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Journal of Film and Video, Volume 61, Number 1, Spring 2009, pp. 6-17  
(Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jfv.0.0019>



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# The Individual in Collaborative Media Production

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ROB SABAL

FILM EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES DOES NOT BEGIN IN FILM SCHOOL. By the time students enter a college film production<sup>1</sup> classroom, they have seen countless movies, television shows, and YouTube shorts; listened to all kinds of music; and read plays, novels, short stories, and comic books. In all likelihood, they have engaged in some form of artistic production. No doubt each student is acquainted with an array of Web sites dedicated to industry deals, production credits, and festival updates. Directors, producers, cinematographers, and editors are branded, emblematic of a particular visionary style. Having internalized the success story of their filmmaking idols, by the time students walk into a film production classroom, they do so with a clear understanding of what it takes to “make it.”

The “Film School Database” on filmmaking.net lists 237 film production programs at colleges and universities across the United States.<sup>2</sup> In this competitive environment, film schools recruit students by bragging about their students’ festival awards, the quantity and accessibility of equipment, the experience and dedication of their faculty, and their big-name alumni. But many of these schools’ marketing materials also celebrate the development of the prospective student’s “vision,” “voice,” or “unique artistic identity.”<sup>3</sup> Dean Elizabeth Daley of the University of Southern California writes,

The breadth and depth of this environment [the USC school of cinema and television] will challenge you to draw from the world within you and the world around you. In doing so, you will hone your vision and add your voice to one of humanity’s grandest and most enduring traditions. (1)

Filmmakers themselves perpetuate this vague but attractive precept. Chris Eyre, best known as the director of the film *Smoke Signals* (1998), in answering the question, “What message would you like to impart to those who wish to venture into filmmaking?” replies,

That it is not . . . about the technology which continues to change. It is about the personal vision, whether you are making a major studio feature or a low budget passion project. You have to have a vision and spirit that endows the life of the movie. Understanding this and looking at the bigger picture is as important as the tight, meticulous work that will also have to happen. It starts with a vision, not a new camera. (1)

One of the challenges for the film production teacher is how to foster a collaborative environment in a group project-oriented film production class when there is so much emphasis on each student having her or his own “vision,” or “artistic identity.” The romantic notion of the artist standing outside of society is both a fiction and an impediment to quality artistic production. Given that most films are made in groups, it seems important to ask students to reflect on the constructed notion of the individ-

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ual artist, on who each student is, and on what they bring to the group production process. It is equally important to provide opportunities for students to ask questions about group organization and about the influence of grading and evaluation on the group and to explore what it means to collaborate. Searching for answers to these questions opens up the possibility for new forms of production group organization, effective collaboration and communication during the production process, productively engaged conflict when it occurs, and in the end, a meaningful learning experience.

Why should we care about the collaborative environment? Because it is a dynamic space where a student's agency is asserted and tested—where a student learns who and how to be in the world. The collaborative production class is not dedicated simply to making films, but to helping each student construct a thoughtful and deeply felt version of him- or herself in relationship with others. L. Dee Fink, in his book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, identifies the “human dimension” as one aspect of a significant learning experience. The human dimension includes learning about one's self and learning about others. “When we learn about our Self, we might learn something that helps us understand who we are at the present time; this kind of learning changes or informs our self-image . . . We might [also] learn about the person we want to become; this gives us a new self-ideal” (44).

Marcia Baxter Magolda has followed one hundred college students from 1986 to the present. One of the key findings of her longitudinal study is that college classes can and should play a more significant role in helping students “internally define their own beliefs, identity, and relationships,” something that she characterizes as “self-authorship.” Her conclusion is that “[s]tudents must develop a strong sense of their own identity if they are going to take responsibility for constructing their own knowledge and other aspects of their lives, that is, if they are going to engage in self-authorship” (qtd. in Fink 45). If we wish to create an enduring learning experience for our

students, then when we ask them to collaborate on a film, we must also ask them to learn about others and about themselves. Part of our job is to create an environment that integrates this kind of inquiry into the fabric of the class. If we define our job narrowly, we teach technology and process. But undergraduate education has to be deeper and more significant, and so we must see our role as educators more broadly. The collaborative film production class can create the kind of meaningful learning experience that transcends the specific subject matter and goes on to inform all aspects of a student's life.

