Cinematic Storytelling Across Cultures
A Collaborative Venture between National University and Griffith University

In fulfillment of the 2011 – 2013 COIL Fellowship

Hugh Burton
Del Mackey
Bettina Moss
James Napoli
Herman Van Eyken
Who We Are

National University
Bettina Moss, Associate Professor
James Napoli, Core Adjunct Professor
Del Mackey, Senior Technology Specialist (NUCRI)

Griffith University
Herman Van Eyken, Director, Griffith Film School
Hugh Burton, Specialist Faculty
In Sept/Oct of 2012 the MFA in Professional Screenwriting program at National University collaborated with the Master of Screen Production at Griffith Film School in Brisbane, Australia on an international course “Cinematic Storytelling Across Cultures.”

• Genesis of our course
• Nuts and bolts preparation
• Content creation
• Teaching
• Assessment
Spring of 2011 the COIL Fellowship was brought to the attention of Bettina Moss by her dean Karla Berry.
Institutional support came from **NU Provost, Dr. Eileen Heveron**.

As part of our application the following idea for a course was submitted to COIL:
Cinematic Storytelling Across Cultures

A graduate level eight week workshop in which a group of international (later became Australian) and American students explore cinematic storytelling. Through cross-cultural exploration and sharing of customs, ideas and artistic sensibilities, students will partner to create a treatment for a feature film.
Why This Course Made Sense

International collaboration is especially relevant because movies are nearly always funded from multiple international sources.

Films may be shot in far flung locations. Crews and acting talent are often international. Tax write offs are often dependent on where you shoot and who you hire.
An example of the international influence in Hollywood, still considered the center of the American film business, is that one of the most iconic symbols—Grauman’s Chinese Theatre—where the hand and foot prints of famous actors are found was recently purchased by a Chinese TV maker and will be renamed the TCL Chinese Theatre.

Establishing international relationships while emerging filmmaker and screenwriters are still learning the craft at university seems an ideal way to build relationships that may result in careers moving forward over a lifetime.
Nuts And Bolts
Finding an International Partner

• The lynchpin!
• Too caught up in the logistics (i.e. the application, the blessing of the provost, letters or recommendation)
• Didn’t think early enough about the partner!
The Search is On

Frantic! We moved full steam ahead on three fronts.

- Obtained a membership list of international film schools from numerous film-related academic organizations.
- Cold research on foreign film schools on the internet
  - (Likely English speakers, Canada, Australia, the U.K, Germany and the Netherlands.)
Finding an International Partner

It’s a Numbers Game!

• From 20 plus emails sent we got:
  • 4 responses !!!
  • Two were not interested !!!

• The two that were, were both in Australia!
  • One was on an extended leave (something we found common in our Aussie neighbors – love those long leave times!)
  • Fortunately Prof. Herman Van Eyken from Griffith Film school in Brisbane, Australia enthusiastically came on board for the application.
Finding an International Partner

The Appeal to Griffith

• Griffith Film School was responsive to the call, as Griffith Film School is convinced that screenwriting in a cross cultural context helps to broaden the horizon for our students to conceive their projects.

• The fact we could have the students work on longer form projects was in line with our newly developed master in screen production - program

• Partnering with an institution who works fully in the online environment was very important and encouraging for us

• Griffith had a positive previous experience with the COIL fellowship program (Criminal Justice offering)
Finding an International Partner

The Appeal to Griffith

• We are further looking to implement modules or components of modules that we could offer on line and the fact we have guidance both from COIL, but certainly from National University, in our first attempt in the online environment made us feel more comfortable

• The track record and profile of the MFA in Screenwriting in National University helped us convince and sell the idea internally

• The trial course and feedback from our students made us decide to look into the possibility to continue the partnership in line with the overall strategic plan of both the Griffith Film School and Griffith University, and offer the course as an addition to our programs.
DEFINE YOUR PARAMETERS

What are your basic requirements for a partner?
Common Language

- For the purposes of our course where students would be writing together it was crucial that English, if not the primary language, was spoken with great fluency.

- English speakers may not be as germane for your area of expertise.
Compatible Schedules and Semesters

- Timeframe of course? Although the majority of National University classes are one month long, in the writing programs they are often two months. This put us on more even footing with the longer traditional university semester still widely adhered to at most American universities as well as around the world.
University Policies and Administrative Support

- Institutional support was crucial. At NU there is significant interest in international collaboration. But perhaps not true everywhere.

