Taking a stance: resistance, faking and Muddling Through

Roy Hanney

To cite this article: Roy Hanney (2016) Taking a stance: resistance, faking and Muddling Through, Journal of Media Practice, 17:1, 4-20

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2016.1159437

Published online: 19 May 2016.
Taking a stance: resistance, faking and Muddling Through

Roy Hanney

School of Media Arts & Technology, Southampton Solent University, Southampton, UK

ABSTRACT
This article focuses on project-based learning in media practice education, identifying three themes of interest. The first questions the recontextualisation of practice from the professional to a pedagogic environment. The second theme questions how much we know about what goes on inside a project and contrasts the ways in which students ‘do’ projects with the ways in which educators idealise project work as a mirror of professional practice. The final theme questions whether processes and procedures external to a project environment may result in a decoupling between professional practice and the everyday formulations of practice enacted by students. While educators may seek to encourage students to simultaneously adopt academic, professional and creative identities, as part of an active and purposeful approach to doing projects, this article questions whether tensions between these identities may actually encourage students to engage in decoupling behaviour. The article aims to encourage media practice educators to reflect on their own use of projects and question the ways in which the identities students claim as learners align with educator’s beliefs and values.

Rationale
The research for this article emerges from the experience of the author as a media practice educator working in UK-based universities for close to 15 years. Reflecting on this experience, the author notes the manner in which students respond to the media practice curriculum in surprising ways. By way of example, a few quotes noted during tutorials with students are offered. Student A, when offered advice about how to better integrate within their production group, responded to the suggestion that they research some sound design options and present these to the team with the phrase ‘… that is not how I work…’. When Student B was asked a question about how they might evidence their creative process in an assessment portfolio at the end of a semester, they replied ‘… can I backdate the Gantt Chart and put that in my portfolio?’ Another, Student C, in a tutorial in which the author had suggested they look at the work of particular filmmakers in order to be able to contextualise their own work, commented ‘… I adopted Louis Theroux’s style for my documentary …’. Even though the student’s film bore no relation to the work of this filmmaker, a practitioner who had been introduced to the student only the
week before after the student’s film had already been shot and edited. And finally Student D, when faced with the prospect of having to produce a portfolio of evidence of their creative process for the end of semester assessment, commented ‘… I will just make it up ….’ In each of these quotes, there is an implicit suggestion that students are taking a stance of resistance and faking in response to a curriculum that educators have construed as authentically mirroring professional practice. In particular, the use of projects as a means of reflecting professional practice is thought to encourage student engagement and develop employability (de Graaff and Kolmos 2007). However, rather than motivate student engagement with learning, the quotes above suggest students appear to be taking a stance towards this curriculum that seems to undermine the very reasons for participating in the first place.

The article will begin by reviewing the reasons for undertaking research into media practice education and the use of project-based learning (PjBL) as a pedagogic tool. It will briefly explore the relationship between the media practice curriculum and professional practice in order to clarify some terminological distinctions and set out a field of enquiry. Following on, the article will show that there is an urgent need for research into the pedagogy of media practice education and in particular the pedagogy of PjBL. The article will then explore three key themes that have emerged from research into the problems of projects that may be of concern to media practice educators. The first area of concern, that of recontextualisation, sets up a range of issues from which emerge a number of subsidiary themes. ‘Recontextualisation’ refers to the process of translocating professional practice from the world of work into an academic setting and asks questions about what it means to do this (Bernstein 2000). There is a possibility that the process of translocation has a distorting effect on professional practice that may have consequences for educators and students. In particular, the claim for authenticity that is made for the media practice curriculum is called into question. The article will then focus on an aspect of the recontextualising process that questions the expectations of educators and the nature of expertise as it is applied to the doing of media practice projects in higher education. It sets out the beginnings of some ideas for rethinking the ways in which the doing of projects might be reconceptualised as PjBL. Following on from this discussion, the article will then explore the ways in which the kinds of identities adopted by students may exacerbate the problems already identified by the article and asks questions about how educators can make sense of the confusing multiplicity of identities in play and the ways they impact on the learning experience. The article will conclude with a brief summary and a call to action that identifies a number of topics worthy of further investigation.

**Why study PjBL?**

Creative media businesses, whose sole aim is to produce media artefacts of one kind or another, are commonly acknowledged as project-based enterprises in the literature on organisational studies (Finney 2008; Peterson 2014). These kinds of businesses organise their operations entirely through projects (Whyte et al. 2008, 77), though the forms and techniques for managing those projects may be unique to a particular firm, product output or medium of delivery. This differentiates the business of creative media production from say, a news article in which the repetitive, daily production schedule ‘stresses
continuity more than discontinuity’ (Lundin 2009, 3). So there is a clear difference seen here between project-based enterprises and other types of businesses whose organisational structure is not built around the delivery of projects as a core principle. Even though, for those employed in the media who experience projects on a day-to-day basis, it may be that ‘working procedures are so taken-for-granted and embedded’ (Lundin 2009, 2) that they are hidden from view. Almost like the air that everyone breathes, they are crucial but invisible. Lundin (2009, 2) suggests that projects are part and parcel of the ‘industrial wisdom’ of media practice. As such they are not considered problematic and therefore not worthy of research. It is possible that projects are so deeply embedded into the culture of professional media practice that they constitute themselves as tools in the Heideggerian sense of the word (Dreyfus 1991). In that they are ready-at-hand, that is, practitioners do not think about them when they use them, they are invisible extensions of their own presence within the world of work and cannot be separated from their own self-identity and practice.