Unfortunately, putting students together in groups is little guarantee that this kind of learning will follow. Deep and effective collaboration in filmmaking is an art form in itself. And yet, our classes rarely train or prepare students for it as we do for technical crafts. Many faculty members assume that most people can work together or feel unprepared to engage students in effective group process. Knowing that students come to film school to develop their own “vision” and “voice,” faculty members are not surprised when an entire project suffers because failed collaboration leads to destructive conflict. At best, many faculty members do little more than offer empathy when a group spins into a vortex of negativity. Others stand by transfixed by the wreckage, unable to act at all.

## Group Organization

The industrial model of film production is uncritically reproduced at many film schools. The film industry originally broke production into discrete areas in order to optimize efficiencies (Bordwell and Thompson 11). Film schools employ the same model when teaching narrative fiction film production either because the faculty come out of the industry or because the school is training students to join the industry or both. Assigning students to a specific role—producer, director, cinematographer, editor—without interrogating the inherent and implied power relationships in this kind of organization invites future conflicts. In my experience stu-

dents want a particular role because they believe it allows them to exercise their “creative vision.” They do not know what a director does, but they know they want to be one. This comes from the mythic quality of the director, that person who “in the course of a film production is able to extend his moment of self-expression [so] that his particular vision comes to signify the film as a whole” (Sherman xxiv). Other students in a “craft” position, such as cinematographer, sustain this power relationship by subjugating their own “vision” to that of the director. Often, the student producers martyr themselves by asserting that their job is to “support the director.”

Both independent and industry film directors are the first to assert the equality of all members of the filmmaking team. As Abraham Polonsky notes, “you have to be a real leader. That’s to say you have to let those who are doing their work do their work” (qtd. in Sherman 5). Pedro Almondóvar argues, “[I]t is important that the filmmaker abandon the illusion that he can—or even worse, *must*—control everything in relation to his film . . . to make a film you need a crew made up of human beings . . . and human beings cannot be controlled” (qtd. in Tirard 84).

Although I do not seek to diminish the importance of the film director’s job, to assert that the director authors a motion picture is too facile and too unspecific, and it is ultimately false. To reproduce the romantic fiction of the authorial role of the director in a film school classroom is irresponsible because everyone who works on the film contributes to its outcome. Different roles have different levels and spheres of influence, but aesthetic, procedural, and technical choices are widely distributed among the whole collective, and any film is also a product of the film school context in which it is made. It is critical for the instructor to point out that the students’ film work represents a melding of individual and collective choices and institutional constraints. Authorship is complex. Knowing that no one person is or can be the author helps students focus on doing the work, rather than taking the credit.<sup>4</sup>

If the class adopts the industrial crew organization model, it is worth discussing the history of this structure and the myths surrounding different roles and to argue for a new kind of cooperative and reciprocal set of relationships between each of the roles in the group. A list of the areas of authority and responsibility for each job should be clearly outlined, and the faculty member should model how a particular decision might get made—who does the leg work, who talks to whom, who gets to decide, and what the decision means for the work of others in the group.

Because their work is undertaken in a class, it is critical for students to think of themselves as part of a learning community, rather than a simple production group. I find it successful to emphasize that the whole class (sixteen students) is making (in my case) four short films. The whole class workshops story ideas and scripts. Although student producers ultimately choose which scripts go into production, all students are polled so that producers know how many in the class are interested in working on one or the other project. I emphasize that every student in the class can work on as many films as he or she wishes as long as everyone has a significant role on at least one project. This creates a sense of interconnection and collectivity rather than competition between groups. It also allows for open information sharing and peer learning. Like many other faculty members, I allow students to meet in their production teams during class time to work on preproduction activities, but I also organize time for all of the students performing in a particular role to meet with each other: directors with directors, producers with producers, and so on. In these meetings I ask students to discuss and compare group communication and decision-making processes as well as specific concerns about their production roles. In this way, not only are students engaged in collaborative problem solving, information exchange, and mutual support, but they are also reflecting on how each of the class’s groups is working to achieve its goals. Hearing from other groups acquaints students with the dynamics inherent

in the division of labor model of filmmaking, and it allows each student to reflect on his or her own actions and reactions within the group dynamic.

