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Approaches to Gender Diversity Behind the Camera in Australian Student Screen Productions

Kath Dooley, Margaret McHugh, Marsha Berry, Craig Batty, and James Verdon

Abstract: *This article asks how educators at tertiary level might attempt to address gender diversity behind the camera in student productions. The 2020 Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) report Diversity On and Off Screen in Australian Film Schools outlines the results of a national survey measuring levels of gender diversity behind the camera in Australian university capstone (major project-based) screen production units. The survey results reveal that, while close to even numbers of male and female students are completing capstone projects in screen production departments and film schools in Australia, crew roles are highly gendered. A gendered skew is most pronounced in the roles of cinematographer and sound designer (male dominated), and producer and production designer (female dominated). We argue that an investigation of this subject calls for an examination of the specificity of the tertiary screen production environment. The crewing of student projects can be fraught, involving competition for popular roles such as that of director, and choices are made based on student likes and dispositions. In this article, we further drill into quantitative and qualitative data from the ASPERA survey to examine educator attitudes and approaches towards the gendered nature of some student production roles.*



Figure 1: Women behind the camera. Director of Photography Annalise Kafetzi and Camera Assistant Vivien Hunter at work on capstone project *Carla* (2020) at the University of Technology Sydney. Image courtesy of Margaret McHugh.

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Introduction

The Australian film and television industry is complex and dynamic, with a history that dates back to the birth of cinema. Following a production boom in the 1970s, Australians have enjoyed a steady increase in the production of screen content for theatres, television screens and, more recently, for online contexts. As well as informing our national voice, Australian stories are also a valuable cultural export and many feature films have received global critical and commercial acclaim, thus launching the international careers of acting talent and practitioners working behind the camera.

As is typical for national screen industries, the two main sectors—feature film and television production—offer the majority of paid employment opportunities. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), there were 41,500 people employed in the Australian audiovisual industries in 2016, many of whom were employed as freelancers or on temporary contracts ("Census"). In recent years, questions have been raised about the nature of diversity in front of and behind the camera on Australian productions. But what role does the film educator and the screen production education setting play in this?

In this article, we explore how educators at tertiary level might attempt to address gender diversity behind the camera in student productions. Should gender and diversity in film crews be explicitly addressed in the screen production curriculum? As we argue, an investigation of this subject calls for an examination of the specificity of the film school environment. The crewing of student projects can be fraught, involving competition for popular roles such as that of director, and choices made based on student likes and dispositions.

To examine educator attitudes and approaches towards the gendered nature of student production roles, we further drill into quantitative and qualitative data from "Diversity On and Off Screen in Australian Film Schools", a report recently published by the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) (Dooley et al.). By cross-referencing this survey data with other research, and by reflecting upon recent initiatives introduced around the world, we aim to explore how educators might tackle normalised classroom practices in order to create change. In doing so, we seek to not simply reproduce in the classroom the conscious and unconscious gender biases evident in industry, but, rather, we hope to discover new and nuanced ways of disrupting these through learning and teaching interventions.

The sources and movements cited below reflect the film industry's awareness of gender issues and the means through which some individuals and groups are trying to address the imbalance; however, questions remain as to what educational institutions such as film schools are doing to respond. There may be no ideal model to address gender imbalance, but we are aiming to ignite and continue a discussion that might lead to the further development of strategies.

Gender Issues Behind the Camera in the Australian Screen Industry

Gender inequality, both on screen and behind the camera in the Australian screen industries, has been noted in surveys and studies undertaken since the 1980s (Ryan et al.; Marsh and Pip; Cox and Laura; French, "Gender"; Verhoeven et al.). Despite the findings and recommendations of these reports, little progress has been made to address inequalities. Recent

research undertaken by Screen Australia reveals that women comprise only 35% of workers in "film & video production/postproduction services" (*Employment Trends: Men*). In addition, Screen Australia states that gender inequality worsens when reviewing employment figures for the key creative roles of director for film, television or stage (22% women), or director of photography (5% women) (*Employment Trends: Occupations*). A 2016 study by Deb Verhoeven and Stuart Palmer used a form of social network analysis called criminal network analysis to trace specific producers working in the Australian film industry to see how various actors in these male-dominated networks cohere, and perpetuate and maintain existing connections. They found that "more than 75% of male producers in the industry worked on films during this ten-year interval with only one or no women in key creative roles" (Verhoeven and Palmer). Other research has found that, despite the diverse and multicultural nature of the Australian population, the "overwhelming majority of Australia's screen practitioners and decision makers continue to be white and able bodied and in the senior levels of the industry, men" (McClean 1). This work suggests that there is a clear yet unconscious gender (and diversity) bias at play.

