



## Finding Leadership in Media Education

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Volume 12.2 (2024) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2024.692 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

### Abstract

This article is an exploration of leadership in media education and some of its identifying features. As lecturers in media studies and production, our teaching philosophy weaves through these themes: active learning (Budhai 2021), learning by doing (Schank et al 2013), peer and self-assessment (Iglesias Pérez, Vidal-Puga, and Pino Juste 2022) and constructive alignment (Loughlin, Lygo-Baker and Lindberg-Sand 2021).

**Keywords:** leadership; media education; pedagogy; AI; assessment; higher education; university



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# Finding Leadership in Media Education

Banu Baybars and Murat Akser

## Introduction

One of the quandaries of media educators in higher education sector, we are constantly focusing on the perfection of classroom teaching and tend to forget the bigger picture of sharing expertise and leading/mentoring younger scholars at the entry level. As lecturer in media studies and production we wanted to share our teaching philosophy hoping that it helps new academics in their teaching. Our teaching philosophy weaves through these themes: active learning (Budhai 2021), learning by doing (Schank et al 2013), peer and self-assessment (Iglesias Pérez, Vidal-Puga, and Pino Juste 2022) and constructive alignment (Loughlin, Lygo-Baker and Lindberg-Sand 2021). As for the overview of the structure of our paper we will first talk about our discipline teaching (film/tv/screen media production) and teaching/learning context (industry-informed in teaching PR and filmmaking alike). We will also refer to some institutional priorities and how they relate to our context. It is important for media educators to lead our own transformation from effective to expert educator and be critical about this. We also would like to point out that Ulster University's LTSE Principles and Qualities set a high quality example to indicate and align well with our four theses: active and collaborative learning (active), continuous enhancement (CPD and industry informed) and inclusivity (diversity and

collaboration). UU institutional qualities also align with our approach such as sustainability and research-informed teaching. These all are fleshed out in detail below where we map out and resonate principles and qualities that articulate our approach. In the final section we will be analysing student conceptions of inspirational and excellent teaching.

### Developing Expertise as an educator

Here we would like to draw from our critical engagement with models and research on expertise and excellence. The implications for our focus and development research informed teaching, diversity and collaboration at the core of all TL activities. Our belief in in active learning and why we value reflection has been informed by invoking creative thinking that is integral to all arts teaching and most especially visual media production teaching. As Frank Tomasulo mentions that teaching film production involves *fluency* (expertise in the medium), *receptivity/insight* (into the student and industry needs) and *motivation* (zeal of both students and lecturers) (Tomasulo 2019, p. 51). Here we find ourselves alongside many who are to educate new students in creativity as a quality that is not taught but is something that is *enhanced* and *inspired*. There are several practitioners in our field who influenced our core beliefs like Hodge (2009), Tomasulo (2019) and Lulkowska (2024). The practitioners in the field assert that students need to practice learning actively, they need to collaborate and resolve conflicts during

the creation process and creatively negotiate the sparkle in the production process. (Hodge 2009, p.20).

The inclusivity element also added a new dimensional to our teaching. To that end we have been working with the students to create stories of more diverse characters (gender/ethnicity) and enabling narratives. This resulted all of the least two years' dramatic short films having characters and storylines that deal with diversity (22 films in groups of 5 around a total of 120 students). We have also led the rewriting of MA in Film/TV to include diversity and environmental sustainability. The readings assigned and films screened for these modules are also representative and inclusive (half are women and people from different ethnic backgrounds). The fact that these films also enter and win awards at different festivals around the world that champion diversity is also evidence to the success of this approach. We are also the school lead on the diversity charter and meet with our course teams regularly to guide them to implement a more inclusive curriculum.

The second theme (industry-informed continuous enhancement) that the industry and academy working to create a valuable work-based learning environment is resonating through pedagogic writings in the field (Mateer 2018, p.142; Sergi 2023). Carl Schoenfeld reiterates the “disparity between skills supply and demand in British film and TV is obstructing business expansion and curtailing employment opportunities” and that this matters to students (2018, p.

