Swinburne University of Technology

Marilyn Tofler and Ekaterina Pechenkina

Group-devised screenplays and film projects in Higher Education curriculum

Abstract

Group work is a well-recognised pedagogical practice in Higher Education (HE), meant to facilitate peer collaboration in contexts simulating realistic industry situations. While group work is credited with helping students to develop a range of communication, social and negotiation skills, it can also disenfranchise students, leading to disorganisation and creative disputes. With increased numbers of students taking up HE film and television and creative writing degrees, group work is necessary to prepare students for industry practice. However, with limited time within a semester to produce such artefacts as screenplays and short films, group-based projects can backfire, creating tensions and conflicts, and resulting in decreased student satisfaction. This study discusses the process of implementation and evaluation of a redesigned screenwriting model, where the act of restructuring the group work component of the studies to ensure that all students participate in the writing of the team's screenplay helped shift the unequal power balance between students and boost individual student agency. While contextualised in the field of screenwriting and filmmaking, the findings pertaining to group work dynamics and the mindful use of student evaluations to improve teaching can be transported to other disciplines and contexts. Personal skills developed through HE group work, such as collaboration and negotiation, may be applied to other real-world industry and international settings.

Keywords: screenwriting, teaching, collaboration, creative writing, film and television, curriculum

Introduction

The 'very obvious' difference in the process of writing a novel compared to being (in) a writers' room is that the latter is a collaborative engagement. (Awad 2018)

Grounded within screenwriting theory and film and television studies group work scholarship, in addition to a wider body of scholarly teaching and evaluation literatures, this paper investigates a student agency-centred model of curriculum design for screenwriting and film production. Screenwriting is a form of creative writing that sits between creative writing and film and television studies. By drawing on a range of student-generated data, the research asserts that student group work that is structured in a way that shifts typical power dynamics by distributing control over the writing and production process equally among students can facilitate better engagement and foster a sense of ownership over the project. This can be achieved by designing the group work in a way that allows for student engagement to extend across the entirety of the project, from a screenplay's initial conception, through the process of writing and editing the script, and into the production and post-production periods.

This study specifically examines the development of short film screenplays by second-year screenwriting students undergoing a Bachelor of Film and Television at a mid-sized Australian university. From 2014-2017, approximately 350 students were involved in the development of sixty-five short film screenplays, ranging from three to eight minutes in length. Each individual screenplay was developed within a period of six weeks, by a team of four to six students.

Drawing on previous group work and screenwriting research, the purpose of this study is twofold: first, to offer new insights on group work dynamics by studying it from the perspective of screenwriting in film studies; and second, to show how an evaluation of student satisfaction data grounded in scholarly teachings can inform curriculum redesign, leading to more fruitful interactions between students, as well as between students and lecturers.

While this study is contextualised in the field of screenwriting and filmmaking, its findings regarding student group work dynamics and the mindful use of student evaluations to improve teaching and learning may benefit

other disciplines and contexts, especially those which aspire to imitate real-life collaborative multi-industry situations through university-based group work.

This paper is structured as follows. First, topical literatures across screenwriting and film and television studies and those more broadly focusing on group work are analysed; second, this study is presented and contextualised; and third, data of student evaluations is presented to make a case for the curricular change described. The limitations and future directions of this study are also discussed.

Group work in Higher Education (HE) studies

Intended to facilitate peer collaboration in contexts simulating realistic industry situations, group work is a common aspect of Higher Education (HE) student experience. Collaborative learning such as group work is credited with contributing to students' cognitive learning and socio-emotional development as well as with preparing them for jobs in which they would be expected to work in teams (De Hei et al 2015). Across disciplines, previous group work research has focused on the principles of effective group work designs, with the role of group work in engaging international students and boosting positive diversity dynamics in the classroom being of particular interest (Cruickshank et al 2012; Pham & Pham 2018).

From an industry viewpoint, students' exposure to group work is an important expectation. A recent survey of 400 companies found that ninety-six percent of employers believe that HE students should be exposed to the types of learning experiences that teach them to solve problems collaboratively with people whose views differ from theirs (Johnson et al 2016). Education and creativity expert Ken Robinson (2010) states, 'most great learning happens in groups ... [and] collaboration is the stuff of growth'. At the same time, education scholars such as Masika and Jones (2015), whose research focuses on communities of practice, find that while there are indeed many positive aspects to group learning, including students developing a stronger sense of belonging and greater confidence when learning in collaborations, students can also experience tensions and frustrations in the process.

Others (Pauli et al 2008) have reiterated the above finding, arguing that group collaboration may lead to conflicts and personality clashes, which result in student disenfranchisement, loss of agency and disorganisation. The so-called 'free riding behaviour' (or the 'sucker' phenomenon, according to Salomon & Globerson 1989) implies some individuals in a group may benefit from the work of others without equally contributing, and has also been flagged as a consistent issue which hurts both types of learners in a group – those who do the work and those who do not (Kloppenburger et al 2018). Another study of group work (LaBeouf et al 2016) found that the biggest issue reported by students in regard to group work was the allocation of grades for group members reinforcing the perceived built-in imbalance between an individual student's contribution and the shared grade.