In media practice education, educators take great pains to replicate the particular models of production that they see in industrial contexts and map them onto the curriculum. Consequently, the adoption of projects as a means of structuring the doing of practice is commonplace. In fact, the notion of a media practice curriculum that is not orientated around the doing of projects is impossible to conceive. This would appear to be a very different case from, say hypothetically, a course in geography in which a decision has been made by a course team to adopt PjBL in order to fulfil a particular pedagogic need. It may well be the case that geographers do projects but to argue that all businesses operating in this field are project-based enterprises would seem untenable. Conversely, in media practice education, educators do not get to choose to do projects. It is in the very nature of media practice to do projects. It cannot be avoided. Thus, when educators try and replicate the practices they see in industry, in order to teach these practices they automatically adopt ‘projects’ as the means of doing this. Usefully for educators, projects fit easily into the time-delineated structures of academic life. They produce the kinds of outputs that can be easily measured or assessed, for example, a media artefact. It is assumed that doing projects mirrors the real-world practices of media production and contributes to the development of ‘job-ready’ graduates. Consequently, it is thought that doing projects constitutes an authentic media practice curriculum (Barab and Duffy 2012).

There is a two-sidedness to projects here that induces a kind of double hermeneutic, to misuse a concept proposed by Giddens (1987). In that, PjBL is deployed in order to teach the doing of projects. Or, to put it another way, while projects are the very essence of media practice in the context of the academic setting they are also a pedagogical discourse, that is, PjBL. Trying to tease the two sides of this dichotomy apart is complex but necessary, since the tension between the practice of projects in the professional realm and, as is argued here, the doing of projects within an academic setting sets up a series of problems for educators. However, outside the fields of engineering (see e.g. de Graaff and Kolmos 2007), there has been very little research undertaken on the use of PjBL in higher education and almost none in the field of media practice education, bar one significant study into the pedagogy of screenwriting (Colwell 2014). Even within the subject discipline of project management, there is wide and disparate debate about the nature of projects, and even the definition of the term ‘project’ is much disputed.
So, it would seem that there is still work to be done if educators wish to properly understand ‘what it is we do when we do this thing called a project’ (Hodgson and Cicmil 2006, 32).

This article takes as its principal methodology the possibility for critical reflection as an effective research tool. It is argued here that it offers an opportunity for articulating experiences in a way that enables educators to produce constructive meanings from their experiences. It encourages an unpicking of assumptions (Fook 2011, 59) that might lead to the reformulation of thoughts, a redirecting of action and the production of new meaning. There is a dialogic exploration of experience in critical reflection that, for example, takes advantage of the researchers’ repeated conversations with students individually and in groups over some 15 years of experience as a media practice educator. There is a special interest in those unguarded moments when students reveal some aspect of their practice which may offer an insight into the backstage performances that are often enacted unseen and unavailable to the educator. Moments pass fleetingly yet hold the researcher’s attention for months or years after. Such valuable insights evidence a dynamic interaction (Fook 2011, 60) between the subject and researcher that illuminates a shared experience in which the researcher is participant. In this way, critical reflection is symptomatic of a dialogic (Fook 2011, 60) exploration, one that is integrative (61), processing the complexity of experience through the contextualising framework of theory. In doing so, the research is able to produce new linguistic descriptions that articulate their observations in such a way that they can be communicated. Fook (2011, 61) describes the ways in which critical reflection as a research method is transformative (61), linking personal experience, professional practice and social context with research in ways that can provide a feeling of agency and lead to action.

Seen through the lens of critical reflection as a research methodology, this body of experiential knowledge, held tacitly by the researcher, would seem to be a useful resource and an excellent starting point for a deeper questioning about what it is students do when they do projects. The particular choices of theoretical framework offered below are intended to offer a scaffolding for understanding and making sense of the researchers’ ongoing critical reflection and for framing the questions the researcher has been asking about the nature of projects.

**The pedagogy of PjBL**

It is simple enough to establish that the topic of PjBL in media practice education has been under-theorised, since a search of the literature on the topic will result in a very limited return. The material that does exist usually suggests that more needs to be done and often outlines an agenda for further research. For example, Helle, Tynjälä, and Olkinuora (2006) set out to undertake a thorough literature review of the research on PjBL, asking questions about the nature of PjBL and its pedagogical value in post-secondary education. While their study offers an informative review of the literature, their evaluation of the pedagogical benefits of PjBL suggests that the existing material tends towards course descriptions rather than empirically grounded research (Helle, Tynjälä, and Olkinuora 2006, 306). Typically, this would include advice on how to organise PjBL activities with advice on which tools to use and the possible ways in which assessment might be deployed. What is offered here is a conception of PjBL as an administrative container for learning...
rather than an explanation of the ways in which learning occurs. This would appear to mirror the literature in the subject discipline of project management, which, until the advent of the Making Projects Critical movement (see Hodgson and Cicmil 2006), largely focused on the procedural and analysis of the how of doing projects.