- You need to make sure you and your potential partner have the support in place before you take the collaboration to the next level.
Logistics

• What authorizations were required from both institutions?

• How would course be hosted (ie. e-college)?

• Who would pay for/facilitate hosting?

• Legalities/realities of enrolling international participants as students vs. guests in course.

Provost Heveron again provided support in all these areas.
October 2011 Bettina, James, Del and Herman participated in a 3 day NY conference kicking off the COIL fellowship.

COIL provided guidelines about course creation and practices regarding cross cultural approach.

We met other fellows from U.S. universities around the country and internationally from Denmark, Africa, Sweden and South Africa.

Afterwards, we returned to our respective homes and began the online collaboration.
INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION IN CREATING THE COURSE

Initial **FlashMeetings** (a form of Skype with numerous participants.)

COIL set up a FlashMeeting page for us.
• Started off with the philosophical overview. In these early flashmeetings we simply talked about how we hoped to create synergy between our students.

• In total we met via FlashMeeting and Skype 10 to 12 times for approximately 2 hours each. A few months after the first COIL conference, Herman introduced us to Hugh Burton, the Griffith U. specialist faculty who would participate in content creation and teaching with James.
THE STUDENTS

• We discussed which students would participate in the course.

• Because this was the pilot offering we wanted to maximize the potential for success.

• For both NU and Griffith we decided to invite from a small hand picked pool of students.

• The NU students would be enrolled in and pay for a regular class which would count as an elective.

• The Australian students participated as guests in our e-college course and were enrolled on the Australian side.
Course Design

• Once James and Hugh got into the nitty-gritty of content creation they primarily communicated via email while Herman and Bettina took a back seat and would periodically check in and provide feedback.

• NU gave us access to e-college to create the course.
E-College

The e-college platform is an LMS (Learning Management System) that sits outside the University server. It is very similar to Blackboard and Canvas or Moodle.

Here are some examples of content within e-College.
Reading:
The Australian and American Independent Cinema Industry

As we begin our course, let's read about the state of the movie industries from each of your respective countries.

Read both of the embedded articles below. In the Discussion Board, you will be asked to comment on the article of the country opposite to yours.

You might encounter references or terminology that are unfamiliar to you. If so, investigate. Google names and ideas, see what else you can find. Delve into the movie industry culture of your international classmates.

First, read the embedded articles:

FIRST ARTICLE: THE AUSTRALIAN FILM INDUSTRY - PDF

National University Students: In the Week 1: Ice Breakers Discussion Board, post your thoughts about the Australian Film Industry article.

To the best of your ability, comment upon what you learned from reading the piece. What new information did you glean from it? What would you like to communicate to your Australian counterparts now that you have read Marshall's opinions on the industry? What questions does it leave you with?
Week 5

Discussion Board

When there is more than one topic in a Discussion Board, immediately below the introductory block of text will be a bar with a heading reading “Topics.”

- Any multiple topics will be listed below this heading.
- Clicking on a topic will make it go from blue to black letters, and a “-” icon will appear before the topic name to indicate that you have opened up a new topic.
- (NOTE:) Sometimes clicking on a new topic will pop you back to the top of the screen. Simply scroll back down to the topic posting area to post your response(s).

If you’re the first to enter the Discussion, there will only be a Respond button. Otherwise, you will see one or more postings from your fellow students below. You may read them one at a time, or click on the + Expand All button to view all of the entries made by your colleagues.

- Check the individual topic sections for due dates and times for initial posting and responses.
- Remember “netiquette.” Avoid harsh commentary, but do not hold back on useful criticism for fear of not being nice. Be kind. Be constructive. Be specific.
Course Aims

• To create a course that supported diversity in story form and content.

• To encourage innovation by asking students to contemplate personal processes of creativity.

• To foster fruitful partnerships between Australian and American students with an eye to their future work in an internationally-collaborative industry.
Course Design - General

• Experienced film educators started with a clean slate.

• Faculty designed processes to challenge students’ approach to creativity and the task of creating a film script.

