

# Developing Professional Attitudes and Capability through an Arts Experience Documentary Film Making Project

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*'If a picture is worth a thousand words, then, at 24 frames per second, the moving images of an average, 90-minute film must be worth 129,600,000 - approximately 568 times the number of words that exist in the English language!' (Jeremy Barham, 2009)*

### Introduction

Have you ever sat through the credits at the end of a film and marvelled at the number of people involved in a production and the multiplicity of technical, managerial and artistic roles that are portrayed? Film projects provide enormous scope for coordinated collaborative working - they offer opportunities for thinking about, planning and decision making on a significant scale, for team working and purposeful communication, for taking the initiative, for developing and applying specific technical skills, for time management and budget control, not to mention the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of collaborative working. The end result - a film is a very tangible product that all who have contributed can take pride in, but there are many intangible bi-products like for example new relationships that can be utilised for further collaboration.

All these things were in our mind when we decided to use the idea of a film project as the vehicle for improving learning and teaching through a Fellowship that was awarded in June 2009 by the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education (SCEPTrE). The principal motivation for the project was to improve the opportunities for students on some of our undergraduate programmes that do not currently include a professional placement or for students who cannot or do not want to undertake a year long placement to develop and use capabilities that are necessary for being an effective professional.

Another important motivation was the desire to develop stronger collaborative links between the Departments of Music & Sound Recording and Dance, Film & Theatre Studies, and the Guildford School of Acting (GSA) which had just joined the University at the time the Fellowship project was being designed. The project also provided the possibility for enhancing links between the university and professionals working in film making and film music/sound design.

The project aimed to provide an opportunity for students to work together and with industry experts in the production of a filmed documentary showcasing the learning and teaching associated with the creative and cultural industries that take place at Surrey University: music; composition and performance, dance; choreography and performance and video production were all featured. The intention was to showcase student activities and also the University's involvement in cultural activity that involved people and organisations in the wider external community. We were looking for a good story that could be captured and made available through a professionally produced multimedia DVD: the intention was to use the student-made media to promote the Surrey arts educational experience and use it as marketing tool. This meant the materials had to be of very high quality.

We anticipated that the students would gain valuable experience and develop important professional capabilities in the process so we designed in to the process opportunities for students to reflect on the process of creative collaboration required by the project.

## Film and DVD Products

The products that were created through the process, namely the DVD films – speak for themselves. Extracts from the films can be viewed at: <http://learningtobeprofessional.pbworks.com/w/page/33573617/Arts-Experience-Documentary-Film-Making-Project>

Events filmed as part of the Arts Experience project include:

- Composition concerts
- Lunchtime recitals
- Free for All concerts
- University of Surrey Big Band concert
- Composition/Choreography weekend workshop
- University Symphony Orchestra and Choir Cathedral concert
- PATS Sound Installation & Improvisation event
- GSA production of *Wildest Dreams*
- Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*
- Guildford International Music Festival
- The Descent of the Angel (vertical dance, Cathedral tower)
- Interview with Vice-Chancellor, Prof Chris Snowden
- Interview with Head of Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, Prof Phil Powrie
- Interviews with Surrey placement student and Graduates at LSO St Luke's
- JVC 'Sound and Vision' Film Competition winning entries

The resulting 25-minute film was released at the start of the 2010-11 academic year, in DVD format (approximately 200 copies) for distribution to interested parties. Excerpts will also be utilized by the various departments in their website and admissions material, at Faculty level for promotional purposes, and for viewing on the SCEPTReE webpages as a departure point for further reflection on collaborative, student-focussed and professionally guided experiential learning processes. The DVD contains links on its main menu to a series of short, self-contained films of music, dance, theatre and film activities made during the project, excerpts of which have been used to form the main feature.

A high-profile University-wide launch of the DVD was undertaken in early October 2010. The launch included presentations by the Vice-Chancellor, Dean of Faculty and project leaders. Invitees included staff and students from across the University, external partners and industry professionals who have supported or have been connected with the Arts Experience project.

On the basis of the critical mass of internal and external collaborative activity generated by the project, Arts Experience also initiated the new annual 'Sound and Vision' filmmaking competition, sponsored by JVC. This is specifically targeted at undergraduate students in Music & Sound Recording, Dance Film and Theatre Studies, and the Guildford School of Acting (GSA) in order to give them added opportunities for creative partnership and reflective professional practice, in the making of a short 5-minute film with original music/soundtrack.