In another example, a recent review of enterprise initiatives within UK universities (Goode, Jackson, and Molesworth 2014) looked at the range of provision of live projects within the sector and makes useful comparisons between approaches taken by differing universities. Live projects have a real client with a real business need who set a brief, which students undertake to deliver. Live projects are seen as valuable because they are thought to bring a degree of situated practice into the academic setting and are thought to provide a degree of authenticity for student projects. From this report, it is possible to gauge quite how embedded the use of live projects has become within the contemporary university curriculum. The reported use of live projects in the study extends to a broad range of subject disciplines, having emerged originally in the field of design education in the mid-1960s (Hanney 2013, 48). This just goes to show how much the use of live projects has since colonised the wider curriculum. What is significant here though is the identification by the study of the deficiency of research in support of the use of live projects as a productive pedagogy. It questions the lack of evaluation of pedagogic issues such as expectations from students, staff and stakeholders, ethical dilemmas posed by students undertaking unpaid freelance work, issues around motivation and barriers to success, as well as the ways in which learning on live projects connects between the world of work and the university experience.

Another study, investigating disappointing responses in the National Student Survey (NSS) for the subject area of Art and Design, found a general acceptance among educators within the field that there has been an ‘inadequate level of subject-specific pedagogic research’ ( Vaughan and Yorke 2009, 19). The study identified a feeling within this community that there is a need to develop a pedagogic understanding of the learning and teaching philosophy underpinning the subject and calls for more research into the field of Arts, Design and related disciplines. According to Vaughan and Yorke ( 2009), the kinds of self-identities adopted by students within these fields may conflict with the representations of academic life embedded within the configuration of the NSS. It seems that students of creative practice often feel that they are at odds with the particular kinds of academic organisational structures they encounter. The study implies that students may see these structures as opposing their own self-determined approach to organising their learning, an approach encouraged by educators who take a view of creative practice, which values self-determination and self-negotiated forms of study ( Vaughan and Yorke 2009, 14). The NSS results aside, it is possible that there are serious issues at play here if students are adopting identities that run counter to those that academic institutions see as productive of learning. Such issues could question the very relationship between creativity and learning in practice-based subjects within universities.

Clearly then, if educators are to use PjBL as a purposeful teaching methodology then they should be able to do more than define the tools that are used to deliver a project or describe the process of delivering PjBL. A brief review of media practice course websites reveals the overwhelming adoption of live projects as a method of pedagogic delivery. The approach is often a key selling point for undergraduate programmes, yet a review of the literature concludes that PjBL, at least as it is formulated within media practice education,
is under-theorised. If educators wish to engage with the institutional and governmental challenges facing them, it should be possible to integrate theories of learning into the practice of doing projects, in a way that opens up the student experience to pedagogic enquiry. There is then, a very real need to analyse the experience of students participating in PjBL; re-theorise PjBL as a pedagogy and develop a new model for the use of PjBL in media practice education. Otherwise PjBL is surely no more than an administrative container for structuring learning activities that has little pedagogic value in its own right. Furthermore, this lack of pedagogic theorising calls into question the very authenticity that is claimed by educators for the doing of projects in media practice education.

Recontextualising professional practice as a pedagogic discourse

For Bernstein (2000) the pedagogic discourse is a principle by which other discourses are appropriated and brought into a special relationship with each other for the purpose of selective acquisition and transmission (32). The pedagogic discourse delocates, relocates and refocuses according to its own needs. To give an example, the pedagogic discourse takes professional media practice and transfers it from the workplace into an educational setting in order to produce a media practice education curriculum. But the world of the work is not a discrete object that can be moved from one location to another. The world of work and the practices found there are part of a closed sociological system built around interactions between people within a symbolic domain (Engestrom and Middleton 1998). The workplace is a habitat, ‘a given space, a set of relationships, a range of values, an overall atmosphere, which penetrates it and whoever experiences it’ (Dowling 2009, 18). Furthermore, it has been argued that it is a ‘sociological space that is produced through negotiated meanings in which knowledge is inextricably embedded within the activity system that generates these meanings’ (Porac and Glynn 1999, 583). The suggestion here is that knowledge cannot be separated from the sociological habitat that produces that knowledge. Thus, attempts at relocating knowledge or the habitat within which it is embedded distorts and transforms it, perhaps even in unpredictable ways. For Bernstein the transformation is from an actual unmediated discourse to an imaginary discourse, for example, an unmediated discourse might be carpentry (professional practice), whereas the equivalent imaginary discourse would be woodwork (academic practice) (2000, 32). It is perhaps akin to the idea of doing professional cinematography on set in the workplace as opposed to playing at cinematography, on campus, in an educational setting. That is not to decry, of course, the value of play in education. The point is that when educators take the practice of projects from the world of work and translocate it into an educational context, they are creating an imagined activity, which is somehow thought of as authentically mirroring the original practice.

