

The Early Career Educator Caught Between Cinema Theory and Film Production
Practice as Research Curriculum Innovation and Engaging Students as Partners

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Screen programmes across the globe, which now relate to the fasted growing area of our economy, are plagued by the same fundamental problem, otherwise known as ‘the split’ (Buckland 2016). Problem is, the theory (film studies) has become too hermetic and cut off from practice (filmmaking) and the practice (filmmaking) has become renowned for evading and disdaining theory (film studies), reducing much contemporary film education to a sterile exercise in learning to use technical equipment (Buckland 2016; Nelson 2013; Tomasulo 1997). Over the past 3.9 years, I have co-led a team in the design, delivery and development of all major graduate project modules on the Cinematic Arts programme at Ulster University, Magee. This included curriculum design, in which students and staff worked together to develop and enrich the learning and teaching experience, and better articulating and integrating the rich relationship between theory and creative practice. My curation and management of the final year, in particular, involves leading a team of core and part-time staff, some of whom had no prior knowledge of practice-as-research (PaR) processes. This involves a significant deal of mentorship, particularly of our part-time tutors (professional filmmakers), who are often at odds, for example, with why a screen work might be accompanied by a written dissertation, and to ensure appropriate alignment of teaching, learning and assessment practices. Rather than conceiving of filmmaking as merely a practice, our students need to also conceive of the craft as a practical way of thinking, and so a new approach was needed - one that recognises skill and technique as manifestations of deep rational knowledge and competence.

The final semester of the Cinematic Arts programme did not yet exist when I joined Ulster University in 2015. After I was asked to curate it (from scratch), it became clear, from subject experts, employers, industry experts, and benchmark statements, that the final semester of final year should constitute a unique experience in which students would undertake two semi-self-directed modules (one theoretical and the other practical) leading to the submission of a written dissertation (the theory) and an accompanying short film (the practice). After many fruitful conversations with the soon to be final year Cinematic Arts students, it became clear that they were very much at odds with how to put film theory into practice (which came as no surprise), and how to undertake a research process that leads to an arts-related output (what they would be required to do in the final semester). Further challenges arose when it became apparent that our part-time tutors, uprooted from industry, were reluctant to do anything other than they did as established professionals, prompting questions like, ‘how can creative practice articulate a research inquiry’.

I believe that relationships work best when they are reciprocal. The teaching and learning environment at its best will express, ‘what you have to offer is of value to me, and what I have to offer is of some value to you’ (Strong 1995). In the process of designing the curriculum for final semester, I wanted my final year students to play a role in challenging established ways of thinking and doing - to have a stake in how they would undertake such independent, semi-self-directed research modules, which felt overwhelmingly complex to them at the time - and to develop new and critical ways of understanding the discipline. The goal here was to ensure that our graduates were equipped to create practice-as-research projects, to gather research by creative means and to express research through creative artefacts. This would require us to work harder together, as staff and students, to abolish the traditional academic view that the relationship between theory and practice is dichotomous.

I see curriculum design as perhaps the most important step in effective teaching (Fink 2003). It was important to me that the design process of the final semester modules was collaborative, as this kind of approach affords staff and students an opportunity to develop comfort with, and confidence in, the shared work (Bovill and Bulley 2011; Cook-Sather et al. 2014, Lubicz-Nawrocka 2018; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Simoni 2018; Matthews 2016; and Mercer-Mapstone 2017). The goal here was to enhance my final years' experience through the provision of a well-designed, flexible, inclusive, relevant and accessible final semester and through curricula that promotes student engagement and success.

My periodic discussions at dedicated workshops with students, in particular, allowed me to gather real-time impressions about what was, and was not, helping develop their skills on the programme. The biggest challenge, according to the students, was learning how to conduct research from a film practitioners' perspective - an insider's perspective (Kerrigan and Callaghan 2016), which would become increasingly important as they progressed to final year. This they (rightly) perceived was caused by the segregated nature of theory and practice within the academy (demonstrated, at times, by the core staff's reluctance to engage with filmmaking technology in class [most of *us* are theoreticians]) and outside of the academy (demonstrated, at times, by the part-time tutors' reluctance to engage with theory in class [most of *them* are filmmakers]). As stated, this challenge, to recognise the valuable nexus between theory and practice, continues to plague screen media programmes, not helped by the fact that most contemporary film theory is unreasonably abstruse.