A faculty member can foster less hierarchical group structure by asking students to spend time working out the team's process issues before production begins. *Team* is a specific term defined as "a group of people who come together under shared leadership, mutual responsibility, and conscious authority, to achieve agreed-on goals in a mutually effective fashion." Team members "make conscious decisions about how decisions will be made, how work will be assigned, how deadlines will be set, and how the various tasks that face the team will be handled" (Sugar and Takacs 5). The faculty member asks each production team to make its process explicit. Will all decisions be made by consensus? Will members vote? Will some members have final authority for particular decisions? What will be more important, practical considerations or aesthetic considerations? Who contributes funds to the project? Who decides how the funds are spent? How often will the group meet? How will all team members be informed of the ongoing work of the others? What happens if someone fails to do his or her job? What happens if someone goes beyond his or her role and tries to do someone else's job? What happens if an emergency keeps a team member from being able to come to the shoot dates? How will conflicts be managed? The first assignment is for each team to report the outcomes of this meeting to the whole class. Reporting to the whole class creates ownership of the process, allows the other teams to reconsider their own approach, and creates a spirit of the whole class that extends through and between production teams. The focus on process cannot be a one-time activity. There are four critical activities that a group should perform on a regular basis in order to achieve and maintain functionality:

- Set and reset goals and priorities.
- Analyze and allocate the way work is per-

formed according to team members' roles and responsibilities.

- Reflect on the way the team is working—in decision making, communication, and process.
- Review how the group handles agreement and conflict. (Beckhard 7)

It is essential for a faculty member to remind students that the primary goal of the course is to increase each student's knowledge of the production process, self understanding, and awareness of how he or she works with others. Drawing from the literature on cooperative learning groups, there are five key elements that have to be emphasized to students (Smith 74–76):

- Positive interdependence: The success of the individual is linked to the success of the group; individuals succeed to the extent that the group succeeds.
- Positive interaction: Students are expected to actively help and support one another. Members share resources and support and encourage each other's efforts.
- Development of teamwork skills: Students are required both to learn the subject matter (how to make a short sync-sound film) and to learn the interpersonal and small group skills required to function as part of a group (teamwork). Teamwork skills will be taught as a key component of the course.
- Group processing: Students should learn to evaluate their group productivity. They need to describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful and to make decisions about what to continue or change.
- Individual and group accountability: The group is held accountable for achieving its goals. Each member is accountable for contributing his or her share of the work; students are assessed (graded) individually.

Grading complicates the academic film production environment, especially given that grades are individually assigned even when

students work in groups. The literature on collaborative learning acknowledges this tension: “The fundamental challenge in collaborative learning is ensuring individual accountability while promoting positive group interdependence” (Barkley 83). The concern is that assigning a grade for the whole group based on the project’s outcome does not ensure individual accountability, nor does it recognize individual contributions. Likewise, grades solely based on individual contributions might minimize a student’s commitment to the outcome of the final project.

Games theory suggests that grading in itself has a negative influence on group process. In his paper “The Application of Games Theory to Group Project Assessment,” author M. J. Pitt notes,

Students in higher education are increasingly expected to work in small groups on projects of several weeks or longer. Where they make an important contribution to their marks, the application of games theory shows that the best strategy for students may not be that which promotes teamwork and cooperation. (1)

If a student’s grade is primarily based on the final film, then, Pitt argues, “a sensible group strategy [is for] weaker students [to] contribute less” (7). He further concludes that teamwork and contributions to the group are “hard to define and essentially impossible to assess fairly” and that “rating students on some perceived performance has as much to do with the perception as [the] performance” (7). While acknowledging that grades are a motivating factor, Pitt’s study suggests that group-oriented projects are essentially corrupted by grading and that grades are most often “fundamentally unfair” (7).

