

Those who

An old joke nicely illustrates what might be the biggest problem facing the film and television industry. Some tourists stop their car on a winding country road and ask a shepherd – a piece of straw sticking out of his mouth – how to get to London. ‘I wouldn’t start from here,’ he replies.

The problem lies in the training of scriptwriters to write (and others to read). There has not been a significant improvement in scripts over the last decade, so is there perhaps something wrong with the place from which the process of training the talent starts?

Whether the problem lies with the talent (those who want to be writers), or with the teachers (many of whom are or want to be writers), is difficult to say. We keep hearing phrases like ‘training the trainers’ bandied about as if repetition will make it come true. In issue 10 of *ScriptWriter*, Bicât & Macnabb noted that ‘The presumption is that if we keep training and retraining the writers endlessly to write and rewrite to some mystical blueprint, we’ll somehow achieve a great artistic and/or box office smash.’

I believe that we need to face the unpalatable truth that the teaching of scriptwriting is nearly impossible. Since scripts are stories about people, what should be taught to those wishing for careers as scriptwriters is psychology, in particular, the study of human behaviour and motivation. These are recognized academic subjects and can be taught accordingly.

The dominance of structure as a central tenet in the teaching of scriptwriting has attracted those students with analytical skills rather than creative skills. (See Jürgen Wolff on the need for more right-brain writers in issue 1 of *ScriptWriter*.) What aspiring scriptwriters also need to be taught is the collaborative nature of the craft. (See Lucy Scher’s article on key problems of development in issue 11.) Unlike other creative occupations, many of which tend to be solitary (writing of novels, painting, sculpture), scriptwriting is best done in collaboration with others on real projects. In order to collaborate effectively and successfully, student scriptwriters must learn the industries’ requirements and *modus vivendi*. By and large, such craft skills are not academic subjects and are best learned on the job, in the real world.

Equally important, and something that

cannot be taught, is life experience. Most universities are like safe havens away from the real world, likely to prevent students from gaining the life experiences that come, for example, from a gap year in some remote place where new resources have to be found from deep within or even from a demanding job (including parenting).

If the quality of scripts (or the quantity of high-quality scripts) is not significantly increasing, it would appear that the academic, theoretical teaching of scriptwriting is failing the industry. No one can seriously argue that the British film industry is in good shape. If it is in better shape than it was five or even ten years ago, it could be because of strategic tax systems for financing (Section 48) and the UK Film Council’s *largesse*. But the great scripts are not there.

However, in the opinion of many, there is a considerable increase in the number of extremely badly written scripts that circle around industry desks, vast numbers of which will never be made, or even be considered for optioning. What we are witnessing is the rapid growth of an unregulated development industry, made up of increasing numbers of courses offering to train virtually anyone who wants to learn to write scripts, and this is resulting in a huge script mountain. As more and more ‘students’ choose to be trained to write scripts, so new courses are made available, giving the academics and trainers a more secure living.

Many people I know will not thank me for saying this, but I believe that the most important reason for the failure of the British film industry to achieve some kind of lift-off is the failure to train the right people in the first place in the right way. This is why there is a lack of good scripts and it is this, not the lack of access to screens for British movies, which is holding the industry back.

There is an ever-increasing number of ‘students’ willing to part with substantial sums of money for both long and short courses. Could it be that the exponential growth in numbers reflects refugees from the ubiquitous and bland media courses that are finally being derided?

If we could select more talented writers and train them in a more effective way, we would have a more profitable and globally successful film industry. Poor scripts do not mean that

more training is necessary for more people. I believe that what we need is different but better training for fewer people, those who can demonstrate craft skills, knowledge of human behaviour and storytelling ability. Offering training to allcomers is not good for the health of the industry.

The standard must be raised so that only the best make it to the top. At present this is demonstrably not the case with hundreds of scriptwriting graduates coming on to a market that doesn’t respond well to what they have to offer. Unless the standard is demonstrably raised, we will not find and nurture the writers who have both the storytelling talent and the determination to master the craft skills. This may be elitist, but then the democratization of access to training seems an unrealistic indulgence when dealing with a vocational skill like scriptwriting.

A successful feature film script is one of the most difficult forms to write, far more difficult in my view than a novel or even a stage play. Yet a lemming-like wave of people are encouraged to attempt it, as if giving encouragement is unquestionably desirable in a civilised and culturally aware society. I believe it was Pauline Kael who said of Hollywood that it was the only place you could starve to death from encouragement. People need to be deterred from scriptwriting as a career by making it very clear how difficult it is to succeed, rather than opening new courses across the country in the hope of discovering a rare talent almost by chance.

Can an 18-year-old reflect or refract the subtleties of life as well as a 40 year old? The 18-year-old may have a sensibility about what youth say and do (something that can be researched by older writers), but my money is on the older writers who face ageism more now than ever before, not on the younger writers so proficient in structure and the formatting of Final Draft.

