

Since Plato a debate continues in western civilization as to what to teach to whom, and when and how to teach it. I would argue, however, that this issue has become increasingly widespread in importance, and increasingly contentious, in the last twenty years. In this brief article, I intend to address the question of educational practices and possibilities at the university level, focusing on issues in the field in which I teach, research, write, create, and produce - namely, film, television, and video.

Only for a Written World ?

Higher Education in The Newer Media

By Paul Monaco

The artistic, technological, social, and cultural aspects of film, television & video point directly to an inherent pedagogic crisis in our universities today. Put simply, an increasingly sullen and dejected faculty of traditionalists confronts a burgeoning student body which the faculty considers pre-literate. In the U.S., we know that by the time the average young man or woman reaches the university, he or she has spent nearly 18,000 hours in school classrooms, *but* nearly twice as much time in front of a television set. The comparable figures for Germany may not be quite so dramatic, but the basic tendency is the same. Today's students have read little by the time they reach the university, and frequently seem inclined to read even less in the future. They are, in many ways, "post-literate", which I mean only descriptively and not in any negative sense. Their knowing of the world, and, hence, their being in it, is less dependent upon the

written and printed text than any previous recent generation. I do not find this nearly so disconcerting as do many of my university colleagues, remembering that print is only a technology that enables expression and communication, and, as such, carries no inherent superiority to any other technology of expression and communication.

Today's university students are demonstrably no less bright nor informed nor able than their predecessors of thirty years ago who were drawn ostensibly from more exclusive and elite ranks. Nonetheless, today's students both require and deserve a learning environment that has been drastically reconsidered and restructured. At our universities we run every risk of being completely overrun by the demands of a changing student body, accompanied by a changing global economy in which a transformation is occurring to "post-industrial" enterprise in developed nations, and a more

amorphous - but undeniable - thrust toward a vastly expanded political and cultural democratization of society. With regard to these developments, our university curriculum - especially in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts - lags woefully behind.

Expectations and Standards

During the last two decades the faculty's response, in essence, has amounted to defensiveness and a decline in standards. Simultaneously, the pressure of increased numbers of students from diverse backgrounds and formal educational training, has led to a deterioration of standards (grade inflation in the U.S.; declining examination criteria in Germany) *and* to a pompous posturing on behalf of academia's claims vis-à-vis its value to society.

In good faith, perhaps, and, at least, we suspect, with good intentions, faculty have responded to increasing numbers of students by steadily decreasing expectations for the new waves of university attendees. These very students, however, are the ones least well served by an erosion of standards. And faculties insistently exaggerate their claims that being learned in a bookish sense is a given precondition to moral action in the world.

On both counts, there is scant evidence to support either position. Students, by and large, will tell you that they don't like receiving grades or recognition which they have neither earned nor deserved. What they look for is an evolution of what is expected of them, followed by a consequent application of standards of assessment of performance. The deterioration of grading and examining standards is not seen by students as a kindly gift bestowed upon them; rather, it is perceived as yet another example of the faculty's negligent inability to define and express authentic authority, and is, hence, more ammunition for the wide-



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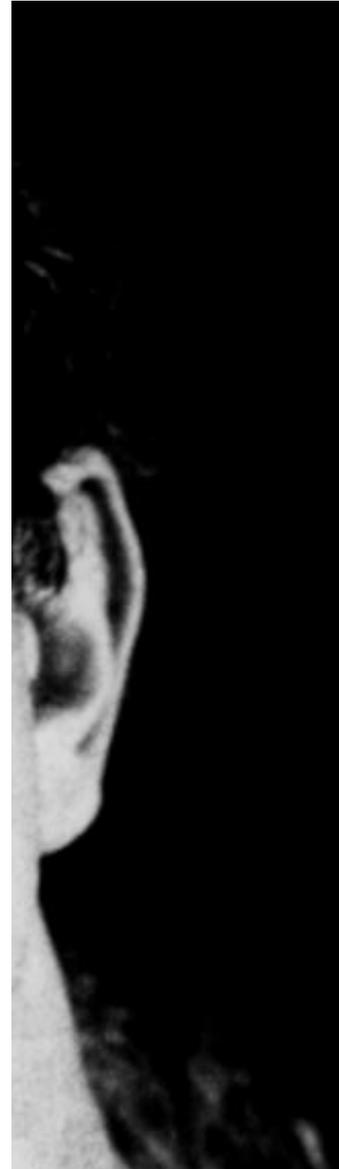


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spread student disillusionment with much that goes on in our universities.