In their book *Collaborative Learning Techniques*, Barkley, Cross, and Major suggest a grading process that balances the assessment of the individual with that of the group (83). Key to this approach is deciding what to evaluate. For a short film, the faculty member should develop a rubric for each key area: the producing, the directing, the cinematography,

the sound, the production design, and the editing, for example. At the same time, the faculty member has to see each element as part of a whole because the quality of each aspect of the completed film is dependent on the contributions of everyone in the group. For example, the final screen performance is co-created by the actor, director, and editor and is influenced by the production design, the lighting, the camera work, and the sound design. In this way the director cannot be solely accountable for the performance seen in the final film. Any rubric has to account for these kinds of reciprocal relationships.

To address this limitation, it is essential that the faculty member ask students to turn in the notes and materials that they developed during preproduction. These documents provide evidence about the preparation of the student for production. It is also essential that the faculty member view the film in progress, from dailies through each successive rough cut to the final finished film. In this way, the faculty member will understand the choices that were required to solve specific storytelling problems. Although this approach requires a high level of faculty member engagement, it provides a fairly comprehensive understanding of the role each individual played in the film project.

Another approach to grading the group project is through a process of peer assessment. Mike Searby and Tim Ewers’s case study of peer assessment in the school of music in Kingston University in England provides valuable material for consideration. Peer assessment, they suggest, starts by negotiating a set of evaluation criteria with the students in the class. In a film production class, the criteria could be specific aesthetic and technical elements of the finished film. These aspects could overlap with the rubric applied by the faculty member. Searby and Ewers suggest that students practice assessing projects from previous classes in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how the negotiated criteria are appropriately applied. Working publicly in this way allays students’ fears that their peers are unqualified to assess the finished work. Once the standards

are set and the students have practiced, then students assess each other's work at the end of the semester. These assessments contribute to the final grade.

Not only can students contribute to the assessment of the finished work of others in the class, but they can also help assess the contribution of their peers to the work within their own group. Barkley, Cross, and Major note that "students can provide useful insight [in evaluation and grading] as they have had a firsthand view of the collaborative experience" (89). The authors advocate the use of a standard peer evaluation form (92). Students should draw from the team process discussion and report (required at the beginning of the project) to develop their own criteria related to "contribution to the group." In this way, the group formulates its intention, and then each individual knows that he or she will be evaluated, in part, based on these standards.

Self-assessment is both a method of evaluation and a key learning activity in the class when contribution to the group figures in the final grade. I ask students at a minimum to track their activities and time spent working on the film but recommend that they keep a brief journal to help them reflect on the project when it concludes. At the end of the semester, I ask each student to write a paper that reflects on his or her experience working on the film. The paper asks for specific details about the technical, aesthetic, and procedural choices that they made and the effect that these choices had on the finished film. I also ask them to reflect on the collaborative production process. Questions about collaboration include the following: What and how did I contribute to the group effort? What kinds of conflicts came up, and how were they negotiated? How did we make decisions as a group? How much authority did I have to make my own decisions? What kinds of roles suit me in a group project? How did I support or inhibit other group member's work?

Reflection allows students to see how they have developed over the course of the semester, what they have learned, and what they would like to strive toward in the future. "Our

job as teachers is to devise sequences of assignments which encourage conscientization, the discovery of the mind in action" (Berthoff 25). As students reflect on the work they performed, they come to a better understanding of what and how they can contribute to future group efforts. "Reflection provides a nice balance with the activity of collaborative learning, building the bridge between experiences and learning. Reflection helps students become more self-aware as they discover their thinking processes and develop patterns of self-regulated learning" (Paris and Ayer, qtd. in Barkley, Cross, and Major 90).