## The Collaborative Process

The Arts Experience project provided the opportunity for over 60 students in the Departments of Music & Sound Recording, Dance Film and Theatre Studies, and the Guildford School of Acting (GSA) to collaborate with each other and with industry professionals in the production of a multi-media documentary charting the whole spectrum of creative arts activities taking place at the University of Surrey during the academic year 2009-10. Music, dance, theatre and film events were filmed and reflected upon through interviews and discussion with participants, staff, the Vice-Chancellor and the incoming Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, in order to demonstrate the vital contribution made by such activities to the academic and cultural life of the University, and to the future career prospects of Surrey Graduates.

The project leaders formulated a detailed timetable of arts-related events taking place during the academic year 2009-10, and earmarked those which they considered would be appropriate for filming and inclusion in the documentary. Essential project roles were identified and drawn up on shooting schedules, ready for students to sign up for. An initial marketing video was made by students to promote the Arts Experience idea <http://www.youtube.com/sceptresurrey#p/u/256/wnVGmV-ar80>

A plenary meeting was held in October 2009 for all students interested in taking part in the project, At this meeting (attended by in excess of 70 students from departments of Film, Theatre, Sociology, Music, English, Dance, and Media Studies), the project leaders introduced and outlined the aims and objectives of the project, described the various roles attached to it, fielded numerous inquiries and distributed schedules for students to express their interest in contributing to the project by signing up in one or more of the following capacities:

- Production managers
- Production researchers
- Production assistants
- Presenters and voice-over artists
- Post production team
- Dance consultants
- Theatre studies consultants
- Production designers
- Music consultants
- Music composers
- Sound recordists

Over 140 individual expressions of interest were received as a result of the meeting, during which the potential of the project was enthusiastically recognized, and warmly responded to, by the student body.

Production groups were initially identified by the project leaders to manage the first shoots. Meetings were held with smaller groups of participating students to discuss the practicalities of undertaking shoots and the responsibilities for ensuring that the correct documentation (such as production sheets and release forms) was completed for each engagement. Over a short period several key members of the student personnel emerged as having particularly effective skills in certain areas, and those with strong organizational skills were able to take the lead in managing subsequent shooting activities with a considerable degree of autonomy.

At various stages of the project, meetings were held between the project leaders and participating students to monitor progress, assess the quality of filmed material, discuss possible improvements/adjustments to shooting protocols and techniques, and to plan further shooting tasks. It was the experience of the project leaders that timing of the tasks sensibly around examination periods was essential so as not to overburden students and to maintain a realistic level of commitment. It was also found that there inevitably emerged a variety in the degree to which students required guidance from project leaders. While some worked extremely well independently, others needed closer supervision. However, most students conducted themselves with a high level of professionalism and maturity, producing imaginative results and addressing problems and opportunities creatively and positively. This was one of the most gratifying aspects of the project.

During the course of the project various methods of communication among leaders and participants were contemplated and trialled, and it was found that having a dedicated Arts Experience e-mail account proved to be the most efficient means of interaction. On occasions students were able to respond through this at short notice to a new filming opportunity, and very few of the planned shoots proved impractical.

In order to enhance the level of professional training embedded within the project, industry experts were enlisted (utilizing Fellowship funds) to deliver workshops, masterclasses, talks and training days. On the film side, a professional filmmaker, editor and lighting expert was invited to tutor students in various aspects of filming techniques, and a copyright consultant employed to clarify and inform participants of current complexities in UK rights laws; on the music side, a professional film music composer, sound editor and music consultant was

employed to give highly successful and well-received workshops in the MacLabs teaching facility to students interested in composing music and designing sound for the documentary.

The GSA contribution to the Arts Experience film underwent several changes during the course of the project. GSA students contributed in three main areas. Firstly, in the filming and editing of rehearsals and performances for an Alan Ayckbourn's play 'Wildest Dreams', which was performed in the playhouse in February 2010.

David Newell, a documentary film maker, was invited to teach a workshop with the cast of 'Wildest Dreams'. It provided a great opportunity for students to engage in subject matter normally outside of their curriculum. The students learned about shooting and cutting techniques and drew up their plan of action for the shoot. Three excellent students were recruited from the University of Surrey BA in Film Studies TV module, to do the filming and editing but GSA students were involved in the choices, assembly and film editing process which was a great learning curve for them.