188). For each of our modules and for the validation and revalidation of two programs' curriculum preparation/revision we led (BSc Cinematic arts, MA Film and Television production and Ba in Public Relations and Publicity). We have made the integration of funding agency/industry content development guidelines to prepare assignment briefs for our students.

Inspiring teaching and learning in film production education are relevant and hard to achieve in a highly marketized HE environment like in the UK (Dransfield, Wood and Su, 2022, p. 972). There are not just two stakeholders like the lecturers and the students but multiple stakeholders from communities to relevant industries, in our case creative industries in Northern Ireland and Turkey. Our aim to achieve inspiring teaching involves an authentic commitment to teaching fostering active learning, learning by doing, through industry-informed and community-sensitive approach (inclusivity, diversity, sustainability). This also fits well with LTSE Principles and Qualities such as inclusive and active and collaborative learning. Inclusive here means "aiming to design, deliver and assess our provision as inclusively as we can" (LTSE). Where we have choice, we select inclusivity. In terms of our approach we design more accessible content through blackboard, such as links to films, templates for industry related documents and assignments. We also made EDI a central part of our modules from design to delivery. We also put active learning as a centrepiece. Here it is always our intention to put students at the centre of their learning through participation in activities linked to their learning outcomes. Through

different platforms like BlackboardUltra/Moodle and classroom activities we aim to create a safe and a flexible space where students can move the furniture and split into groups to collaborate on a variety of activities. We then incentivize the students to break out into social spaces of our course for further activities. As active BAME+ Network members and NECS WG chairs we involve our students in organising community outreach events like film workshops, films screenings and invite communication/PR guests speakers regularly. These initiatives are supported at the faculty level and we am glad to confess that our vision and intentions as HE media educators align with our universities' diversity and inclusivity principles.

### Sector Disciplinary Pedagogic Context

The film/television production (or screen/media Production) and PR sectors are now driven by pedagogic approaches that value learning by doing and creation of a professional safe environment during create explorations, but it was not the case just two decades ago. Indeed, film and media scholars valued more theory and critical thinking than creativity and practice-based outputs.

Our sector is moving towards inclusivity of more stakeholders such as film/tv industry and communities. This changes the teaching excellence and move it from mastery of the subject to the development of lifewide-learning skills for students (Sergi, Fitchett and Fisher 2023). It is

now standard practice at HE institutions to employ lecturers who come from industry background and transform them into inspiring lectures inhouse. We are such lecturers and through our careers at UU and KHU, we were able to inspire new lecturers joining our course teams. Hence active learning, learning in the classroom but also for life using differ classroom techniques such as real-life software, equipment, scenarios, briefs, funding applications are part of our approach.

As Kelly Burke states “film and Television is an artistically diverse and technically and physically demanding discipline in a highly competitive global industry” (Burke 2021). It is a dynamic industry which requires authentic, engaging and active methods of teaching that engages with industry. So, it is very important in film/tv education to have constructive alignment of student needs, industry needs and lecturer competencies (Biggs, Tang and Kennedy 2022).

Access to networks, having prior real workspace experience and professional film/tv credits-festival screenings are essential for a film/tv student in finding employment when they graduate (Higdon and Chapman 2020). We support continuous student activity in and outside the classroom to create and disseminate their work across different platforms from film screenings at UU and KHU to online festival screenings and PR industry events. We also advocate for students

to have short term placements in film and tv companies which generates film credits for them for future use on their CVs.

