

Reflective Learning through Practice: design of a Film Studies module

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Key words: *reflective learning, transferable skills, collaborative learning, group work, group assessment, film studies, documentary film-making*

Introduction

This paper outlines the rationale and objectives for the design of a new module for Film Studies, *Documentary and Representation*, and offers a critical discussion of the process of designing it, including reference to the learning context, learning outcomes, content and assessment methods which I have opted to use.

My starting point was the perception that the Film Studies course at north campus, London Metropolitan University was lacking in its overall provision in two respects: there was no module dedicated to the significance of documentary in the British and world traditions of film-making; and there was no space to highlight debates on the politics of representation which specifically engage with and reflect the multi-cultural communities in which the university's students live.

From statements of London Metropolitan University policy it is evident that the university is responding to the pressure for widening participation, and specifically for 'enterprise' skills and 'personal transferable skills' to be built into the curricula (see Harvey & Knight, 1996). As a result, communication skills, teamwork, creativity, independence in learning and problem-solving have gained in importance alongside the more traditional, academic skills. This is one reason why Film Studies recruits well. From their feedback, students feel that it is relevant to their life experience and has the possibility of offering them direction and skills to be used in their working lives.

Pedagogic approach

Given the numbers of students who do not come from a conventional academic background, the theory/practice model which already distinguishes Film Studies at the University is attractive. This approach involves a commitment to seminars as a teaching and learning method throughout the modules on offer, with rigorous criteria for practice and assessment. It allows for students to nominate within the boundaries of the course skills and knowledge which they want to acquire and is part prescribed and part learner-directed, both characteristic of the 'experiential' and 'personally relevant' approach to educational practice as described by Toohey (1999, p. 59).

In considering what encourages students to tackle real problems and to discover knowledge for themselves as a basic premise for embarking on an appropriate design for the module, I therefore decided that the practice/theory approach would be most suitable. However, Film Studies at North Campus has also evolved and retained a pedagogy which is textually-based, and approaches the subject through presenting films as case studies, or texts, through which to make readings informed by various conceptual traditions of thinking, in the same way that narrative analysis is used in

English Literature. It was therefore important and desirable to reflect this distinctive balance in my curriculum design. Furthermore, it was necessary to discuss pre-requisites which would direct students' choices in terms of the overall curricula set for the graduate qualification as a whole. By restricting the module to those students who have already gained a basic familiarity with video-making skills, students only needed to be introduced to particular documentary techniques, which meant that the content I had originally envisaged for the module could be significantly reduced.

Curricular aims

Colleagues in Film Studies supported my analysis – through an assessment of the curricula taught across the module line and students' feedback sheets– that there was both a limited opportunity for students to engage with culturally specific issues of representation, and that the particular combination of practice with theory would usefully address problems which students have stated in engaging with the complex theoretical debates which apply in this area. Colleagues also felt that this module would be a useful addition since there was no module dedicated to documentary practice in the range then on offer. The new module would compliment this course by introducing questions of ethnicity and debates around its representation, and also build on the theorists and theoretical concerns developed in FM126, a core module for first years introducing *National Cinemas* in the context of issues of nation, culture and representation.

The community of students taking up Film Studies represents an immensely varied cultural background. However, feedback sheets have revealed how students are challenged by the theoretical frameworks and discipline necessary to interrogate a way of seeing dominated by their exposure to American cultural practice and narrative structures in both cinema and television. Since this aspect of students' personal development also reflects their position in society as consumers in a historical and cultural framework where knowledge and representation are restricted by current, commercial priorities, I considered it important to include a socially critical approach in the course design. This would affect the content by necessitating the inclusion of data and empirical evidence on the broadcasting and production environments within which any documentary representation takes place (for instance, statistics showing the demise of factual programming on international issues and the developing countries - a drop of 50% in the schedules between 1989 and 1999). In addition, documentary case studies would need to be situated in relation to their industrial, as well as their cultural and aesthetic contexts. The whole question of culturally specific representation begs the key question referred to by Toohey (1999, ch. 3) in connection with socially critical approaches, namely, 'Whose interests are being served?'.

From the background of my research into the media, university, subject and student contexts I formulated three aims for this module: to enable students:

- to gain a critical understanding of the ways in which representation in documentary practice is affected by its historical, cultural and technological context;
- to examine ways in which documentary both reinforces and interrogates assumptions about culture and identity;
- to develop skills in documentary research and the translation of that research into documentary form.

