

## **Where's the timetable? Making spaces and the dissolution of discipline boundaries**

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## **Where's the timetable? Making spaces and the dissolution of discipline boundaries**

The way that we have developed work for lens based media at Bath Spa University has been shaped by the porosity of discipline boundaries in film and media production courses. Some of the practical questions I hope we can discuss are outlined on the slide.

What I want to talk about today is the way that shifts in what staff and students expect to do in film and media courses have brought significant changes to our organisation and, quite literally, created new spaces. As a teacher I'm interested in the ways that space informs practice and have been fortunate, through my role as a manager, to be able to test this for real through the design and development of several media making spaces created at the University since 2005.

### **Contexts**

In 2005, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced the creation of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) - CETLs represented HEFCE's largest ever single funding initiative in teaching and learning and Bath Spa University's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning brought with it a funding programme totalling £4.85m over five years.

We called our CETL Artswork because at its heart was the making of things – whether books, dance works, material objects or films. Artswork provided funding for new tools to develop our work across 6 new or refurbished lab spaces. Artswork was interested in the way our courses fed into the creative and cultural industries and much emphasis was placed on practitioner led curriculum.

### **Creating new spaces in old places**

Our range of media making spaces has since grown to include a state of the art media production facility and associated studio space based in the City of Bristol, where an old paint factory has been turned into a creative media business quarter: and in the last 6 months we have agreed plans to develop a further media studio and post production suite for postgraduate students based in what were once painting studios – a studio space that will service postgraduate programmes and researchers working in scriptwriting, songwriting and heritage management.

In 2004 we had two consumer video cameras and one Avid editing suite and about 25 students doing work in making film. Today we have 45 editing posts on the main campus with a further 12 at the Paintworks and 10 at Corsham Court: last year over 200 students were involved in film based work across my School alone.

So for Bath Spa University film work has been a catalyst not just for subject level transitions but for significant institutional change. Indeed so powerful has been the work that Artswork developed that the University is now poised to invest 40 million pounds in a new digital arts building at the Newton Park campus which will include two large sound stages and associated post production facilities'.

In all of the spaces I have mentioned we have been working across discipline boundaries – at first informally via mentored project work available to students in subjects ranging from Creative Writing, English Literature, Media Production, Film Studies and Business & Management, Graphic Design and Creative Music Technology. As it developed Artswork became a means of enabling faculty and students to pursue their passions – working across (and often against) discipline boundaries to make what they wanted. In 2008 our experience of working collaboratively within Artswork CETL led the University to commission a new BA degree programme which offers students the opportunity to study in the art school, the film and media department and the Creative Writing and Publishing department at the same time.

Today I want to use our work over the past 5 years as a case study that highlights how the changing nature of film and media studies has acted as a catalyst to dissolve discipline boundaries in one small UK university.

## 1. The Crow Road

One of the early Broadcast lab projects was a collaboration between film makers, literary critics and interaction designers resulting in a GPS enabled guide to the West Coast Scottish locations of Iain Bank's novel *The Crow Road*. This prototype version was built in a Flash environment that wove together a variety of media assets and we are developing an App that will make this resource one of several literary journeys that we plan for iPhone.

This project was undertaken in 2006/7 and it demonstrated the value of taking students out of the university setting and working with them via professional mentors to help them make something collectively that they could not create independently. The core of the project was a week long shoot and data logging exercise in the West of Scotland locations that feature in the novel. Working on this project convinced us, however, that this kind of ad hoc approach to multi-disciplinary work was not sustainable since once we had captured material on location students fell back into subject modules in different Schools and a lot of time was lost as the project team fought to cut across often very different timetable structures to try and keep the team together.

## 2. Artswork Media

The solution was to embed multi-disciplinary work within the design of a degree programme and in 2008 I was able to convince the University that the next step in the development of the Artswork project was a dedicated degree course that purposely broke down subject boundaries, opening up curriculum that had hitherto been zealously guarded behind subject firewalls.

Taking advantage of the VC's desire to see better cross-university working I worked with my opposite numbers in the Art and Performing Arts school to create the BA in Creative Media Practice. Central to this programme was an innovative final year that sees students leave the campus to take up a place in a University supported media company. This approach was inspired by the work of the Kaos Pilots School in Aarhus who I visited as a result of the UK Design Council's highlighting of their innovative approach to creative entrepreneurship in the 2006 report *Learning from Europe*.<sup>1</sup> The Kaos Pilots' approach inspired me to develop the final year of the new BA as a year-long 'live brief' – with students working as fledgling professionals under the leadership of an experienced industry mentor.

