

TEACHING RULES OR TEACHING CREATIVITY: A PARADIGM SHIFT

By Simon Bovey for the Screenwriters Research Network Conference 2016

Structure is everything in a screenplay we are told. If indeed there are any rules to screenwriting then this would be carved in tablets of stone. And we all appreciate the value of rules, how the game is played or the etiquette of a situation. Creatively rules have their place, only when we know them can we break them and therein lies true creativity. Yet all too often we are told we have to apply a very prescriptive model. Indeed many students want that to be the case, they seek a magic bullet, a template they can use to frame their story. If you understand the rules then success, if not guaranteed, can at least be more readily expected. Were that life was so simple.

CREATIVITY

To talk about creativity is to open a can of worms and to talk about rules in screenwriting is to invite scepticism. We can I think agree that the promotion of creative thinking is a good thing. Ken Robinson holds it as important as literacy. But what exactly are we talking about?

Greek poets would call upon their favourite of the nine Muses, (Apollo) and at a crunch that is always worth trying but French polymath Henri Poincaré (1904), building on the work of Freud, William James and Galton, gave us perhaps our first glimpse of cognitive creativity when he investigated how Einstein's genius worked and remarked that it was a process that was applicable not only to mathematics but to any creative discipline.

Graham Wallas in 1926 took this further and defined four areas of the creative process *Preparation, Incubation, illumination* and *verification*. James Webb Young later expanded

this to a five-step outline. Firstly the systematic *gathering of raw material*, then '*digesting the material*' looking for relationships.

Thirdly, the simplest part and the one perhaps I and my students are best at, *unconscious processing*, an act that must have 'no effort of a direct nature.' The idea dates back to James, who coined the concept of fringe consciousness. T. S. Eliot called this mystical part of creativity "idea incubation." Tardif & Sternberg stressed that 'creativity takes time...the creative process is not generally considered to be something that occurs in an instant.' Recently John Cleese has similarly stressed the importance of time.

The fourth step, the one we pray for the most, is the *A-Ha moment*, out of nowhere the Idea will appear, usually when we are least expecting it. Finally Webb Young defined the fifth step as the *Idea versus reality* time. The hardest part, where the work must be done and many ideas start to wither on the vine.

Howard Gardner described creativity as the 'ability to solve problems and fashion products to raise new questions.' Lucas that it is a state of mind 'where all our intelligences are working together.' And Robinson that it is an 'imaginative process with outcomes that are original and of value.'

The real authority seems to be Dr Paul Torrance who became known as the father of creativity. After reviewing over fifty definitions of creative thinking he defined four criteria, Fluency, Flexibility, Originality and Elaboration.

Fisher noted that creativity is as much an attitude as it is a set of mental processes. It's about making original links. Bill Bernbach the legendary American advertising director captured the essence of JW Young's ideas with "creativity is just connecting things."

Theories abound that we writers here will recognise as our everyday. A process emerges that governs creativity and in screenwriting process is everything.

TEACHING RULES OR TEACHING PRINCIPLES

But that process has become highly systematised and prescriptive in its application. Personally I blame Aristotle. (He's dead so can't fight back) In the Poetics he proclaimed that 'most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action.' Dick Ross noted at a Sources 2 workshop in 1997, that this is an approach to narrative that persists today, over two thousand years later. Character is subsidiary to action. And a focus on action leads us to consider plot. Even though Hardison believes Aristotle's sense was not what the performers do on the stage, but something closer to 'process', the damage was done. Bridget Connor's must read study found that most manuals argue Aristotle's work on story is foundational.

Why? Well, Syd Field wasn't the first to take Aristotle and create a method but he was perhaps the most successful with over half a million copies sold of his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (1979). Field outlined his view that successful screenplays are made up of three distinct divisions. The setup, confrontation, and resolution. A three act structure that helps us guide the action. What he called The Paradigm. Many others we know and love followed.

From Michael Hauge who claims Hollywood movies are simple. 'And here's the good news, whether you're writing romantic comedies, historical dramas or big budget science fiction, all successful Hollywood movies follow the same basic structure.' Too Linda Aaronson who uses the three-acts as the foundation for her section on narrative structure. The darling of

European screenwriters Yves Lavandier. Gulino with his sequence technique. And my students' favourite, Blake Snyder who wrote the only book on screenwriting you'll ever need apparently.