That disillusionment is being fueled, too, by the excessive claims of many academics that the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts, as taught in our universities, provide some kind of moral high road for masses of students. What is the proof to support such posturing? If one assesses the horribly destructive phases of European fascism and communism since the First World War, there is plenty of evidence that the learned and the well-read supported these movements - and even participated in their barbarism - as much, or maybe more so, than the uneducated and the semi-literate. In fact, it appears that everywhere peasants, workers, and "simple folk" provided more resistance qualitatively to Hitlerism and Stalinism than did the professoriat.

The Single-Minded University

In the mid-1960s the communications theorist Marshall McLuhan predicted, perhaps somewhat peevishly, that by the year 2000 all books would be in museums. That won't be literally true, of course. But with the increased use of computer screen "electronic printing", a certainty of the 1990s, the prediction will be yet a step closer to having been realized. Still, this hardly means that writing and literature is about to disappear from our civilization, but only that they will continue to have to share increasingly with other forms and modes of expression and communication the realm of our public discourse. Everywhere else, not only in western civilization, but throughout the world, this is already the case; everywhere, that is, except in our universities.

Our universities remain so single-minded in their commitment to privileging the written word, that I can only label this determination as

"dogged". We are spending billions upon billions, year-after-year, to teach people how to write better and how to tell good literature from bad. We spend next to nothing, by contrast, on education in film, television & video which are the pervasive forms of expression of communication with people under the age of thirty.

But let me make one thing clear. My argument has nothing to do with a plea to vastly increase spending on the newer media. This won't happen; the problem with which I am concerned is going to have to be solved within the context of decreasing - not increasing - finances for higher education, which is essentially the fiscal trend for the foreseeable future. I would argue in favor of some modest adjustments within already existing budgets within the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts to replace some faculty positions (which become open through attrition) with posts in the newer media, as well as endorsing modest redistribution of resources within existing budgets toward these media.

Moreover, readjustments are definitely called for with regard to how "communications studies" are pursued. In both the United States and Germany this field has become widely characterized by markedly bad attempts at dubious social science in pursuit of strikingly marginal questions.

The Necessity of Field Work

The humanities, the social sciences, and the arts in our universities have been suffering from their attempt to ape the natural sciences. Investigation and inquiry in these fields have lost almost all sight of relating research to synthesis by way of wide-reaching and over-arching insights. This is not a problem so frequently described as research flourishing always at the cost of teaching. Quite to the contrary, I've never seen someone who teaches effectively

over the long haul who is not deeply committed to vigorous inquiry and investigation of fundamental issues in his or her field. But, then, we may disagree in our evaluation of effective teaching!

The changing environment in which we live demands that university teaching increasingly make as its goal the compelling synthesis of major, fundamental issues and their presentation to students as such. We give far too little shrift to calling upon faculty to lecture well, which, after all, is only marginally a matter of style. Good lecturing is founded upon the capacity of being enough in touch with core issues and questions in one's field to produce insightful syntheses for both framing and answering fundamental questions.

Efficiency is a word for which many academics appear to hold scant regard. Nonetheless, it is a keyword for curricular revision, improved teaching, and the building of a university environment that turns students away from much of their present cynicism. We need to be doing more in less time, and we need to be vigilant in assuring that what we are doing addresses compelling issues and leads students toward a closer appreciation and understanding of whatever the subject may be. All too often our curriculum, and the way it is being taught throughout the humanities, the social sciences and the arts, in fact, winds up alienating students from the subject matter by propelling most phenomena of inherent interest in the direction of some narrow and myopic analysis of them.