Those coming from industry into academia as practice educators bring with them a set of values, beliefs, practices and expertise valued by universities and students alike. However, there is often a sense that they are attempting to replicate their experience of professional with no consideration for what that might mean or for how translocation of practices from one domain to another might transform that practice. Garraway (2005) illustrates the way in which this distortion occurs in his study of the development of a vocational qualification for sanitation workers in South Africa. He breaks down the process of recontextualisation into a number of levels of knowledge translation (Garraway...
First, he describes a selective process of sampling, which focuses attention on that which is most relevant to the problem at hand – in this case, the development of a qualification for sanitation workers that meets certain aims and objectives as set by the policies of governing institutions (government, educational frameworks and needs assessments). In this particular instance, Garraway found that it was not possible to visit all possible workplace sites; so a small number that had been recommended for best practice were sampled instead. Thus, the logistical practicalities of sampling had already begun to determine the quality of data being gathered, further narrowing the field of study to the exclusion of alternative, and possibly innovative or otherwise valuable, practices.

The second level of knowledge translation occurs when the things people do in their day-to-day lives are transformed into functional descriptors (Garraway 2005, 7). Often these descriptors are a generalisable contraction for a range of activities that would take place. He gives the example of a sanitation worker who is required to contact local households to investigate existing sanitation arrangements and, in negotiating with them, identify their needs. This was reduced to ‘registering households’ (Garraway 2005, 7), thereby reducing a complex and socially embedded set of activities to a form that is abstracted from the context of its practice. He then goes on to explain the ways in which these functional skills descriptors were then further delinked from the contexts within which they were originally situated, by administrators who wished to organise them into skills-related categories. Having grouped these functional descriptors relating to differing activities from varying contexts into similar skills categories, Garraway explains that only the skills category headings were then transferred to the qualification under development, as learning outcomes. Thus, the process of codifying workplace knowledge transforms it into something else through a recontextualising discourse, producing what Barthes might refer to as ‘work-as-text’, that is, a system of categories and relations that are bought together by the observer (Dowling 2009, 22).

It is possible to imagine a similar process at work in the production of the Creative Skillset, National Occupational Standards (NOS), which is often adopted as a benchmark for developing media practice learning outcomes. To take one random NOS statement by way of example, in this instance a descriptor that is taken from the ‘Creative Media/Film & TV/Camera’ standard. Under the heading of ‘Collect information and develop shooting ideas’, the descriptor states that a professional camera operator should be able to:

Encourage and enable effective liaison between relevant personnel in the camera department and all other relevant personnel to successfully achieve production needs. (Creative Skillset 2012)

It is possible to see from the abstract language used that there are layers of meaning obscured within the descriptor: the nature of ‘effective liaison’, the requirement that there is pre-existing knowledge of what might constitute ‘relevant personnel’ and the related ‘other relevant personnel’ or the allusion to ‘production needs’. These are open statements that allude to a wider sociological world. There is reference to relational knowledge that would be situated within a symbolic and sociological context – knowledge that may have different meanings, for different observers, in different contexts and that would require a capability for a high level of situational discrimination in order to be able to perform effectively in this role. Such a role would differ wildly depending on the situational context of the production (e.g. drama, documentary, corporate, commercial, news and so
on to mention but a few typical scenarios). For example, in any given situation an experienced film production professional may have one understanding of the meaning, having tacit knowledge of the kinds of people who may constitute as relevant personnel – while a student may have a more restricted understanding of the meaning based on information provided purely through coursework material, modelling and tutor explanations. The two domains of activity are different and are mediated by different situated practices.

In a similar manner, if it is possible to conceive of a project as a professional domain of activity, then PjBL is surely a pedagogic domain of activity. The two things are not identical, and Bernstein (2000) argues that the recontextualising process silences the role of culture and context producing a form of ‘jejeune trainability’ (67). Is it possible that this recontextualising discourse renders what initially appears as creative labour, that is, the work undertaken by professionals, into academic labour, that is, the work undertaken by students? If so, it would be possible to argue that the two kinds of work hold different meanings for students and might be approached with differing levels of motivation and engagement. Indeed, Colwell (2014), in his study of screenwriting as pedagogy, suggests that the process of recontextualisation establishes an ‘internal contradiction between the activity and its assessment, which may result in students misrecognising their own learning’ (108). Thus by encouraging students to construct identities around notions of professional practice within an academic setting we are instigating a disjunction between the identity adopted by learners and their own learning experience.