Sandy Frank in *The Inner Game of Screenwriting* goes through 20 Archetypes and explains how to construct them and make any screenplay a hit.

The message endlessly espoused, Conor tells us, 'is that anyone can learn the craft of screenwriting by taking up the limited and repeated techniques offered. Adhering to the structural calculations and formulae upon which so many classic and successful films and television programs are based.'

And this host is now legion. Carmen Sofía Brenes calculated that between 2007 and 2012 more than 100 new books on screenwriting were accessioned to the United States Library of Congress. With titles ranging from the *Complete Screenwriting Course* to *Your Screenplay sucks!* Some are fine and interesting works but others have questionable legitimacy. We live in the age of what Phil Parker calls the 'new structuralists.'

For me these approaches are at best deluding and bring chimpanzees typing Hamlet to mind, and at worst dangerous, locking the student into only one form of expression. It's called a screen play so where is the 'play' when we have only one sandpit to go wild in.

But perhaps the tide is beginning to turn. In a recent addition to the pantheon by Charlie Harris he warns us that what his 'book will not give you is a one size fits all formula', and he goes on that 'a living screenplay comes from a process of discovery. A good writer learns to live with, indeed welcome, uncertainty.'

On his popular blog *Script Gods Must Die*, writer director Paul Peditto has openly derided the effect Field has had on screenwriting alleging 'his system dictates that there is only one way to write a movie. And that is loco.'

A feeling echoed by Brüttsch who after studying a great number of texts realised that there is 'a surprisingly low consensus on how to divide films into three acts. The discrepancies seem fundamentally due to the imprecision and vagueness of the paradigm's core ideas, and thus neither the functions ascribed to acts nor the concept of plot points appear to be valid tools for ensuring consistency in analysis.'

UCLA screenwriting lecturer Corey Mandell believes manuals to be deficient. 'Over the years I have brought in agents, managers and producers to speak to my UCLA classes,' he tells us, 'and they all pretty much say the same thing. They can spot a script written to one of the popular structure formulas a mile away, and these scripts almost never succeed.'

In a new book by Emmanuel Oberg, launched this week, he suggests that three act structure is optional. Of more importance is knowing what type of story you are trying to tell.

And we are all contributing to this systemisation of the craft in some way. Our own Iain Macdonald highlighted the fact that when grading screenplays our uncertainties about the aesthetic mean that we fall 'on more objective, technical-rational criteria.' So too when we look across the lecture theatre at all those earnest faces dreaming of screen glory, we must tell them something. Three act structure and its attendant turning points has a strong siren song, and of course it is essential, but we must also tell them what I think is best phrased by the screenwriter Samson Raphaelson who wrote *The Jazz Singer* and forty six other

screenplays, 'I am convinced that the essence of the matter is threefold **feeling, humanity and character.**'

Ian David found that 'recent advances in neuroscience have begun to unravel the part played by emotion in decision-making and creativity. All storytellers rely on emotion, but the screenwriter, conveying the essential narrative and technical information required to make a film, carries a unique burden. Screenplays must act as a bridge from the author to the audience, describing the narrative's capacity to evoke emotion through action and image.'

Murray Smith in his useful book wrote that 'We watch a film, and find ourselves becoming attached to a particular character or characters on the basis of values or qualities roughly congruent with those we possess, or those that we wish to possess, and experience vicariously the emotional experiences of the character.'

The cruelly neglected Wells Root who though a devotee of the three acts also urged us to 'Write a man or woman or child who is everybody, but who becomes in your dramatic story an absorbing variation, a striking original.'

'Start with the heart of any drama', said Lajos Egri '...its characters. Character is the vital material with which an author must work.' And to be fair it is there in many of the volumes I have criticised. McKee believes this argument to be 'specious'. 'Structure is character; character is structure.' Syd Field (1984) too believed that

'Good character is the heart and soul and nervous system of your screenplay. It is through your characters that the viewers experience emotions, through your characters that they are touched...'

So, the script Gods should not die, but perhaps we should worship them a little less. These paradigms the books ask us to adhere to are not wrong but should they be rules? Mckee again highlighted that 'Story is about principles not rules.' How then do we address the balance in the lecture room, in the tutorial?