Understanding The "Time" Arts

The future doesn't belong to those who can understand and use *only* written language, though often our universities seem to be teaching as if our faculties believed it were. In some universities in the U. S. public speaking is required - and admirably

so - in a manner that integrates the theory of oral communication with actual practice in speech making under a system of control and criticism. (All of which is a far cry from that random mode of "talking" that reigns uncontrolled - and, I might say, essentially "unproductive" - in so many university classrooms). The newer media of film and television nowhere enjoy even the limited - and sometimes contested - recognition and curricular presence of speech communication. Their presence in the university - even in the United States where they are developed professionally at an extraordinarily advanced level of international influence and appeal - remains marginal.

For the past seven years I have taught at Montana State University, located in a small town not far from Yellowstone National Park. Our department enrolls approximately 225 students in Motion Picture or Video Production. For the past several years I have devoted much of my energy to developing and teaching a basic course called "Understanding Movies, Television & Video" in which both majors (students enrolled to study in the department) as well as non-majors (who have not yet selected an area of study, or who are studying in another field) attend. The entire course is based upon as extensive an integration of theory, history, and practice as I have been able to create; as a goal all the students are involved in the production of a short (five-minute) film.

I am convinced that this integrated approach to learning in this medium is vital to understanding its essence and its nature. The course itself (which meets three hours a week) consists of:

- lectures which present theory, as well as an historical outline of the development of film, television & video;
- the screening and discussion of film and video works;

- required writing in the form of journals kept by all students in which they must write on all film or video materials seen by the class; - and, as mentioned above, production of a film, in groups of five students each.

Film, television & video are "time arts" whose artistic nature is defined by the fact that they proceed sequentially in time. Hence, they are quite different from literature (in which the reader determines the temporal flow of what is read), and arts such as painting, sculpture, or photography in which time appears to be "frozen". One of the primary artistic devices in film, television & video is the manipulation of time, and no degree of theorizing or describing this in words can replace even a relatively brief experience in actually making editorial decisions and seeing what occurs as they are made.

In the same way, the often over-used theoretical notion of film constituting its own language can be quickly grasped as problematic when a student begins consciously confronting the range of shots available to him or her in a specific sequence of filming, then being forced to select the shots in a particular order to create the desired informational, intellectual, and emotional sequence in the film that he or she wishes.

Nowhere, perhaps, is thinking about and understanding a medium more necessarily dependent upon the actual making and doing of its production than in the arts in general and the contemporary communication arts in particular. Unlike music - where one must have a certain level of technical mastery over an instrument - or painting or sculpture - in which specific physical elements must be mastered by hand - the media of film, television & video are based on technologies that can be learned very quickly. The physical operation of the equipment for editing film or tape poses scant chal-

lenge; understanding *where* and *why* and *when* a particular "cut" is made in a film or tape is the real challenge.

Towards Integrated Approaches

In the integrated approach to a basic course in film, television & video that I am describing, I note these advantages:

- Students are forced to inquire theoretically into the nature of a medium under the conditions of its actual production. They can learn theory while testing it, and they become aware that theory - especially in a field that is quite new to academic study - develops not on the basis of tradition and reference to prior scholastic authority, but rather by a give-and-take, a surrender-and-catch, if you will, between the thing itself (Ding an sich), its essence (Wesen), and its making (Produktion). Further, may I note, this process actually brings the learner closer to a "scientific process" (through the testing of a hypothesis) than is normally the case in our studies in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts.

- Students must work collectively. A significant part of the challenge in this process is to understand the importance of group psychology and collective problem-solving in the contemporary communication arts. The system of collaborative work establishes a framework of mutual responsibility - a vital enough undertaking in almost all human undertakings. And may it be noted, again, this process resembles inquiry in the natural sciences far more closely than is often the case in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts.