Recent social movements such as #MeToo and #OscarsSoWhite have fostered a broader public conversation around issues of diversity on screen and behind the camera. Predating these developments, Screen Australia launched the Gender Matters funding initiative in 2015, which aimed to address gender inequality in key creative roles (writer, director, producer and key protagonist). This involved an allocation of $5 million over three years (2015 to 2018) for the support of female-driven businesses and the development of female-driven stories (Gender Matters 2019). Further initiatives, such as an attachment scheme and a five-point plan, were announced under the banner of Gender Matters in 2016 and 2017, and new key performance indicators (KPIs) were announced for the period of 2019 to 2022 (Gender Matters 2019).

Against this backdrop, the 2020 report commissioned by ASPERA outlines the results of a national survey measuring gender diversity behind the camera in 2019 Australian university capstone (major project-based) screen production units. The survey results reveal that, while similar numbers of male and female students are completing capstone projects in tertiary (higher education) screen production departments and/or film schools in Australia, crew roles are highly gendered. This research raises the question as to when biases towards gendered crew roles set in, and what can be done to address these skews. The qualitative data yielded from the ASPERA report suggests that, while film schools and screen production departments are mixed in their responses to such questions, they are all in agreement that the issues are urgent and need to be addressed.

Literature Review: Global Perspectives on Gender Diversity Behind the Camera in the Screen Industries

Looking beyond Australia, we note that a number of researchers, institutions and educational bodies abroad have highlighted concerning levels of gender inequality behind the camera (Cobb et al.; "Gender Inequality"; Green; Liddy). The anthology *Women in the International Film Industry*, edited by Susan Liddy, includes case studies providing evidence that the marginalisation of women in film industries is a global problem.

Work exploring the UK context builds upon a report by Shelley Cobb, Linda Ruth Williams and Natalie Wreyford that surveyed 203 UK films in production in 2015 and found

that only 20% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, cinematographers and editors of these projects were women. Furthermore, the report highlights the low participation rate of women who are Black, Asian or of ethnic minority identities. On a related note, Laura Green finds substantially fewer female composers than male composers working in the UK film industry. Green's doctoral research project cites a lack of role models as one reason for low female participation, and seeks to remedy this by profiling active female composers.

Work by Martha Lauzen on the US film industry finds that only 20% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors and cinematographers who worked on the top 250 domestic-grossing films in 2018 were women. This research shows that women fared best in the producer role (26%) and worst in the role of cinematographer (4%). Similarly, Amanda Coles reports on gender inequality in the Canadian screen-based production industry.

A special section of *Media Industries* journal edited by Skadi Loist and Deb Verhoeven features international and intersectional perspectives on gender in the screen media sectors in the post-Weinstein era. In an article featured in this issue, Verhoeven and others note that while male domination of the film industries is a global problem, "the extent of male domination varies across different jurisdictions and repair may therefore also require targeted and cooperative solutions rather than a singular, universal proposition" (Verhoeven et al). They caution against attempts to boost female participation through the sole measure of introducing more female directors into the system and note that "power inequalities in the film industry are the expression of, and contribute to, wider inequitable social relations." Moreover, Verhoeven and others address the relationship between the gender of a film's director and the geographic distribution of the screening frequencies of new cinematic releases, and conclude that:

> Policies designed to "improve" women filmmakers through remedial skills training are not the answer and have the effect of suggesting that women themselves are the cause of their own statistical failure. Individual women are not the architects or the operators of their own industry-wide inequality. Male domination of the world's film industries will not decline until there is a different distribution of the film industry's resources.

Further to this analysis, we question how classroom resources and film school curricula might impact upon the success of female students in particular crew roles.

Gender Issues in Tertiary Screen Production Education

While substantial research into the nature of screen production tertiary education has been undertaken in recent years (Aquilia and Kerrigan; Chambers; Hjort; Petrie) and, more specifically, into the nature of collaboration within screen production courses (Dooley and Sexton-Finck; Hodge; Sabal), less work has explored gender and diversity issues within educational institutions.