Diversity and inclusivity have also appeared as new initiatives in industry after MeToo and BLM movements. The annual UCLA study in diversity in film/tv industry indicate an overwhelming dominance by white males at every level in our business. The opposite is true for our classrooms where we have increasing mixture and diversity in gender and ethnicity. This is not immediately reflected in the industry, but emerging new funding and skills training are now designed for more diversity at entry level. So we aim to have diversity in classroom/curriculum content in terms of more diverse films/readings. In addition, we invite students to come up with new and diverse voices in their films and PR projects. Finally, we tie this into reaching out to communities to train community members in diverse filmmaking practices. This is a holistic approach in implementing diversity and representation through content creation, training and dissemination with outreach. We are now doing diversity in film, with film and through film (Huffer 2017; King et al 2020).

The speed of change forcing students/lecturers to adapt, the difficulty of entering and working in the film/tv sector and students' needs pushes me to position our priorities in advocating for an inclusive, industry-informed and active learning. The continuous professional development we pursue also presents us with the opportunities to engage with students and staff



and have influence in shaping their teaching and learning. One particular is that we are leading the sustainability element in making films and PR projects. We have become the BAFTA Albert lead for UU and led colleagues to include sustainability as an element in their curriculum design. As a result, several film modules are now running with industry standard sustainability certification as would have happened in real life film/tv productions.

### **Institutional Learning and Teaching Priorities:**

Based on our research into our field's needs and our decision to act on leading for change we now would like to position the implications for our local context, direction and development. UU and KHU have institutional directives, targets and principles that guide its staff and students. Of these the Teaching and Learning principles and qualities lead us in a variety of ways. We support inclusive teaching by designing and delivering through an inclusive curriculum. We include diversity of material (different genres of films), ideas (social, personal, cultural) and methods of assessment (group output as well as individual critique). By engaging students with a diverse variety of content creation techniques provides them with opportunities to engage with a variety of viewpoints and equips them for a global and diverse environment.

We also use active, collaborative and experiential pedagogies to enhance student engagement.

We use creative content for film /tv questions that challenge and interest students. We also lead students to self-critique their film work and understand their learning from each assignment. We foster small group work in media creation and also provide the environment to lead their learning experientially by thinking, discussing, investigating, and creating their film work and PR projects.

In terms of qualities authenticity and sustainability are our focal point. We invent both authentic ways of teaching and assessing in film and tv production education and also lead the way at UU in BAFTA Albert sustainability certification for every student production.

### Student Conceptions of Excellent Educators and Learning Experiences

In the course of our research we have consulted student opinion most recently through module in screen production MED339 Short Film. Here the students have expressed their support in three areas to define the ideal lecturer they had in mind: lecturer command/competence, support by creativity with constructive feedback and keeping student engagement throughout the class/semester/year. We were glad to see that all of these qualities exist in us, and we are planning on expanding their scope and intensity. These findings are in line with UK wide

national findings by other scholars like Hiles (2016). Hiles lists *fairness, specialisation* and *overall support* as the three major findings in their study (p. 24).

Desired Lecturer Keywords	Competence Industry- informed teaching	Feedback- supporting creativity	Keeping engagement alive/fun to be in class
No of students (33)	9	12	8

Our reflection on the findings from our research with students has indicated somewhat supporting outcomes. For example, a third (9) in class expressing expertise, competence and industry informed lecturer as necessary qualities. It is standard in film production teaching to have people with industry experience as lecturers and we are glad the students felt that way and were able to recognize this quality. This should not come as a surprise though as Roy Hanney (2013, p. 47) indicates that decades of film studies teaching have created a bias in students studying media production that their lecturers are indeed value theory more that practice. Secondly and the one with the most hits was on supporting of creativity (12). Somehow the students valued being able to be creativity create their own films and the constructive feedback

support given by the lecturers. Finally keeping the in-class attention alive was given the third largest support in imagining the ideal lecturer. The seriousness of some of the dramatic subjects student tackle can be daunting. The production process itself is full of potential risks and misfired that may end in the film that was not envisioned by the student production team. The process of planning and executing the film requires complete attention to detail at all times and that is difficult in our age with younger student generations. We find their insight into keeping the in-classroom fun/humour and engagement alive very useful.

