

Chapter 22

Creativity, screenwriting and filmmaking: Approaches to teaching and learning at the London Film School

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"Anything we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments."
(Aristotle: The Ethics)

"The best way to help people maximise their creative potential is to allow them to do something they love. The freedom to choose what to work on allows individuals to seek out questions that they will be highly motivated to pursue. The high level of intrinsic interest will lay the groundwork for creative achievement."
(Motivation and Creativity – Collins: Handbook of Creativity – Sternberg (ed))

Since the Romantic movement of the early eighteenth century, the idea of creativity has become a central concern of secular culture, where man rather than God is now the creator. For the Romantics it was especially *artistic* creativity that was seen as the highest form of human activity. An art that was no longer in imitation of God's creation but something more human and personal. Schiller asserts that "human beings are only human in so far as they *play*." In the modern era, the free play of imagination is central to the idea of creativity. But to what does creativity refer and what else does it involve. Can we learn to be creative? Can you teach someone to be creative?

Conventionally, to be creative is to be open, flexible and original: to make or give expression to something new. But new creations rarely appear fully formed. Creativity usually involves some kind of contextual knowledge, technical skill,

perseverance, and practice as well as inspiration and quick, fluid thinking. Any creative process also has a very practical side that can be learned while the more playful, exploratory aspect supported and encouraged. Creative thinking and doing can be found across the range of human endeavour from the everyday to the great paradigm shifts in philosophy, art and science. For many the idea of creativity defines human potential and lies at the centre of individual development and education. At the London Film School where we make 170 films every year, the creative process is a constant *practice*. This paper aims to explain our understanding and approach to teaching creative filmmaking.

As a graduate school we are fortunate in our ability to select talented individuals from around the world who are excited about studying filmmaking and are therefore already personally committed and involved in their own learning. The one year Screenwriting MA and the two year MA in Filmmaking take place in an intensive, interactive environment of constant activity, workshops and discussion that often continues into the night and at week-ends from coffee bar to editing suite and viewing theatre.

On the MA Filmmaking programme students learn and become more confident through working together across six twelve week terms on a series of progressively more sophisticated short film exercises. They begin working on a three minute silent short fiction, learning the basic language of film, telling the story through looks and glances, image and action. In the second term every student writes and directs a short non-synch sound film based on a painting in the National Gallery. The third term focuses on the making of a ten minute documentary and in the fourth/fifth term the students get the opportunity to work with a 35mm camera on a built set. The graduation film of the sixth and final term shows what the student has learnt and is often a highly achieved and confident demonstration of her or his professional credentials. Throughout the process, students are building their skill and knowledge base through constant practice. And in this practice they are continually faced with a range of aesthetic and practical problems to which they have to find solutions. This is how students learn: by applying themselves to practical problems and seeking creative solutions. It is in this sense that creativity can be understood as problem-solving.

At the same time, by switching roles on the various film exercises, the more technically inclined student acquires knowledge of other specialisations that will help them in their professional career, while those more interested in directing, producing or writing gain a technical competence that opens them to the range and possibility of the art. This includes students on the MA Screenwriting who not only have the opportunity to have their scripts made and make future contacts for professional life but by working on student films are able to gain practical experience of the technical aspects of cinema that illuminate the nature of what it is to write for the screen. They come to understand that screenwriting is not just writing but filmmaking.

If they did not realise before they came, students on both programmes soon come to understand that achieving creative excellence in film as in many other kinds of creative work requires a complete commitment to what is a complex, prolonged and demanding process. This is the centre of the LFS method. And against this background of practice, a series of lectures, workshops and classes

provide a technical and historical context as well as practical strategies for framing, writing and developing students' own screen stories.

The core learning then at LFS is based around the short film exercises where the students become technically more assured, take all the aesthetic decisions and solve problems in professional units. This work is constantly assessed and criticised in one-to-one and small group discussions but also by the students themselves who are encouraged to keep reflective journals of what they have learned and what gaps in knowledge they have discovered. The keeping of a Work and Research Journal is an integral part of the student taking responsibility for their own learning. Assessment and external evaluation is seen as complementary to the student's own development and not a constant controlling presence. At the end of each term every film and film exercise is screened in the school's cinema and comment is given by all the departments – camera, lighting, sound, production design, music, direction, script, production. The process usually takes five or six days with the whole school, students and faculty in attendance. This compliments the more intimate feedback that students get from individual tutors and from each other. They are continually learning from each other.