Group work in screenwriting and film and television studies

Research into collaboration and communication skills development for screenwriting and production students showed that while the majority of HE film courses do require students to produce films in groups, the actual skill of collaboration is not explicitly taught (Dooley 2015; Hodge 2009; Sabal 2009b). Specifically, 'deep and effective collaboration in filmmaking is an art form in itself ... [and classrooms] rarely train or prepare students for it' (Sabal 2009b: 7). Hence, the question of 'how might screenwriting and film production students work more effectively and more harmoniously together?' is central to the discipline, with Sabal asserting that, 'filmmakers who know how to work well together produce better films' (Sabal 2009a: 3).

Arguably, group work in such creative disciplines as screenwriting and film and television studies adds an additional layer of complexity to group dynamics. Time constraints and deadlines to produce creative group projects combined with unbalanced power dynamics can lead to intense inter-group conflicts and resentment when someone's creative input is overlooked. With increased numbers of students enrolling in HE creative writing and film and television courses [1] and limited time within a semester to produce such artefacts as screenplays and short films, designing group work in a way that empowers students rather than disenfranchises them, while still exposing them to simulated industry dynamics, promises to address various issues associated with group work, as well as boost student satisfaction and increase retention.

Group work is a well-established industry practice in screenwriting and film production. Script development as a practice is central to the broader practice of screenwriting but is often hidden and/or unacknowledged (Batty et al 2017; Conor 2014; Tofler et al 2019).

According to Tofler, Batty and Taylor (2019: 4), 'script development almost always includes the writing of multiple drafts, and in most professional instances also includes the writer's incorporation of ideas, notes and changes from those in various executive or production roles'. Script development hence 'might include creating

memorable characters; building an appealing story world; plotting action and reaction; structuring theme' (Tofler et al 2019: 4).

Film and television scripts are frequently written in teams of two or more with script development notes provided from a script editor, director, and/or producer. Phalen and Osellame, who interviewed forty-five television screenwriters between 2005 and 2009 and conducted a six-week prime-time drama series observation, discuss that while writers' rooms may vary depending on genre and personal preferences, several elements remain fairly constant across rooms:

Writers spend time in the room discussing stories and coming up with ideas for episodes or ... rewriting scripts. When the writers are in the room a writers' assistant takes notes so the writers can concentrate on ideas. The showrunner is responsible for the process and the final product, and studio and network executives read scripts and give notes and approvals at different stages. (Phalen & Osellame 2012: 8)

Similarly, in HE environments, student films are often created within teams. Less common, however, is the kind of group work that ensures students' active participation in the screenwriting process from the inception of the screenplay to its production and post-production stages.

Adding to the 'normal' group work challenges outlined earlier, student filmmakers experience group work at the same time as they are 'learning their craft and discovering their own artistic instincts' (Hodge 2009: 3). Of particular relevance is that creative disagreements often occur within student film teams. However, when constructive, group conflict can catalyse a creative solution to a problem. Differences in opinion between two people can inspire a third or fourth team member to come up with a unique solution.

Dooley's (2015) research into collaboration skills in university-based screen production courses has seen her create an inventory of approaches to student collaboration to help improve working relationships, increase creative output and assist with conflict resolution skills. Her underlying approach was to dispense with the idea of the 'auteur', which tends to result in a situation where one student takes on a writer/director role and, by default, becomes the group's leader, while others settle into the roles of a producer, director of photography, sound designer, production designer and editor. This dynamic may leave some students feeling 'shut out' of the decision-making process while others may become resentful that everyone in the group receives the same mark without contributing equally. Dooley draws upon Hunnigher's (2000) ideas about putting student collaboration before authorship, whereby students would not direct their own scripts, instead opting for a process where the script is developed as a team effort.

Dooley and Sexton-Finck (2017) proposed that screen production educators should approach collaboration and teamwork throughout the semester with a clear focus on student learning. Aligned with Smith's (1996) work, this idea was developed further by Sabal (2009b) who reiterated five key principles to be emphasised to students commencing group work: positive interdependence, positive interaction, development of teamwork skills, group processing, and, importantly, individual and group accountability. By emphasising these principles to students, educators will be more likely to succeed in discouraging individual group members from fixating on their specific role within the group, focusing instead on the success of the group as a whole.

The group work redesign process that is about to be presented is grounded in the ideas discussed above. The redesign was undertaken in response to student feedback – after working as a convenor and lecturer in the unit in question over the past five years, the first author, Tofler, revamped the unit to enable more productive group collaboration by encouraging students in each production team to create a group-devised screenplay of a short film they were to produce during semester. As the article demonstrates, this change to group work structure has resulted in students creating stronger films without feeling overwhelmed or disgruntled by the process. As a result of collaborating with a scholarly teaching and evaluation-focused colleague (second author), the lecturer articulated the new process and analysed student satisfaction data to offer new insights on the topic of effective group work in screenwriting and film studies and more widely.