## Collaboration

Collaboration consists of surprising sparks of interaction made possible because multiple perspectives and talents converge to provoke new ideas, insights, and directions for action that would not have happened otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

Collaboration in the filmmaking environment is decision- and action-oriented and assumes the active engagement of all of the group members. In order to reach a joint decision and the resulting plan for action, a team formally or informally engages in three steps (Gray 14). Step 1 is defining the parameters of the decision. For example, a group is trying to decide what kind of film stock to purchase. At a group meeting the team outlines what they need to know: What are the aesthetic dimensions related to the stock—color reproduction, latitude, grain? What are the attributes of the location, and how much light will be available? How much do different stocks cost? What experience have team members had with different stocks? Is the film going to be finished as a film or video? Is there going to be a supervised transfer? Talking about the stock brings up questions about the film lab too and whose job it is to send the film to the lab. The group has a discussion about the "look" that they are trying to achieve and how the stock and the transfer process might contribute to this look. Step 2 is finding and sharing this information: outstanding questions are assigned to different group members



who agree to e-mail what they find out to all other group members. The group decides to meet again in two days to agree on a plan. Step 3 is an agreed-upon action: the group discovers that stock costs are about the same for any stock and that they have enough in the budget for a supervised transfer, which allows for the desired look. The group decides that once the location is locked, the cinematographer will visit the location, assess the light and lighting, and make a stock determination. She will pass her request to the producer, who will submit the order. When the film arrives, the producer will deliver the film to the cinematographer, who will be responsible for bringing it to the location and making arrangements with a lab for processing. This high-functioning hypothetical group respectfully considers a variety of concerns as it works toward agreement.

As we all know, groups do not always function so perfectly. The blending of ideas and personalities can be powerfully effective, but if personalities and ideas are in conflict, it can be crushingly painful. Here is an example of a pattern of behavior that I have seen repeated in many classes, the dark side of the group process just described. In a small production group one person just seems to be a leader. She is a bright and eager student, the kind that most faculty members want in their classes. At the outset she does help the group get going on the many tasks needed to produce the project. At the next meeting, the leader has all of her work completed and is ready to hear from the others in the group about their tasks. Several others in the group have not completed their tasks. The group leader immediately believes that the other group members are incapable of completing the required work or are less committed to the project (The leader thinks, "I've been waiting to get into this class, and I really want to make a great film. This is my top priority."). The leader begins to take on some of the others' work. By doing so, she asserts a bit more control over many aesthetic and procedural components of the project. The rest of the group members, with less to do and with less

important input in the project, feel increasingly marginalized, leading to their incremental withdrawal. As the group draws closer to production, the leader has taken on the majority of the project's tasks. Other members have withdrawn completely or simply cannot contribute because they do not know what is going on. The myriad of details begins to overwhelm the leader. Usually at the breaking point, she comes to me, as the instructor, to complain that the other group members are not working or that their work is inadequate and will cause the film to fail. At the same time, I am told that she cannot do all that needs to be done; she is too stressed, and she is cutting her other classes to work on the film. With the shooting dates drawing near, she does not know what to do. Meanwhile, at least one other group member comes to me to complain that there is nothing for him to contribute and that he does not wish to be part of the group any longer. The leader, he protests, has become a dictator who tries to control everything. He argues that he has his own way of doing things but that the leader never acknowledged that things could be done a different way. Now he just wants out of the group so that he can do a film on his own, to exercise his own vision. Another group member comes to tell me how worried she is about the group not getting along and how she has tried to get the group together to talk things out, and this has not worked. As the production dates loom, critical work is not being accomplished, information is not being shared, and if the shoot happens at all, it will clearly suffer. Although this is only one permutation, I suspect that anyone who has taught collaborative production has encountered any number of dysfunctional groups.

It seems to me that the place to begin teaching about collaboration is in coaching students to observe, from moment to moment, the patterns of action and reaction that they engage in and to observe the kind of actions and reactions of others in their group. In this way, students might be able to choose a less manipulative and more peaceful manner of interaction.



Effective collaboration starts with and relies on an understanding of one's own essential strengths and qualities and one's own character and characteristics in the context of the group dynamic. Collaboration flourishes when group members can also spot the qualities and strengths that others are bringing to the team.

