
Article

Exploring film education in neurodivergent and economically deprived pedagogical settings in conversation with Del Pike of Hugh Baird University Centre

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Abstract

While creative subjects such as music, art and film have been deprioritised and defunded under the United Kingdom's Conservative Government, the social and pedagogical utility of their study, particularly in areas of economic deprivation and within neurodivergent cohorts, is clear. This article draws forth these issues in a conversation with Del Pike, the leader and convenor of the Moving Image Production degree at Hugh Baird University Centre, Bootle, UK, a course which uses the study of cinema as a form of social corrective, and which encourages frequently marginalised learners to participate explicitly in the creation and analysis of culture. Our discussion details the pedagogical opportunities offered by the practical and theoretical study of film, and considers the challenges of film education in a further and higher learning institution located in a deprived area of England that engages with a high needs student body as an aspect of policy. The article seeks to understand how the practical study of film within a neurodivergent teaching context creates new expressive possibilities regarding film form and film education pedagogy.

Keywords neurodivergence; film education; social inclusion; economic deprivation; further and higher education; film literacy

The study of creative subjects such as music, media, art and film has been deprioritised and defunded under the United Kingdom's Conservative Government. Former education secretary Gavin Williamson (2021) described non-STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects as 'dead-end', and incumbent Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledged to phase out degrees that do not improve an individual's 'earning potential', while also seeking to introduce a 'Russell Group of world class technical colleges' (Wingate, 2022: n.p.) that would provide an alternative to university. More explicitly, the Office for Students announced that the 2021/2 academic year would see funding for students studying creative and arts subjects drop from £243 to £121.50 per student, in reforms that sought to prioritise 'high-value' courses such as STEM and medicine (UCU, 2021).

While these perspectives express a political and legislative attitude that dismisses the social and economic value of creative subjects, particularly in areas of social deprivation and among working-class populations, they also accentuate what Jamie Chambers, through Bergala (2016), has described as the 'otherness', 'out-of-place-ness' and alterity of arts education within traditional educational settings. With an explicit focus on film and the work of Cinema en curs, Chambers (2021) asks how one might reconcile an ambitious creative pedagogy with the conservative priorities of the broader curricula. This question can be usefully adapted to consider the pedagogical approaches employed when teaching the 'othered' subject of film to a student body frequently marginalised by mainstream educational practices and government policy.

Hugh Baird is a college and university centre located in Bootle, Merseyside, UK, and primarily attended by local commuter students from areas of high social and economic impoverishment, as classified by the Index of Multiple Deprivation. The Index of Multiple Deprivation, as designed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, measures the proportion of the population in small areas of England experiencing deprivation relating to low income, exclusion from the labour market and exclusion from educational opportunities. The index also considers health deprivation, and disability and living environment, as well as crime rate, access to housing services and overall quality of living. According to the index, the Bootle region is within the top 0.5 per cent most deprived areas nationally, while the Liverpool region is home to the second highest proportion of neighbourhoods in the most deprived 10 per cent of neighbourhoods nationally (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). As such, Hugh Baird attracts harder to reach students from areas with low higher education participation, low household income and low socio-economic status. Additionally, many students attending Hugh Baird deal with complex social and emotional issues exacerbated by, and frequently stemming from, chaotic home lives and lifestyles, while an increasing number of students face mental health issues (Hugh Baird College, 2021). As of 2020, 40 per cent of Hugh Baird's higher education student body have a declared disability or specific learning difficulty, or a disability that can affect learning. As such, 18.5 per cent of the student population require additional learner support (Nield, 2021). Hugh Baird contends with issues that would typically be less prevalent and felt less acutely in other higher education settings. Non-attendance due to employment commitments and the anxiety of trying to balance an academic schedule with working life impacts learners. Similarly, the pressure of complex home lives impedes attendance, performance and concentration. Academically, learners often join the university centre with reading and writing skills that may not be as readily fluent as their peers.