TO TEACH IS TO BE

There is a profundity of educational research and literature on producing a creative environment. In 2013 Dan Davies and others made a systematic study of 32 papers to identify the key conditions that are most effective in promoting creative skills. The three broad themes that emerged are 'the physical environment, the pedagogical environment and the role of partnerships outside.'

The physical environment is a university, doesn't get much better than that. The pedagogical environment is down to us. As I have shown principals and methods to write we have in abundance but it's the method we teach with that concerns me here. I hold on to Einstein's quote 'it is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression...'

If we wish to teach creativity then first we have to teach creatively. Fautley and Savage in 2007 identified nine key elements that are required to do just that - Be an inspiration, easier said than done, Know your subject, continue learning yourself, make connections, have high expectations, stimulate curiosity, encourage, give them time and finally find your own style.

Day characterises the qualities of a passionate teacher more succinctly, a knowledge of what they teach, and self-knowledge so as to allow an emotional connection to their students. And this I think is paramount. When we examine the contributing factors that can stifle creativity, not just in our students but in all of us, they are a fear of making mistakes, a

dread that we are not very good and a judgemental environment. Those first two are with us from cradle to grave no matter what our success but they are issues we can tackle head on and we must do.

Remember we are asking students to share their story ideas at the birth of those ideas. It is often work that is highly personal, close to their heart and perhaps existentially challenging. Both student and project are fragile. The wrong word, the ill-judged criticism, can result in something dear being cast aside and worst still a student left feeling they have no ability. We must, through our passion and our knowledge make ourselves as 'tenderly vulnerable', to quote Liston, as they are. In this way the physical space and the pedagogical are embracing, nurturing and fun, an environment to screen play.

The outside world is harder to manage. We have students away from home, family and friends. So at Worcester we extensively use peer review. Not just to challenge the material, but also to help the students build new creative support networks. An interesting report by Sue Clayton at Royal Holloway found that peer review was where 'creative ideas are not seen as coming from an indefinable site of private imagination; nor do they come from the precepts of industry *how to* books. They come out of each writer's complex and unique history and practice.' It's Disney's technique of 'displayed thinking', where ideas are incubated by a continuous process of brainstorming during which the originators of the idea allow others to add their input.

Thorne recognised that 'What young people need is guidance, coaching and the sharing of wisdom. (They) need to own and take responsibility for their own learning.' And part of that is giving them the right tools. Just as Fleming threw light on how students learn differently, so too have I seen them respond to different tools for structure and character. We all have

our favourite screwdriver but there are more in the box than the manuals would have us believe.

The number of films that have used The Kübler-Ross model, or the five stages of grief, is a matter of record. From *Groundhog Day* to *The Babadook*. Gustav Freytag's triangle is simplicity itself and often referred to as the model of all narrative and dramatic structure.

Then there's Hegelian dialectic that outlines three stages of development: a thesis, an antithesis and then the tension between the two resolved by synthesis. *Legally Blonde* brilliantly uses this to chart the change in its main character Elle Woods.

The heart of the program of personal recovery for Alcoholics Anonymous, or the Twelve Steps, describes a structure and process that ultimately changes the lives of those that follow it. From hopeless to hopeful. Or death from sclerosis of the liver like Nick Cage in *Leaving Las Vegas*.

Another useful tool is Carl Jung's categories of psychological function which can help shape characters and create interesting paradoxes and, more importantly, conflicts.

Maslov's triangle to help us define what type of story we want to tell and many others we can steal and adapt. CBT therapy, treatment for addictive tendencies, even approaches to marketing strategies and action research. Tools are everywhere. The secret, as my carpentry teacher was so keen to drive home, is to use the right tool for the job. Finding it is an act of creativity in itself.

Francis Ford Coppola believes that 'Although knowledge of structure is helpful, real creativity comes from leaps of faith in which you jump to something illogical. But those leaps form the memorable moments in movies.'

Moments that arise from great scenes charged with emotion. Craig Batty in *Movies that Move Us* acknowledges that in the monomyth 'action is intrinsically linked to character development, or emotional transformation.'

A structure of emotional truth.

So if there is a rule, it's be true. Find the reality in the portrayal of emotional responses to events, care about how someone would react in that situation and treat it honestly. Filter that through your eye.

Charles Harris (2014) defined it beautifully. 'Write until a pattern begins to emerge, a style, something that is different, original and yet truthful. You.' That is the key principle to both being creative and teaching creativity.

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