• Considering how students would engage with the material: as individuals or as partners?
  
  o Assignment completed by pairs: dialogue within the pair combines to create the treatment (script in prose form).

  o Assignments completed by individuals: provides for reflection of potentially different perspectives within a Discussion Board context. Theoretical, conversational feedback not tied to collaborative project.
Course Design - General

• Predicting and dealing with the challenges of student partnerships
  o Forming pairs
  o Influence of similarities
  o Ice breakers: an imperfect science, but extremely valuable in gaining a sense of which individuals might make effective partners.
  o Favorite Film
  o Family Story
  o Comparison of Australian and American Film Industries.
Quick Talking Points

- Advantages and disadvantages of partners in different time zones (or what time is it there?)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME U.S. PACIFIC</th>
<th>TIME BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA</th>
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Quick Talking Points

• To maximize potential of online delivery, participants should be able to engage with the material whenever and wherever they choose. The density of course content and the sequential nature of the design created external deadline pressure, but flexibility of place was unbounded.

• Influence of locus of creation upon artistic practice – artists creating from within their culture, even though they are partnered with a person from another culture. (Quite different to physically travelling to another country and producing work whilst in the foreign country)

• The advantage of having a different perspective: where cross-cultural partnerships enabled participants to view the familiar as strange.
Quick Talking Points

• Partly influenced by student level of excitement, who seemed to quickly sense the unique opportunity the course provided.

• The cross-cultural/cross institution experience appeared to encourage respect and courtesy, beyond the level expected in face-to-face learning.
Quick Talking Points

• Using specific examples of short and long form films to stimulate discussion and awareness about points of difference and commonality.
Film Break
2 Cars One Night

Clip from
Two Cars
One Night
Film Break

Love Sick

Clip from Love Sick
Film Break

Noise

Clip from Noise
Film Break

A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints

Clip from

A Guide to Recognizing your Saints
Quick Talking Points

• Embedding Dream Diary and Dream Narrative exercises within the curriculum to promote awareness of
  o drawing upon personal impressions to build or enhance stories
  o enriching narratives with the emotional, visual territory of dream experiences
  o Images from dream narratives became pivotal characters in more than one of the collaborative scripts

• Building stories from the inside out: using the Critical Axis, to form powerful cohesive stories.

• Formal reflections on creativity in comparison to other established artists, not the same as a course evaluation incorporating discussion of their own working methods.
Talking Points

• The Assignments: What the students delivered and what that revealed about how to finesse the assignment criteria in the future. How could our intention have been made more clear so that the learning outcome goal of the assignment would be more apparent in the work?
Talking Points

- GRADING – How to get on the same page? If a collaborative work is graded individually, are different criteria applied to each student partner?
  - The need for rubrics
  - The vagaries of collaborative grading
Letter of Agreement

Although we took pains to impress upon our handpicked students how important it was to commit to the course (and had them sign a letter of agreement), one should always expect unforeseen circumstances and be able to adjust accordingly.

“I agree to commit to a high level of availability for communication with my international partners in synchronous online class meetings and in Discussion Boards or other forms of shared dialogue and I agree to participate fully in all assignments and requirements for the course.”

Signature
Technical Aspects

e-College

- Well suited platform for its purpose
- Allows many great embeddable features
- Is a HTML rich environment with Visual page creation and basic coding
- Some things you can do, and some things you can’t, as with any product
Technical Aspects

How do you go from this:
Technical Aspects
to this:

Week Two
The Big Idea

"The only certainty about writing and trying to be a writer is that it has to be done, not dreamed of or planned and never written..."

- Janet Frame

Novelist whose life was the inspiration for Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*
Technical Aspects

HTML

- Open/Close Language
- Like a queue system
- Common sense rules it
Technical Aspects

Resources

http://www.htmldog.com
Technical Aspects

Resources

http://www.codeacademy.com
Technical Aspects

- Don’t fear the “Technology Monster”
- Plenty of resources available for free
What did you find most valuable about this intensive course?

The American influence to the scriptwriting process and the resulting ongoing (professional) relationship I have with the writing partner I was paired with in the course.

Coming out of it with a tangible piece of work. It was also the only course I have done which went so deeply into the craft, and almost the 'philosophy', of writing. I can't really describe it, but it went above and beyond the standard stuff of character, what makes a good story, etc, I could almost analogise it to an existential discussion, except about writing...
Quotes from Course Survey

Did you have any other reasons for enrolling?

