

The Mediatrain Project:

Questions of Employability and Entrepreneurialism

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Im not a businessman

Im a business, man.

Jay-Z

I'm neither but, through my involvement with a project called Mediatrain, I'm being drawn into a world of business ideas and terminology.

While working on the project I have come to use a couple of terms with which I haven't always felt comfortable but that have become central to my thinking. As I have a longstanding aim to develop the employment prospects of young people, I am an advocate of that unaesthetic word used to describe students' readiness to get a job – employability. Employability has been high on the agendas of HE directorates for some time and the statistics that affect university and departmental rankings in the newspaper league tables are likely to be taken into greater account by government as a result of the recession and rising unemployment.

Closely associated with employability, another business term that is becoming embedded in university discourse is entrepreneurialism. The Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS 2006-08) has advocated the need for entrepreneurialism within the creative industries, the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship (NCGE) offers funds and prizes to students and graduates for entrepreneurial projects, and, closest to home the HEA's Art Design and Media Centre has published a report on entrepreneurship education in the creative industries (2007).

A Search for Theory

Since January 2008, Bridges, the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at my university, has funded Mediatrain - a project that aims to put the vocational awareness and employment prospects of our media production students at the heart of the academic curriculum. In leading the project, my tasks have been to develop a professional awareness programme throughout the curriculum, set up a new work experience course unit and manage the small number of externally funded productions that come our way.

Now that the CETL funding is over, I am trying to reflect on the experience and, because the project developed organically, I am like a lost boy looking this way and that in search of a theory to explain where I have come from and help foresee where I should go next.

One source has been the formative pedagogic work of Bridges, the CETL at my university. Bridges has sought to provide a university-wide infrastructure for teaching and learning predicated on the development

of a student centred curriculum that 'engages with' rather than 'delivers to' its subjects. Bridges (forthcoming 2010) has identified and elaborated on five key areas for stimulating learning: Personalised Learning, the Curriculum, Realistic Learning, Employability and Assessment. While recognising the value of all of them, the notes on assessment proved challenging reminders of the need to develop effective strategies for marking work experience assignments.

Although written at an earlier time, the benchmark statement for Communication, media, film and cultural studies (2002) offered a salutary reminder that fostering employability within degree programmes 'requires the development of students' creative, intellectual, analytical and research skills'. Nevertheless, while education should not be conflated with training, the terms are not mutually exclusive and as I will argue training has a place within work experience courses.

Most recently I was surprised by Dawn Weatherston's (2009) call for a deeper relationship between theories of entrepreneurship and the teaching of professional development to arts students. Having followed the accepted understanding of an entrepreneur as 'a person who sets up a business or businesses, taking on financial risks in the hope of profit' (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2004) I have always avoided them because I know in advance that we have nothing in common. Nevertheless, Weatherston conjures an image of music students and their relationship to academic staff that has a remarkably close fit to how I imagine students on the Medietrain course:

They provide attractive fodder for the advocates of cultural enterprise: they are seen to be enterprising by nature; and they are upheld as taking enterprise to a new place. They thrive on 'difference', yet they are 'not for profit'; they may be 'community enterprises' and actively distance themselves from the overtly high-tech 'spin-out', at the same time exhibiting a natural disinclination to be seen as entrepreneurs.

Weatherston applies a theory of 'nascent entrepreneurship' to conceptualise the students' activities and goes on to cite findings from two major and influential research projects (the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor) that have identified precise stimulants to nascent business activity and that include:

- regional location
- visibility of role models
- gender
- ethnicity
- access to financial resources
- possession of cultural capital
- the act of writing a business plan.

Following Weatherston's lead, I will consider the significance of some of these in relation to Mediatrain. Nevertheless, I should make it clear that

what follows is a case study that tells a story and only draws on theoretical insights from time to time.

Background

Vocational education has been on the university's media agenda for six or more years and has developed two strands of activity: Going Professional and Mediatrain

Going Professional started as a student careers conference in 2003 and brought a variety of media professionals including alumni, media specialists and employers to the university. As a direct result of the first conference, one student was signed up by an agency and shortly afterwards became a presenter on BBC children's television. Two years later, in the wake of the PDP (personal development planning) initiative, Going Professional was developed into a taught course for all media students and, when this was found to be too broad, was changed again into a short course specifically targeted at media and television production students.

