

## **TEACHING TELEVISION: An exercise in Collaboration**

### **Intro:**

I'm John Mandelberg, Moving Image Tutor at the School of Media Arts at WINTEC. I redesigned the 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Moving Image Production course to be a mostly experiential one with opportunities for collaboration on Television based projects.

Last year the students produced a television sitcom: THE COUCH set in a regional casting agency, based on a screenplay written by myself and Joe Citizen.

*"There are no jobs in the New Zealand television industry  
- only opportunities."*

That's what NZ filmmaker Costa Botes said to a group of Moving Image students at an informal discussion about his work in the NZ film and television industry. Although some felt he was being negative about their prospects, I believe that it's those opportunities that our Moving Image students should be equipped to take advantage of.

With this in mind, one of the main ways to become a player in the film and television sector is be skilled at collaboration, which after all is the key to effective Film & Television production.

Our 3-year Visual Arts course has a range of introductory electives: a taster of the core teaching areas on offer. Students interested in filmmaking can choose to do a 15-week introductory Moving Image paper during first year, before entering the core Moving Image course in years 2 and 3.

During these two years we introduce them to a range of theory and practice, where practice-based learning is at least 75% of the outcome of the students assignments.

We encourage the development of the student's individual Filmmaking voice, as many gravitate towards technical/aesthetic roles in order to get jobs in the Film & Television sector. They learn a range of technical/aesthetic skills through practical teaching, class assignments both individual and collaborative.

Long term US Industry heavyweight film editor and sound designer Walter Murch says: *"Each of these moments of collaboration, each contribution by someone other than the director, adds a slightly different perspective to the work, some chisel mark slightly at an angle to the central vision. And each of these moments, these facets, has the potential to make the work 'sparkle' in a creative sense, and make it accessible to a greater variety of people over a longer period of time."*

In the early 70's, after graduating from the National Art School in Sydney, I starting a 2-year part-time course in Film & TV Production. I wanted to work in television as an editor, although I knew I had to "do my time" as an assistant, before rising "inexorably" up the career ladder.

I learnt production basics at Tech and on graduation started working as an assistant editor at the Australian Broadcasting Commission. But it was only then that I really started to learn about collaboration, mostly by example and observation through my very first editor, then directors and over the years from a cavalcade of experienced practitioners.

30 odd years and multiple careers later, I can reflect on the journey of learning through practice and my efforts to translate this into effective education.

As most of my learning was done “on the job”, I am always interested in experiential learning as a key method of teaching Moving Image practice.

Our students are taught at a standard industry entry level, where they learn a technical/aesthetic skills base across a range of production roles: editor, camera operator, producer, production manager, sound designer and director. They develop an understanding of film & television practice, in both drama and documentary production.

We stress the essential links between what they learn in the course, and how it relates to the Film & TV Industry. Like many film programmes around the world we have steadily moved away from the auteur (the director as author) model of Moving Image practice towards learning about collaboration through individual and collective skills development.

Over the two years of the course we teach a range of technical and aesthetic strategies for the students to conceptualise and create work. In the teaching of practical skills the students tend to work in groups modelling a collaborative production unit, but at times will work more individually towards their various core assignments.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> year “MOVING IMAGE PRODUCTION” paper Assignment #2, is a seven-week module, which is all about Multi-Camera Television Production.

It's an experiential teaching & learning project where students make a choice as to their production roles within a TV studio-based project that includes classroom activities, developing specific skills and preparation for a 2-3 day "live" studio production.

This is almost the only time that all the students work together on just one large project where they are dependent on each other's skills and collaborative potential. These roles again model an Industry standard TV production crew and collaboration is an important part of the learning.

This immersive, "learning-on-the-job" teaching strategy works quite differently to the teacher-lecturer and demonstration-based model. Although, students do enjoy the collective process of learning, they're not really able to model the true hierarchical approach to industry production practice.

Ted Hardin, professor and the assessment co-coordinator in the Film and Video Department at Columbia College in Chicago, wrote in his 2009 article, '**NOTES ON COLLABORATION: ASSESSING STUDENT BEHAVIOURS:** *"We are often at our best as teachers when we are well prepared, rested, and able to stick to a Socratic and dialogic teaching style that is unifying in its learning among teacher and students. Then there are those moments when the projector breaks, we have misplaced our notes, there is too much to cover, the clock is ticking—and we resort to a series of assertions that we insist are all very important and should be learned accordingly. We may be admired for such lectures, yet when teachers lecture at students, there is a sudden separation between the instructor and the students—a separation that is often consistent with the traditional classroom,*

*yet has differing results for members of a creative team.”*

A practical-based Teaching television production assignment is also an acknowledgement that most of our graduates will in one way or another work for this medium. Not just to be directors: the Artist/Rebel of the Auteur (Author) Model of Film production.

Many of our graduate students are currently working as editors, camera operators, vision switchers, producers, writers and directors in a range of Moving Image productions both Internationally and in New Zealand.

In financially depressed times, the teaching of practice-based courses that puts people into work is the catch cry of most economic-rationalist governments and New Zealand's is no different.

