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Introduction

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Introduction

ROB SABAL

THE IMPULSE FOR THIS SPECIAL ISSUE on teaching about and through collaboration comes from a shared search for answers to the question, "how might production students work more productively and more harmoniously with others—peers, professionals, and members of the community?" The search is spurred by the recognition that, as a field, we are not doing much to address this facet of production education. Drawn together by a mutual concern for providing a rich and lasting education for our students, the authors included in this issue, along with fellow members of the University Film and Video Association, formed an informal collaboration interest group and have, for several years, been sharing stories, ideas, information, and resources about teaching collaboration and conflict resolution.

The implicit question running through this special issue is, "what is the purpose of a film production education?" This seems to be a particularly important question to ask of undergraduate production programs because the traditional value of a liberal arts education is its breadth and its focus on inquiry and methods, which gives it its enduring value over a person's lifetime. What do we teach in a traditional production class that is of abiding value? Certainly nothing related to physical production, where technology, process, storytelling structures, exhibition, and distribution outlets continue to change rapidly. The enduring value of production classes has to be that as each student develops his or her artistic identity, he or she also comes to a clear and truthful understanding of him- or herself, develops an ability to see and appreciate the talents of others, learns to constructively negotiate conflict, and extends this ability to work positively with others into their institution and their community.

It is also our collective assertion that filmmakers who know how to work well together produce better films—that the interpersonal dynamics of the project are inscribed in the completed work. Although we offer no scientific study in this issue that proves this hypothesis, and certainly many of us can cite examples to the contrary, our evidence is based on qualitative surveys, observations, and anecdotes. These perspectives represent the collective experience of well over a half century of filmmaking and film teaching at more than ten institutions. To support our students in making the best possible films, most faculty members recognize that students must fully engage with each step of the production process. Yet somehow, inexplicably, teaching about collaboration and conflict management is rarely considered the domain of the production course—as if working together and resolving conflicts is never a component of the production process.

It is no surprise that the quality of a particular student's experience is deeply affected by his or her working relationship with others in the production group. It is equally clear that sometimes things work out well, and sometimes they do not. When collaboration tools and conflict management skills are not a part of the course content, whether a production group is functional or dysfunctional seems to come down to chance. As the collaboration interest group began talking with one another

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and to other faculty members around the country, we collected anecdotal responses that demonstrated empathy when a group was taken over by strife, but little effort on the part of faculty to mitigate this difficult situation. Characteristic responses included "Oh well, that's just how it goes"; "nothing we can do about it"; "damn shame, but it's their own fault"; and "they learn as much from a bad experience as from a good one."[1]

The truth is that students do not learn anything useful from either a positive or a negative group experience if learning about collaboration and group process is not one of the objectives of the class. Unless the instructor provides a context for understanding and reflecting on the collective work experience, there is no way that a student filmmaker can endeavor to reproduce a positive experience or to develop approaches that might prevent a negative one. This is one reason that students want to work with the same group of people repeatedly—they know they can work well together and are afraid to risk working with others whom they do not know. But of course we all have to learn to work with people we do not know and even with people we do not especially like.

And so we put the question to ourselves, "what can we do to facilitate better group interaction and collaboration between students in our production classes?" There has been some resistance among production faculty even to raising this question—preferring to assign the whole matter to interpersonal communications or group dynamics classes. Faculty members lament that, with the demands of new technologies and processes, there is already too much to cram into our increasingly fast-paced classes. But for all that is there, it is not really enough to adequately prepare students either for their immediate production work or for their lives after college as educated people living and working in the world.

The first three articles in this volume consider the question, "what can we do?" albeit in slightly different ways. In my article, "The Individual in Collaborative Media Production," I explore the unique problems and opportunities that working collaboratively presents to students as individuals with their own ambitions, strengths, and weaknesses. If students are to collaborate successfully, they first need to have some awareness about their own fundamental abilities and limitations. I discuss how a class can incorporate activities that promote this kind of self-awareness, how learning about group process can be integrated into the class, how individual grades affect the group project environment, and how individuals can anticipate and manage group conflict.

The focus of Carroll Hodge's article, "Film Collaboration and Creative Conflict," is on structuring class experiences and production activities that foster and support the development of conflict negotiation and collaboration skills. She describes a number of thought-provoking exercises that can be incorporated into any media production class that has the goal of deepening students' abilities to work together. Incorporating quotes from both professional filmmakers and group process trainers about the importance of collaboration and conflict, Hodge's work is practical and inspiring.

Hoping to understand student expectations and attitudes toward collaboration better, Ted Hardin administered questionnaires and collected data from 149 film students and 24 faculty members over a two-year period in order to test the accuracy of behavioral clichés that are attached to different film roles: the rogue director, the Machiavellian producer, or the cool cinematographer. Hardin wondered if particular types of people are, in fact, attracted to particular production roles. Testing this hypothesis, he reasoned, would yield data that production teachers could use to design classes or exercises that would support collaboration between student filmmakers. Although the results presented in "Notes on Collaboration" are preliminary, Hardin's conclusions challenge widely held assumptions about the students who attend production courses.

As our conversation about collaboration expanded, it became clear that there are other forms of collaboration to consider. Emily Edwards set up collaboration across educational

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institutions with the aim of producing feature films. Proving again that collaboration has to be understood in the context in which it takes place, Edwards's "Intercollegiate and Community Collaboration: Film Productions for Students and Community Volunteers" suggests how different institutional imperatives and constraints pushed the project in different directions. Edwards's case study proposes a useful structure for faculty members who are initiating multi-party collaborations in the future.

The first four articles concern collaboration in narrative fiction filmmaking. In "Documentary and Collaboration: Placing the Camera in the Community," Elizabeth Coffman considers how filmmakers collaborate, not with each other, but with the subjects that they are documenting. Drawing from ethnographic filmmaking traditions, Coffman describes the ethical and procedural challenges encountered by several projects that invite collaboration between filmmakers, subjects, and the broader community. It seems clear that this type of collaboration requires students to negotiate a different range of challenges while developing the same set of skills that enable students to work positively and productively with each other.

As a group, we would like to thank our students, who have been our partners in our investigations; our home institutions, for the support they have provided for this inquiry; and our many production colleagues across the country, who have challenged us to share what we have learned.

NOTE

1. Notes from the exploratory panel on collaboration at the University Film and Video Association annual conference, Toledo, Ohio, 2004.

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