But how does a student assess his or her essential strengths and qualities? And why make this an objective in a film production class? I will start with the second question first. Although we might teach students about coverage planning or lighting design, the production process itself asks students to engage in a number of other activities: critical thinking, problem solving, time management, budgeting, and organizing. In a film production course, all of these activities are dependent on group communication and on the group dynamic. When we teach only about the technical, aesthetic, and procedural part of production, we choose to ignore the foundation on which success in all the other areas rests.

One of my teaching goals is to help students develop an ability to work productively with others. This is an essential skill for success not only in the media production field but also for many other vocations and for civic engagement generally. In order for the class to address this goal, some questions need to be asked and answered: To what extent are students aware of their own preferred ways of working and communicating? Do they recognize that their preferred ways are sometimes more or less effective? How clearly do they understand that others with whom they work and communicate may not share their preferences (Angelo and Cross 83)? What I am asking here is not for the students' preference for the kind of work they might do—cinematography, editing, directing, or producing—but for the students to inquire about three other areas. First, in what way might the student best contribute to the group's work? Is the student someone who can keep the group on task, someone who can contribute new and fresh ideas, someone who has excellent judgment and can pick out the best choice from many options,

someone who can make sure the details are attended to, someone who is willing to do the hard work, someone who can rally the group and pick up everyone's morale, or someone who can make everyone feel valued and appreciated? Second, how does each student like to work? Is the student most comfortable when everything gets worked out in advance, and the group plays it by the book? Or is she more excited when there is improvisation along the way? Perhaps the student likes to consider a problem or situation for a long time and then at the last minute pull everything together. Maybe a student is most familiar with just showing up and seeing how the group invents something totally in the moment? Third, how and when do students communicate with each other about what they think are their essential strengths and the way that they like to work?

Angelo and Cross's well-known book *Classroom Assessment Techniques* encourages faculty to ask these kinds of questions and suggests tools to help students and faculty find answers. Two exercises can be adapted for the collaborative group-project film production class. The first is the focused autobiographical sketch. This assessment asks students to write a short autobiographical sketch focused on a single aspect of group process; the following is an example:

Write a one to two page paper—not more—relating and discussing a recent experience in which you successfully contributed to a group task and learned something significant about group process from your success. Detail your contribution to the group, what you learned about how groups function, and how and why you learned from this experience. What does this suggest about the kind of group you'd like to be a part of in this class? (281)

The autobiographical sketch highlights group process as a component of the course, encouraging students both to reflect on past experience and to predict what kind of group they might fit with best. In the next class session,

students are placed in discussion groups of four, with others who have distinctly different ideas about what constitutes successful group process. Students briefly share their stories and report on their common understanding of positive group process.

A second approach to understanding students' orientation toward group work is through a self-assessment. (This is not used for grading but simply for information.) This technique requires the faculty member to start with a specific theoretical framework about how people act and react when working on a group task. The students are asked to compare themselves with several different profiles and to choose the way they most often respond in a given situation (Angelo and Cross 295). John Bilby developed the theoretical framework that I use in my class in his book *Being Human: A Catalogue of Insights*. Bilby suggests that out of eight principal categories of action, each of us favors one or two approaches to acting in the world.<sup>6</sup> A person's essential strength comes from his or her preferred way of acting in the world. These essential qualities are positive and productive. Destructive reaction comes with excess—that is, a quality pushed to the extreme. For example, a film director's ability to work is enhanced if she or he has the ability to lead, to assert, to take charge, and to follow through. But these abilities can spill into excess when the director becomes arrogant, pushy, controlling, dictatorial, and bullying. I have developed a short questionnaire that is designed to help each student identify his or her typical approach to acting in a group.<sup>7</sup> The questions highlight both productive and destructive actions that a student might take in a group environment. Although I adapted Bilby's taxonomy for the profiles I developed, a faculty member can choose from any theoretical framework that he or she understands and finds meaningful. My objective for the self-assessment is to help students understand their own tendency toward particular kinds of productive action and destructive reaction. If they glimpse this, then they have taken an important step toward developing their ability to collaborate effectively.