Ritesh Mehta, who undertook an ethnographic study of film school students in the US, argues that individuals arrive at film school with differing "factors of individuality," such as "ambition, restraint, and aesthetic subjectivity" (viii). As students encounter curricular requirements that involve practical filmmaking, they undergo a process of "resocialisation" so as to "fit with film crews considered as temporary organizational structures" (viii). On a related note, US educators Anne Orwin and Adrianne Carageorge suggest that female students have different needs and approaches to learning that need to be addressed at film school. These

researchers highlight gender biases that favour men, such as the selection of male-oriented material for production, differing levels of technical competence and leadership experience. More recent scholarship into US-based education by Miranda Banks suggests that media production in a university setting is more equitable than in the media industries; however, significant biases, power dynamics and privileges remain. Banks offers four interventions to address issues of equity, access and creative collaboration that can be adopted by educators.

In an Australian context, Pieter Aquilia explores the role of film schools and government initiatives in relation to the gender imbalance for directors working in the local film industry from 1970 to 2015. She highlights the role of the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in the successful career trajectories of directors Gillian Armstrong, Jane Campion and others; however, she notes that, in the twenty-first century, film school is but one potential pathway to a viable industry career. Following this, a recent report commissioned by Screen Australia provides evidence that, while similar numbers of male and female students graduate from screen production programmes in Australian films schools, gender discrepancies are present, particularly when considering below-the-line crew roles (Bizacca). This report collects quantitative data from four institutions with major film schools, and confirms anecdotal evidence presented by Cara Nash in a recent article on women in Australian film schools. Nash interviews Professor Trish FitzSimons of Griffith Film School (Griffith University, Brisbane), who similarly observes a ratio of male-to-female students to be "around even numbers these days", while noting that "Camera and Directing are the two areas in particular to which more males than females gravitate."

The 2019 ASPERA Survey on Diversity in Australian Film Schools

ASPERA's "Diversity On and Off Screen in Australian Film Schools" is significant for the fact that it provides a wide and comprehensive survey of diversity in Australian film schools. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 17 universities and/or accredited film schools across the country. A total of 21 capstone (or culminating) units conducted in 2019 were reported (17 undergraduate, 4 postgraduate), with data obtained relating to 182 capstone projects (141 undergraduate, 41 postgraduate). One aspect of the ASPERA survey involved the collection of quantitative data through closed questions in relation to the gender diversity of student crews. For every reported project, educators were asked to record the gender of the director, writer, producer, cinematographer, production designer, editor, sound designer and composer.

The survey results demonstrate that, while close to even numbers of male and female students are undertaking capstone projects across undergraduate and postgraduate courses, the breakdown of genders in individual crew roles is uneven. The skew towards male students is most pronounced in the cinematographer role where, across 182 undergraduate and postgraduate projects, 63.7% have a male cinematographer, 30.8% have a female cinematographer and, for 5.5% of projects, the cinematographer's gender is not specified. The sound designer and composer roles are also highly skewed towards male students, with 46.7% of capstone projects having a male sound designer compared to 28.6% projects with a female sound designer. The gender of two sound designers is categorised as "other", while a high number of projects have not specified the gender of the sound designer (23.6%). Of the 182 total projects, 35.7% of projects have a male composer, 13.2% have a female composer, one composer is identified as "other" and 50.6% of project composers are not specified. According to notes in the survey report, high numbers of "unspecified" genders for crew roles may be

because the gender was unknown to the person completing the survey, or there may not be anyone fulfilling the role on the project. The roles of director and editor show slighter skews towards male students. Of the 182 projects, 53.8% have a male director, 45.2% have a female director, one director is identified as "other" and one project's director is not specified. More than half (51.6%) of projects have a male editor, 43.4% have a female editor, and nine project editors are not specified. By contrast, the roles of producer and production designer show a significant skew towards female students. Of the 182 capstone projects, 54.9% have a female producer, 39.6% have a male producer, and 5.5% of project producers are not specified. Of the 182 projects, 51.6% have a female production designer, 16.5% have a male production designer, one designer is identified as "other" and 31.3% project designers are not specified.