Mediatrain was set up in 2005 in response to requests for publicity films from a variety of local organisations. The idea was that Mediatrain would be a not-for-profit unit that would offer a low-cost production service to the university and local organisations. At the same time, Mediatrain would help bridge the education/industry divide by employing recent graduates to crew the productions.

For ease, the two related projects have been rolled into one and called Medietrain.

Aims and Objectives

The initial bid for funding to Bridges stated that Medietrain aimed to put vocational awareness and employability at the heart of the academic curriculum by:

- embedding a vocational awareness programme throughout the core curriculum and
- establishing a work experience elective for final year undergraduates.

While this aim and its objectives have been central to the project they overlooked the external, income-generating productions that lay outside the curriculum because at the time they seemed less significant.

Nevertheless this third strand of activity has continued during the lifetime of the project and is considered at the end of this paper.

The Students' Diversity and Disposition

In common with many other university departments, our students are socially, academically, ethnically and culturally diverse. University statistics show that 28% of our home students are from ethnic minorities and over 11% are international students mainly from Asia. This compares with national averages of 19.6% and 7.9% respectively (HESA 2007/8). While most students have ability; for one reason or another,

many lack basic literacy skills and in some cases their life experiences are more significant than their previous academic success.

On arrival, students have very different approaches to learning. Some are academically motivated and adjust quickly to university routines while another minority has entrepreneurial aspirations and sees the university as a means to an end (e.g. a source of specialist facilities and equipment). The majority however, come with a variety of unfocussed aspirations, take time to adjust to university teaching and struggle to take responsibility for their own learning. Their self-esteem is mixed and while some harbour unrealistic dreams about fame and fortune, many don't believe they are good enough to get a job.

Altogether, they are a rich, exciting and challenging mix that reflect the changing demographic of the 21st century and, although they are unlikely to believe it, this diversity may be their greatest advantage. While celebrating their diversity (and even their sub-cultures, blud) we, their teachers, devise strategies to ensure inclusivity and make individual interventions to raise the expectations of some while checking the attitudes of others with the overarching aim of providing all of them with the cultural capital expected of a university education.

The Vocational Awareness Programme: Structure and Approach

Mediatrain's vocational awareness programme is targeted at all students and aims to raise their awareness about how the media industries are structured and the sort of qualities and skills that employers look for. As a result of the CETL funding a range of initiatives has been developed

across all three years of the undergraduate programme. In Year 2, for example, Medietrain provides a vocational awareness course for 100+ students that extends from the professional practices embedded in a core production unit on fiction production.

Having learnt from past experience that many students are resistant to vocational education because they don't see it as being directly related to their degree and recognising the needs of a crowded curriculum, we have kept the course short and to aid motivation, introduced an assignment that is worth 20% of the total marks for the unit. The course objectives are to enable students to:

- use available resources to research different branches of the media industries, job roles and entry level jobs;
- listen to and talk with media professionals;
- evaluate their personal skills and interests in the media;
- write effective CVs;
- apply for work experience and other opportunities;
- find out about the Medietrain courses in Year 3.

Last year, the course was based on six one-hour lectures, four of which were delivered by guest speakers from industry and two by media and careers staff. To help students' identify with the course, the first talk was given by recent graduates now working in the media – one worked for a broadcast production company and the other was freelancing while setting up her own company. Other speakers included a television producer who also runs a professional training company, a film industry

line producer and the diversity and talent manager from Channel 4. For most students the course provided a first opportunity to meet industry professionals and begin to understand professional practice. In addition to the weekly lectures, students were expected to research industry production roles and were assessed on CVs that had to be submitted at the end of the course. In the recent past, students have written all sorts of long-winded, badly designed and miss-spelt autobiographies. To rectify this, they were asked to write one page CVs following a recommended format.

The Vocational Awareness Programme: Outcomes

The Year 2 course enabled the Division to develop good contacts with key media industry organisations, especially Channel 4 and Skillset, who provided two of the guest speakers. As a result:

- students were impressed by the guest speakers and, on one occasion, stayed for an extra hour to continue listening to the talk about the film industry;
- all students wrote (more) effective CVs by the end of the course;
- some students used their CVs and successfully applied for work experience during the summer vacation.