The study: Using student feedback to redesign group work for screenwriting students

Context

The second-year screenwriting unit at the core of this study forms a part of a Bachelor of Film and Television degree at a mid-sized Australian university. Given the course's entry requirement is via an ATAR score of over ninety-two, the unit typically attracts high-achieving students [2]. When the lecturer took over this unit, its curriculum was overloaded with assessment tasks and unreasonable deadlines. All students would pitch and write a short film but only one in five or six of these films would be chosen for production, leaving many students resentful about having to write a screenplay which would not be produced. As students worked in teams to produce their films, one student would inevitably act as 'auteur' – taking on a writer/director role and becoming

the group's default leader – leaving others to take on the roles of producer, editor, director of photography, sound designer or production designer.

Based on Tofler's observations and student feedback, it seemed that when a student writer directed their own work they often became overly dictatorial, unable to be objective about creative decisions. As a result, some group members felt ostracised and shut out of the decision-making process while others resented that everyone in the group received the same mark without contributing equally. The situation was exacerbated by placing an additional pressure on students to pitch and create a music video in addition to their short film. Students were often stressed and resentful by the end of semester, and their formal unit feedback reflected this – the unit tended to receive low student satisfaction ratings. Using this feedback as a catalyst for the unit's redesign, Tofler revamped the unit's assessments to facilitate more productive and rewarding group collaborations.

The new group work process

As a result of the redesign, the unit's curriculum was adapted so that each screenplay would be group-devised from the start. In this new process, which emulates industry 'writers' room' practice, students learn collaborative skills integral to creating, writing and editing a screenplay and also learn how to give, receive and integrate script feedback.

The new process has six steps:

1. All students devise and verbally pitch a short film idea; each student receives feedback from peers and their lecturer.
2. All students submit a logline and synopsis of their short film idea.
3. The students and their lecturer vote on which ideas are to be made into films. Students then get into production teams based on which idea they would like to help develop and what they can offer that team.
4. Over the next four weeks, each production team works to develop a screenplay based on their chosen short film idea.
5. Script exercises are undertaken in class over several weeks, and students work in their teams to collaboratively devise and write a screenplay. Inevitably, the person who originally pitched the idea comes to act as head writer, however the screenplay has input from the whole team.
6. Students continue to work in teams to produce and edit their short films.

In addition to the redesign of the group work process, the music video assessment component was removed from the unit, while an individual reflective journal assessment was added, requiring students to research screenwriting and film theory and use it to reflect on their own creative work. Where group-based scriptwriting is concerned, various in-class exercises and discussions occurred throughout the semester, allowing the class as a whole to give and receive feedback, exposing students to each other's screenplay development processes and unearthing creative challenges their peers might be facing.

It is an industry practice to invite a range of film industry personnel to attend actor readings of screenplay drafts and give feedback so that writers, directors and producers can gauge whether their project's screenplay is hitting the mark and screenwriters can then revise accordingly. Emulating this industry practice, a script-reading workshop was held where each screenplay was read and students received feedback from the lecturer and their peers, allowing a fresh perspective on any scripting issues. Script reading also helped clarify problematic decisions made within the team, as sometimes it takes an outsider to identify script problems.

All students were encouraged to give constructive feedback regarding other groups' screenplays and to articulate what makes a strong, engaging screenplay. This process was beneficial to students, as providing and receiving constructive script feedback is not only a skill required of film industry screenwriters, script editors, directors and producers to help writers polish their screenplays ready for production, but also for film editors to provide story feedback to directors as they refine the narrative of the film in post-production.

Writing the film as a group can encourage the whole team to contribute to the creation of a screenplay. Such a group-devised screenplay benefits from having the producer, editor, sound and production designers and director of photography all contribute to the script based upon their specific area of knowledge and the skills specific to their role. For instance, an editor may come up with a solution to a problem by keeping in mind how the film will be cut to fit together as a whole, while a suggestion from a sound designer may enable a superfluous scene in the film to be cut by using a clever sound effect or setting a particular emotional beat to music.

In the middle of the semester, an established director was invited as a guest speaker along with professional actors from a local studio in order to improvise scenes from students' screenplays. Improvisation is a tool used by filmmakers such as Robert Altman, John Cassavetes, and Mike Leigh to help develop story narratives and also allow actors to organically develop their characters. During this directing/actor workshop, the backstory to a scene could be improvised, with this change occasionally working its way into the screenplay. At this stage, students were also shown how to use improvisation as a rehearsal technique, another effective industry tool that allows actors to develop an emotional memory about their characters.

Using student feedback data from end-of-semester surveys as well as students' performance grades, the revised group work structure was evaluated for effectiveness.

Evaluation

Methodology

Purposed with assessing the effectiveness of the revised group work structure and grounded in scholarly teaching approaches, the evaluation drew on multiple data sources, primarily student feedback, satisfaction ratings and academic performance grades. Methodologically, this study was informed by Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) which allowed the authors to problematise the classroom/curricula practice while contextualising it within the discipline of film studies. As 'What is going on here?' and 'Why is 'X' happening?' (Hubball & Clarke 2010: 2) are among the questions asked by SoTL, its overarching method of mindful analysis of diverse student data emerged as most appropriate given our set research goals. Specifically, this study falls under such methodological approaches as case study research and program evaluation research (Hubball & Clarke 2010). A common source of data in education research (Golding & Adam 2016), student evaluations of teaching in this study were used to improve teaching and revise curriculum to achieve better experience for students.