We have also moved towards engagement with community and industry both regionally, and nationally with the Television assignments. So that there is a real world outcome along with individual assessment. During the last few years the range of TV productions have included Music-Performance based programmes, live issues-based forums; a School of Media Arts overview including course specific videos; a Dragon's Den-like business entrepreneur-based project and a TV Game Show. We had not been able to produce a drama-based TV production due to budget constraints of this type of project.

Nonetheless in the last two years we have been able to make within the student production paper, two drama-based TV Multi-Camera projects.

By collaborating together on a WINTEC Research Project with my colleague Joe Citizen, regionally based film & TV practitioners and the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students, we wrote the screenplays and pre-developed the projects for the course. This also meant that additional funding could pay for actors, a costume designer, a make-up artist, set design and construction as well as the hire of specialised equipment. Mind you this did add another level to the production hierarchy with Joe and I being both teachers and collaborators with the students.

On the positive side, students were able to practice collaborating with various industry professionals who worked on the production. There was a nominal level of hierarchy, which included the students acting as studio director, floor manager/producer, and the lighting director, with the rest of the crew working together under their direction.

In discussing the outcome of a student filmmaking survey at the Department of Film and Video at Columbia College in Chicago, Ted Hardin discovered that, *“Surprisingly, only 4 percent of the students’ behaviors align with the Artist/Rebel, distributed equally throughout the capstone courses.”* He further said that, *“An explanation for a lower emphasis on the Artist/Rebel behaviors may be a departmental shift away from an auteur model of filmmaking toward a producing culture that has sprung up over the last six years (and is the industry norm in the United States)... Further evidence of this shift away from an auteur (model) may explain the relatively small number (16%) of students who declared themselves leaders in the first survey that I administered... (in 2007).”*

Not to say that the students were always agreeable and subservient to the leaders in their team, they also enjoyed the process of developing collaborative skills in this production model, which does engender team spirit.

In Michael Rabiger's seminal text *Directing*, he writes that: *"The feeling that comes from working effectively as a group is important: it can be the most exhilarating and energizing experience imaginable, and seems to be specially strong during times of crisis. Careful selection of the right partners makes anything in the world possible.*

*A team of determined friends is unstoppable. "*

In their reflective journals students talked enthusiastically about the different learning opportunities they had had, whilst some looked only at the individual skills needed in their own roles and not the overarching TV production model. The fact that they had only learnt the technical process of their own role in the jigsaw puzzle did seem to be a down side of this type of learning.

Ted Hardin writes that *"For the sake of remaining aligned with a rich tradition of liberal arts education in order to facilitate the emergence of more imaginative film innovators to the industry, film production programs must ask themselves, **"Are we teaching students to make films, or are we teaching them how to become the people who make films?"** The ideal answer many film educators want to blurt out is **"Both!"***

Reflecting on the 2010 sitcom project THE COUCH, we found that 3<sup>rd</sup> year students had little buy in with the idea at the beginning, but took two weeks before they became engaged with the project. As the “live” shoot dates grew closer the class production teams collaborated in production meetings, camera planning and rehearsals.

Although, students tended to refer to THE COUCH as “*our project*”, *ie.* it was Joe and my project, rather than their own. We were puzzled about this comment, as from right at the beginning of the module I was at pains to explain that being a member of any Production Crew it is highly unlikely that you would have written the script, that you would only be involved in the interpretation of the script within your production role. It wasn’t until we surveyed the students during the next Semester that we found that they had indeed enjoyed the process, it had given them a good overview of this kind of production, and it was a valid mode of teaching & learning Television Multi Camera production.

This year’s production was similar as we again used a script of our own. This time it was a sci-fi narrative interactive project, that had a range of constraints based on the interactivity of the project, but was also able to be made as a multi camera shoot.

For 5 weeks students rehearsed their individual and collaborative roles in-class, getting the feel for the pace of production. Although only a few students attended the director and actors script readings and rehearsals.



The production took place at night over two weekends on campus. There were very few students who did not engage in the project or their roles, although some believed that they were at the edge of their understanding of what they were actually doing.

During the first weekend they realised how slow they were, so in the following weekend they became more focused as a production group “getting the job done”. Although this may be a reflection on the question that Ted Hardin asked of this type of teaching mode: ***“Are we teaching students to make film’ or television’, or are we teaching them how to become the people who make film ‘or television’?”***

I would also like to add, as Ted Hardin’s says: *the ideal answer many film educators want to blurt out is “Both!”*

Whilst viewing the final production footage the students expressed a sense of pride in finishing the project, although many realized that some of the filming was somewhat rushed, especially at 2am in the morning. In their reflective journals students talked about the immense learning curve they had undergone. Some spoke about the widening of their skills from single camera drama to Multi camera television production as a possible area of future work opportunities.

Following the end of each year’s production, many of the students were able to take up an Internship opportunity working for a regional production company on a live-to-air television broadcast event. After that event students also went on to freelance in Multi-Camera television events for local TV Production and Events management companies.

I would still firmly hope that in Teaching Television in this immersive way that the students would both learn **how to make television** and **how to become the people who make television'** and understand the need to collaborate effectively.

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