

# ‘Employability and the Arts Based Course – a Defence of the Media Production Degree’

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# Profile

My first career, following graduation in 1984 from Manchester Polytechnic, was as a location lighting camera man; initially for the BBC and then, after ten years, in a freelance capacity. Throughout this time I maintained and pursued a keen academic interest in the visual cultures. My passion for the subject led me first to study with the Open University, then at the University of Manchester, where I graduated in 2005 with a Masters degree, and in 2013 with a PhD, both from the School of Arts, Histories and Visual Cultures.

My interest in teaching at HE level began eleven years ago on a voluntary basis, but was quickly followed by part-time positions at the universities of Chester, Manchester and Salford. In 2009 I was offered a full-time position at the University of Chester as a lecturer in Media Production. In August, 2013 I joined the staff in the Media department of the University of Bolton where I now lecture in Media Production – specifically cinematography and visual theory.

## Abstract

There are challenges within the delivery of Media Production degree courses that stem from a misalignment of student/employer expectations, and can be summed up thus: Most students attend Media Production courses to improve employment prospects within the industry and believe that this is best achieved by focusing on acquiring technical/practical expertise. As a result they are often reluctant to engage with broader aspects of education associated with critical thinking. Potential employers, however, are not overly concerned with new recruits having expertise of current technologies. Of equal, if not of more importance are 'transferable' skills, many of which are developed through critical thinking exercises.

As a result, graduates from Media Production courses enter the work place believing they are sufficiently prepared for what is a very competitive industry, but, in reality, they lack the skills employers look for. Inevitably the academic reputation and credibility of these courses is progressively undermined, and graduate dissatisfaction increased.

The process of creating media product, however, draws heavily on the same transferable skills most employers seek in new recruits. The proposition, then, is that increasing critical thinking elements within these courses will simultaneously enable students to perform better at subject level AND increase their employability, both within the media industry and beyond. But how might this be achieved if students feel critical thinking contributes little to their employability?

## Keywords

Media Production, Critical Thinking, Employability

## Introduction

This report adds to research already undertaken, (Yorke, 2006; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Fallows & Steven, 2000) by focussing on inherent problems within the delivery of practical-based arts courses explicitly linked to professional practice; specifically Media Production degree courses. The problems, it is argued here, stem from a misalignment of student/employer expectations, and potentially impact upon curriculum design, content delivery and student employability (areas debated throughout the HE sector since the 1990s - see Fallows & Steven, 2000). While this report responds to modules delivered at the University of Bolton, the problems it discusses are not presented as unique to this institution.

My concern regarding this misalignment is that year upon year graduates from Media Production courses enter the work-place under the impression that they are sufficiently prepared for what is a very competitive industry, but are, in reality, actually lacking the skills employers look for (this problem is not unique to arts-based courses as an article in The Telegraph newspaper recently highlighted – Smith, 24/1/2015). The result is that the academic reputation and credibility of media courses are continually and progressively undermined, and graduate dissatisfaction increased. Professor James Curran has raised such concerns before, most recently at the 2013 MeCCSA conference in Derry (Curran, 2013). His keynote speech highlighted the ignorance and prejudice that Media Studies programmes experience. Although this report is specifically concerned with Media Production degrees – there is a subtle difference – they are tarred with the same brush. And because Media Production degrees are, essentially, practical-arts based courses, they are further criticised for lacking realistic career opportunities.

Based on personal teaching experience, I believe students undertaking Media Production courses compound the situation because they are often unwilling to engage with the intellectual challenges associated with the critical thinking exercises common to traditional degrees. This is because they feel that they are of little relevance to their career ambitions. What students believe is of more importance, and are therefore more willing to put their energies into, is the acquisition of technical skills and an extensive knowledge of specific technologies. Unfortunately, such entrenched decisions rarely conform to employer expectations. As a result Media Production courses are often maligned, with accusations being levelled that they are less than academically challenging, they lack intellectual rigour, and that they do not adequately prepare graduates for the work-place.