Screenwriters also learn the collaborative nature of filmmaking by working on films but also script editing each other's work and by working with professional actors, directors and producers. The core of their development is writing and feedback in small groups and one to one. In the first term they write two short scripts very quickly which gives them a sense of closure and achievement but also provide them with scripts they can discuss with the filmmaking students. The real centre of the writers' work however is the development of a feature project from portfolio through several drafts to a final MA submission. This work is supported by experienced writers, development professionals and in the final term by individual mentoring.

Screenwriting like any other form of writing comes from practice and feedback from clever, sensitive, cine-literate script editors. Screenwriting can't be taught in the didactic sense but can be encouraged and supported by a well-designed course and experienced tutors. The interest and commitment of the writer is what drives the course, the deadlines and classes provide a focus. At LFS we encourage free-writing and the generation of ideas and solutions through a class called the Writer's Gym. Classes in dramatic theory are also based around writing exercises as well as analysis of scenes and films. Writers deepen their technical and theoretical understanding of filmmaking not only by working on student films but by attending classes with visiting editors, composers and actors. They join their colleagues on the filmmaking course in classes on film history and style where the construction of masterworks are illuminated in a way that is useful to the practitioner. Their reflective journals, which are also part of their course work, are often full of reflections and insights gained by this deepening understanding of the tradition that they are working within and the direct relationship between theory and practice. And of course they also learn from each other. They are encouraged to create their own writing community within the larger filmmaking community of the London Film School.

From our experience at LFS of developing filmmakers over fifty years, certain themes and guiding principles emerge in supporting and encouraging creative development and outcomes. Our programme is designed for self-learning rather

than learning by rote or inculcating rules or formulas. Students discover what they don't know: they discover problems, gaps in knowledge and seek answers. These discoveries and their learning are achieved through practice and their reflections on that practice. The educators offer advice, observations, critique as well as hints, suggestions, inspiration for further study and practice. Whatever is shown or suggested by the teacher, each student will create something of their own, according to their need. And this requires an environment where the student feels free to try different approaches, free to fail without fear of punishment and a programme that strikes a balance between creativity and evaluation of the creative work. Clearly certain kinds of technical knowledge have to be understood and can be taught but creativity requires space and permission for experiment and the free play of imagination.

People can learn but not be taught: or at least taught anything of real significance partly because no one can know beforehand what is of personal significance. And there is no learning without desire: a desire to know or to solve the problem of what they don't know but need to know: a desire to create in their chosen domain. A course or teacher needs to provide the stimulus to curiosity that sustains the needful perseverance and commitment to the process: but best of all the student is already intrigued by the subject of study and comes eager to learn. A creative teaching environment is thus a place of *learning*.

A creative environment then is a space where people can dream and explore, try and fail and in the process work out who they are, what interests them and what they need to know to fail better. And this creative space is also a *community*. From the Latin "cum" i.e. "together, among each other" and "munus" gift, thus meaning literally to give among each other. Thus I define my learning community as a group of people who welcome and honour my gifts and for whom I can reasonably expect to receive gifts in return. Whether we are making love or making films, human creativity, human flourishing is based on this simple truth of becoming the occasion for each other's self-realisation: "the free development of each is the free development of all". As Pablo Cassalls observed, "I teach. I learn."

And this sense of community is something that can be taken out into the wider world of success and markets and competition: both as a valuable human experience and as a practical living network of support and contacts for future professional development. If the education has been successful (educare = to draw out) you will also take with you from this creative environment, transferable skills of communication, of technique, of empathy, of listening, observing, reflecting, of working in teams, of making failure and disappointment a spur to further development and a new confidence in your creative abilities. You will have learned to make something of value for yourself and others. And if you attend film school you will have contributed to the making of a film. Kurt Vonnegut explains why that might be something you might want to do while reminding us of the romantic ideal of artistic creativity still present in the modern era.

" If you really want to hurt your parents and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is to go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living . They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practising an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the

shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something."

References

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The website of the London Film School: www.lfs.org.uk