**Recontextualising project processes as pedagogic discourse**

There are further issues of concern that emerge from this unwrapping of the recontextualising process. In particular, there are concerns about the nature of professional expertise and the expectations placed upon students who may be required to perform as project participants against a set of imagined norms. Project management occurs within a framework of professional practice. It requires a high level of expertise that emerges from the experience of problem-solving through repeated iterations of project life cycles (Jarvis 2015). It draws upon a range of tools and techniques that have grown out of historical practices that are embedded in media production, which would be familiar to those working within this community. To draw in an example from drama production, the process of breaking down of a script into its component parts is a simple enough task if you know what to do with the resulting information. On the one hand, this information may appear to exist purely within a logistical domain, yet each piece of information is inextricably linked into a web of critical and creative decisions that impact directly not only on the scheduling and logistics of a production, but also impact on the production of meaning in the final film.

An effective project manager is someone who ‘embodies both explicit knowledge of principles of practice as well as tacit knowledge of how these principles are integrated and applied to practice’ (Colwell 2014, 109). This may be an aspiration for students and educators alike but it does not paint a realistic picture of what students actually do when they are required to undertake projects, especially in relation to the processes of developing, initiating and delivering a project. The issue of concern is that students might not have the necessary experience to conceptualise the ideas behind project
processes and would certainly not be in a position to deliver a project at the same level of expertise as an experienced project manager.

Dreyfus (2004) offers a simplistic but influential taxonomy for characterising expertise that runs from: *novice*, through *advanced beginner*, to *competence*, then *proficiency* and finally to *expert*. At the highest level he sets out the following as a definition of expertise: the expert transcends reliance on rules, guidelines and maxims, has an ‘intuitive grasp of situations based on deep, tacit understanding’, has ‘vision of what is possible’ and uses ‘analytical approaches’ in new situations or in case of problems (Dreyfus 2004, 180). Clearly this level of know-how is aspirational for an undergraduate, even for the stronger students, since, in order to achieve this level of expertise there is a requirement for the practitioner to have been through many iterations of a project life cycle and to have shared with others the experiences of problem-solving, which has led to the development of an intuitive grasp of project processes. Such expertise emerges from an ‘accumulated knowledge base that is acquired experientially through successive iterations of work activities’ (Hanney 2013, 47). This kind of situated, workplace learning would have naturally occurred as practitioners moved through various grades/roles in the workplace.

In the researchers’ own experience, the concept of Communities of Practice as outlined by Wenger (1998) is commonly adopted as a justification for modes of study built around PjBL in course validation documents. Though there often seems to be little consideration as to what this might mean pedagogically. Communities of Practice (1998) commonly involve mentorship by more experienced practitioners at an informal or formal level. A mode of knowledge transmission akin to that experienced on an apprenticeship and not a mode often found within undergraduate courses in media practice. In fact, it is difficult to see how a live project could be formulated as a Community of Practice when there is rarely evidence of expert mentors participating in any way as part of the project team. Yet, with no previous experience, students are still expected to undertake project work that is essentially highly complex and riddled with unpredictable problems. They are required to deploy common project management tools that would normally require high levels of situational discrimination for their effective use – tools which the students have little or no experience of using and the meaning and value of which may be entirely misunderstood.

Being able to participate as part of an effective project team is certainly an essential and valuable employability skill. It is just as important to the creative process as being able to operate a camera or any other piece of technical equipment. If a camera operator cannot competently expose, focus or white balance the camera, then it becomes an obstacle to creativity. It is *present-at-hand* to employ Heidegger’s phrase (Dreyfus 1991), which is to say the object is in the way, it exists but it is not useful and it may even obstruct the creative process. This is just as true for the capability for project working, it is an important and essential part of the creative process that can become as much of an obstacle to creative expression as a conduit for creativity and innovation. It needs to be recognised as such and the ways in which students engage with project processes needs to be explored in depth. Professional project managers operate within a professional framework embedded within a community of practice (Wenger 1998) that has evolved over time into a sophisticated sociological and cultural domain of practice. Students cannot be expected to operate at this level and it would be surprising if they made much sense of the tools and techniques expert practitioners employ. Why would they? After all, it can take many years of practice
for those working in the industry to achieve a level of expertise that places them in a position to be trusted with millions of pounds worth of budget. So how can educators make sense of the ways in which students engage with project work and how might they conceptualise an appropriate methodology for novice practitioners?

**Muddling Through as a novice project methodology**

Lindblom’s (2010) work has been extremely influential in the field of organisational studies and decision-making. He explores the ways in which policy-makers make decisions and this has been usefully adapted as a means of conceptualising the ways in which projects are organised (Wilson 2006). Lindblom contrasts an ideal decision-making method, that of the *Rational Comprehensive Approach*, with the way in which he suggests things are actually done; with *Successive Incremental Comparison*, a method that has come to be known as *Muddling Through*. With the *Rational Comprehensive Approach*, decision-makers evaluate values and set objectives; they then comprehensively analyse all possible solutions available to them, taking account of all potential factors that may influence an outcome. Finally, a choice is made on the basis of the solution that delivers the highest value while meeting the objectives identified at the start of the process. Referred to as a ‘root’ approach (it builds from the base up), it is reliant on theoretical models and accounts, it builds up from the roots ‘starting from fundamentals anew each time, building on the past only as experience is embodied in a theory, and always prepared to start completely from the ground up’ (Lindblom 2010, 81). Importantly, the means and the ends are always considered separately after careful and comprehensive consideration of all the possible options. Such an approach might be familiar to anyone who has undertaken research or worked in academia. For the purposes of this discussion, it could be termed an *empirical* or *academic* approach.