Hugh Baird provides for this community through trade-specific and vocational training, as well as traditional academic degrees. These degree programmes consist of two or three years of foundation-level study, supplemented by one-year honours top-up degrees. Across all the institution's courses, employability, vocational skills and interaction with industry are privileged in an approach that responds directly to a student population that seeks an employer-driven curriculum that prepares them for working life. The Department of Creative Industries reflects this approach by offering industry-focused courses in Creative Make Up Design and Practice, Digital Imaging and Photography, Fashion and Textiles, Game Design, Graphic Design, and Moving Image Production. The Moving Image Production degree at the university offers learners a two-year foundation degree which can then be supplemented by a

further year's study in which students achieve full bachelor honours. The course, which is designed in collaboration with the University of Central Lancashire, combines the theoretical and practical study of film – training students in camera, sound, lighting and post-production – while seeking to underpin this practical interest with a study of film theory and history.

Historically, the course has attracted a high number of neurodivergent learners who have benefited from the practical focus and an innovative approach to assessment that moves away from traditional written reflections, essays and individual presentations, and towards educational plans that work to support a variety of pathways through learning. Small class sizes, portfolio-based assessment strategies, the avoidance of final examinations and a consistent, empathetic and structured approach to teaching and learning provide an academic environment in which neurodivergent learners may excel. This article synthesises several conversations with Del Pike, the founder and leader of the Moving Image Production degree at Hugh Baird University Centre, which took place between September 2022 and January 2023. Through a focus on first-year students' initial experiences of film-making, it seeks to understand the specific approaches and pedagogies employed to engage a neurodivergent student body in an area of social deprivation, and considers the way in which film education might be employed productively as a tool for social inclusion, while remaining sensitive to an existing tendency that positions neurodivergent individuals as the 'exotic other' (Eastwood et al., 2022: 9).

In working to resolve the economic, educational, cultural and utilitarian questions posed by the study of film in the specific context of a neurodiverse learning environment, the Moving Image Production degree at Hugh Baird chooses to ground creative work in the life of the student. Initial film-making projects are designed to focus upon environment and individual, positioning the skills, geographies and experiences of the learner as valuable creative resources, while foregrounding the critical and artistic possibilities of the urban. This encourages what Felipe Correa (2020) describes as a resignification of space via aesthetic means – a resignification that takes place among a cohort often excluded from political discourse, and within an economically and socially disadvantaged geography. As Del Pike describes:

The initial first-year project is entitled 'My Liverpool'. Here, we ask our students to produce a sixty-second short based on what their city means to them. While this is a valuable way to begin to introduce elements of film history and film practice through a discussion of the 'City Symphony', the key learning outcome is to encourage students to reappraise and perhaps see anew their environment, and the way they engage with and navigate this space. In doing this, we express to students that through film-making they can be involved in the conversation about who they are and where they come from.

Notably, there is often a gendered reticence when approaching this assignment, which can inhibit the creative practice of male learners beginning their studies. As an institution that attracts roughly one third more female than male students, and with female students enjoying moderately more academic success in terms of degree outcomes (Nield, 2020), it is perhaps unsurprising that male learners in this environment feel constrained when beginning to express themselves creatively. In confronting these antiquated attitudes towards the study of the arts as a legitimate pursuit, Pike employs a flexible attitude towards each assignment, which encourages an autogenous interpretation of the work:

Ostensibly, the 'My Liverpool' project is about engaging with urban space, but it is also concerned with the individual within the city, and it can be appropriated productively in either way. Some students may choose an observational approach focused on urban degradation or regeneration, architecture, modernity and cultural memory, while for others, it provides an opportunity for more direct self-examination.

Pike continues:

A student focused their project around a small bar that they constructed with their father in the family garden in honour of a sibling who had passed away, rationalising that this was *their*

experience of the city. In the exhibition of this piece and the classroom-based evaluation that followed, the student discussed how the project allowed for difficult emotions to be revisited and grief to be reassessed. Essentially, the practice of film-making unlocked a set of expressive possibilities that were previously unavailable – and in that became a tool to be used.

Here, the flexible project brief allows learners to appropriate the assignment in more analytical or more emotive ways. Additionally, in screening and discussing these short films, learners think cinematically about the various formal choices made, but they are also encouraged to think empathetically about the content of the material they are viewing. Positioning the screening of these short films as a vitally important group activity and a celebration of each individual, the process of reviewing work becomes a collaborative celebration and exchange. Through this, learners confront their initial scepticism towards producing creative work, finding a functional and cathartic potential in the study and production of film, while also developing their ability to analyse cinema, and fortifying the creative and personal bonds within the group.

