

Using practical film-making skills to enhance the understanding of theory in the Institute of Film and Television Studies



Dr Gianluca Sergi

Gianluca is currently researching Filmmaking practices, labour relations in Hollywood cinema, and film sound. In the future, he plans to focus mostly on researching contemporary cinema and television. He is currently working on a research project on the role of the movie guilds in Hollywood today. He also plans to continue exploring further the relationship between filmmaking practices and film theory, and the role of sound, extending to media other than film.

What was the learning and teaching issue that this work sought to address?

We teach film and television and there was a lack of any facility that might allow us to integrate practice with theory. Traditionally film has been divided into two categories; either you do theory or you do practice. But that is a false dichotomy really. There is no reason why you should choose. There is a 'third way', which is getting students to understand the theory by doing some practical work.

In other words rather than posing questions at the very beginning, we can let them get their hands dirty, and then, based on their own experience, they can look at what theoreticians and scholars have said and see whether there is any correlation.

This allows you to ask tough questions. So, for instance, people criticise Hollywood for making money and not art. When the students were engaging with making their film, were they thinking about how much it was going to cost or just trying to do the best they could? In other words, it is a way to get them to think about questions from a different perspective.



What skills do the students develop through this initiative?

Interestingly, the technical skills they develop are the least important, as they really only use a very small part of the capacity of the technology. Given that the course is primarily a theory course, we need to make sure that even the most technophobic person can do the work we require. What they do learn is how to translate problems into technological questions: I need to do this - what kind of technology can help me best? There might be more than one option. They learn how to identify the best tools at their disposal.

Video-making

The primary skill they develop is how to work in a group. All of the modules using the technology involve group-work and this is obviously a great way to develop time management skills, and to learn about the allocation of responsibilities. They learn to come to terms with having to give something up to gain something bigger. They see the added value to 'we', and they get a buzz out of the energy generated by six people working to the same goal. They start off not liking it because everyone wants his or her opinion to prevail. But they begin to gain an understanding of what an incredible enterprise, in terms of communications, film-making is. You have all these people from different backgrounds, using different technical languages and somehow you have to get together and understand what the project is and then work to that brief.



What impact does groupwork have on assessment?

This is really interesting, as there is a clear correlation between group-work and higher marks. And this is a pleasant surprise for the students! At one stage, the mark differential between the group-work elements of the module and the rest seemed so stark that I actually asked the External Examiner to look at the whole module. He said that I needed to change the marks. He marked them up! So they ended up getting even better marks. There are problems with group-marking however, and being fair is difficult. But as a teacher, you have more time to assess group-work than you do with an individual assessment, so this is a plus too. All students say that they spend an inordinate amount of time working in groups when they are doing practicals. This is good and bad. You have to be careful that they then don't spend less time on their other work!

What are your future plans?

At the National Centre for Animation at Bournemouth University, they have developed a relationship between the different Schools and Departments based on projects. Students doing animation projects cannot do everything by themselves. When it comes to doing the sound element, for example, they can post something on a common board and say 'I need someone to do sound', and someone from Film will say 'I am looking for a project' - so you create those kinds of synergies, which is really good. We're not there yet, but it is something that we could look at in the future.

How can the technology you have add value to teaching and learning in other disciplines?

The Institute of Film and Television Studies is part of the School of American and Canadian Studies where several colleagues have an interest in topics that could benefit from practical film-making. A colleague who works on Slavery for example, uses paintings and literature to illustrate her research and teaching. She would like to see if film-making could provide different ways of using imagery and sound in her teaching. Colleagues in Literature have expressed an interest too, and there are other disciplines like Music where there are possibilities to interact. So clearly, the disciplines which could benefit from using this technology are many.