It is contrasted with the method of *Successive Incremental Comparison* in which decision-makers evaluate a limited number of available options, often based on previous experience, and make comparisons based on projected outcomes from each option. This leads to the implementation of a short-term solution which is then tested and re-evaluated leading to incremental steps towards an ideal outcome. Referred to as a ‘branch’ approach (i.e. it looks at nearby branches), it accepts that not all possibilities are available, that it is not possible to evaluate all possible factors that might impact on a solution and accepts that solutions may be imperfect. The means and ends are intertwined and delivery of a testable working solution is seen as more useful than producing a perfect solution. It is an everyday, common-sense method akin to *reflection-in-action* (Schön 1991) and has become known as *Muddling Through*. For those engaged in a process of *Muddling Through*, experts and academics are often seen as unhelpful outsiders because they espouse the value of problem-solving that is built on empirical analysis and theoretical precepts (Lindblom 2010, 87), whereas, following Lindblom, for those engaged in the delivery of a project, intuition, guessing and negotiation around shared goals have more value. A quick reference back to the definition of expert shows that these are skills that align well with those that are cherished as expert capabilities.

There is a systematic method at play in *Muddling Through*; it is not a ‘failure of method’ (Lindblom 2010, 87) but is in fact a well-tried and tested approach that is a ‘highly sophisticated form of problem solving’ (88). However, in order to constitute an effective project
methodology, *Muddling Through* needs to be overtly or consciously practised. Student projects often appear to lack this characteristic and their projects appear to be shaped more by their encounters with unsolved problems or by problem avoidance rather than by any purposeful decision-making undertaken by them. Most educators working within the field of media practice education will be familiar with the ways in which the complexities of project working can impact on the outcome of the group’s efforts. Problematic issues around the dynamics of group working and effective project management are numerous (see e.g. Davies 2009 or Sabal 2009) and can often lead to ‘sliding’ (Rehn and Lindahl 2012), which describes the process of muddling but ‘not getting through’ (808). Sliding should not be thought of as an indicator of failure but more of a *faltering-on-the-way* to completion of a project. A project’s process is a ‘complex interaction between structural and action elements’ (Rehn and Lindahl 2012, 808), and breakdowns, failures or mistakes can often lead to innovation once a project has recovered its equilibrium. The muddling of students, who often appear to slide through projects unconsciously, is problematic only because of the missed opportunity to actively engage in critical reflection, review and analysis.

There are then two forms of *Muddling Through* to consider here, that of conscious and unconscious muddling. Conscious muddling (i.e. muddling and getting through) is a rational problem-solving methodology based around critical review and reflection as an approach. To go back to Dreyfus’s taxonomy of expertise, this might correlate to the level of *advanced beginner* who is able to apply rules and has the beginnings of a capability to make situational discriminations, that is, their creative problem-solving skills are developing. A useful metaphor might be that of a mountain climber who is skilful and engages with careful decision-making. The climber evaluates a number of possible routes ahead from their present position. The number of options is limited and the most obvious choices are compared and acted on. The climber may test possible roots before making a final decision and moving to the next position. The climber then analyses the new position and begins the process of stepping forward again. The decision-making process is analytical, evaluative and risk orientated. This contrasts with that of sliding or unconscious muddling (i.e. muddling and not getting through), which could be compared, using Dreyfus’s taxonomy of expertise, with that of a *novice* who is able to follow rules but may not have the capability to engage in situational discriminations, that is, their creative problem-solving skills may be limited. Sliding calls forth the metaphor of a toboggan careering down a hill following the easiest path. Though there is some limited steerage it generally finds its own way; its trajectory determined by the topology of the ground rather than by purposeful control. Decision-making is clouded by limited judgement, differing agendas, poor communication, lack of analysis or evaluation, and poor risk management.

For students, the consequence of an educator’s recontextualising of professional project processes may be twofold. Firstly, the expectations of educators may be mismatched against the actual capability of students, which could be frustrating for all parties involved. Rather than set out to develop the students’ project-working capabilities from *novice* to *expert*, wouldn’t it make more sense to aim for moving between *novice* and *advanced beginner*? In some cases, it might even be possible to move them towards a level of *competence*. If educators were willing to work with the actual capabilities of students rather than to some imagined ideal, there might be a possibility for linking the learning of the doing of projects and the practice of creativity within the curriculum. Secondly,
the tools and techniques of professional project processes lack use value for students who have no situated experience of using them. Consequently, though students will produce process documents, they may bear little relation to what they actually do and in reality may have contributed little to the process of managing their project. So the question here is: Why produce process documents that are not used to inform process, decision-making and creativity? This disjunction between expectations and capabilities may constitute a faked performance, which may mask the realities of their actual practices. Students may present as undertaking a project to the expectations of their tutors but actually they are *Muddling Through*, often unconsciously. If, rather than setting overly high expectations, educators were to engage with the actual practices of novice project workers, there may be more opportunity for support, engagement and learning.