What this misalignment of student/employer expectations masks, however, is the fact that the process of creating media product draws heavily on the same transferable skills the majority of employers are reportedly seeking in new recruits; transferable skills that the University of Bolton's current Careers Service Employability Guide announces its students should possess when they graduate, and lists as: communication, team work, organisation and planning, problem solving, initiative, self-awareness, flexibility, numerical interpretation, personal impact and confidence, and action planning. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that Media Production courses are, if not unique, then very rare in this regard. This being the case, I argue that if critical thinking exercises can be increased in what are heavily practical curricula, in such a way that they will be willingly engaged with, then students might perform better at subject level AND increase their employability; not just within their area of study, but across a range of career options. (There is ongoing debate regarding the definition of employability, but this report draws on the HEA's currently accepted definition offered by Yorke, 2006)

It must be stressed that this report does not promote a purely vocationalist approach to HE. The sole function of universities should not be the training of students – the majority of whom enrol while less than twenty years of age - for specific career paths. On the contrary, what this report works towards is the proposition that universities should be able to prepare students for a choice of career paths yet to be determined. Of the fifty-six students initially surveyed for this report, just over 60% suggested that they were studying Media Production as a means of entering the media industry, suggesting that nearly 40% of the cohort might be seeking an alternative career. That said it is also the case that universities should also be able to support specific career ambitions should students express them. A pre-determined career path and the broader pursuit of knowledge, need not, indeed, should not be mutually exclusive; and, it is proposed here, the Media Production course that can boast a significant critical thinking element can achieve this balance.

Nor does this report negate the value of teaching technical skills. They are an essential requirement for the production of media content; but not the only requirement. Evidence collected for this project suggests that employers within the media industry (and, indeed, many other industries) want new recruits to have the capacity to learn how to use new technologies, as and when they are introduced into the respective work places. But the same research also indicates that the majority of potential employers expect to teach new employees how to use the technology they rely upon, implying that graduates need only a basic understanding of specific technologies.

## The Need for Inquiry

In part, it is the contemporary digital landscape that necessitates this research, with concerns from within the media industry itself being voiced at four conferences held in 2014, each aimed at those seeking entry-level employment in the digital media industries: the Digital Skills Festival 2014, Manchester; BBC Vision 2022 – Technology Day, Media City; Royal Television Society Student Conference, Media City; and Working in the Media Industry, Bradford. In all four the importance of 'soft' or 'transferable skills' was regularly and repeatedly emphasized as being of equal, if not of greater importance than knowledge of specific technologies.

In addition, because Media Production courses are regularly maligned as lacking in intellectual rigour, leaving graduates considerably disadvantaged in their search for employment both in and out of the media industry, we, as convenors of such courses, have an obligation to determine if these criticisms are justified; and if so, to address them. We also have an obligation to constantly monitor student and employer expectations of each other – especially so in the digital industries. The importance of technology in the digital age should not be underestimated, specifically in the northwest. Manchester is the second largest digital centre in Europe - London being the first (Foggett, 2014) - but universities must be sure that what is delivered to the student body has long-term value and is not merely a form of technical catch-up in a rapidly changing industrial landscape. Alice Webb, Chief Operating Officer for BBC North, acknowledged that technology is moving so fast that it is difficult to guess what might happen next, implying that focussing too much on current technology should not be of primary importance for graduates. It is, she stated, 'ideas [that] are our lifeblood – we need content', a point reinforced by Ralph Rivera, Director of BBC Future Media (BBC Vision 2022 Conference, 2014). Without doubt, using technology and adapting to its developments is essential, but it is only part of the picture.

Of course, there is also the ongoing debate surrounding the value of critical thinking exercises in HE, and how best to implement them, and this modest study reinforces some of those areas already covered (Fisher, 2007). And because the role of the university is constantly being debated in relation to employability (Alexander & Alexander, 2002), studies such as this one should be ongoing.

## Plan of Action

The plan, then, was to investigate why those who study on Media Production courses might be reluctant to engage with critical thinking exercises, and to determine how this might be resolved so as to convince students of the contribution to their employability, both within and beyond the media industry, these exercises can make. A focus group comprising a mix of twenty-six Foundation Degree and BA (Hons) undergraduates – all of whom were studying the same practical film production module - was taken from the initial group of fifty-six students. They were asked, amongst other questions, why they chose to study Media production at degree/foundation degree level. Half of them did so to work within the media industry. They were then asked if they believed that such a degree could directly help to secure employment within that industry – all but two felt it would. What, then, was the most useful attribute that they felt they could learn whilst at university? For just over half of them it was the acquisition of knowledge of technology and how to use it.

Pursuing this line of inquiry further, they were asked to rank, on a scale of 1-10 (10 being very and 1 being not at all) how relevant they felt the learning of practical/technical skills (such as camera operating, editing etc.) was

to securing employment in the media industry. The results: Position. 10 - 20 votes, Position. 9 - 2 votes, Position. 8 - 3 votes and Position. 5 - 1 vote, confirmed my initial assumption that the majority of students studying on Media Production courses feel it is of more value to their career ambitions to concentrate on the acquisition of technical skills and an extensive knowledge of specific technologies.