## Conflict

Because each of us has a unique way of being and acting in the world, when we work together, conflicts will inevitably emerge. Lack of conflict is not a measure of the healthy functioning of a group. No conflict suggests that group members have stopped caring about both the work and the outcome. When students are invested in fulfilling their roles, and when they care about the final film, conflicts will surface. All of the group process work that I have mentioned before is not aimed at eliminating conflict. I do hope that it can make conflict more productive and less destructive when it surfaces, but I acknowledge that, at times, there will be serious discord. Conflicts are not simply disagreements about what should be done—a conflict has an emotional dimension that must be acknowledged and understood before the group can make progress on its task. Most student groups have been taught to keep feelings out of the process and to deal only with the practical dimension of the situation. This critical mistake keeps the conflict alive and active and invites all kinds of manipulative communication. Only when individual group members attend to their own feelings, talk about the upset, and listen to how other group members feel will the group recover from the conflict.

Engaging conflict is not easy or without risk. People get hurt. Relationships are placed in jeopardy. It takes time and energy away from group tasks and redirects it onto process concerns. Nevertheless, productively engaging conflict can invigorate a group by harnessing and focusing the energy of the upset. Resolving the conflict creates a stronger community and deeper investment from all members of the group, even those not directly involved in the conflict. The recovery process itself can connect individuals in profound reciprocal relationships. For a student who sees his or her future working in the group production environment, struggling with conflict is a productive endeavor in itself—providing valuable experience no matter what the actual outcome. And finally, by working to understand one's own

feeling states—one's rational and emotional contribution to a conflict—there is an opportunity to learn about oneself. Kritek writes, "The resolution of conflict is a moral enterprise that is the responsibility of every human; to not pursue the creative and constructive resolution of conflict is to deliberately further divisiveness and the harms such divisiveness creates" (33). Although the fate of the world does not rest on the conflicts that are negotiated and resolved in a college film production class, the fate of humanity does rest on the ability of college-educated people to constructively engage with and resolve conflict. To ignore teaching about conflict in the collaborative film production class misses an opportunity to contribute to the world in a significant way.

Along with the "team process" discussion that I ask my students to have, I also ask them to address how they intend to work with conflict when it comes up. Areas to consider include the following: Will we deal with conflict in the moment? Will we adhere to a cooling-off period? Will we discuss the conflict as a whole group? Will the parties in conflict seek a separate consultation with an outside party? How will we address people's feelings? How much time will we take to resolve conflicts during production? When a disagreement erupts, any group member can remind the parties in conflict of these prior arrangements. This helps everyone recontextualize the conflict as an expected part of the process rather than an unwelcome visitor.

Most of the time, it is simple and appropriate to ignore things that come up. It just is not useful or productive to process every conflict that comes along. Most are small, require a moment of conversation, and even if they are not worked out, can be left unresolved without anyone feeling too bruised (Schaub 6). When a significant conflict does arise, Laird Schaub, a group process consultant, proposes the following method. Step 1: Find out what is happening emotionally. Find out how everyone is feeling, starting with the people in greatest distress and working to those who are the least bothered. Acknowledge everyone's feelings

without judgment. Step 2: Find out what the story is. Give everyone a chance to tell his or her version of what happened and his or her reaction. Although a battle over the truth can emerge, it is important to focus on the relationships between the group members rather than the "truth." The group is not the jury, and it is important not to name someone "right" or "wrong." Step 3: Ask the group members what they want. Schaub notes that "sometimes a major element in conflict is a gross misperception of what another wants, and that can be revealed at this stage." Finally, step 4: What do you want to do about it? It is essential that the suggestion is a concrete and measurable action. It is also important for this to be self-directed. It is not "what do you want *others* to do?" but "what do *you* want to do?" (Schaub 7). So the producer in the dysfunctional group that I previously described would help alleviate the conflict by deciding that she would do only her own job and not the work of the others in the group. The other group members would help to reduce the conflict by deciding to meet the deadlines set by the producer. When all members of the group are allowed to describe how they are feeling, tell their side of the story, outline what they want, and commit to what they will do, this group's conflict can be addressed.