**Decoupling of interior and exterior project identities**

A further consequence of the recontextualising process may be the impact it has on the kinds of identities adopted by students undertaking media practice project work. As suggested above, it seems possible that students adopt duel identities, one that is presented outwardly towards tutors and another, which is reserved for private interactions among project participants. In fact, the situation may be even more complex than this and the presentation of duel identities may involve a decoupling of expectations external to the project group from the actual practice of doing projects within the group. In other words there may be a disjunction between the learning aims configured by the proposed activity and the recognition of this learning by the students engaged in the activity. In organisational studies, ‘decoupling’ (Crilly, Zollo, and Hansen 2012) is the separation of the behaviour of those acting inside the organisation from that which is expected of them by external factors, such as legal or policy requirements. The decoupling of external policy requirements from practice occurs as a consequence of environmental stress that acts upon the interiority of organisational space. In the case of project management, the project team constitutes a small-scale organisation typically bounded by a variety of objects such as a ‘Project Initiation Document’ (Hanney 2013, 52), which establish membership of ‘distinct spatial ecology’ (Hanney and Savin-Baden 2013, 18). Decoupling within projects is likely to occur in situations where the perceived aims of external policies do not align with the shared goals of the project participants. It is a form of deception that seeks to mitigate against criticism that members of the project team might anticipate. It may also occur if the project participants are not closely integrated or if the team is fractured or dysfunctional. Decoupling may equally be an act of resistance to a perceived regulatory system that seeks to impose identities, behaviours and values upon those within a project space – whose existing personal identities may already be in conflict with the idea of *doing-things-a certain-way*. For example, students may have their own ideas about how media is made, which may be in conflict with that of their tutors. The student who insists on a particular post production workflow, the production group who put off making key decisions or those who insist on interacting in crowded social spaces all have good reason to behave in this way even if the reasons for the behaviour are not immediately apparent to tutors.

Drawing on theories of *cognitive dissonance*, Warin et al. (2006, 237) develop the idea of *identity dissonance* in order to conceptualise the ways in which individuals might manage...
multiple conflicting identities. Taking this idea a step further, Lund Dean and Jolly (2012, 229) link identity dissonance with situational salience as a means of understanding student disengagement with learning. For example, students might perceive the request to document their project as emanating from an academic need to assess project work rather than as something that might be of value to them creatively. An obvious example would be that of a production budget which, in reality, is a valuable representation of an important and tangible element of the production process, that is, the flow of money. Students, though do not have any money, were consequently required to produce budgets in a request to fictionalise a representation of an imaginary practice. Such a request is likely to be seen as a tedious labour without identifiable benefit and one that lacks meaning for those producing it. In another example, the requirement for students to interact with texts that are perceived as overly academic may be resisted, whereas celebrity media practitioners may be weighted as having more value by students. So, while educators may value the theoretical writings of Sergei Eisenstein over interviews in celebrity magazines with Quentin Tarantino, students are more willing to engage with the latter. Or, a student with an overriding passion for camera work may disengage from activities relating to screenwriting, even though being able to interpret a script maybe a useful skill for a Director of Photography.

In this way it is possible to see how the world view of a student might predispose them to place greater significance on certain kinds of knowledge depending on the kinds of identity they may adopt. Thus, the self-perceived needs and aspirations of the student may result in attitudes towards learning, which differ from those that are considered desirable by educators. Lund Dean and Jolly (2012, 230) identify a number of behaviours that might be associated with identity dissonance and suggest these may come about when the norms of academic life are inconsistent with a self-identity that is embedded in social and cultural milieu that maybe in opposition to an academic identity. Peer pressure, family influences, class, cultural, sub-cultural and ethnic norms might all contribute to this fracture. Students might adopt a ‘too-cool-for-school’ demeanour, or may avoid participating in class-based activities. Those who identify as creatives may feel that tutor-led activities curtail their creativity and constrain their self-expression, whereas the tutor may in fact be posing problem-solving exercises.

Engaging with learning means students will not stay the same, that their ‘self’ will change and it is the learning activity that hopefully triggers that change. However, it is equally possible that the learning activity may trigger identity dissonance (Lund Dean and Jolly 2012, 236). Learners make decisions as to what changes they will accept. If they perceive the change to self-identity as positive they may comply, on the other hand there may be a dissonance between value of the learning as it is presented to them and their idea of how things should be done, for example, by creatives in a creative field. Thus the concept of ‘what I might be’ (Lund Dean and Jolly 2012, 236) may not align with the possibilities for what I could be since aspirations which may motivate learning are often distorted conceptualisations of the world of work and the being of creatives in the field. Though educators may attempt to correct these erroneous worldviews, their efforts to do so may actually serve to reinforce this distorted sense of the world. While feigned conformity, participation and faked compliance may appear to the observer as apathy, they might just as easily be symptomatic of strategies of resistance (Hope 2013, 46). Such performances challenge the normalising discourses of academia and mask reality, manifesting as a form of playful and creative resistance, at once affirming and weakening
that discourse (Allan 2013, 30). Resistance to this normalising discourse allows for the possibility for individuals and groups to shape their own identity through subversion. As they transgress against the norms that compel a repeated performance as a subject with whom they do not identify (31).