All students were made aware of the exercise before they agreed to take part, and anonymity was assured for everyone completing the surveys.

Simultaneously a range of potential employers from the media industry were asked to prioritise the following eight skills/abilities with regard to new recruits (1 being the most important and 8 being the least): Knowledge of specific technology, Interpersonal communication skills, ability to research thoroughly and broadly on any topic, generating ideas for media content, problem solving, question the validity of the results of their research, work within a diverse team toward a common goal, and time management skills.

The list was compiled following a series of earlier conversations/communications with potential employers within the media sector, combined with the previously mentioned skills the University of Bolton presents as those 'that it expects all its graduates to leave with' (Bateman and Sheppard, 2013, pp.4-5).

While the positioning of the last five qualities listed was evenly spread, the responses to the first three are worth closer scrutiny. Only one employer placed 'Knowledge of specific technology' at No. 2, the rest relegated it to 5 or below. 'Interpersonal communication skills' was considered the most important attribute by all but one of those surveyed, and the 'Ability to research thoroughly and broadly on any topic' was positioned at 4 or above by everyone.

The results from these two surveys indicate that a significant number of students attending Media Production courses do so to improve their employment prospects within the media industry. This, in itself, is not uncommon (Bateman & Sheppard, 2013, p.2) and not necessarily problematic; but it would seem that the same students are under the misapprehension that this is best achieved by focusing primarily on the learning of technical skills, which is why they are often reluctant to engage with the more traditional aspects of education that might be described as critical thinking. In contrast to what students believe, however, the majority of those employers surveyed stated that they are not overly concerned with new recruits having expertise of current technologies. What they see as being of equal, if not of more importance are the 'transferable' skills that can be developed through critical thinking exercises combined with the production of media content. (The definition of critical thinking is complex - see Bowell & Kemp, 2005 and Fisher, 2007 - and subject to ongoing debate; this study uses Moon's summation, Moon, 2005, p.12)

In short, motivated by convictions established prior to enrolling on their production courses, students are putting their energies into the wrong area of study in a vain attempt to impress potential employers, and at a cost to their employability and the reputation of the degree they are undertaking.

The modular system of curriculum delivery, it is argued here, does little to alleviate the situation; allowing students the potential to compartmentalize subject matter (see Gibbs, 2012 for further discussion on this issue). If the relevance of one module to a student's ambition is not immediately obvious then it will not readily be engaged with. And if, as my evidence suggests, many students believe that the most important aspect of an arts based course is knowledge of technology and technical skills, then separate and individual critical thinking modules will be undervalued. If, however, students can be convinced of the importance of such a learning process to their employment prospects – an approach the HEA seemingly supports (Ball, 2003) - they might engage with it more eagerly.

My challenge, then, was to try to embed a series of critical thinking exercises into a heavily practical module in such a way as to entice students to commit to them - a form of critical thinking by stealth.

## Implementing the Changes

The module I chose to work with requires students to produce three films, the middle one being a short documentary. It was regarding the production process of this factual film that I decided to introduce two seminars presented as intending to improve film production technique, but devised to simultaneously develop the cohort's critical thinking skills AND address as many as possible of the eight employability skills listed in the employers' survey. These exercises were inserted into two existing three-hour practical workshops, and lasted an hour each.

Over the two seminars I showed the students extracts from two British documentaries that focused on different ethnic groups: the inhabitants of a giant rubbish tip in Lagos, Nigeria; and the Amish community in America. In an attempt to engage the students I explained that analysis of these films would teach them a great deal about documentary structure, camera operating, sound recording and post-production, which it certainly would. The emphasis, at least as far as the cohort was concerned, was on the practical and the technical.

In the first week I divided the cohort into groups of five or six and showed them what is known in the TV industry as 'the pre-title tease' of a BBC Two documentary called 'Welcome to Lagos' (Searle, 2010). This is the section of the film before the opening credits intended to reveal enough of the subject matter to keep viewers interested. The individual groups were then asked to discuss what they felt the film might be about, following which the discussion was opened up to the whole cohort.

Repeating this process - working in small groups and then opening up the discussion to the whole body - we analysed the photography, editing and sound (music, effects, interviews and voice-over) initially to explore the structure of the film and the technicalities involved. But in addition I steered the debate into a much more critical approach. That is, I asked them to consider and discuss the effectiveness of, for example, the combination of music and images, the gender and ethnicity of the narrator, the impact of unpleasant images - the film is about people who live and work on a giant rubbish tip - when juxtaposed with more positive scenes. The intention was to lead the students into considering how limiting information, or delivering it in carefully controlled combinations, affects the audience's interpretation of what they see and hear.