The 'My Liverpool' project is followed by the production of a three-minute documentary entitled 'My Hobby', which seeks to strengthen the film-making skills developed during the first assignment while encouraging an even greater degree of focus on the interests and abilities of the student. As Pike describes:

These initial projects are an invaluable way for us to begin to understand the specific perspectives, interests and needs of our learners. Frequently, our neurodivergent learners will reveal key interests and preoccupations in the creation of these early short films that can then be incorporated into our pedagogical approach as their degree progresses.

These preoccupations within neurodivergent and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) individuals can be understood as circumscribed interests, a subcategory of restrictive repetitive behaviours that occur commonly in people with ASD, and that can be characterised by an intense and focused interest in a narrow range of subjects (Harrop et al., 2019). As Harrop et al. (2019) acknowledge, while circumscribed interests in people with ASD have the potentially negative consequences of interfering with everyday activities and increasing social isolation, they may also, in some circumstances, be advantageous. Harrop et al. (2019: 64, emphasis in the original) suggest that circumscribed interests 'may represent *islands of ability* for individuals', with a set of competencies and expertise developing around an area of engagement. As Pike says:

We have seen work concerned with anime, comic books, *Doctor Who*, K-pop and cosplay from our ASD learners, and in embracing these interests, we find fertile ground on which to explore a range of aesthetic and cultural issues. These students bring a tremendous amount of knowledge and expertise to a discussion of their interests, which can also then be used in a classroom setting as a way of encouraging peer-to-peer learning.

Pike continues:

Learners with autism spectrum disorders really do thrive when allowed to work on projects that incorporate their personal interests. Specifically, a student used the 'My Hobby' project as a way of introducing the cohort to their autism and describing the comfort and stability they found in the precise and repetitive nature of needlework.

This then has implications for how we may engage the student going forward. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this is that learners are surprised that they are 'allowed' to talk about these interests in an academic setting, as previously these kinds of discussions were often minimised and devalued as 'unacademic' or distracting.

Encouraging and incorporating the circumscribed interests of ASD learners as part of a fluid pedagogical approach has important implications in the delivery of the Moving Image Production degree. It suggests

that a flexible programme with broadly defined and variably apprehended assignments encourages a creative space that makes a virtue of neurodivergent approaches to learning. Importantly, this approach does not just provide an avenue for creative expression and an opportunity for tutors to better understand their students and their students' needs, it also allows for tutors to deploy these circumscribed interests as a means through which to motivate creative work – navigating around what Alan Smerbeck (2017: 248) characterises as the perseverative behaviour that may occur when circumscribed or restricted interests are frustrated or interrupted. Pike says:

We are extremely open to the different ways students wish to apprehend each of the creative briefs we give them – fundamentally, we do not take issue with neurodivergent students using the same source material as inspiration for multiple projects.

For example, in our module Sound Design for the Moving Image, students are tasked with replacing the audio from a sequence with found and created sound. An ASD student with a profound interest in *Doctor Who* was able to select a sequence from the 1970s' incarnation of the programme and then use contemporary methods to produce new and more 'futuristic' sounds.

In an adjacent module, Writing for the Screen, the same student produced a short script that extended an aspect of the *Doctor Who* universe they felt had been underexplored. Here, we have not only produced valuable creative work and taught transferable technical skills, we have also encouraged a discussion of transmediality. Rather than being inhibitory, this focus on a single subject can open up new avenues of discovery, while almost guaranteeing engagement.

Clearly, and as Smerbeck (2017) has acknowledged, circumscribed or restricted interests are a flexible category, and they cannot be exclusively described as either positive or negative when incorporated into a learning environment. However, rather than attempting to inhibit and alter repetitive behaviours, the Moving Image Production degree tentatively shows that it may be possible to diminish the negative effects of this behaviour without diminishing the interest itself (Smerbeck, 2017), incorporating these preoccupations into a holistic and learner-centred pedagogical approach, and preserving their productive and positive aspects.

The short and largely self-contained projects undertaken by learners in the first and second year of study provide the base from which they produce a 10- to 12-minute graduation film in their third year. Learners may produce work in any form; documentary and narrative film are the most popular, but avant-garde and animated approaches are often employed. These final films are a collaborative endeavour that necessitates the expertise and cooperation of individuals across departments and disciplines, and learners are required to fulfil a variety of roles on several short films throughout the duration of the module. As evidenced, the Moving Image Production degree at Hugh Baird welcomes a mixed-ability cohort, and it is particularly sensitive to the needs of neurodivergent learners. However, collaboration can be a significant difficulty for some ASD individuals.