Over the past four years, and with the help of all stakeholders, I have been able to better assimilate both elements, on the macro-level of curriculum design and on the micro-level of individual module offering, to ensure that students (and staff) better construct meaning through more relevant teaching, learning and assessment activities. This, I have achieved through a pedagogical strategy that sees students alternate between theory and practice modules in the final year, in particular, and attend 'fused' masterclasses, in which part-time tutors work side-by-side with core staff inside the classroom to help students gain a 'build' of knowledge on practice-as-research process week to week and month to month. My curation of the final semester involved a significant amount of mentorship, particularly in relation to part-time tutors, who felt well equipped to teach practitioners, but ill-equipped (in the beginning) to teach practitioner-researchers (what filmmaking students are now expected to be by graduation). I believe that the future success of the programme depends on our capacity to respond energetically to change. Over the years, I have spent much time leading and managing our part-time staff to face the new and uncertain demands of the final semester, which places a much greater emphasis on research than other semesters, which are predominantly used to instil into students basic and advanced concepts, as well as a wheelhouse of sophisticated practical skills.

Higher education staff value mentors who are innovative, participative, generous with their time and recognition, and experienced (Ramsden 2002). I drew on my knowledge of adult development, cinematic arts, arts-based curriculum and pedagogy, and my understanding of my part-time staff, in order to make principled and informed judgements about sound practice as this is what an effective mentor does (Portner 2008). My decisions were not only grounded in pedagogic scholarship, but also in experience. I worked hard to strengthen the effectiveness of my part-time staff, in particular, by critically examining their practice, and sought to expand their repertoire, deepen their knowledge of, and sharpen their judgment around, practice-as-research processes, all the while encouraging them to apply their new findings, ideas and theories in class. I then safeguarded quality by gathering and using feedback to modify the modules, teaching, learning and assessment approaches throughout the semester.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of my interventions in the final semester, I paid attention to student attendance records, their participation in class, and periodic discussions with core and part-time staff. I also paid attention to the quality of students' research progress (as their final project supervisor I was able to comprehend if there was a strong connection being made between the theory and cinematic practice) and I studied the Module Feedback Surveys where several students explicated mentioned that their technical skills where now being supplemented with rational and intellectual capacity. I found that by making small changes that I could make a significant difference to our teaching and my students learning. For example, by having my studio-based doctoral candidates, of which I have six (most of whom are deeply invested in practice-as-research projects) host Q&A screening sessions for the final years, my students were able to glean a better understanding of what screen production research is and looks like. Furthermore, my mentorship of one particular part-time staff member (a cinematographer by trade) has caused him to expand upon his own screen production projects by integrating theory (in fact, he intends to undertake a PhD in 2020).

The programme's recent revalidation was extremally encouraging and annual reports from the External Examiner confirm that the BSc Cinematic Arts is a leader in the Higher Education Film Production sector (we are ranked 2nd in the UK). Our graduates have also been deemed highly employable in the creative and related industries given their skills and their range of experiences in terms of course structure and content which makes the mixture of learning opportunities even more coherent and cohesive. We currently enjoy a NUS score of 100% and I am delighted to have been nominated for several Learning and Teaching Awards at Ulster (one for every year of service).

This project has clarified for me how to increase resource productivity and enhance teaching quality. I have also learned how I can help my staff through periods of change without compromising professional standards. My working to further recognise the rich relationship between theory and practice has been read by my students and colleagues as a celebration of creative practice and as an important pursuit in the contemporary academic landscape. The project has given me an opportunity to draw on ideas from the world of business leadership as well as research into what makes academic staff committed and productive. I now possess practical tools with which I can improve upon my management and leadership skills. Most of all, my innovative curation of the final semester has showed me that it is, indeed, possible to turn adversity into prosperity. The legacy of this approach is embedded in ongoing course developments. Due to success of the Cinematic Arts programme, I was invited to guide the design of the new BA Screen Production programme at Belfast Art College.

My curation and management of this particular pedagogical strategy, which works to facilitate understanding around a deeply misunderstood mode of enquiry (creative practice), and through collaborative curriculum design, innovative learning and teaching strategies, and empathic mentorship of staff, is genuinely transferable. The challenge of integrating cinematic theory and film production and, indeed, integrating film scholars and film practitioners, utilising each to their full potential, is an issue affecting screen media courses globally (Nelson 2013). Any pedagogic efforts to abolish the dichotomy between theory and practice are relevant and applicable to any creative practice course across the university and, indeed, the world (Batty and Kerrigan 2017).