Often it is hard to know if a significant and potentially destructive conflict is brewing in a group before it is too late. Assessing group work along the way can function to reveal nascent trouble. Angelo and Cross suggest developing and administering a simple questionnaire asking students to provide feedback on the group process (349). Although this feedback provides the instructor with a glimpse into the group's working relationship, it does not necessarily suggest the nature of the conflict, if there is one, nor can it provide any direction for managing the conflict. The benefit of this kind of assessment might be more for the students themselves, providing them with the opportunity to reflect on the group's working relationship and to communicate their concerns to other group members.

Like many film production teachers, I require

students to pass a “preproduction review” prior to principal photography. Each member of the group discusses his or her understanding of the story, how the aesthetic choices that she or he has made fuse with the choices of other group members, and the technical/logistical preparation that will allow these choices to be actualized in production. The group’s presentation is a clear indicator of the group’s dynamic. I have had presentations where the writer or director talked for the group the whole time while others looked on skeptically. I have seen presentations where significant work was still unfinished, and yet there was a positive and confident group demeanor. The preproduction presentation reveals the group’s tensions and strengths, allowing the instructor to highlight imbalances that might evolve into destructive conflict.

## Final Thoughts

Collaborative group production classes already place heavy demands on faculty and students alike. Students are asked to learn new production technology, to assume new roles in the production process, and to commit to higher standards of discipline and detail in each stage of the process. Adding more to the mix seems impossible. Yet much of what we currently teach is essentially ephemeral. We all know the technology is going to change, and as it does, the production process will change too. New aesthetic possibilities and new approaches to storytelling will emerge. There are only two aspects of this enterprise that remain immutable: that projects like this can be accomplished only by a group of people working together and that everyone who works on this kind of project brings essential character strengths and weaknesses with them. As educators, it is our duty to direct our students toward learning these more difficult but ultimately more enduring aspects of media production. By highlighting group process, collaboration, conflict management, and self-knowledge in the media production class, we move beyond training our students to complete a task in the

present. No matter what direction they take, we have helped orient them toward a lifetime of achievement.

## NOTES

This research was supported in part by a grant from the Emerson College Advancement Fund.

1. I use the word “film” to mean fictional narrative media production generally—no matter whether the material is originated on film or video or distributed as film or video.
2. The database lists 530 schools worldwide.
3. There are many other examples, including the University of Texas Film Institute at UT Austin. More recently, some marketing documents mention collaboration as a component of the program. Previously on the Web site of the program at Emerson College ([http://www.emerson.edu/media\\_arts/](http://www.emerson.edu/media_arts/)), then-chair Michael Selig said, “[T]he Department of Visual and Media Arts provides you the opportunity to explore your artistic identity in an exciting atmosphere of collaboration among students and faculty.” Dean Bob Bassett writes on Chapman University’s Web site (<http://ftv.chapman.edu/>) that the film school experience “must be driven by individual passion yet build on collaboration.”
4. See the unit “Social Factors in Film Production” in Bordwell and Thompson’s *Film Art: An Introduction*. See also Janet Wolff’s *The Social Production of Art*.
5. Carroll Hodge contributed to the development of this definition.
6. Bilby’s eight types are listed here. The first name of each type is its essence (strengths and qualities). The second name is the personality of the type (manipulations and defenses). Can-do person/dictator, teacher/con artist, player/judge, artist/rebel, hard worker/doormat, student/believer, lover/martyr, healer/kind helper.
7. To read more see <<http://www.mindfulnessclasses.com/thumbnail.htm>> and Ted Hardin’s “Notes on Collaboration: Assessing Student Behaviors” in this issue.
8. The self-assessment questionnaire is reproduced in its entirety in Ted Hardin’s “Notes on Collaboration” in this issue.

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