While end-of-semester student satisfaction ratings and feedback are indeed among the most common types of data lecturers use to improve their teaching and/or show impact of augmented teaching approaches (Hammonds et al 2016; Hounsell 2009), one of the limitations of this data is that it is not compulsory for students to partake in these surveys, resulting in a skewed sample. Further, anecdotally, some lecturers feel that disgruntled students are more likely to fill out a survey while those contented with their experiences are more likely to ignore the survey all together. Some lecturers have also been found to be concerned about the validity of student satisfaction ratings because they did not perceive students as knowledgeable enough to perform useful evaluations (Hammonds et al 2016). To supplement quantitative data, qualitative comments left by students as well as objective observation of a change in academic performance grades were also used to inform this evaluation.

All data was analysed using the interpretive approach in order to make judgements on whether the redesign of the unit's group work structure was effective, namely in alignment with the question of: How well were the student learning outcomes met by using this teaching approach? Specifically, the learning outcomes evaluated were concerned with whether students as a team were able to develop and pitch a well-structured and engaging script concept for a short narrative film. In regard to the former, the criteria for assessing what makes a script well-structured and engaging is based upon screenwriting expert Syd Field's checkpoints for writing a better screenplay. These include the effective setting up of the main character(s), by establishing the dramatic premise, situation, and circumstances surrounding said character. Furthermore, the following questions are used as guiding principles: Does the structure effectively hold the story line together? Is the dialogue too explanatory, or too wordy? Is there effective conflict? Does the main character's dramatic need drive the action forward? (Field 2005).

Limitations

It is important to consider other factors that may be affecting students' classroom experiences and, subsequently, their feedback and satisfaction ratings. Recent research into implicit bias in the classroom argued that lecturers' perception of their student cohort shapes the way they teach (Pechenkina 2017). The same is true for students' perception of lecturers. For example, several studies (Kogan et al 2010; Lazos 2012) confirmed that female lecturers fare worse than male colleagues in student evaluations. Further, students feeling uncomfortable in the classroom, whether due to the complexity of the topic, feedback received or even its delivery, could also affect how students evaluate their experience in the end-of-semester surveys (Lazos 2012). While research shows that all these factors affect student evaluations, these important nuances are rarely accounted for when lecturers are assessed by their supervisors or when tenure or promotion decisions are made.

Therefore, while student satisfaction data serves as a key evidence by which the success of the group work redesign is judged upon in this paper, we acknowledge this approach's limitations and endeavour to balance it out by also drawing on the excerpts from students' reflective journals. Further, whether student films developed within the unit were selected for screening at local and international film festivals as well as whether student films were presented with local and international awards was also used as a criterion of success, as these outputs reflect industry peer review and recognition.

Methods

After being introduced in Semester 1 2016, the new curriculum for this unit has now run for four semesters. We have analysed student satisfaction data across the total of eight teaching intakes, including four teaching semesters preceding the new group work structure and four semesters following its introduction. While there were other components of this unit which tended to provoke mixed reactions from students (eg additional

assessment tasks, such as a music video and reflection journals), the group-based scriptwriting project remained a constant element throughout the years. Hence, only the group work focused comments from student surveys and reflection journals were considered for this evaluation.

As the university student survey instrument underwent a significant change in 2015, some design inconsistencies had to be addressed. Specifically, as of 2015, the university swapped its 6-point Likert scale (1 = 'Strongly Disagree' and 6 = 'Strongly Agree') for a 10-point scale (1 = 'Strongly Disagree' and 10 = 'Strongly Agree'), while also reducing the number of questions. To address the first discrepancy, all 6-point scale distributions were converted into 10-point scale ones by multiplying each mean response by 1.67, and rounding to the nearest whole number (eg a '6' on the old 6-point scale corresponding to 'Strongly Agree' became a '10' on the new post-2015 10-point scale ($6 \times 1.67 = 10.02$, rounded to 10)). This technique is based on that described by Kehoe et al (2017).

In regard to the changed list of questions, the 2014 surveys featured eight Likert scale statement questions, namely:

1. This unit is well organised
2. I received helpful feedback on the assessment in this unit
3. Learning materials and resources for this unit meet my learning needs
4. I have learnt a lot in this unit
5. I am given opportunities to apply my learning in this unit
6. The assessment tasks in this unit assist my learning
7. I find this unit difficult compared with other units in my program
8. Overall, I am satisfied with this unit

All post-2015 student surveys, however, comprised three questions, namely:

1. Overall, I am satisfied with this unit
2. The unit is well organised
3. The assessment requirements were clear

Both surveys also included two open-ended questions, allowing students to point out the unit's best aspects and suggest improvements. To ensure all comparisons were made across meaningful criteria, the evaluation analysis centred around three questions deemed comparable across both surveys:

1. Overall, I am satisfied with this unit
2. The unit is well organized
3. The assessment requirements were clear [3]

Deciphering student satisfaction

Table 1 presents student ratings for each Likert scale question statement as mean values, with unit ratings compared to those for the faculty as a whole.