In addition two GSA students were invited to conduct interviews on camera in the TV studio with Vice Chancellor and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences. GSA students provided the voice over component of the non-GSA parts of the Arts Experience Film. Overall GSA students greatly benefited from the workshops in Television Presenting, Documentary Film Making and Handling the Media that were offered as part of the support for the film making process. An unanticipated outcome was the influence the project had on the undergraduate curriculum: the Head of Undergraduate Studies at GSA is now planning to include some Media Studies and Presenting work in the new curriculum starting in 2011.

## **Student Testimonies**

A number of students who worked on the project were contacted by SCEPTRe using email and invited to provide feedback on their experience, in particular to explain:

- Their role in the production
- The value and benefits of the experience to them
- What they learnt from the process

Their testimonies highlight the value of being involved in this collaborative, real world challenge through which they gained valuable experience that was relevant to being a professional in their chosen field, developed a range of capabilities that are important to being an effective professional and insights into what being professional means. It helped them develop their portfolio and, in one case, helped them secure an agent and their first TV role.

'Arts Experience was a fantastic way to explore the potentials of collaboration between the Music Department and the Film Department. As a Music and Sound Recording student, I have always been interested in using my skills in the realm of motion picture, and getting involved in the Arts Experience project was a great start. I was given the opportunity to use my sound recording skills for producing the documentary, and as a side-project I also got to compose original music for the Film Department's Student Showreel, which was an excellent opportunity. Arts Experience improved my skills of working with other people in the film industry and made me more familiar with the professional environment. Throughout the process I learnt about how video editing on Apple's Final Cut Pro works. This was very useful as I wasn't familiar with the technical aspects of video before. I also learnt about various video formats and gained some general information about professional filming equipment.

I very much enjoyed the experience, and as a result I am now much more familiar with the process of film-making. I have also made a number of very good friends in the Film Department, with whom I am certainly hoping to take part in further collaborative projects in the future.'

**Mario Bordbar Level 1 Sound Recording Student**

'Knowing that my experience is limited in art forms other than dance, I signed up to be a production assistant and a shadow production manager for ArtsExperience in 2009. I got the chance to work with music and film students as I hoped to in the first production filming, and became the production manager in the next two.

Being in a leadership position in ArtsExperience was one of the small but important steps towards my professional development. As an aspiring arts manager those were the first times I learnt to work with artists who had artistic visions in mind and I made sure that I gave them the conditions so that they can fulfill those visions while at the same time completing the tasks assigned to the group.

The experience became better and better following each production. I learnt some things from each of them and eventually felt more in control as a leader. This had built my confidence tremendously and strengthened my aspiration to be an arts manager. Thank you, ArtsExperience!

**JaiXuan Hon Level 3 Dance Student who performed one of the production manager roles**

'I came to United Kingdom in October last year and the university had already prepared something for us – the Arts Experience project. I went to the first meeting for the Arts experience in October, but I got involved in it only later.

The first event I filmed was GSA production *Wildest Dreams* and after it more and more events occurred. I took part in filming PATS Sound Installation, interviews with the Vice-Chancellor and Surrey graduates at LSO. I was the camera person, the sound person, the floor manager in the TV Studio, the interviewer and the editor. However, Checkov's *The Cherry Orchard* made the biggest impression on me, because we were filming the rehearsals and preparation, taking interviews from theatre students (at the same time making connections with future actors in our films!) for several weeks, moreover I did most of the editing. It was not a simple task, but a challenge and a big responsibility to do our best. We made quite a few mistakes in the process, but we had the time to learn from them and ask the more experienced people around us in case we needed help.

Also, I participated in some invaluable workshops with people outside university. We learnt how to make proper interviews with a well known cinematographer Nick Gordon Smith, we went to the famous Lionhead Studios in Guildford and learnt how to work quickly in a team and create a promo video. And then we had an especially useful lecture about copywriting – one of the major issues in the 'professional' world. Consequently just in one year I managed to gain plenty of information about the film industry, the filming process (planning, writing, filming, editing), and most importantly I learnt about myself.