According to the so-called 'behaviourists', teachers should focus on what they want students to achieve and try to express those goals as educational objectives, so that

students know clearly what they should be able to describe, identify, resolve etc. The nature of the two key elements which form the basis for the module in question – documentary filmmaking and issues of representation – do not lend themselves to a scientific approach in terms of delivery. Filmmaking is not an empirical process and the forms which have been and can be used and developed for the creative interpretation of reality which is documentary, are constantly in flux dependent both on the filmmakers' and the viewer's context. Nonetheless by taking a selection of core theories of representation informing documentary filmmaker's practice this module could offer a cognitive base, key concepts and structures which students could use both to develop their own film project and to critique others. This would include theories of identity, racism and representation as developed by Benedict Anderson, Robert Stam and Stuart Hall, and theories of documentarists including John Grierson on the function of critical interpretation of reality, and Stella Bruzzi's contemporary analysis of 'performative' documentary.

Learning process

Students would have three opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of these theories; in class discussion of case studies, in their written work and in the production of a film project of their own choosing. However because of the interpretative nature of these theories there would not be a single standard in assessing their application but rather a set of criteria developed for the assessment process which would examine students' familiarity with basic concepts and their ability to translate them into their own frameworks. In particular, given the focus on representation, students would be encouraged to be self-reflective in discussing their understanding as it is derived from their experience as being part of particular ethnic, class and cultural groups.

In order to develop students' awareness of learning processes and the way different methodologies can be used to achieve different outcomes, I also wished to shape a module where students worked together in reaching collective understanding and devising jointly the solutions to the issues thrown up by their research. To this end it was important that students should have some freedom to choose their own subject for the film project and to choose the teams with whom they would work and see the process of their learning through. As discussed above, this practical component would compliment the cognitive element in developing transferable skills such as team work, communication, problem solving and in general, the ability to manage their own learning.

The practice element of the module would thus emulate practices of other problem-based structures for modules where students have to determine an objective, gather research, and constantly evaluate its significance in relation to the objectives of the project. In addition, because this is video practice they will be engaging in translating this experience into an audio-visual form of representation, understanding how their choice of character, camera angle, sound, commentary, music and cut all carry implicit understandings and judgements in relation to the subjects they are describing. For students to gain the maximum benefit from this group work, and so that there is a basic level of technical expertise to build on from their learning outcomes on other units, it became clear that this should be a module directed at third year students.

This level of learning would, of course, affect the kind of activity which can be used in teaching and assessing the module. It would allow for a maximum weight to be given to project work and a teaching strategy that combines delivery of a theoretical framework with engaging students in learning through group work. I therefore decided that the first six weeks would take the form of lectures, together with screenings used

as case studies and discussion. In preparation for the making of the video, and to increase their understanding and communicative skills with the students who they will be working, students would by the third week have formed themselves into groups. In discussion after screenings they would return to these groups to respond to the theoretical and practical questions posed by the case studies presented alongside the lectures, and so as to develop their research and proposal for their video projects. This would give the students time to prepare and direct themselves towards the production of the documentary during weeks 7 to 11, and week 12 would be devoted to screenings of the projects and feedback. During the 6 weeks of production there will be workshops with the individual groups allowing them contact time to explore their problems and find the best way of resolving issues coming up from their research and the execution of the project.

Assessment process

In considering appropriate assessment methods, I was keen to include both a formative and a summative assignment, where the formative assignment would help students become aware of what they have learnt and what they need to take further in order to transfer and integrate aspects from their theoretical learning and cognitive skills into their practical work. I was also concerned to choose assessment tasks which would both reflect the learning goals of the course and promote a deeper learning which would take into account the performance of students in carrying out a 'real-world' task in which communication and sharing of skills is essential.

The first assignment, to be delivered before the filming took place, would therefore be a written assignment to evaluate aesthetic, cultural and industrial aspects as taught in the lecture and discussion series in relation to their own project. This written essay would represent 30% of their overall mark. Secondly the video itself would represent 50%, because it would demonstrate whether or not the student has understood both the theoretical and practical aspects of the module in delivering the assignment.

I decided that the remaining 20% of marks should be allocated according to their own group assessment of the execution of their project, according to specific criteria: the relevance of the elements and visual treatment of those elements to the subject addressed; their own evaluation of the questions of representation which the video addresses, and their technical performance. In a separate statement, students would be asked to assess their own performance within the group and to give an account of how the group operated. In this way, I hope to encourage a self-reflective practice and to achieve some of the general abilities relevant to the module.

References

- Harvey,L & Knight, P (1996) *Transforming Higher Education*. Buckingham: Open University Press
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Biographical note

Holly Aylett joined London Metropolitan University in 2002 as a lecturer in Film Studies. She is a writer and documentary filmmaker, Managing Editor of *Vertigo*, a magazine promoting debate and diversity in the moving image, and Director of *The Independent Film Parliament*, a new forum for debate on the impact of film policy on the cultural/non-industrial film sector.