and could have been better. Perhaps I was not good enough. At the time, I certainly felt that the latter was the case. Yet, *The Tribe's* production company, Cloud 9, continued to commission me to write for television.

By saying, 'I have 124 notes for you', it gave the producer the upper-hand and upset the balance of power in what should have been a collaborative experience. I became nervous, defensive and confused. His opening sentence had completely crushed my confidence. And there's the rub. Writers put themselves out there and say, 'Look at me, look at what I have created,' but there is another part of them that is afraid of criticism. If the producer had said instead, 'Hello, welcome, I've read the script. The main character is thought-provoking, visceral, honest (please supply your own adjectives here) and I am wondering if we might tweak this a little by escalating the drama, perhaps by introducing a new problem in the middle? I often find the middle sags a bit, don't you?' Then I would have felt a part of the refit and perhaps we would have ended up with a better drama or even a drama that was broadcast.

Praise

My producer seemed to lack empathy and the ability to praise. His negative comments almost stopped me writing altogether. As a lecturer, many years later and of many years standing, this lesson continues to constantly sit at my side. My priority over everything else is to try and find something positive to say to my writing students: something honest and supportive. In a one-to-one meeting I make my encouraging comment and then I wait for their eyes to light up. The moment when the message hits home. 'Because how many of us do respond

well to negativity and criticism? Don't most of us just shrink inside and put that work to one side, unsure how on earth to fix it? We do respond to positivity, however' (Dawson 2020, p.54).

In my teaching, I try to tailor critique to match the current position of the writer. All writers move at different creative paces and there is no one-size-fits-all when you are trying to draw a story outline from memories, objects, observations, imaginations, thoughts and feelings, or simply from thin-air. When a script is not working, for whatever reason, as the encourager, you might need to draw from your own experiences. Give little hints and examples as to why a scenario might not be ringing true. At this junction try not be tempted to tell them how to resolve the problem. Keep going with the hints and examples until you experience their 'penny-drop' moment. That clear sight and sound moment when you know they now know how to tell their story. You have helped them up on to their story springboard but now they need to dive in on their own. Which is how it should be. Always.

Corrective Culture

When a group of undergraduate filmmakers, optioned a neat and breathtakingly simple three-minute script from a university script competition, every member of the student crew inadvertently assumed that that script would need to be fixed. Alas, it was not broken. It went into preproduction and much of the initial activities centred around note-giving. After some 14 rewrites and much wringing of hands, the undergraduate writer came to me. Having read the original draft but not being part of the ensuing process, I could clearly see that the story did not need all of this work and opinion and butchery. Indeed, perhaps it had culminated thus because the filmmakers felt that they must make comments rather than comments needing to be made. 'There is a corrective culture of script development that regularly goes

unchallenged,' argues Taylor (2016, p. 3): 'The notion of development in the case of screenplays is often synonymous with repair and that script development ... is a process that leans heavily upon assumptions'. Taylor suggests that 'assumptions are perhaps born of the marginalisation of the screenplay in wider discourses of filmmaking, as well as the assumptions inherent in the language of screenwriting practice' (2016, p. 3). Certainly, on this occasion, assumptions had been made and everyone was a critic.

I tried to be neutral as we discussed possible scenarios. The student decided that the best things to do, in this instance, was to take their name off the project. They were right: the production crew did not fully understand the original concept and the writer was exhausted and crushed by having to rewrite it so many times. The story had been well-written, and the first draft was infinitely better than the fourteenth. Furthermore, it had changed so radically that it was no longer the story that the crew had optioned in the first place. The filmmakers had created a great deal of paperwork but failed to provide a contract. The student writer left the project and yet another draft was written, this time by the director. I asked the student in 2019 what would have helped the most in terms of script editing and story feedback.

Having someone who is understanding of the writing process and can give advice and guidance without trying to make the story their own. Story feedback focussing on the actual story rather than suggesting new ideas to be implemented on the story would also be helpful.

How does a screenwriting tutor or script editor nurture someone's original story idea? How do they oversee fresh talent? How do they serve as 'plotters' rather than 'pantsers' – those that write the story down first and those that write by the seat of their pants – and vice versa? How do they *not* crush creative endeavour? How do they guide their proteges toward the jigsaw pieces that reveal the full picture? How do they assess objectively and become that constructively critical friend? Perhaps the industry and academia have a little to learn around

this still. In script editing there appears to be a quantum leap between showing novice writers the basics (such as how to format a screenplay) to telling them how they should write their story. The real script editing must surely lie somewhere in between. MA Film & Television student Katherine Press's (2019) ideal expectations from a script editor were:

To guide (rather than dictate) the way towards a more cohesive, polished version of the story I'm trying to tell. A sense of empathy is invaluable, as each writer will need a different approach at different times and on different projects. Someone who can free up, empower, reassure and motivate.

