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Nurturing enterprise in work-based learning

Laura Taylor

To be enterprising, as a personal trait, has been listed in our admissions requirements for some time now on the Foundation Degree (FdA) Film and Television Production at Leeds Metropolitan University. It has been defined as the notion of targeting a goal, and using one's personal skills and talent to achieve it. Nicky Ball, Crew & Freelance Development Manager at Screen Yorkshire, recognises that “the recent graduates who succeed the most are those who have gone out and found work experience not only through their course but off their own backs” (personal communication, 10 December 2009). Work-based learning (WBL) on the course is seen as a natural place to nurture enterprise.

The Foundation Degree in Film and Television Production sits within the Northern Film School at Leeds Metropolitan University.

The course has a widening participation remit and traditionally recruits a diverse set of students. It was originally a stand-alone CertHE run by West Yorkshire Media Services (Hall Place Studios). Many of the original objectives are still maintained today from within its home at the Northern Film School such as:

“An awareness of [students’] personal creativity or individual ‘voice’ and its application within the context of simulated industrial practice and pressure.”
(HEFCE, 1996)

Placing a Foundation Degree within a Film School, thus creating a place for widening participation and diversity, is innovative and has many benefits, such as enabling FdA, BA and MA students to work together, share good practice and develop knowledge and skills through social interaction. The Northern Film School also has a long history of industry partnerships and this is of great benefit to the Work-Based Learning module within the FdA.

Work-based learning is a fundamental part of the Foundation Degree ethos:

“Authentic and innovative work-based learning is an integral part of Foundation degrees and their design. It enables learners to take on appropriate role(s) within the workplace, giving them the opportunity to learn and apply the skills and knowledge they have acquired as an integrated element of the programme. It involves the development of higher-level learning within both the institution and the workplace. It should be a two-way process, where the learning in one environment is applied in the other.”
Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark (QAA, 2004)

There has been a lot of debate as to what constitutes WBL, how it should be assessed and what should it look like.

“Learning in the workplace can refer to a variety of different forms of learning, which may or may not be formally structured, some of which take place spontaneously through the social interactions of the workplace.”
(Evans et al, 2006, quoted by Longhurst, 2009)

On the FdA Film and Television Production course, WBL breaks down into four categories and during the Autumn term 2009 students were brought together and asked about their expectations and aspirations regarding WBL. Feedback from more than 100 students was found to be overwhelmingly positive; this and contact with recent alumni during 2009 forms the basis of the following case studies.

1. The big broadcasters

Emmerdale – ITV Yorkshire Partnership

Until 2008 the FdA had a large placement scheme with ITV Yorkshire. Every year a number of placements were ringfenced for our students at *Emmerdale*, a popular ITV soap opera. There were roles for students within all departments including sound, art department and camera crew. As a result of this partnership we have a number of former students who now work full-time on *Emmerdale* as well as a few who are employed on a freelance basis.

Adam Sales, a 2006 graduate, is currently 2nd Assistant Director on *Emmerdale*, having gained full-time work with ITV Yorkshire after working there for a Level 2 WBL placement. He said:

“I consider moving to Leeds for that course one of the best moves I’ve ever made.”
(Personal communication, 13 March 2008)

WBL placements like this are seen as by far the best type by our current Film and TV students as they are a direct route into gaining the contact and experience that they want. They are the most obvious choice of placement, and the results in terms of getting work after graduating are clear to see. Former student Luke Selway, who graduated in 2006, is now a freelance Camera Assistant, currently working as a Central Loader on features. He got his first placement on *A Touch of Frost* while in the first year of the FdA. Through this placement he made contacts which enabled him to take on more WBL during the Summer between his first and second year, followed by further WBL during his second year. After graduating from the FdA he continued as a camera trainee on *Brideshead Revisited*, then *Harry Potter 6*, then stepped up to the role of central loader, did the UK shoot of Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland*, then worked on Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes*, and most recently on *Robin Hood*, a Ridley Scott movie (personal communication, 2 April 2009).