An unexpected but especially valuable outcome was that the Channel Four's Diversity Unit enabled 15 students to gain work experience on a Film Four production that was shooting during the summer.

Work Experience: Course Structure and Approach

It is sometimes said that the 'catch 22' of finding work in the media is that you can't get a job until you have professional experience. The new Medietrain course unit lies at the centre of the project because it aims to provide final year undergraduates with work experience as part of their university course.

Corkhill (2010) identifies five generic types of work experience and of the two that emerged in Medietrain, the first relates to the well understood model of 'work placements' that were first developed in sandwich courses while the second combines some of the characteristics of the 'live' projects developed in art and design courses by importing real commissions from design companies with the 'work-based' learning that is a central feature of foundation degrees. For clarity, I have referred to the placements as 'media internships' and the live projects/work based learning as 'community productions'.

As discussions developed with the partner organisations, it quickly became clear that the media companies would act as surrogate employers to the interns who are known in the industry as 'runners' because they are often sent to fetch this and that. While some companies offered to provide training, most expected the interns to learn by observing and participating in day-to-day professional practice. The relationship between the community producers and the local (non-media) organisations was different. The organisations acted as clients who commissioned productions from the student teams who then took responsibility for making films to the clients' requirements.

Some colleagues were concerned that the community productions were 'high risk' because the films might not meet the standards needed for public exhibition and they suggested that the production teams should be hand picked. Given the diversity of our students I thought a streaming approach was undesirable. Nevertheless, as colleagues recognised, there was a real need to aim for success and this was greatly assisted by employing a recent media graduate to mentor the production teams.

In choosing voluntary and public sector organisations, the primary intention to set up interesting productions for the students coincided with the ethical idea of benefitting the community and the more strategic objective to enhance the relationship between town and gown. In line with the media subject benchmark statement it provided an opportunity to engage with 'the role which community and participatory media forms may play in contributing to cultural debate and contesting social power' (QAA 4.5.3). Commercial companies were not contacted partly because their productions might be less interesting and also because it seemed inappropriate to carry out commercial work as part of a university course.

The course was piloted as a 30 credit elective during the autumn term of 2008 and again in 2009. The objectives were to provide Year 3 students with:

- opportunities for independent learning
- real work experience under controlled conditions

- alternatives to university projects
- a knowledge of how organisations (businesses) work
- enhanced employment prospects.

During the summer vacations detailed briefs were developed with the external partners and advertised to students at the start of each academic year - 32 final year undergraduates signed up in 2008 and 37 students in 2009. In 2008, 4 students were placed in 4 media companies and 28 worked with 7 local voluntary and public sector organisations; the pattern was similar in 2009.

It's worth noting that five students who joined the course in 2009, had recently completed foundation degrees at the university's partner college in Bedford and who joined the course were skillful, highly motivated and integrated easily with the other students. Foundation degrees are known for their emphasis on practical skills and Bedford is no exception; its on-line publicity for Media Production (2009) offers students the opportunity "to undertake work placements and use our production training environment on-site to give you realistic training and experience".

Training need and should not be learning by rote and is more properly considered as applied learning within or related to the work place. If this definition is accepted then much of the experiential learning that occurs within work experience can be thought of as a kind of training for employment. More widely, since most media practice courses are self-

evidently vocational they are likely to include training alongside 'the development of students' creative, analytical and research skills' (op.cit.)

During the course, students worked for 2 or 3 days a week over eight consecutive weeks with the host organisations. To monitor progress and plan ahead, the mentor and I held weekly meetings with the students and the mentor also ran production workshops and supported the shoots and edits of the community productions. As a recent graduate with external freelance experience and who was knowledgeable about the ways of the Division, he was well placed to gain the students' confidence and he helped raise the standard of their productions significantly.

Work Experience: Outcomes

There has been some discussion about the relative merits of 'work placements' (media internships) and 'live' projects (community productions). Generally the educational argument favours live projects because they usually involve on-going cooperation between educational staff and their external partners whereas, once placements commence they are delivered solely by external organisations and are often outside the influence of the educational staff. While this is partly true, we found that both work experience types are relatively high risk and require effective management by the hosts as well as strong support from educational staff. The great advantage of the community productions, from a course management perspective, was that they provided places for many more students than the internships and so made the course viable.