The debate led, as expected, to issues of authorship, meaning, and audience consumption, and touched upon the work of theorists Erwin Panofsky and Roland Barthes to name but two. With regard to the narrated script, or voice-over, I asked the students to consider not only whose voice we could hear, but who might have written the words and directed the actor with regard to delivery? Of course, without research they could not know, but they could consider the situation as being pertinent to the audience's understanding of the film. Offering them the information the group then debated how the ethnicity, class, education and political persuasion of the film-makers might impact on what was presented as a 'factual' film, raising issues of imperialism and globalization.

Following what was, in reality, an exercise in the critical analysis of a given text, I repeated the structure of the seminar the following week using a Channel 4 film, by the same production company, about a group of Amish teenagers who visit Britain to experience a more conventional lifestyle ('Amish: World's Squarest Teenagers', Whalley, 2010). Prompted by the lively discussion regarding the previous week's film, the students quickly began to openly debate what they felt the film-makers were trying to suggest, both about the Amish and about British teenage culture. Once again, and to ensure they engaged with the exercise, I used the technical elements of photography, picture composition, sound recording, voice-over and music as starting points for our debate.

Without discussing the concept of critical thinking with the cohort, I argue that what was offered as an opportunity to consider the technicalities and practicalities of film making simultaneously impacted on four of the skills potential employers had indicated as desirable; these being: 'Interpersonal communication skills' and 'Working within a diverse team toward a common goal' (when discussing ideas and opinions in small groups and then presenting them to the rest of the cohort); 'Generating ideas for media content' (when considering how they might choose to film different ethnic/social groups in order to present their own agenda); and 'Questioning the validity of the results of their research' (when debating authorship issues and agendas). I would



also argue that there was ongoing consideration of technical issues (if not specific technologies). The impact of photography, sound and editing cannot, and were not, debated without considering issues of how the different technologies were used.

Following this exercise the students were asked, on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being not at all and 10 being very much so) how relevant they felt these seminars and exercises were to their understanding of film production; to what extent they felt that this form of education should form a significant part of each year's curriculum; and how much did they enjoy the exercises. All but two placed the exercise at 7 or above on each question suggesting that the students could not only see the value of this method of learning to their career ambitions, but that they enjoyed the experience as well.

The module then required them to produce a short factual film which, as has been argued, demands students employ all eight of the transferable skills listed above - and most of those that the University of Bolton hopes all its graduates possess - if the end product is to be affective.

## Conclusion and Further Development

Admittedly, as an action-research plan in its earliest stages the reliability of this study is questionable. Working with such a small focus group (only twenty-six) over a limited period of time – eight weeks - delivers results that are best used as a starting point rather than as conclusive evidence. The same is true of the number of potential employers surveyed – while comments came from all nine approached, only six completed the survey. And although they were chosen from a range of job areas and company sizes from across the UK, their number remains small. That said, the evidence collected from this group supports findings from existing research and, indeed, the University of Bolton's own stance on employability skills.

The value of this report, then, lies in its justification of further and prolonged research into these issues. The next step is to expand the investigation to include all students studying Media Production across all three undergraduate years at the University of Bolton, and all the staff who teach them. No single module can realistically address the entire range of transferable skills that employers are asking for, nor can they all accommodate the same type of critical thinking exercise. For this revision of the curriculum to be effective, it needs cohesion at the planning stage and consensus regarding its implementation. A greater number of potential employees will also be surveyed. Initially this will be restricted to those working within the media industry as there already exists substantial evidence detailing what employers in other industries look for in new recruits.

Long-term, it would be ideal to follow graduates who have experienced three years of this re-structured curriculum into the work place to investigate how they and their employers might benefit from it. While such a time-scale seems daunting, the real value of this research relies upon its contemporaneity and should, I argue, be ongoing in some form or another. The speed at which the digital industries are evolving requires a constant monitoring of the relationship between graduates and employers.

Despite its limitations, however, this initial study does go some way to confirming that students studying Media Production courses believe learning technical skills should be their primary concern; employers are more impressed by transferable skills (skills that are essential to the production of media content and that critical thinking exercises can significantly improve); and that, introduced strategically, students will engage with critical thinking exercises if they appear directly linked to what students perceive as vocational skills.

What this early research might also offer is a means of combatting the erosion of public confidence in what I feel is a valuable area of study. By introducing more critical thinking exercises into traditionally heavily practical based curricula, students will not only be able to perform better at subject level, but they will increase their employability across a whole range of career options. But, and this cannot be stressed enough, any increase in critical thinking exercises in these course must be strategically executed; they must be embedded carefully so as

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