Inevitably there are downsides to these types of placement; often they do not live up to expectations. The nature and hierarchical system of film-making and the difficulties inherent in allowing students to use specialist equipment on set may mean that students feel sidelined. Although at the time students feel that this is a negative experience, it is actually a good indication of the entry level tasks that one should expect within the industry and often helps students manage their expectations of life after university, enabling them to map out future plans and aspirations more realistically.

These types of traditional placements can be extremely rewarding. There is a history of excellent broadcast placements on the FdA Film and Television Production course from independent film-making in New York to a visit to the set of *Desperate Housewives* and work on the set of *Quantum of Solace*. Students have gained these placements by using their initiative. The opportunity on *Desperate Housewives* was gained when the student wrote down the name of the producer from the credits, ‘Googled’ him and emailed him directly. We see this as enterprising and would always encourage students to approach their work creatively; provided there has been an element of research and preparation, we see no problems with targeting potential employers in this way.

2. NHS project

A simulation of corporate film-making

‘Client briefs’ have been an integral part of WBL on the FdA Film and Television Production course for as long as it has been running. They are defined as stand-alone projects that are run by University staff in collaboration with the organisation that has instigated the project. In the past students have worked very successfully with a number of clients such as the NHS, BBC Big Screen Leeds, and LUTV. These types of projects have mixed benefits. The downside is that there is rarely direct contact with television and film professionals, which is seen as one of the major reasons for choosing to undertake WBL; there are therefore many benefits in emulating the workplace from within the supportive environment of the University.

According to current students the opportunity to build a show reel, the video equivalent of an artist's portfolio, while on the course is the second most important reason for choosing the FdA Film and Television Production route. Client brief projects look excellent on the show reel as they often document that students are performing highly responsible and complex roles in areas such as budget management, hiring of crews, organising shoots and risk assessments. There is also the benefit of the client–student relationship, which differentiates this project from a typical in-house exercise or production.

“My course really set me up for working on a film set and I recommend it to everyone who asks as it's so practical and in this industry with so much competition it is better to be able to (for instance) set up and use a camera rather than write an essay about doing it.”

Kayleigh Cruickshank, 2006 graduate
(Personal communication, 21 September 2009)

Independence with large and often complex projects means that students are given a huge amount of responsibility within a tight delivery period, which usually cannot be extended; these real-world deadlines seem to have a positive impact on the projects. Students feel empowered and trusted to deliver: this is further discussed in the Festival Republic case study below.

One example of this type of project ran during 2006-07 with FdA Level 2 students for the Geoffrey Giles Theatres at St James's Hospital in Leeds. We were approached by a member of staff to make a film for children to ease their fears about going into theatre for operations. The client felt that students would have a fresh and interesting take on the project. After a series of meetings between NHS and University staff, details of the project were released and students were asked to pitch their ideas. This project was particularly interesting for budding directors and producers on the course as it offered plenty of creative input, as well as an opportunity to work for a well-known establishment. The project offered great flexibility to the students and the client was open to a process where students could be very creative.

A core team of six was chosen for the project, who met hospital staff regularly to discuss their ideas for the film. Pre-production mirrored industry practice and students were asked to submit their ideas to senior members of the NHS Trust. Although one member of staff was a point of contact, students were aware that they had to receive feedback from members of the team within the NHS. They were also mentored by a professional director who was able to support and guide them while they were on location; this helped ensure good practice, and that students were emulating what would happen on a professional shoot. This is a particularly important element to consider: it is essential to learn good practice and not build on bad habits – this is where the role of the ‘industry savvy’ supervisor becomes paramount.