That students act out their conception of what it is ‘creatives’ do as forms of play and that they resist attempts at transformation by educators should be no surprise. It is after all one of the primary activities of media practice education to encourage students to adopt creative roles and undertake creative work. It should also be no surprise in a subject discipline which celebrates Guerrilla Filmmaking that students adopt identities that run counter to those considered desirable by educators. There are Guerrilla Filmmaking books, websites, magazines and competitions dedicated to promoting this identity. Guerrilla Filmmaking is risky, no-budget filmmaking that is shot quickly in real locations is often without permission. Guerrilla Filmmakers are passionate, maverick and identify as outsiders. This is very much the ethos of low budget filmmaking and even professionals working in the media industries take time out to participate in what they deem to be the real creativity of Guerrilla Filmmaking. Director of Photography John Mathison, who was nominated for an Academy award in 2001 for his work on Ridley Scott’s Gladiator (2000) talks about how he cut his teeth as a Guerrilla Filmmaker. He explains that running around South London in the 1980s shooting in disused buildings with no money was a way of getting films made, getting experience and making contacts (Mathison 2003). Media practice educators encourage students to adopt this identity; it is at the very heart of student productions to go guerrilla since they have no money or other resources to draw upon. At the same time, universities expect students to adopt an academic identity that requires conformity and studiousness. Meanwhile, their tutors also direct them towards an aspirational goal of becoming professional creatives, an idealised personality.

Alongside this confusing milieu rests their own personal psychology exacerbated in some instances by the influence of their peers and the particular psychological dynamics of group working. The work of Marsh and Craven (2006) is informative here, suggesting that self-concept is multifaceted and may interact with collective-self-concept in antithesis to the kind of idealised learner behaviours favoured by educators. Decoupling then can be thought of as a tension within the subjectivity of learners that comes about through identity dissonance as a result of the situational salience that is generated by confusions around the kinds of identity that educators see as an ideal as opposed to those the students choose to adopt.

Future stratagems

This article aims to draw attention to a range of problematic issues for media practice education and positions itself as a call to action. In the context of the forthcoming white article from the UK government that seeks to impose a ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ upon higher education, there would seem to be an important opportunity for media practice educators. However, if educators wish to be able to articulate the qualities of their pedagogic practices, then perhaps now is the time to begin a full and thorough investigation into the nature of media practice education. This will bring forth challenges and may well require a ‘letting-go’ of cherished beliefs in favour of sound pedagogic research rooted in
robust theoretical frameworks. The researchers own experience of entering higher education from industry was one of confused bafflement at the way in which students were supported through project work. It led to the research asking fundamental questions about the nature of projects, a journey that is still only partially completed. At each stage of this journey, further layers of complexity have emerged as concepts that initially seemed to offer solutions failed to whether analytical investigation. The testing out of alternative approaches in the researchers’ own teaching practice has led to further investigation and the broadening out of the field of enquiry to encompass organisational studies and project management theory. Yet there are still fundamental questions that need to be asked and a debate to be had.

What is certain is that is a need to investigate what media practice educators believe they are doing, when they construct what appears to be an imagined practice and yet make claims for it, pedagogically, as an authentic practice. Recognising this process as one of recontextualisation would appear to question the very foundations of media practice educator’s beliefs about their curriculum. It is argued here that there is a need to address this issue if educators wish to understand the particular characteristics of PjBL within a media practice curriculum. There are also concerns about the way in which projects are managed within the curriculum and educator’s expectations of student capabilities as project participants. The discussion asks if educators are doing projects or are they doing PjBL and questions the pedagogic value of current approaches. Finally, there are issues around the kinds of identities adopted by students and the ways in which this might create confusion over attitudes towards their learning. Each of these topics is wrapped up within, and emerges from, the overarching issue of recontextualisation and questions the claim for an authentic media practice curriculum derived from the use of projects as a means of reflecting professional practice. The discussion proposes that educators ask questions about what it is students do, how they conceptualise project work, and the particular ways in which they engage in problem-solving and project management. It asks that educators question the kinds of identities adopted by students and contrast these with the idealised identities formulated by educators through the academic discourse. Answering these questions may help educators come to a better understanding of what students do when they do this thing called a project (Hodgson and Cicmil 2006, 32).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Roy Hanney is employed at Southampton Solent University teaching media practice. His research interests include PjBL, project management and live projects/briefs. He is currently studying for a Ph.D. at Portsmouth University.

ORCID

Roy Hanney http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7374-0032
References