Currently I am a second year film student and I realize how competitive the film industry is. However, I am more than excited to get into it since the University of Surrey gave me the ability to actually explore myself in the field, realize what I like, what I am good at and what I can do better. I am sure now that film is the field I honestly want to be in. Moreover, the Arts Experience helped to make invaluable connections and friendships with the fellow students – after all you must become a good team after several weeks of filming! If I had the chance to repeat it again, I would try to get involved from the very start so not to miss any opportunity to learn something new, to participate in a multicultural event and to feel an important part of my university.'

**Ieva Bachtiarova Level 1 Film Studies**

'For me the arts experience was an extremely rewarding process. I worked within a group of friends and together we conducted and recorded interviews and also concerts. I probably put in around 10 hours of work into the process, in terms of filming, editing and preparation. In terms of my work within the process I tended to be on camera and direct the interviews, occasionally doing the interviewing too.

Overall, the experience was invaluable. Not only did it add to my familiarity with the Canon cameras and the filmmaking process but also it gave me my first experience of filming within a professional environment when I interviewed staff at the London Symphony Orchestra. At first I felt like I had been thrown in at the deep end as I had a limited level of professionalism, but now I feel that I thrived within the situation. Without the art experience I wouldn't have known that I was able to rise to this level of a challenge in filmmaking.

I would definitely recommend film students to get involved in the arts experience, not only because it is a huge collaboration between students, staff and professionals but because it has the ability to teach you more than your practical modules ever could. The arts experience teaches you what it means to be behind the camera within a professional environment and makes you step out of your comfort zone. I found this to be incredibly rewarding as I felt as if I learnt more about my passion and interests in terms of filmmaking. It taught me that I don't just want to be behind the camera but I want to be in control of it all, that I want to direct. I was given this chance when I directed an interview with the Vice Chancellor of the university in the TV studio. I learnt a lot this day, as it was only the second time I had been into the studio. This put in the deep end even more so, but it is situations like this where you either sink or swim. Without the arts experience I wouldn't have known how passionate I am about filming as a process, not just narrative and visuals but the process of creating a film.'

**Nathan Coetzee Level 1 Film Studies**

'Working as the DSM for JC on 'Wildest Dreams' was a challenging and rewarding experience. High standards were expected from both the cast and production crew. The making of the documentary film for the SCEPTrE project was a new experience for me and provided valuable insights into the making of a play from the actor's point of view. Being allowed to express our feelings and ideas with regard to the process was a welcome change from the traditional rehearsal process and the resulting communication between cast and crew was beneficial to the end product. I learned a lot.'

**Jess Ormsby GSA Production Student 2010.**

'While involved in the amazing learning process of the MAA Film Project 2010, I was given the opportunity to act as interviewer for the Arts experience SCEPTRe project. I learned much from the sensitive preparation and the interview itself where I experienced the pressure of a professional set for the first time. I thought it entirely appropriate that the university used a student interviewer to discuss the Arts at the University of Surrey, giving a unique professional experience and the opportunity to demonstrate the value of an arts education in a single project. I am very grateful for this opportunity and utterly convinced of the value of the SCEPTRe philosophy.'

**Rosalind Bird. GSA MAA 2010**

'I enjoyed the making of the documentary of 'Wildest Dreams'. Working with JC is always unconventional and exciting and I grew more in my work with her than in any other aspect of my training. I showed the documentary to agents and casting directors who liked the work. I signed with my agent and booked my first T.V. job as a direct result of the SCEPTRe Project.'

**Charlie MacGecha. GSA BA 2010**

I was the cameraman for the orchestra/choir rehearsals. It took about 2-3 hours of filming. It was a great experience, because the Guildford Cathedral, where the rehearsals took place is very cinematic. I discovered different framing possibilities and also learned how to choose a place for the interviews in terms of lighting conditions. We learnt how to film in a huge building, even though at first we thought we might have some issues with it. Apart from that, it was nice to hear professional opera singers with the university choir, I felt I was a part of this cultural event, too. Therefore, Artsexperience not only helped me to build my portfolio but also to discover different horizons!

**Glebs Nagornijs Level 1 Film Studies**

## **Effects and impacts of the project**

The Arts Experience project has introduced many actual and many potential future benefits to the student experience at Surrey, in the form of inter-departmental collaboration, professional training, experiential learning, industry links, arts promotion and staff expertise.