The students worked extremely hard in post-production, which was perhaps the most testing period of the project; student and client expectations of what the project would look like were high and there were many changes made to the film right up to the deadline. This really pushed the students and helped raised their awareness of how much a client expects from a project and how much work goes into a project of this size. It was delivered and there was a public screening; the students had a solid piece of work that they could take away and show prospective employers. The film is now used on the intranet at the hospital as a resource. The students exceeded the expectations of the NHS staff; raising the profile of the courses within the local business community is really important and we have since had more requests to complete projects with the NHS in the future.

3. Festival Republic partnership

The University currently has a partnership with Festival Republic, which provides exciting opportunities for students, staff and alumni to “develop experience and skills in a festival setting, to contribute significantly to the work of Festival Republic and to enhance research in festivals and creative performance” (Kill & Bonser, 2009). Festival Republic employs approximately 30,000 people in the festival season and runs Leeds and Reading Festivals (approximately 150,000 people attending over the two sites), Glastonbury Festival (177,500 people), Latitude Festival (30,000), and a number of smaller festivals (Kill & Bonser, 2009).

During the 2009 festival season over 200 students, staff and alumni had a behind-the-scenes experience at Latitude and Leeds Festivals. They were involved in stage management, filming, performing arts, playwork, running campsite DJ stations and helping festival-goers. Internships in artist liaison, sound, lighting, press and PR, and environment and sustainability also enabled students to put their learning into practice and gain an in-depth insight into the running of a major festival.

For the past two years FdA students have been undertaking WBL at the festivals, working with Festival Republic, Leeds Met, BBC Introducing and Raw Talent. They have been making films at the festival, including performances on the Lake Stage at Latitude and the BBC Introducing stage at Leeds. Ten students work with the film crew and some of them are able to use this work as credit for the WBL module. Over the three days of the festival they create three 90-second films that are streamed on the Leeds Met website and given to Festival Republic and BBC Introducing to use for their own publicity.

Liane O'Toole, a second-year FdA student, said:

"I really enjoyed working [at the] Latitude festival as part of the film crew for WBL. It was a professional brief that we had to meet. The pace was fast and hectic and it was everything and more than I could have wanted from WBL.

WBL is very important to me as getting as much experience as possible is integral to success in this industry. I managed to successfully network with industry professionals and work alongside the stage crew and spoke to artists' managers and bands. It was an invaluable experience and it gave me a real taste for the industry and I can't wait to enter it when I complete my course."

(Personal communication, 8 December 2009)

"Loads of responsibility and support": a personal blog written at Latitude Festival July 2009

It's the end of the first full day of filming and the festival is in full swing. Lots of planning has paid off and the film crew are on form; when interviewing Post War Years – hot from their set on the Lake Stage – the band commented on how professional our Leeds Met students were. Brilliant. This is something that has been mentioned many times before in relation to the Festival Republic partnership; something that makes this project interesting for me as a Work Based Learning advocate.

Students on the Lake Stage are being managed by the wonderful Kev, who has a stage to run, but is happy to give loads of responsibility and support to our stage crew volunteers. He threw them in at the deep end this morning and they're coping well. This theme continues with our film students who are producing an official Electronic Press Kit, which is a promotional video, for Festival Republic. There's such a sense of trust and respect for our students, a real belief that they will deliver within their various roles. We're all working very hard and the learning curve is sometimes steep, but the rewards are clear to see.

This project has the best of both worlds as we are able to mentor our students from within the supportive environment of the University but students have to work alongside and deliver to BBC and Festival Republic so it is an excellent chance to make contacts and impress potential employers during a very high profile and intense project. Indeed one of our students who worked on the project in the first year went on to work for a freelance lighting camera op the following year in a paid position. It is these enterprising students that often get into industry.

(Taylor, 2009)

4. Community projects: related industries

Within the local business community there are many companies that students have often not considered as WBL providers. Although often overlooked, many jobs in community arts have great potential to draw on skills developed on the course and many skills learnt could be transferred or are desirable to employers within broadcast media, to which most students look as their final career destination.