To assess their educational value of the internships and the community productions, there are other significant differences that need to be taken into account. The interns usually worked individually alongside media professionals and engaged directly with media industry practice whereas the community producers worked in self-regulated teams that used their expertise to make short films for their clients.

In theory, the internships should help improve students' chances of finding work in the media not only by countering the old catch 22 but also by providing opportunities to 'network' with staff in the host organisations. The community productions should help improve students' show reels and may even equip them with the entrepreneurial spirit needed for self-employment. Both types should help students' prepare their applications for employment or further study by providing interesting lines on their CVs.

Media Internships: Outcomes

The students' experiences of the internships went some way towards meeting the course objectives. They all worked for media/cultural organisations, most worked with media professionals, some assisted with office work while others helped plan or participated in productions.

All the students were excited by the idea of working for professional organisations and in general were responsible and well motivated. In 2008 three out four and in 2009, five out of six students interns were positive about their experiences. The intern who was placed with the

media unit at a major charity was especially impressed by the opportunities he had to assist professional crews with the in-house productions, see the work of the archivists and find out about the ways in which the organisation relates to the media. Of the two students who worked for a local production company in 2008, one enjoyed the experience while the other felt she wasn't given enough to do but, following changes at the company, both interns in 2009 said they had a great time working on a music video and a viral advertisement for a fancy dress hire company.

While the Head of Production at an international documentary production company was concerned at the outset by his intern's literacy skills, he took her on trust and was won over by her positive attitude and ability to mix with his staff. Following the internship, a feature film production company offered their student a job that he was delighted to accept. All the host companies were pleased with the scheme and said they would do it again. Nevertheless, staff changes can make big differences and some organisations that participated in 2008 dropped out in 2009.

Community Production Outcomes

The community productions provided an innovative approach to work experience that has enabled students to apply their creativity and expertise to a variety of projects in the town and the surrounding area. Good examples of the range are 'Wish You Were Here', a marketing film made for the university's international office that is being used to recruit international students; 'Homeless', a fundraising and public information

film made for a local charity that supports young homeless people; and 'The News from Slip End' a local news programme made for and by children at Slip End Youth Club.

The community productions had more tangible outcomes and a closer fit with the course objectives. All the students worked with professional and/or volunteer staff on real projects and applied their production skills to make short films that were intended for public exhibition or were targeted at specific audiences.

On the whole, the mixed ability production teams worked well and sometimes enabled students to work away from their usual friendship groups but, as always, one or two experienced difficulties and one student had to change teams. Some students emerged as leaders while others were team players and there were some surprises as one or two outgoing and entrepreneurial students, who had not been motivated by earlier university projects, came to the fore. Students took on specific roles within the production teams - one of the most important being the Production Manager who had to liaise with clients to plan the schedules and try to ensure that productions were delivered on time. Even so, a few productions were delivered late; sometimes the responsibility lay with the students and at other times it was outside their control.

During production, the clients helped with scheduling and access and some made constructive suggestions in the latter stages of post production. In all cases the clients respected and trusted the expertise of the production teams. On seeing the edit of a live recording of his folk

group, the band leader said it went far beyond his expectations and he would use the DVD to get more gigs and try to get a recording contract. On seeing the film for the international office, the university thanked the production team and invited the students to lunch.

Curriculum and Assessment

Until recently, the Division has encouraged work experience outside the curriculum and most often left it up to the students' to find their own placements. The Medietrain unit, however, has introduced work experience within the curriculum by setting up and managing internships and community productions.

Medietrain was not intended to be a taught course, instead it has sought to provide opportunities for final year undergraduates to develop independent learning. Nevertheless as a 30 credit elective it has to be appropriately structured with two assessment points. The first assignment is to show evidence of the work experience and the second is to write a business report about the host organisation.

Because internships are oriented to process rather than product, the first assignment presented a challenge. While I was reasonably confident that the interns participated fully, gained all sorts of professional know how, personally matured and, hopefully, networked with staff at the host organisations - the outcomes were largely intangible and hard to assess.

At present, interns are required to write reflective diaries about their experiences and provide as much hard evidence as they can of the work they have contributed to in the companies. While it is possible to see qualitative differences between students' work, the reflective diaries are often fuzzy and even the hard evidence is in question because the extent of their contributions to projects and products is unknown. In 2009, some interns decided to give powerpoint and video presentations about their experiences at the course review. The presentations had a similar standing to screening the community productions and generally enhanced the dynamics of the review process. In future, the assignment may be extended and require students to give presentations as well as writing the diaries.