Pike argues that the structure of the course responds to and navigates this complexity. The empathetic acceptance of difference is encouraged through screening and discussion, and it creates a dialectic between neurodivergent and neurotypical learners that develops through the programme and is expressed in the collaborative exchange that takes place in the production of the graduation film:

Early in the course, we often see a creative breakdown between neurodivergent and neurotypical learners that has led to verbal and physical conflict. We observe where these frustrations stem from and how they develop, and almost exclusively they are born from neurodivergent students being extremely protective and passionate about their work and wishing to defend it, even from constructive criticism, and neurotypical students, perhaps initially, not understanding this passion.

It is my belief that our approach leads to a breaking down of these barriers, and that through the process of exhibiting work in the classroom – work that speaks specifically about the interests and experiences of the neurodivergent learner, and celebrating this creative act – neurotypical students become much more aware of the needs and interests of their neurodivergent peers, and much better placed to collaborate in a sensitive and inclusive way.

Speaking specifically about the nature of the work produced, and with reference to the creative output of neurodivergent learners, Pike describes the opportunities and personal advancements made possible by the production of the final film:

We are always struck by the ingenuity and compassion of these final films, and there are many striking examples of excellent work. Frequently, learners choose to produce pieces concerned with their own interests – video essays about horror cinema or anime, for example. But we also see learners extending and embellishing the strands of previous projects.

A learner produced a documentary that reflected on ideas of femininity, motherhood, difference and personal history, which they first explored via their 'My Liverpool' work. This neurodivergent individual, who found it impossible to communicate with their classmates at the beginning of the degree course, was now able to lead a small team of students, articulate themselves with insight and sensitivity through their creative work, and then discuss this work perceptively and reflectively as part of a group.

We encourage ASD learners to embrace their conditions and their interests with positivity and creativity – and to understand the act of making and sharing creative work as inherently compassionate and empathetic.

Through these processes, film becomes an edifying object that allows learners to transcend personal and social circumstances. In apprehending these projects, learners employ a language that offers a new and deeper degree of expression, while also improving their interpersonal skills and having their personal interests validated as worthwhile and rewarding areas of exploration and development.

As Steve [Connolly \(2013\)](#) has observed, one of the key values of a media-inclusive educational approach in the context of a 'high-needs' educational setting is that it encourages students to see the world in a different way. As [Connolly \(2013: 52\)](#) suggests, media education allows learners to both 'question and represent themselves in the world they inhabit, to be included in it'. For [Connolly \(2013\)](#), media education offers the opportunity for self-determination and expression, especially among cohorts historically undervalued and overlooked by mainstream educational practices. Inherent in [Connolly's \(2013\)](#) argument is the suggestion that, within these contexts, film-making becomes a political act. Film education in all settings improves confidence, verbal and non-verbal communication, technical competency, team work, and the ability to creatively collaborate. However, within high-needs and economically deprived educational environments, these creative practices take on an important social function. Here, film education acts as a social adhesive and salve in that it encourages the creation of emotional and educational connections among the student body, while also engaging those same learners in a discourse about place, space and politics. In this way, film practice functions, both directly and indirectly, as a reaction to, and rebuttal of, the attitudes that inform educational and economic policy, and it provides an avenue through education for otherwise marginalised learners. Perhaps most importantly, the degree provides learners with the technical skills and creative vocabulary to continue to represent and speak for themselves beyond the life of the course, with students finding employment within the creative industries or film and media education, or employing film-making as part of their personal therapeutic practice. The work undertaken by Del Pike at Hugh Baird expresses the importance of pedagogical approaches that actively engage students in the design and delivery of film education, and it celebrates the opportunities created by a neurodivergent classroom setting. In its outlook and approach, the Moving Image Production degree

knits together the personal, political and pedagogical potential of film education, and balances the often complex needs of its student body and the requirements of degree-level education, without sacrificing the creative and expressive possibilities of film practice. Rather than an exercise in idealism, the degree embodies a pragmatic approach to film education that embraces the specific skills and interests of ASD learners. These are then incorporated into a fluid and flexible pedagogy that transcends the complexities that the individual may face to offer new ways of thinking about and representing difference.

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