It has enabled for the first time working partnerships among Faculty departments and the GSA in ways that reflect closely the conditions of professional practice in film making and arts-based media production. With film, the pre-eminent cultural form of our age, as its central focus, the project has depended upon the multiple input of musicians, dancers, actors, and production teams both in the creation of the filmed material and in the reflection on and documenting of the experience of undertaking the filming. The high degree of co-operation and interaction has led to new formal and informal staff-staff, student-student and staff-student working associations that will continue to benefit the learning environment in the arts at the University long after the project has officially come to an end. Two of the project leaders (Barham and Davis) are developing proposals for new combined film and music academic modules that embed the good practice of the Arts Experience project within an accredited learning model. This will enhance the ways in which the existing project has already addressed one of the Fellowship's key strategies of developing curricular experiences that combine learning from academic, work and life experiences. Barham and Davis are also formulating plans to cement the film-making skills and processes developed through the project in the establishing of a 'Surrey Film Institute' body alongside Surrey TV, peopled by staff and UG/PG students 'for hire', to fulfil on-campus, and in due course external, film-making commissions. GSA (Carey) had the opportunity to offer students workshops in Media, Documentary and Presenting, subjects not previously part of the GSA curriculum. These elements will be part of the planning for the new curriculum in 2011.

The project has afforded students on programmes currently with limited professional placement opportunities experience in developing new ways of researching, planning, producing and editing a work of documentary film. Key skills in all areas of professional film making have been central to the learning process, for example:

- Development of initial proposal (identification of key personnel, liaising, feasibility studies, communication, permissions)
- Production management (administration of shoots, camerawork, sound recording, lighting, interview techniques)
- Post-production (editing, voice-over, music composition, sound design, titling, narrative structuring).

This, combined with opportunities for students to reflect on experienced processes, and with professional guidance from newly formed external industry links, has promoted collaborative learning within and outside the University, and has contributed to curriculum development by way of encouraging students to bring the professional and personal development required by the Arts Experience project to bear on the entirety of their academic life at the University. Newly forged industry links will be of great benefit to the University's culture and profile within the professional arena, and will offer increased opportunities for external student mentoring, work placement and long-term student employment prospects. These benefits have been matched by greatly enhanced levels of staff expertise amongst the Fellows in project managing and leading, as well as exploring and sharing aspects of curricula and professional practice they might not otherwise have had access to. All of these personal and professional enhancements will have long-term effects on the delivery of programmes, the wider student experience and the professional development of all concerned.

The Arts Experience project's end product and surrounding documentation not only serves as a high-quality record of its own achievements, but longer-term will also provide a valuable teaching resource and model of best practice in arts collaboration, creative partnership, intermingling of the professional and the academic, and the mining of the potential for student-led practical initiatives. Its steps in furthering the integration of the GSA in the University context serve as an excellent starting point for exciting future interactions. Its development of new University-industry partnerships is of enormous long-term value, exemplified by the inaugural JVC 'Sound and Vision' film-making competition which will provide an ongoing, year-on-year platform for the recognition and rewarding of student creative endeavour in multi-media collaborative environments. The quality and flexibility of the DVD content significantly increase the potential for promoting the arts at the University for recruitment purposes, and this aligns with current vigorous Faculty marketing strategies.

Sustaining these sorts of enterprises is difficult but two of us (JB and LD) are keen to build on the ArtsExperience by creating a multidisciplinary project involving arts students around the filming of a 3-day music conference being hosted at Surrey in July 2011. The 'Mahler Centenary Conference' focuses on the music and culture of Gustav Mahler (1860-1911), one of the key figures in early modernist music whose anniversary years are 2010-11. Mahler's music is truly interdisciplinary in context - as well as the usual papers and discussions from scholars and creative practitioners from all over the world, as part of the conference we are holding musical and possibly dance performances, a composers' forum, a sound installation, as well as an art exhibition and a tour of the Hatchlands collection of musical instruments (including a piano owned and used by Mahler himself). This would offer a great opportunity for existing and indeed new students to use the SCEPTR<sub>E</sub>/Arts Experience framework to put into practice the collaborative film-making skills that have been learnt over the last year, in the professional context of an event with international exposure.

**To view extracts from the DVD visit**

<http://learningtobeprofessional.pbworks.com/w/page/33573617/Arts-Experience-Documentary-Film-Making-Project>