Table 1: Overview of the unit ratings by mean of student satisfaction 2014-2017

Student feedback item	Teaching Intake (Unit/Faculty Mean)							
	2014/ S1	2014/ S2	2015/ S1	2015/ S2	2016/ S1*	2016/ S2	2017/ S1	2017/ S2
Overall, I am satisfied with this unit	5.8/8.1	6.7/8.2	6.7/7.7	4.10/7.7	6.6/7.8	5.9/7.8	6.3/7.9	5.7/7.8
The unit is well organised	5.8/8.3	7.5/8.3	6.8/7.8	4.8/7.8	6.5/7.8	5.8/7.9	5.9/8	5.3/7.9
The assessment requirements were clear	6.8/8.2	6.9/8.3	7.4/7.7	6.5/7.7	6.3/7.8	6/7.9	N/A [4]	N/A
n = Respondents (Percentage of cohort)	15/58 (26%)	9/47 (19%)	23/46 (60%)	10/23 (43%)	48/67 (72%)	18/33 (54%)	21/42 (50%)	13/33 (39%)

**New group work structure is introduced*

Presented below (Tables 2-4) are visualisations of these longitudinal student rankings.

Table 2: Longitudinal visualisation of student rankings for ‘Overall, I am satisfied with this unit’ question

Table 3: Longitudinal visualisation of student rankings for ‘This unit is well organised’ question

Table 4: Longitudinal visualisation of student rankings for ‘The assessment requirements were clear’ question

The above data sets (Tables 1-4) show an increase in student satisfaction corresponding to the semester when the new group structure was introduced, however this subsequently returned to a similar level of student satisfaction to that of previous years.

While quantitative student feedback sheds light on one aspect of student experience, arguably this evaluation benefited most from the qualitative comments. What follows is the thematic analysis of the latter, corresponding to the teaching periods before and after the group work structure was changed. Relevant comments pertaining to group work were also extracted from student reflective journals and included in the narrative.

Before the change

As a small but consistent segment of the student cohort pointed out, students appreciated the opportunity to conceptualise and create a film as a group, with one student saying ‘the chance to bounce ideas off of other students/work on script ideas together’ was of most value. Similarly, others said that the best aspects of the unit were: ‘group discussions ... [and] feedback from ... peers’, working together on ‘build[ing a] script’, ‘discussing ideas as a large group’, and the very process of ‘making ... a short film with a passionate crew and a terrific script’. It was ‘the creativity side of the subject’ that students appreciated the most, especially ‘being able to come up with your own original script’ – and ‘even if you didn’t get to make your film, [you] still g[ot] advice and feedback’. However, repeatedly students wished for more opportunities for peer collaboration, expressing a need for ‘more time ... spent improving scripts’ or even just to ‘find the right script and group to work with’.

However, various tensions and anxieties surrounding group work also emerged. There was a concern from some students who felt that it was not fair that everyone received the same mark for group work. Some felt that those who took on roles such as the director, for instance, may have ended up doing more work than others.

Others also spoke of a need for a ‘better regulation of groups’ and ‘better system for getting into groups and choosing which films [to work on]’. Some students also took issue with the process of choosing films for production and felt that a few of the best film ideas were forgotten. As a related observation, some comments hinted at complex class dynamics, touching on the role of the lecturer’s gender in student evaluations, which is discussed in multiple other studies (Kogan et al 2010; Lazos 2012). For example, one student pointed out how the lecturer was ‘a little brutal’ with her feedback in whole class situations, encouraging students to vocalise what could be improved in their peers’ work. While the task of giving (or receiving) feedback can indeed be confronting, these are in fact essential skills in creative industries where feedback, critique and rejection are all part of day-to-day experiences. Another student pointed out that ‘the lecturer is quite opinionated’, which is something that could have been articulated as ‘authoritative’ or ‘strong/powerful’ in the case of a male colleague. While gender and other ‘hidden’ factors were not a focus of this evaluation, comments such as the ones above indicate that these factors added to the already complex classroom dynamics in this study and could be a focus of future research.

After the change

Students’ feedback received in regard to the unit’s group work component served as a rationale behind changing the way groups were formed and films were chosen for production. The overall goal was to make the entire process more transparent and democratic by sharing the lecturer’s responsibility with the students. Pertaining to the changed group structure, however, some students still felt that the process could be improved further, as one commented, ‘there needs to be a better system in place for selecting ideas to go ahead.’

When the new group work structure was introduced, the average grades for the screenplay assessment increased from 72.88 per cent in Semester 2 2014 to 80.44 per cent in Semester 1 2016. This improvement in student grades is significant in showing the benefits of group work on screenplay writing for this unit; it is unlikely that this improvement in grades could be attributed to sources other than the addition of group work, as there was no change of unit instructor nor any other significant changes to course design. However, among the limitations of this study it is acknowledged that there is a multitude of other nuanced factors that might also influence student experience.