Fortunately, the Division has well-developed criteria for assessing students' films and effective methods for identifying individual contributions to group work so the productions were easier to assess. Nevertheless, community productions are different to other university assignments because they are 'commissioned' by external organisations that variously need, public service announcements and educational, training and marketing films. This functionality placed new and exacting demands on students' because it required a problem-solving approach in which the producers had to consider the intended audiences as well as the need for high production standards. Thus Medietrain has broadened the range of students' productions, introduced new assessment criteria and helped raise standards. In respect of standards, it's worth noting that one of the Division's criteria for first class degrees is that students' final productions should be suitable for public exhibition.

As part of their work experience, all students carry out a piece of action research within their host organisation to find out how the organisation is structured, the roles and day to day routines of the staff and review the organisation's products or services. The resulting business reports are assessed for Assignment 2.

In 2008 the reports were generally fulsome even if they lacked analysis and I judged that the students had the transferrable skills to apply their academic writing skills to new subjects. To develop the assignment in 2009, a colleague from the Business School gave an informative talk about mission statements, USPs, marketing strategies, consumer profiling and so forth. Even though he made it clear that such business strategies could be applied equally well to the voluntary sector and to small organisations as well as large companies, some students found it difficult to apply the concepts in their reports about their host organisations. I have yet to read the reports but instinct tells me that this 'business studies' assignment needs a greater taught input in future.

Beyond the Curriculum

Mediatrain was initially set up in response to production requests from external organisations and operated outside the curriculum. It was also conceived by some as a way of capitalising on the university's media facilities by, for example, hiring out the TV Studio. For a variety of reasons the productions remained sporadic and facilities hire did not develop.

The CETL project significantly extended Mediatrain's role within the Division by providing new opportunities to work within the curriculum. CETL also provided the funds to employ a recent graduate as a teaching assistant which coincided with a Divisional initiative to employ selected graduates to assist the technical support team. The scheme provides a temporary but safe transition into the workplace from which some graduates have gone on to find work in the industry while others have continued their studies on postgraduate courses.

Additionally, the experience of setting up the community productions within the curriculum for the CETL project has helped Mediatrain to gain a better understanding of and a more flexible approach towards its external clients. Between 2008 and 2010 Mediatrain has taken on occasional commissions that have provided temporary employment for a small number of graduates and raised a modest income, referred a production request from a local manufacturer to a partnership run by two graduates and, most recently, agreed to make a short film for a high-profile community project for young people at risk. Six students and three graduates have volunteered to work on the production, which, if successful, may generate an income through sales.

The second aim of the Mediatrain project that was overlooked at the outset of the CETL project can now be formulated. Mediatrain aims to provide a community service that helps generate production and employment in the Luton and South Bedfordshire area by:

- providing a year-round, low-cost production service to local voluntary and public sector organisations
- advising local organisations about fundraising for media productions
- providing freelance employment for graduates
- supporting local production enterprises (especially ones run by our graduates) by passing on production requests from commercial organisations
- generating an income stream that supports Medietrain.

In many ways Medietrain acts like a business and arguably needs a business plan but does that make it one? Not in my opinion. There are three reasons why I think Medietrain is fundamentally an educational project. Medietrain's exists under the auspices of the university that provides the essential infrastructure of facilities, equipment and staffing; its entrepreneurial activities are predicated on its work within the curriculum; and its standing in the eyes of the community depends on its status as a university project.

Summary and Conclusion

While Medietrain's vocational awareness programme and work experience course do not provide hard, statistical evidence, they show that universities can respond in meaningful ways to government exhortations about employability by:

- raising students' awareness and experience of the media industries

- networking and developing projects with the media industries locally and nationally
- establishing new types of assignment in the curriculum
- recognising and developing students' entrepreneurial skills
- introducing business awareness within the curriculum.

Working within and beyond the curriculum, Medietrain also illustrates the contribution that university-based entrepreneurial initiatives (where success is not measured by profit) can make to the wider economy by:

- developing production and employment in the locality
- supporting regeneration projects and social awareness programmes in the community
- promoting the principle of social entrepreneurship.
- establishing alternative business models in higher education.

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