The industry has apparently failed to grasp the importance of demanding higher standards in the training of new writers. It has far too little interest and influence on what is taught to whom and how. The industry – not the academics – is to blame for this and it should be more involved in determining the validation and accreditation criteria of degree courses. Academia and the film industry in Hollywood are closely integrated where there is a culture of

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meritocracy. Are we in the UK too nice, too soft, too accommodating to be meritocratic?

Do other industries allow the academic community such freedom to dictate what is taught and how? If you want to be a doctor, engineer, architect, etc. there is a close overlap between industry and academia. Is it because scriptwriting is essentially a freelance occupation that the film and television industries believe they cannot have more influence in what is taught and to whom?

Perhaps not enough of the trainers are involved sufficiently in the industry. A second-year scriptwriting undergraduate doing work experience looked blankly at me when I asked if she regularly read the trade papers. Did she imagine I meant *Builders' Weekly*? How aware are her teachers of the importance of industry knowledge? Some teachers of scriptwriting are themselves working writers, but freelance writers tend to have a modest range of industry experience (and there is no overwhelming proof that writers necessarily make the best teachers of writing).

One university where I taught was upset when a couple of students gave up the course because they had so much commissioned work from television series that they couldn't do both. The university was concerned that it would lose the government subsidy for the students. I tried to reassure them that we should aspire to lose all the students this way because then the course would be the most successful in the country and the university would have the pick of applicants. Funny, they didn't seem to see it that way!

Does it matter that the great majority of those who want to write scripts are determined to become feature film writers, even though it is pitifully obvious that there is very little likelihood of them actually earning a living by doing so? There are not enough features made in the UK; our broadcasters don't do enough singles and most of the prized two-parters are given to fairly experienced writers.

So, should public funds be spent training the wrong people in skills or for jobs that don't exist? How many of the courses utilizing government funding adequately recognize that – in career terms – it is television that is critically important. Television, soaps especially, are seen by most would-be scriptwriters and the majority of academics teaching

scriptwriting as a poor relation to the feature film script, despite the ability of soaps to attract and communicate with millions of viewers night after night. Is it that a movie is so appealing because it is assumed to be the work of a single voice and is therefore far more self-aggrandising? Does the collaborative nature of team writing and serial writing seem like a less fulfilling activity, so attracting fewer egos?

We should not ignore the importance of ego here. Writers need egos to face the glaring white page and to be prepared for the hobnailed boots of less literate mortals who misread and misunderstand their brilliance. Older writers complain that the commissioning editors and producers seem to be younger with every passing year and it is well-known that those who greenlight are sometimes afraid of writers who know so much more than they do.

Nor should we ignore the needs of academics, many without security of tenure, who must not only continuously publish, but must increase the numbers coming to their courses or they may be forced to make a living in the outside world. But we can no longer ignore the fact that all the effort and subsidising of the training of scriptwriters is not producing that many notable scripts.

As I mentioned in the last issue, Britain – Europe for that matter – has well-established development industries, but since there is virtually no production industry, with little to distribute, there is not much of a distribution industry. Our actors have few starring roles, so we don't have the stars to open movies across hundreds, never mind thousands of screens.

We frequently hear people in the media or on its fringes say that there is nothing good on television. Writers, in particular, like to say this, as though denigrating the work of others will enhance their own. No commissioning editor actually chooses to make a bad programme badly, so why do so many people, especially those wanting to write feature film scripts, speak of television in such a disparaging manner? Is it partly their way of justifying the dubious rationality of their desire to write feature scripts when they know in their heart of hearts that this is quixotic, that few succeed and that they won't earn a living?

Telling stories needs experience of life. Over thirty years of working with writers has proved to me beyond any doubt that there are as many talented writers who have never formally studied scriptwriting (or been to a place of higher education) as those who have. This is not to say that a degree in scriptwriting is not worth having. If it directs the students to the needs of the industry, if it provides them with responsive and informed script editing, and ensures that they graduate with a fat portfolio of scripts in various genres and formats, and a decent list of top industry business cards, then it is certainly worthwhile.

I am not arguing that training is a bad thing. I am saying that the bad training of students who should not have been selected in the first place is not good for the industry. Short courses tend to provide a facile understanding of jargon rather than the underlying nature of screen communication or of human behaviour. Unless a script says something interesting about the human condition, the structure of its acts will not make it into a good story. As Lajos Egri so elegantly said in his book *The Art of Dramatic Writing* sixty years ago, the story (plot) must come out of the characters, not the other way round. The wonderful subtitle of his book is *Its basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*.

The best training for writers usually involves the process of writing and developing real treatments and scripts in real time with real industry personnel responding to their work. Rather than importing so many films because the audience clearly enjoys imported movies, the industry needs to find a more effective *modus operandi* with the trainers if writers are to play their part in reversing the hegemony of popular American films.

At the moment we have a film industry that requires constant government subsidy, and a training industry that produces thousands of graduates who see their hopes and dreams of having their names in lights dashed. These two industries must sing from the same song-sheet because paid writing jobs are more difficult to find than work as a shepherd, but at least the shepherd knows how difficult it is to get there from here.

Dear reader what do you think?

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