Further, based on qualitative comments collected from student surveys in semesters following the implementation, students identified significantly fewer issues with the group work process. Instead, whatever negative comments students had primarily focused on the reflective journal assessment and other unrelated aspects of student experience. Several points students raised pertaining to the group work component, however, indicated there were further concerns to assuage. Some felt that it would be better if all students got the chance to write and develop their own scripts. Several students felt that the scriptwriting process was not collaborative as they observed that one particular group member did the majority of the writing. Others felt that the pitching process was a popularity contest with teams consisting mostly of people who already knew each other. This, they felt, made it more difficult for people who had deferred or for those who, for various reasons, did not know their classmates.

Regarding the latter, the pitching and voting process had the students divided. There were those who enjoyed the democratic aspect of the process and felt that it was great to pitch ideas, choose the best ones to produce, form teams and produce their chosen projects. Many also liked having both the capacity to have their own ideas produced but also enjoyed learning to work with other people’s ideas. Others, however, disagreed. These students expressed that the system of voting for the best films was confusing and uncomfortable, and felt exposed about being put on the spot and required to pick favourites.

As a consequence of these negative comments, the unit’s delivery has since been altered so that students and the lecturer confidentially vote for which projects will be produced during the semester.

The majority of students, however, felt that they have had ownership of the film project as they all contributed to its screenplay genesis and growth. Relevant comments came from students’ reflective journals. A cinematographer commented that being so closely involved with the film from its inception and throughout the

screenwriting and production process allowed the student to get to know the story and its characters. This later allowed the cinematographer to engage with the story-telling process through the camera once on set. A sound designer commented that the scriptwriting and directing unit was the best unit experienced in the course as it taught the student how to get the most out of his/her stories and writing, as well as getting the most out of his/her actors and production.

Still, judging from the polarised nature of student views expressed, this unit continues to be both a challenging and positive experience for students. Considered separately from other issues raised by students, the unit's group work structure seemed to work well for many students, but arguably not for all. Students' experience of group work was very much tied to the dynamics of their individual groups and whether students felt that their team contributed equally.

While some appreciated the ability to produce their own film, others found the process of pitching individually and then writing and producing as a group a challenge. This process, however, emulates industry practice – successful filmmakers must learn resilience. *Wentworth* screenwriter, Sarah Walker, argues, 'You have to be resilient and have your ideas knocked down... If you've got an ego that's fragile, forget it' (Awad 2018).

Discussion

The new group-devised screenwriting curriculum has now run for several semesters. When the redesigned screenwriting group work was first introduced, student satisfaction ratings rose considerably (when over seventy per cent of students participated in the survey) but are now returning to the way they were before the change was implemented. However, student satisfaction quantified via survey metrics presents just one way to gauge student experience of a unit. Hence, perhaps more useful insights come from the changes the lecturer observed in the quality of student screenplays and engagement in the classroom. The group-devised screenplays benefitted from the addition of students in the team to act as script editors. This enabled team members to identify and creatively solve issues of concern within the group's screenplay relating to concepts discussed in the unit's screenwriting lectures and workshops. Team members were able to identify and solve their script problems such as undeveloped characters, narrative structural issues and ineffective dialogue. In addition, having students create their script as a group led to a higher level of engagement as such a collaborative process enabled the production team to have a greater interest in all stages of the project and, in particular, understand the connection between the story and their individual roles. The group-devised screenplay process also has provoked fewer complaints in relation to individual students avoiding responsibility.

Aligned with Hodge's (2009: 23) argument that 'collaboration thrives when the creative 'leadership' is granted to whoever in the moment has the best idea or solution ... rather than who is in the most powerful role', the new process of writing the film as a group ensured the whole team could provide input into the creation of a screenplay. For instance, when a student working as the director of photography became involved in the early stages of the script development process, they quickly developed a deeper understanding of the film's story and its characters that then impacted on how they were able to engage with the storytelling process through the camera.

Further, stepping away from the auteur-centred style of group work in favour of recognising the complexity of creative authorship allowed students to 'focus on doing the work, rather than taking the credit' (Sabal 2009: 8). Such student collaboration on the short film screenplay from an early stage enabled each member of the production team to accept that their role was one of many and that all were integral to the production, with each possessing a valid and important creative voice.

Despite the new curriculum, there have still been a couple of instances of conflict among teams. In each case, this was a result of one student placing themselves as 'auteur' and a team's default leader, making some other team members feel marginalised. Lecturers were able to help resolve such disagreements by reminding the production group that all team members are also executive producers, meaning they all equally contribute to the film's budget and should therefore be empowered to make creative decisions.

Various challenges and pressures students wrote about in their evaluation surveys are a normal, unavoidable part of real-life experiences in the writers' room and during the filmmaking process. For instance, it is not feasible that all students will be able to have their script ideas developed into a film or that all will be able to work as a director. Therefore, exposing students to these realities early should, in theory, prepare them for the real world they are eventually to enter. Yet, classrooms are also not the real world and students' expectations clashing with realities do affect student evaluations, with real-world repercussions for lecturers.

