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Submission type - **Report**

Positive Outcomes for Student Filmmakers in a Pandemic

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Biographical note

Stephen Connolly is a Senior Lecturer in Film Production at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham. His moving image work explores space, history and mobility, and has won awards at film and media festivals worldwide. A Kent 50 Scholar at the University of Kent, his 2018 BAFTSS award winning Practice-as-Research doctorate explored the racialized space and infrastructure of the city of Detroit, Michigan, USA.

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Keywords

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on Film Production teaching in HE. This short report details one HE's changes to the production processes and deliverables for short fiction in response to lockdown that enabled students to develop their filmmaking skills and creative confidence. These positive benefits measured by assessment outcomes were more noticeable amongst women students and were attributed to the suspension of group working in making short film productions.

Positive Outcomes for Student Filmmakers in a Pandemic

The Covid pandemic 2020 has arguably had the biggest social and behavioural impacts on film production and its teaching in recent history. The practical processes of filmmaking have been affected at a molecular level and professional film bodies have issued extensive guidance for production processes.¹ More generally, lockdown restrictions may have constrained student production work off campus in the spring of 2020 before this detailed guidance was available. Faced with a need to continue student productions and progression through their year, could the lockdown foster any benefits for student experience in film production? This brief report considers a positive outcome for students in year one of the Film Production BA at UCA Farnham.

At present through this course, student productions are made by groups, mirroring industrial practice. This collaborative approach is heavily signalled in interviews for the course; and students select a production specialism in their second year. This spring, as pandemic rolled across Europe, our year 1 students raced to finish editing their short 16mm fictions on steenbecks. This stage of post- production could not be *domesticated*; thankfully the UK

lockdown on 24th March fell as students embarked on their digital soundtracks to their conformed picture cuts. At the same time, as confinement descended on the nation, these students were also commencing a screenwriting unit, its delivery modelled on the *writer's room*, a format moved online without difficulty. However, this left a production element, minor in this unit, which needed to be completed in lockdown and with many students having left the campus and returned home.

Given the first two thirds of the academic year provided learning experiences in the social and technical processes of filmmaking – the lockdown production was framed as a release from these working conditions. A solo *pandemic production* was cast as freedom from the negotiations and obligations of group work in pre-production, the social demands of group production on set, and the management of group work in post-production. Instead, the framing emphasised an opportunity for students to explore their *inner filmmaker*, the nexus of creativity and personal inspiration that drives them to choose film production. Students were to take on the mantle of the *total film-maker*; in charge of all elements of the filmmaking machine, a path less travelled in an industrial context. They were to direct a three-minute fiction short, using their equipment, and helped only by those within their social bubble.

In a group working context, creativity can be compromised; it can be experienced as personally exposing, and incompatible with the 'hot house' of film production teamwork. On the other hand, the assured expression of creativity can easily slide into the dictatorial or difficult; students are finding their way in Year 1 and may not yet possess the soft-skills for groupwork. The secondary system in the UK schools examines and valorises personal achievement within a context of competition and individualism. There are affinities here with a lay understanding of how films get made, centring on the figure of the *director*. Autocratic and non-collaborative behaviours are endemic in histories of filmmaking practice, if only grudgingly admitted to in the present day.² The cult of the director as *auteur* - so attractive to so many, remains symbolic of the many hierarchies in the film production industry and its critical and academic shadows. The social behaviours that fuel these cultural imaginaries are heavily inscribed by gender, if not a manifestation of patriarchy. Given this noise in the background, learning to work together as a team can be a steep learning curve for students at the start of a film course.