It is interesting to note that the relationship between a director or producer and the writer can often be at odds, even in projects that have made it to the screen and have won plaudits and awards. Such was the case in 1961 when Janet Green wrote *Victim* for producer Michael Relph and director Basil Dearden.

Green explains that changes suggested by Relph will not work because the logic of the story and the characters would neither be believable nor accurate ... Green's frustration with the development process increases with each draft ... Even though Green is often upset and annoyed by Relph and Dearden's comments, she is still very aware that they are a development team and the writer, producer and director have a common aim in mind – which is to produce the best possible film. (Cited in Nelmes, 2010, pp.261-62)

More recently, and in television rather than film, Graham Mitchell, a writer of seven years standing on the BBC's *Silent Witness* told me in an interview in 2019:

If it's an authored piece it is generated by you as a format: something like *Years and Years* - that's Russell Davies', but something like *Silent Witness*, where each two-episode story is to some extent authored, all the writers come up with the material for those two episodes, but the actual overall ownership is not the writers.

You own your two bits, but the overall ownership belongs to the Exec Producer. If a writer's piece differs significantly from the Exec Producer's view, then he has seniority – that's where the frustration comes from – they get to say yes or no.

If the concept you come up with is severely damaged by the intervention of the senior person then you're immediately into a repair situation before you've even begun the process, as you are constantly trying to rewrite it, and the process is, you're constantly trying to repair an idea that was one thing and is now something else. It's neither one thing nor the other.

Sometimes, it's better if an Executive Producer completely disagrees with a vision for something, to say let's start again – We're not going to agree on this. But because of my seniority on the programme and the length of time I'd been doing it, we got to a place where perhaps that decision would have been taken, but it was too late in the process to replace it with something else. So, we then end up with a muddle.

I asked Graham if he had ever been sacked or fired from a writing job.

Yes, but it's never dressed up as that. Sometimes I have to admit though, and this is interesting for younger writers, you need ego, you need to believe in your ideas to do this job. But too much ego and you shoot yourself in the foot, so, finding the right balance. I've been fired for being difficult and I've been fired for not being very good ... I was fired once from my own show. That wasn't great.

My experience of the TV series that never was, was the equivalent of being fired, and like Graham's experience, it was not dressed up as that. Finally, I contacted Jane Johnson, a successful novelist, editor and 2019 joint-winner of the Alfie Awards, given to her by one of her stable of writers, George RR Martin (*Game of Thrones*) for Editing. I asked, 'What are your expectations from an editor? What advice, help, inspiration, observation, comfort or support do you value most?' She replied,

Book editors are there to help the author maintain consistency, pacing, integrity of structure: not to impose their, or anyone's else's view on a text but to enable the writer to deliver the very best version of their own vision possible. I am the person

who is supposed to hold their works in my head if they write in series – and each time they deliver a new volume I will reread the entire series in order to do just that. If any of them ever has a problem, I am there to listen and try to help solve it; I'm the one who softens blows and celebrates good news with them.

This all sounded so very different from my Langham Hotel experience and the experience of my undergraduate. Johnson also pointed out: 'Writing as a novelist is a very personal and largely private exercise – which is why most of us choose this form of expression over the complex and often frustrating teamwork and consensus creativity of TV/film.'

In Conclusion

The full (and often unacknowledged) quotation from Goldman (1984, p.39) is: 'Nobody knows anything. Not one person in the entire motion picture field *knows* for a certainty what's going to work. Every time out it's a guess – and, if you're lucky, an educated one.' Perhaps the reality of the nurturing, feedback and the script-editing process is to show without telling, suggest without doing, and gently help your writer stick to their story path, without crushing their confidence.

In her blog, Julie Bush (2016) compares jigsaw puzzles with screenwriting and how sometimes she likes to do both at the same time. 'These two things are the same thing. This is a puzzle with layers and that is a puzzle with layers. Do not be afraid ... screenwriting is like putting a jigsaw puzzle together where you have to design all the pieces.' Script editors, mentors and tutors can help new writers with the design but should always gently allow the student to try to find the best fit. A few attempts are part of the game and eventually, with encouragement, they will find where the pieces go to make up the full picture.

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