Overall, however, by having students create their script as a group, there has been an increase in academic performance for this aspect of the unit, combined with a higher level of engagement, as evidenced by lecturer's observations and student reflective journals. Further, films produced via group-devised screenplays have already led to several local and international film awards and selection for screenings at prestigious film festivals – an extraordinary achievement for second-year films. Lecturers within the university's Film and Television Department have commented that the most recently produced second-year films have been of a particularly high calibre with at least four films deemed worthy of film festival entry. Lecturers also commented that the revised

unit integrates well into the Bachelor of Film and Television and lays the groundwork for an outstanding third-year project that students will be tasked with accomplishing the following year.

Conclusions

Group-devised film projects in university classrooms may lead to a lack of commitment, inequitable load sharing, and conflict among students. However, by initiating a group-devised screenplay process early on, students can have a greater level of project satisfaction and engagement. By avoiding a situation where any one student would act as 'auteur' and group leader, and instead having all students participate in the screenwriting process and hold the role of executive producer, students can have a deeper understanding of the storytelling process, which can then be applied to their specific production role. As a result, rather than feeling powerless and marginalised, students involved in a group-devised screenplay instead could all have a valid and equal voice in the project. This can boost students' confidence within their individual creative role and in regard to their share in the project as a whole.

The power of brainstorming a specific issue within a story in a team setting cannot be underestimated, as Phalen and Osellame argue, 'collaboration contributes to the creative process by facilitating an exchange of ideas that helps writers improve their individual script' (2012: 8).

Collaborating on a script as a production team brings together members with different skillsets and sensibilities, which can in turn help a script and project to grow organically: 'Writers can develop new skills by working with colleagues who have different talents and unique perspectives' (Phalen & Osellame, 2012: 11).

Echoing industry script development processes, the script's structural, dialogue and character issues can also be investigated by the student film team and a solution achieved using the proficiency of the entire, often diverse, group and, as a consequence, scripts can be made more concise and powerful.

While this study is contextualised in the field of screenwriting and filmmaking, its findings pertaining to student group work dynamics and using student evaluations to improve teaching can be transported to other disciplines and contexts. After all, group work in university settings aspires to imitate real-life situations and therefore it becomes crucial to prepare students for the tensions and complex dynamics of the professional workplace by exposing them to robust group work early on and having them learn to solve conflicts as a team. Personal skills developed through HE group work, such as collaboration, problem-solving and negotiation, may later be applied to other real-world industry settings. Students who learn to problem-solve alongside their peers holding diverse views will be better positioned for success in local and international industry contexts.

Ethics disclaimer

This research received ethical clearance from Swinburne University's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC). Any potential conflicts of interest were minimal and resolved by having data analysis for this study conducted by a researcher who was not involved in teaching and assessment in the unit described in this study. For the quantitative data, only aggregate statistics were accessed and used, as per the approved institutional ethics protocol.

Notes

[1] Based on data reported by Department of Education and Training, enrolments in Creative Arts degrees across all Australian universities increased from 35,275 in 2011 to over 40,000 in 2016; <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics>. return to text

[2] The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a rank between 0.00 and 99.95 used by tertiary institutions to compare the overall achievement of students who have completed different combinations of studies for entry into specific courses. The Bachelor of Film and Television degree has the highest ATAR entry score requirement at the university where this study took place. return to text

[3] This question corresponds to Q6 of the old scale ('The assessment tasks in this unit assist my learning'). return to text

[4] In the Semester 1 2017 survey this question was replaced with 'My teacher(s) used Blackboard to effectively support my learning', referring to the institutional Learning Management System. return to text

Works cited

Awad, A 2018 'Resilience, Collaboration and Inspiration in the Writers' Room', *Screen Australia*: <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/sa/screen-news/2018/08-24-resilience-collaboration-writers-room> (accessed 4 September 2019)

return to text

Batty, C, S Taylor, L Sawtell & B Conor 2017 'Script Development: Defining the Field', *Journal of Screenwriting* 8, 3: 225-247 return to text

Conor, B 2014, *Screenwriting: Creative Labor and Professional Practice*, Routledge, Oxford return to text

Cruikshank, K, H Chen & S Warren 2012 'Increasing international and domestic student interaction through group work: A case study from the humanities', *Higher Education Research & Development* 31, 6: 797-810 return to text

De Hei, MSA, JW Strijbos, E Sjoer & W Admiraal 2015 'Collaborative learning in higher education: lecturers' practices and beliefs', *Research Papers in Education* 30, 2: 232-247 return to text

Dooley, K & L Sexton-Finck 2017 'A focus on collaboration: Fostering Australian screen production students' teamwork skills', *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability* 8, 1: 74-105 return to text

Dooley, K 2015 'Fostering Students' Collaboration Skills in University-based Screen Production Courses', *Proceedings of the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association Conference 2015* return to text

Field, S 2005 *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Delta, New York return to text