- Students are held to a wide range of expectations, and to high standards of performance in *all* of them. Assessment is so structured that one must write diligently and insightfully (in the journals), read carefully (testing covers assigned material),

and produce well (the group receives a single grade for its film).

- Students accomplish something concrete and whole. And, I think, the very notion of completing a creative work for which they - as a group - are responsible cannot be underestimated in its significance. Especially for students who are insecure about being at the university - because they are not particularly talented in traditional academic pursuits, or because they have difficulty justifying the idea of university study, either to themselves or their parents - the *feeling* of accomplishment is very important.

So far I have talked only about this individual course. Far too few universities are supporting solid, challenging programs in film, television & video (either at the undergraduate or the graduate level). If undertaken, such programs thrive in atmospheres where students are then provided a structure (or structures) for producing work in these media for outside distribution for which the students take on increasing conceptual, technical, and artistic responsibility.

The Montana Experience

Where I teach in Montana (USA), we have a unique situation. Within the university structure itself a station of the Public Broadcasting System is operating, partially staffed by university faculty, and extensively staffed by students enrolled in Motion Picture or Video Production. For students who continue on in the study of these media the opportunity for working cooperatively with faculty on productions is extremely important.

Still our success in Montana is only partial. We are constantly aware that university faculties in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts, while often quite thorough in criticizing the inconsistencies, the incoherencies, and the inadequacies of other institutions in society, are

not nearly so adept at criticizing their own shortcomings which have led to so many gaps and errors in today's university curricula. We remain bound, for example, to the worn idea that the only worthwhile unit of university learning occurs across a specific numbers of weeks, normally equaling what we have chosen to call a "semester". In many ways, of course, we'd be better served by great flexibility in scheduling. Universities could utilize outside specialists (often practitioners in the field) for special short courses and intensive courses, rather than just special lectures and events which are notably always tangential to the curriculum proper. Why can't we offer weekend courses (four Saturdays and Sundays intensively), or evening courses (four hours per night for one week, Monday-through-Friday) to students? Our universities sorely need greater flexibility for engaging outside experts, and greater flexibility for making their engagement "count" in the mechanism of how such activities are valued and credited.

In summary, I would like to express the following recommendations:

- film, television & video are pervasive media of expression and communication in society today and need to be so recognized.
- the effective teaching of film, television & video should be based upon a pedagogic approach in which theory, history, and production are integrated from the very beginning.
- the curricular goal should be to involve students extensively in production; if it is impossible for faculty to develop this with professional agencies or stations, think about using the public access television channels (Offene Kanäle) as a production facility for structured student work (at little or no cost to the university).
- develop policies and practices for recruiting and retaining full-time faculty who are committed to such

an integrated approach; develop contacts with practicing professionals in the field, and integrate them into the academic program as much as possible.

- stimulate all aspects of an academic program that challenges both students and faculty constantly.
- proceed with the basic philosophy that we can be doing much more in an efficient manner, and that synthesizing complex theoretical and historical material is a fundamental expectation for good teaching.
- Students, no matter what their posture, are insecure; rather than looking for explanations of why something can't be produced, take the position that it is primarily an issue of figuring out a strategy by which it can be produced.
- develop contacts with "the profession", and convey to students a balanced, realistic assessment of that profession as it is being practiced; encourage students to reflect seriously upon whether the processes of working and producing in a particular profession fit their own intellect and temperament.

And there is a last point, you should always keep in mind: we all learn by making mistakes; "failed" projects may often be highly valuable. So take it easy.