As a scriptwriter who wants to eventually work in America, the opportunity to write, network and possibly have an ongoing relationship with an American scriptwriter were big incentives. Also having the American influence on the scriptwriting process was an area I wanted to gain knowledge and experience in.

I just wanted to be part of such an exciting course, it seemed to offer a better learning opportunity than other courses... and it did!
Quotes from Course Survey

Is there anything that you would add to the course (assuming that it could be run over two eight week blocks) [If so what?]

Only that some portion of scriptwriting becomes an assignment in the second block. In this pilot course we did a treatment for the final assessment and if there was increased time in the course, I would like to see the first few scenes or X amount of pages of script be the final assessment.

No, I think simply extending the duration of the course would abate my only criticism -- that the course was too rushed, and that there should have been more time between each new phase of the treatment (4 phases was great, but sometimes I needed time to digest feedback before being able to implement it). All of the content was fantastically in-depth, and extending the course should only allow for twice as much discussion stimulus.
Quotes from Course Survey

Is there anything that you would exclude from the course in the future?

Not so much exclusion, but there were a couple of times that assessment dates overlapped or ran very closely together. So just making sure the larger assessments (treatments, etc) get preference with regards to time afforded. From memory, no.
Quotes from Course Survey

I would like to participate in more GFS online delivered content.

100% Agree
Quotes from Course Survey

I would be interested in studying an advanced collaborative on-line course in the future

100% Agree
Quotes from Final Discussion Board

“I was rather astounded at responses in the DB’s during the first couple weeks – the cultural differences emerged immediately, but so did the commonalities...”

Kristen
"I was partnered with Nicholas Burgess, and what a great team we have made. We have continued collaborating, and are well into writing the first draft of our script, THE COMPANION PROJECT. We Skype once or twice a week….and we text daily…. Ultimately, Nick and I have talked about being writing partners in the television area, should we be able to land a staff job at some point. He very much wants to come to LA and do that, and hopefully that will come to pass at some point. We also want to pursue writing more features, entering more competitions, and creating excellent careers. And we have you and COIL to thank for creating such a great opportunity so that we could meet."

Kristen
“All in all, I feel the chat sessions in this class were more engaging than in others I have taken. Usually the professors have to pull information out of the students to keep the conversation moving forward. Here, I think everyone offered something during the chats and there was always a sidebar in the text area.”

Rik
"The international collaboration expanded my creative abilities. Until the first day of this course, I thought I was well rounded in my selection of films. During the first discussion about our favorite films, I realized my film library was not as broad as I originally thought. Over the last eight weeks, I have explored new directors who have unique approaches to storytelling."

Rik
“Over the last eight weeks, I have achieved all of the goals I set for myself during this course. I was fortunate enough to participate in the pilot course which I hope will continue for future students. I also discovered that time zones are a small obstacle when the entire class is determined to make the course work. The final goal was to collaborate with an Australian student to develop a treatment for a feature length screenplay. Not only did Ian and I complete the assignment, but we made the decision to continue the collaboration effort in the future.”

Rik
“In the industry, especially television, there is a collaborative element, whether it’s writer to writer, writer to producer or writer to studio exec, etc. The collaborative experience I’ve had prior to this course was slim to none. What had had me excited...was getting to meet and interact with likeminded people from the other side of the world...I saw this opportunity as an amazing first step that I can take towards that goal. Now that we’re close to the end I can look back on this experience and say with certainty that I got more out of it than I could have possibly imagined.”

Nick
“I really found the entirety of this course very exciting and beneficial. In over four years of university I have never participated in anything like it. ...I found virtually all the weekly tasks and discussions to be immensely beneficial to me own writing. Despite it being a challenge to juggle everything at times alongside three other courses, the learning was always challenging and rewarding in improving me as a writer... My partner and I have discussed continuing our communication and moving the treatment on to developing a screenplay together.”

Jason
“I've really enjoyed the course, in particular the group meetings each week. When you start studies at an undergrad level people are approaching their course from varying levels of experience, commitment and interest but when you have a group at the post-grad level you are with a group of peers who have all dealt with the question of whether or not this field is for them. So it was really good to hear everyone's opinions and input, very valuable.”

Simon
Comments, Questions, Concerns?