Our cohort were asked to feedback on their *pandemic film* experience. Responses from female students imply a relief from the taxing peripheral issues of group work -

If I'm being frankly honest I was glad that we didn't have to work in groups for the project, it released an extra layer of stress and allowed me to focus on just my work instead of other extrenous (sic) factors such as the group's mood and overall morale... *Student OO*

I think that being able to do this project at home allowed me to really develop my own ideas and be less influenced by what other members of my group were doing, but also to be more confident about really taking control as I was working with people who were relying on me to make all the decision and follow my directions.
...*Student HB*

As *HB* indicates, the *pandemic film* was not work in isolation however - for the most part students worked with close contacts and family to carry the narratives of their films. A combination of lockdown and *total filmmaker* responsibilities resulted in collaborations with trusted allies to make their films -

... working with my sister on this project made it a lot of fun for both of us, I was also able to clearly communicate what I wanted her to do and achieve a film that felt a little more personal and emotionally vulnerable as I knew she connected with the theme of my film on a personal level too. *Student HB*

This desirable environment of mutual trust and respect takes time to evolve in professional contexts and some of our students will create them in their final productions. However, these responses hint that underlying the difficulties of group work, are the social dynamics of gender. Every year, female students contact academic staff with concerns about collaboration, decision making, and the performance of power and domination in group work. This is a feature of teaching production in HE, despite in our course, mandatory workshops exploring ideas of mutual respect and ground rules for conduct. Without wanting to essentialise or definitively map gender expression, these dynamics of group work at this

level are highly influenced by the wider social and cultural environment we may be all party to, if not complicit with.

The *pandemic films* from the women filmmakers across the cohort presented a revelation. In general, their work evidenced clear visual storytelling, coherent structuring, poetic sensibility, and a degree of ethical and emotional complexity; their grasp of these cine-aesthetic attributes a significant advance on their previous films. Freed from group work, this project became for them a nurturing of their inner filmmaker. Feedback recognised these conditions had released resources of creativity, resilience and reserves of conviction to get their films made -

Being the only one working on the film, I had the freedom to take the ideas I had written on paper and bring them to life exactly as I had planned, controlling the camera, the lighting, the music, the editing, the props and how everything looked etc., which was very satisfying when it came to the final result. *Student AW*

This continuum between intention and result is a signature of *total filmmaking* as practiced in these pandemic conditions. The student is to be congratulated in this achievement; surely difficult to achieve in such a publicly negotiated and contingent artform as filmmaking.

The impact of the pandemic on filmmaking education should give us pause for thought. Our marking data evidenced a higher average grades for our women students as the assessment outcome of a fiction project made in lockdown. Women students reflected on this experience very positively. Yet in a wider context, women may not be alone in encountering impediments in group work to personal creative expression in film. It is widely acknowledged that students of colour also underperform in HE, albeit this was not evident in this sample.³ Similar dynamics may arise for BAME students in film production. As academics teaching in this field, we need to facilitate conversations around how group work may reward behaviour expressions that do not facilitate the diverse aspirations and creativity of our students. Given our experience with our 19-20 entrant filmmakers, we hope to bring a *pandemic project* into our curriculum in the future. These are the lessons the pandemic and our students, are beginning to teach us as film educators.

1420 words

This is an adapted version of a talk given to GEECT/CILECT 06.10.20 Virtual Conference

How Film Schools Coped with the Pandemic

<https://www.cilect.org/news/view/952#.X9dSFBP7TKk>

https://www.cilect.org/gallery/news/952/02_GEECT_webinar_Poster.pdf

¹ British Film Commission, 'British Film Commission – Working Safely During COVID-19 in Film and High-End TV Drama Production', 19 January 2021, <http://britishfilmcommission.org.uk/guidance/regarding-covid-19-coronavirus/>; European Film Commissions Network, 'FILMING EUROPE IN SAFETY Guidelines for Production during COVID-19', 21 January 2021, <https://eufcn.com/guidelines-production-during-covid-19/>.

² For a light-hearted perspective on this subject, see *Redoutable / Le Redoutable* (Michel Hazanavicius, France, 2017); a hilarious yet also disquieting commentary on a brief period in the work and life of JL Godard.

³ Jacqueline Stevenson et al., 'Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges of Targeting Students from Under-Represented and Disadvantaged Ethnic Backgrounds' (Office for Students, February 2019), <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/d21cb263-526d-401c-bc74-299c748e9ecd/ethnicity-targeting-research-report.pdf>.