As per the three findings we have now been researching more industry funding/skills development briefs and practices to complement student expectations of an industry-informed classroom. Second, we will now put supporting creativity with feedback more than ever. Finally, we plan to use as humours and relevant examples from our field in the classroom to keep the student attention at maximum and give them emotional safe space to grow their confidence.

### Our context-informed L&T Philosophy

We believe in active learning. We believe this is the way students learn by participating and reflecting on the activities in class, module and course overall. We value reflection as part of the learning process as the student becomes aware of how much growth they have activities in which

aspects of their learning by themselves. This approach is very relevant to our creative practice in film as industry also demands the graduates to be able to define why their passion film/tv projects matter in a critical manner. Isabella Cherney (2008) mentions the positive effects of active learning on students' memories for course content such as “more discovery-oriented and student-active teaching methods ensuring higher student motivation, more learning at higher cognitive levels, and longer retention of the knowledge” (154). We also support such active learning with critical reflection as it allows students to look back and contemplate on how much they learnt in the process of their module and course. Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985) mention that critical reflection complements the experiential learning process (12). Our classroom pedagogy in screen production teaching (film/tv and more) is based on constantly asking challenging questions to create and innovate new content in a fast changing technological and format landscape of streaming media.

In terms of our next theme, we value *learning by doing*. We believe in the practice of screen media students in getting better as they progressively practice their art and craft. The authentic and real-life learning helps students to simulate learning for life in an academic and safe context. For example, Darling-Hammond & Snyder (2000, p. 536) illustrate the benefits of exhibition/portfolio-based approach that is standard in film production education. This type of

vocation and professional training is at the heart of our approach as UK, USA and increasingly world media production runs alongside new key skills that are common to all new entrants.

These include creating a safe space on a film/tv set, diversity and inclusivity, and sustainability at the heart of media production (Flynn and Morotta 2021; Akser 2021).

As for our third theme which is related to the previous two, we support self and peer assessment for our modules. We find this approach increasingly relevant as all media development process creatively always involves real life peer review. Boud, Lawson & Thompson (2013) state that by self-assessing student improve the judgement about their learning. The flip side of this approach is self-directed study. Most of the creative process involves also contemplation and self-drive to design aspects of filmmaking each department by assigned roles such as set design, editing, cinematography, sound design and directing. Here personal choices matter and by allowing students to switch roles in different groups and assessments, we increase the diversity of their learning experience.

Finally, we are strong believers in constructive alignment where learning outcomes, activities, assessment all align (Nurmikko-Fuller and Hart 2020). The programs we were involved in designing at UU, BSc Cinematic Arts and MA Film and Television Production and in KHU BA in Public Relations and Publicity are both collaboratively created designed to align with student

needs, industry needs and staff competencies to create the program learning outcomes/activities/assessment. To complement such teaching and curriculum and module design we support interdisciplinarity of different aspects of filmmaking and different arts as well as humanities and social sciences feeding into student learning. Previously we had mentioned creating safe space at school and workplaces. Our approach is to create an emotionally safe space in the classroom and to transcend that into the industry. This complements with diversity themes as we support and encourage the students to lead discussions about filmmaker's role in critiquing race, gender, sexuality, and difference in the classroom (Hunter 2008). Film sets and film related events such as festivals are increasingly stressing the need for regulation in creating emotionally safe spaces. Last but not least we also support humour as an effective teaching tool and a method for relief to bring back student attention to important topics via fun / humour. Moran and Hughes (2006) and Huss & Eastep (2016) mention the value of humour in the classroom for students to cope with stress.

We hope this exploration of our teaching and learning priorities will help future generations of young academics around the world who are looking for inspiration in their teaching. Please cite as: Baybars, B., & Akser, M. Finding Leadership in Media Education. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 12(2), 269–287. <https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2024.692>.

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