During the first semester in 2008, as part of their credit for WBL students took part in ‘The Musicathon’ run by Heads Together, a community arts company based in Huddersfield. Heads Together have run a community radio station in East Leeds for six years called East Leeds FM or ELFM. The Musicathon was a 48-hour charity event in which over 250 musicians and singers performed continuously at Seacroft Methodist Chapel. Heads Together approached the course for some volunteer students to support the project. These students were all placed in direct contact with the public, volunteers and equipment. They were entrusted with many high profile roles, including controlling the desk in the main studio, organising musicians and supporting the main engineer recording live music.

Undertaking projects like this is worthwhile because it is real-world experience and enables the development of many transferable skills. Many students come onto Film and Television courses hoping to be directors in film. This project not only broadens knowledge of what kind of jobs are out there for students with film and television skills, it also enables students to realise that they may be more interested in job opportunities in related areas than in actual broadcast television and film roles. Also, recording techniques and equipment used on projects like ELFM are often the same as those used in broadcast media.

Adrian at ELFM said:

“It’s great having students involved in placements – like when we did the 24-hour Musicathon in Seacroft Chapel. You can see them starting to make sense of the skills they have developed at college in a real-world situation. At the same time they start realising that there are many other areas that they need to develop to be able to work in a community setting such as our East Leeds FM station: for example effective communication skills; time management; how to work alongside people with differing skills, abilities, ages and cultures.”

(Personal communication, 9 December 2009)

During this project students were able to spend quality one-to-one time with staff and get a real feel for the pressures of live radio, which has parallels with working in the film and television industry. By the end of the night one of the students was mixing the live music herself. The mixes that she made that night are available as MP3s online at www.elfm.co.uk and she can now use that resource when applying for jobs.

Conclusion

In the case of FdA Film and Television Production both staff and students recognise the importance and benefits of work-based learning. The FdA has benefited from a long and successful connection with industry, made stronger by the brand power and historic importance of the Northern Film School – a concept that continues to grow stronger nationally, and is evidenced in Lord Mandelson’s statement about *Higher Ambitions – The future of universities in a knowledge economy* to the House of Lords on 3 November 2009:

“We will look to business to be more active partners with our universities. Employers should fully engage in the funding and design of university programmes, the sponsorship of students and offering work placements. We believe this is possible without compromising universities’ autonomy and educational mission.”

Good levels of contact with alumni from the course have identified that our graduates are succeeding professionally in a wide range of media production careers. Several have gained employment with broadcasters in entry-level positions such as art department assistant, camera trainee and 2nd assistant director. Others follow the freelance route and utilise their well-developed teamwork and entrepreneurial skills to build up their CV by working on shorts and feature films. Whether there is a direct relationship between employment and the type of study that students undertake in this subject area remains to be proved, but what is clear on the FdA is that relationships between employers, students and the University are incredibly beneficial and work both ways. The FdA in Film and Television Production has had to be transparent to industry about standards and content within its modules from the very beginning, raising the opportunity for constant feedback and discussion. Employers want to get involved and the work-based learning element of the course encourages students to take risks and work outside their comfort zones. Ultimately, being industry-focused means that the course is set up to evolve with the industry and thus helps students understand the immediate needs and expectations of employers. It could be argued that the experience also enables student to find the level of work appropriate to their potential on graduation, i.e. entry level, assistant and trainee level rather than managerial posts or heads of department.

“Work experience gives them an insight into how the real world of film/TV works and the realities of working within it and how they fit into this world.”

(Nicky Ball, Screen Yorkshire, personal communication, 10 December 2009)

To any graduate seeking employment, it is not just about getting a job, it's being employable throughout life, something that is so important in the film and television industry because of the very nature of the work, with its ever-changing technologies, funding and patterns of work (for example, the growing use of freelances instead of employing staff). Learning the skills is all very well, but they need to be transferred effectively back into the workplace; this is why enterprise is becoming ever more important as a tangible skill and why it is important that it remains a fundamental principle of higher education.

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