

**‘The Cross Channel Film Lab’ case study: bringing together students, staff and professionals.**



**Abstract**

**That each new assessment point should be approached by the student with an increased understanding of what it means to work to a ‘professional standard’, forms the basis of the employability-focused Animation and VFX subject area and underpins expectations on both sides of the student/staff equation. The idea that the responsibility to maintain the necessary cutting edge industry links could and should be shared with the students is the suggestion arising from this snapshot of undergraduate involvement in a dynamic international collaboration. The case study looks at a particular workshop from the feature film development project, The Cross Channel Film Lab, in which undergraduates worked with lecturing staff and professional VFX consultants to help advise director/producer teams on how they could utilise visual effects in their films.**

**Research question**

**“Poor is the pupil who does not surpass his master”. Leonardo da Vinci.**

**“The students should be better than you by the end of the 3 years” friend and teacher.**

**Whilst the benefits of working with professionals to students is obvious, I am looking at this in another way and asking:**

- How can professionals benefit from working with students?
- Do students and professionals have more in common than it appears?

- Is there a way in which expectations can be managed so that professionals can see the benefits that come from working with students?
- I'll be looking at internships, finding out how and why companies headhunt new graduates.
- I'm going to ask if it is possible to convince professionals that level 2 and 3 students are a valuable source of knowledge and inspiration in the creative industries, that they can learn from them.
- Looking at collaborative hierarchical structures for film productions and how students can fit into these will form the basis of my research.

## **Rationale for the Study**

### **The Cross Channel Film Lab, a professional practice project**

**The Cross Channel Film Lab (CCFL) <http://crosschannelfilmlab.com> is a training project involving twenty-four directors/film-maker participants from all over the world and is delivered via workshops that bring together technology with screenwriting and production design to create strong feature-film pitch packages aimed at attracting funding to the projects. One of the ways in which lecturing staff on BA Animation and VFX at Falmouth University have been able to stay connected to cutting edge industry practice is through their work with the CCFL.**

**This case study looks at one particular workshop in which a team of undergraduate students were brought in as concept artists and production assistants on the project and worked alongside the lecturing staff and professional VFX consultants. In doing so they were able to become part of the fascinating process of helping to develop feature films that innovate in their use of Stereo 3D and/or VFX.**

**Within their discussion groups the students contributed production design and visual effects ideas as the directors talked through their treatments, aided by professional VFX consultants. Using an animation-oriented visual approach to storytelling students produced quick sketches on paper, while on laptops and tablets they found useful art references inspired by the directors' vision.**

**The students naturally considered the process to be of great value and it was easy to observe the empowering effect the workshop had on them, yet it has been interesting to note how positive the feedback has been from all the professionals involved. In evaluating their comments it became clear that there were some less-obvious advantages for the film-makers in working with Animation and VFX undergraduates. Through the daunting mire of technology associated with visual effects, many of the directors appeared to find interactions with the students comfortably un-intimidating and their enthusiasm infectious, allowing constructive creative thought to take place. In some cases students continued to correspond with the directors beyond the workshops, resulting in commissioned work and good connections for the future.**

**Further observations from this CCFL workshop case-study add weight to the idea that in our increasingly employability-focused HE landscape, if the responsibility to maintain cutting edge creative industry links is shared with students through similar dynamic collaborations, benefits on all sides could be seen.**



I would like to make observations here from a particular three-day workshop in June 2015. In addition I would like to make the suggestion that it may be possible to develop more collaborative opportunities within the University as a whole, working towards what I see as an inevitable integration of the subject the areas of Film, Animation, Games and Television.