For the University, the Artswork Media year seeks to accelerate students' entry into the world of work by immersing them in an entrepreneurial setting removed from the familiar campus environment and its routines. Students work on group and individual projects across the year. There is no timetable but the week kicks off with a Monday meeting where progress can be checked and problems shared. Students work collaboratively, bringing their subject expertise to bear on work ranging from corporate videos, documentaries and original drama.

The unit is permanently staffed but we have created fractional appointments so as to provide a rich mix of expertise – we have technical staff who run workshops and support students in studio, on location and in postproduction and practitioner staff, largely with an exec producer/directing background, are also brought in to mentor projects. Students can also work in staff roles by applying to become an Artswork Fellow, and in this role take on a range of administrative and organisational tasks - including helping us keep the unit open late into the

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.kaospilot.dk/in-brief\\_cp.aspx](http://www.kaospilot.dk/in-brief_cp.aspx) and The Design Council's report 'Lessons from Europe'.

evening. A range of workshops are offered throughout the year to support the development of business acumen and enterprise.

Two projects highlight some of the ways the project took on its own momentum when the 2009/10 cohort developed a strong interest in working on original drama. Their first major production – a professionally mentored drama called *Liquid Soap* that they developed with the University's Performing Arts School – won the Royal Television Society's SW region award for student drama.

A second drama that has been supported by Artsworld Media is *Vanessa & Virginia*<sup>2</sup> - another collaboration with the Performing Arts School. Here students worked to create the digital set for this new stage drama, an adaptation by Elizabeth Wright of Professor Susan Sellers' acclaimed novel about Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell and Bloomsbury culture. The students worked in close consultation with playwright Elizabeth Wright and director, Emma Gersch, to create a 'mood script' (as the animated backdrop came to be known), that drew from Vanessa Bell's paintings. The students went to the country home of Vanessa Bell in Sussex and took photographs of the house, every surface of which Bell and her lover Duncan Grant had painted. The playwright and director then selected the images which best evoked the mood of the scene being played and the students were asked to create subtle animation effects. The result is a visual score or script which reflects and expresses the action unfolding before it. The project's success can be measured by the fact that it has recently been awarded 35,000 AHRC funding grant for knowledge transfer, with a particular focus on the employment of a recent graduate. The production will be staged at both academic conferences and for the wider public at a series of conferences and events in the UK and abroad until June 2011.

### **Discipline boundaries and the student experience**

In a very short period of time we have established an environment that clearly helps students develop projects that speak to diverse audiences. The student experience of crossing boundaries – from the university to the creative workplace, from working in isolation to working as a team, from being a student to being a fledgling professional - is something that has been crucial to making the Artsworld Media project a success.

To help us monitor and evaluate this aspect of our work we embedded one of the media lecturers at the unit as part of his ongoing research project on how media courses prepare graduates for the world of work.<sup>3</sup> Ashton's qualitative study has been helpful to us in assessing the impact and effectiveness of the Artsworld Media experience from the viewpoint of student users.

Perhaps the most compelling insight to date has been found in the way that students describe a sense of emerging 'professionalism' and a confidence in deploying their skills and contributing to 'real world' client briefs and projects. 2010-11 is only the third full year of operation of our Artsworld Media year in industry. We have just appointed additional practitioner staff and signed a new lease with BBC Studios to secure high quality making space adjacent to our premises.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has sought to offer a brief case study that illustrates the ways in which changing discipline boundaries in film and media teaching and learning have shaped recent developments at my University. We have moved from a situation where film and media work was locked in discipline silos to one where there are many opportunities to work collaboratively across programmes to make a variety of film projects. All of the works I have highlighted today has required multidisciplinary teams to make them happen and this has

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.vanessaandvirginiaresearch.blogspot.com/>

<sup>3</sup> See 'You just end up feeling more professional': Media production and industry-ready personhood Networks, Issue 10, Summer 2010, pp.14 - 15

directly impacted on the University in its thinking about everything from timetabling, to the porosity of subject resources, to its Estates strategy.

Whilst it is true that these developments have been sparked by the initial grant we secured in 2005 it's a testament to the ingenuity of staff and students that today the University's thinking about arts pedagogy has been changed and its new emphasis on collaborative multi disciplinary working at the heart of its plans for a major campus renewal project speaks volumes about the ramifications of dissolving discipline boundaries for the ways creative arts Universities are built and organised in the future.