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten 20 Jahren hat sich das Lernverhalten von Schülern und Studierenden grundlegend verändert. Was sich hingegen nicht verändert hat, sind die Lehrpläne. Die Mehrzahl der Lehrenden geht nach wie vor davon aus, daß das geschriebene Wort einen höheren Stellenwert einnimmt, als jede andere Art der Kommunikation. Dabei wird übersehen, daß heute weitaus weniger gelesen wird als noch vor einigen Jahren. Viele Informationen erhalten wir durch die Medien Film, Fernsehen und Video. Wer aus dieser Entwicklung den Schluß zieht, die heu-

tigen Studierenden seien aufgrund dieser Tatsache weniger informiert oder intelligent als ihre Kommilitonen vor 30 Jahren, irrt. Es ist eher das Gegenteil der Fall: Die Geisteswissenschaften, die Sozialwissenschaften und die sogenannten angewandten Wissenschaften bleiben häufig weit hinter diesem Wandel zurück. Gerade so als wolle man die Zeit anhalten, wird an Büchern als dem einzig denkbaren Lehrmittel festgehalten.

Hinzu kommt, daß die ansteigenden Studentenzahlen zu einer defensiven Haltung seitens der Universitäten und zum Absinken des Lehrstandards geführt haben. In vermutlich guter Absicht wurden die Anforderungen mit Zunahme der Studentenzahlen stetig herabgeschraubt. Die Studierenden sehen dies in der Regel jedoch nicht als Geschenk an; auch sie sind an einer Ausbildung interessiert, die ihnen „draußen“ Chancen eröffnet. Da die finanziellen Mittel immer stärker gekürzt werden, sollte es zumindest zu einer gerechteren Verteilung innerhalb der Ausbildung für kommunikative Berufe kommen - zwischen den traditionellen Schriftmedien und den „neuen“ audiovisuellen Medien. Die Zukunft gehört nicht mehr allein denjenigen, die mit geschriebener Sprache gekonnt umzugehen wissen, sondern zunehmend den Studenten, die es gelernt haben, gesprochene Sprache und Bildinformationen richtig zu verwenden.

An der Montana State University gibt es aus diesem Grund seit einigen Jahren den Grundkurs *Understanding Movies, Television & Video*, bei dem es um die Integration von Theorie, Geschichte und Praxis geht. Ziel ist es, alle Studierenden in die Produktion eines Kurzfilms (von etwa fünf Minuten) mit einzubeziehen. Hier können die Studierenden erkennen, wie Theorie und Praxis zusammenspielen. Sie lernen in Gruppen zu arbeiten und sich gegenseitig zu unterstützen - der gemeinsam produzierte Film wird

auch gemeinsam benotet. Sie erstellen nicht nur Teile, sondern sind verantwortlich für den gesamten Prozeß der Produktion. Da Praktiker von außerhalb dabei ihre Erfahrungen an die Studierenden vermitteln, bekommen sie realistische Einblicke in mögliche, zukünftige Tätigkeiten. Unsere Erfahrungen lassen jedenfalls erkennen, daß die Integration von Medientheorie, Mediengeschichte und Medienpraxis im Studium eine wesentliche Voraussetzung für eine gute und zukunftsichere Ausbildung der Studenten ist.

Der Autor:

Dr. Paul Monaco schloß sein Studium 1974 nach der Erlangung des Bachelor of Science an der Columbia University, New York, NY (1965) und des Master of Arts an der University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC (1966) mit dem Doctor of Philosophy an der Brandeis University in Waldham, MA, ab; von 1973 bis 1975 übte er hier eine Assistenzprofessur für History & History of Ideas aus. Von 1975 bis 1985 ging er an die University of Texas in Dallas, wo er nach der Arbeit als Assistent- und Associate-Professor eine Vollprofessur für Aesthetics & Cinema übernahm; in dieser Zeit lehrte er auch zwischenzeitlich als Fulbright-Professor in der Bundesrepublik (Universität Gießen, 1982/83). Seit 1985 ist Dr. Paul Monaco Professor für Cinematography / Video an der Montana State University und dort seit 1986 Leiter des Department of Media & Theatre Arts. In Zusammenhang mit seiner akademischen Tätigkeit ist er seit 1988 auch Producer und Director für KUSM-TV, Montana Public Television, tätig. Im Sommersemester 1992 war Dr. Paul Monaco Gastprofessor der Universität GH Essen.

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„Interface“ von Frank Georg Lucas