**Twenty-four directors and producers from all over the world have been working with BA Animation and VFX student concept artists at [The Cross Channel Film Lab \(CCFL\)](#), a training project for directors that connects the rural areas of Brittany in France and Falmouth University in Cornwall, bringing together screenwriting, technology and production design at an early stage of feature-film development.**

**Animation and VFX students, Giacomo Ghigo, Lokii Raine, Katie Wyman, Beverly Charoensap and Leonie Isaacs acted as creative consultants, working alongside staff and VFX industry professionals to help advise directors and producers on how they could utilise visual effects in their films.**

**While Lokii had an aptitude for organisation and took on a role as assistant to the CCFL directors, third year student Beverly worked with the others to create concept art and source interesting visual references during the story**

discussions, continuing her correspondence with some of the directors beyond the workshop.

“This was a simulated work environment and it was great to be asked for our opinions” said Animation and VFX student, Giacomo, “I found the hands-on approach of sketching out the directors’ ideas to be a very engaging experience.”

“We are used to seeing student work,” said Leonie “so it was interesting to see professional examples of feature films at the early development stage.”

Katie said, “I enjoyed meeting people from the film industry and getting a sense of their creative process. The workshop was quite relaxed and there didn’t even appear to be a great gulf between us students and the directors. They seemed to genuinely value our input and were open to new ideas.”

Feedback on the students’ work from all the CCFL participants has been enthusiastic and plans are afoot for more student involvement of this nature at the next Cross Channel Film Lab workshop at Falmouth University.



**Team-work at the CCFL workshops, a dynamic mix of skills**

Once the decision had been made and the students selected, their infectious enthusiasm generated an energy that was to continue through the preparatory discussions, throughout the four-day workshop and filter through to the director participants.

**Workshop discussions centred around the desire of the filmmakers to establish a unique style and production design for their film. All of the selected students were visual artists with a well-developed understanding of how to apply their art skills to technology. In addition and importantly the students had worked successfully as part of a creative team, having been educated as part of the studio system operated on the course in how to work in this way. Learning to use a wide range of computer programmes is an important part of what the students on the Animation and VFX course do. They are facilitated in this by the lecturers, who utilise the latest versions of software in the teaching of animation and art skills. Often there is a need to act as a balancing force and to help the students to recognize that the limitations of the software, in bringing them back to some basic art, design and storytelling principles.**



**The students were organized into small teams in an Exchange seminar room with tables; two teams working simultaneously so that students who were particularly interested in a project could select ones that were suited to them. Each team contained 2-3 students, 2-3 professional VFX supervisors, a director (in some cases with a producer) and myself overseeing and moving between groups. All participants used a range of materials: tablets, laptops, sketchbooks, notebooks and occasionally the seminar projector. As the directors talked about their ideas, the students used their animation-oriented approach to storytelling, in which writing *is* a visual process, to produce quick sketches on paper or to find interesting art references on the web, sparked from the ideas being expressed, all the time using laptops and tablets.**

**The dynamic mixture of undergraduate animators, academic staff, directors and industry professionals turned out to be an enriching**

**experience for all involved. But it was in fact the real mix of artists, professional users of technology, directors and producers and the many differing skills around the table that enabled the excellent results. As the staff member responsible for putting the team together and overseeing the process, I was able to watch their work with a certain pride and observe the empowering effect that the consultation role in which they had been placed, was having on the students. At times there was a tangible excitement in the room as one idea tumbled on top of another and an interesting phenomenon occurred: despite having been introduced to the directors as students, they were being consulted seriously throughout the process as experts in their field. In addition, the students were treated with respect by the professional VFX supervisors who worked alongside them. Although the VFX supervisors were able to provide budgeting insights that students could not, as artists working with technology the Animation students were always listened to with interest.**



**It is possible to speculate that one of the reasons for the success of this workshop for all involved is that although directors are naturally excited by the possibilities that animation, VFX, motion capture and pre-viz can offer them, tools that allow filmmakers to take us to strange worlds inhabited by characters that are limited only by the confines of their imagination, (Susan Zwerman, Jeffrey A. Okun 2014), the technological process of getting there appears (and indeed often is), complex and daunting. To help them de-mystify some of the possibilities, the directors appeared to find interactions with the students less intimidating than the professionals.**

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