Golding, C & L Adam 2016 'Evaluate to improve: useful approaches to student evaluation', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 41, 1: 1-14 return to text

Hammonds, F, GJ Mariano, G Ammons & S Chambers 2016 'Student evaluations of teaching: improving teaching quality in higher education', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 21, 1: 26-33 return to text

Hodge, C 2009 'Film collaboration and creative conflict', *Journal of Film and Video* 61, 1: 18-30 return to text

Hounsell, D 2009 'Evaluating courses and teaching', in Fry, H, S Ketteridge & S Marshall (eds) *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education*, 3rd edn, Kogan Page, London: 198-211 return to text

Hubball, H & A Clarke 2010 'Diverse methodological approaches and considerations for SoTL in higher education', *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 1, 1: 1-11 return to text

Hunningher, J 2000 'Putting Student Collaboration before Authorship', *Journal of Media Practice* 1, 3: 172-178 return to text

Johnson, L, S Adams Becker, M Cummins, V Estrada, A Freeman and C Hall 2016 'NMC Horizon Report: 2016 Higher Education Edition', The New Media Consortium, Austin: <http://cdn.nmc.org/media/2016-nmc-horizon-report-he-EN.pdf> (accessed 17 August 2017) return to text

Kehoe, TJ, P Schofield, E Branigan, and M Wilmore 2018 'The Double Flip: Applying a Flipped Learning Approach to Teach the Teacher and Improving Student Satisfaction', *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 15, 1: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1173808.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2018) return to text

Kloppenburger, W, E Nurlatifah, C Spijkerboer & FA Yasmin 2018 'Reducing Free Riding Behaviour in Collaborative Work with Computer Supported Tools', *Journal Online Informatika* 3, 1: 36-43 return to text

Kogan, LR, R Schoenfeld-Tacher & PW Hellyer 2010 'Student evaluations of teaching: perceptions of faculty based on gender, position, and rank', *Teaching in Higher Education* 15, 6: 623-636 return to text

LaBeouf, JP, JC Griffith & DL Roberts 2016 'Faculty and Student Issues with Group Work: What is Problematic with College Group Assignments and Why?', *Journal of Education and Human Development* 5, 1: 13-23 return to text

Lazos, S 2012 'Are student teaching evaluations holding back women and minorities', in GG Muhs, YF Niemann, CG González & AP Harris (eds) *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, Utah State University Press, University Press of Colorado, Boulder CO: 164-185 return to text

Masika, R & J Jones 2016 'Building student belonging and engagement: insights into higher education students' experiences of participating and learning together', *Teaching in Higher Education* 21, 2: 138-150 return to text

Pauli R, C Mohiyeddini, D Bray, F Michie & B Street 2008 'Individual differences in negative group work experiences in collaborative student learning', *Educational Psychology* 28, 1: 47-58 return to text

Pechenkina E 2017 'Flipping diverse classrooms: Instructor experiences and perceptions', in H Partridge, K Davis & J Thomas (eds) *'Me, Us, IT!'* *Proceedings of the 34th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education* (ASCILITE 2017), 2015: 354-363 return to text

Pham, T & L Pham 2018 'An analysis of small group interactions of Vietnamese students under the Bourdieusian theoretical lens', *Higher Education Research & Development* 37, 2: 359-372 return to text

Robinson, K 2010, *RSA ANIMATE: Changing Education Paradigms*: <https://youtu.be/zDZFcDGpL4U> (accessed 8 March 2017) return to text

Sabal, R 2009a 'Introduction', *Journal of Film and Video* 61, 1: 3-5 return to text

Sabal, R 2009b 'The individual in collaborative media production', *Journal of Film and Video* 61, 1: 6-17 return to text

Salomon, G & T Globerson 1989 'When teams do not function the way they ought to', *International Journal of Educational Research* 13: 89-99 return to text

Smith, KA 1996 'Cooperative Learning: Making "GroupWork" Work', *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 67, 71-82 return to text

Tofler, M, C Batty & S Taylor 2019, 'The comedy web series: Reshaping Australian script development and commissioning practice', *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 8, 1: 71-84: doi: 10.1386/ajpc.8.1.71_1 (accessed 28 August 2019) return to text

Editorial note on the publication of this article

For legal reasons which came to the attention of *TEXT* editors after original publication, this article was modified from the original published version with cooperation between the authors and *TEXT* editors. The amended version was uploaded on 20 December 2019.

Dr Marilyn Tofler is a Melbourne based screenwriter, lecturer, performer and has worked as a script assessor in Melbourne and Los Angeles. Marilyn has published journal articles and book chapters on comedy television and web series, film and gender. She co-created and wrote the Australian television comedy series, Whatever Happened to That Guy? and currently lectures in film and television at Swinburne University.

Dr Ekaterina Pechenkina is a Research Fellow at Learning Transformations Unit, Swinburne University of Technology. Anthropologist and education scholar, Katya's research interests encompass critical discourses of technology, innovation in education, teaching excellence, and Indigenous academic experiences.

TEXT

Vol 23 No 2 October 2019

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julianne van Loon & Ross Watkins

text@textjournal.com.au