The results of the ASPERA survey report partly align with the aforementioned Australian industry data, and with demographic data offered by Banks on more than 1500 undergraduate students majoring in visual and media arts from 2013 to 2017 at her home institution, Emerson College in Massachusetts. Banks notes:

> Women overall represented 48 percent of the department but accounted for 78 percent of the students specializing in producing and 70 percent of those specializing in interactive media, but only 35 percent of those in cinematography and 32 percent of those specializing in sound and audio.

The ASPERA report reveals that student crews for Australian capstone projects are usually self-selected, drawing on students within and from outside the capstone cohort. While some student crews were formed through a pitching or interview process, the report states that no example of direct intervention to ensure gender diversity within film crews was provided by educators. Questions remain as to why students self-nominate or gravitate towards particular crew roles along gendered lines. Are female students intimidated by the technology associated with cinematography or sound roles? Or are other factors at play?

Educator Responses

The ASPERA survey also collected qualitative data in the form of educators providing feedback and suggestions for how issues of gender and diversity could be addressed in the curriculum, and in student production processes or teaching approaches, to which respondents mainly answered in four ways. Firstly, it was suggested that students should be made aware of their own biases. For example, one respondent commented that:

> We have students take the Bechdel Test, the DuVernay Test, etc, to see if they would pass muster. Sometimes the students, who believe they are woke and with it, realise their own productions could have more diversity. We also have a reflective assessment element to the capstone production units design, which encourages students to understand their own biases and helps students to identify areas for improvement. (28)

On a similar note, Banks suggests that "students need to be attuned to the ways in which gender and racial bias disrupt and hinder creative collaboration."

Secondly, in the ASPERA report, overt curriculum design or direct intervention in class by teachers was suggested. One respondent suggested that students should "discuss stats around gender and production roles", while another stated that "there are so many things that

can be done: quotas, rubrics that award grades for students enacting these ideas themselves, encouraging research projects around these issues, explorations of representation vs perspective, ETHICS embedded in curriculum/coursework/projects etc" (Dooley et al. 28). Another educator offered the following suggestion: "Create diverse teams by transparently composing teams that are diverse according to a process such as TBL [Team-Based Learning Collaborative]" (28). On the subject of crew role selection Banks suggests that, "for students to succeed, they need an equal opportunity education." She notes that students from more affluent backgrounds may arrive at film school with more experience with media equipment used at home or at high school. To counter this, Banks suggests that educators determine roles for crews beforehand, "thereby assuring that every student has equal time practicing operating various technologies, and that there is a more level playing field."

On a related note, a third theme in terms of the respondents to the ASPERA survey was that educators should "introduce individual formative assessments so that all students are able to get their hands on film equipment, to reduce the technical intimidation that can occur" (28). One respondent suggested that individual assessments could ensure that "females don't have any opportunity to retreat behind others, be that male or female or neutral gendered" (28). This concern that women in particular may retreat from highly technical crew roles is shared by Banks, who comments, "I have heard a number of women say to me that they were already so far behind technically from their peers that they believed their best bet was to focusing [*sic*] on writing or producing in college." She goes on to describe a situation where male students arrive at film school with accomplished technical skills, a certainty of their desired crew role and a competitive bravado, all of which can be off-putting to female peers. For the same reason, Orwin and Carageorge also noted a feeling of disadvantage among the female students they surveyed: "[women] believe that male students come to the program more prepared because they have more technical expertise and have worked with equipment more. While this is not necessarily true, it leaves the women feeling insecure in their freshman production classes" (49). These researchers go on to suggest that female students be offered one-on-one teaching and/or out-of-class equipment workshops, so that they can "learn without the pressure of the classroom and competition with other students for time and teacher attention" (50).

The fourth theme expressed by ASPERA survey respondents was that educators should include diverse texts in their curriculum. For example, one respondent commented, "With our new curriculum we've put it front and centre that our students need to be exposed to a range of work created by people from all sorts of different backgrounds with the hope that they can be influenced and channel that into their own practice" (28). Further to the idea of diverse texts, another respondent noted that diversity should be reflected in teaching staff, allowing "role modelling tutors, technical staff and demonstrators who are females, who are competent with film equipment and post-production software" (28). The value of this approach is shared by Banks who suggests that "all students are challenged when faculty diversify the curriculum. From the introductory level onward, all students need to see the work of women, of people of color, of people working outside the mainstream, of artists and creatives working globally." Likewise, Orwin and Carageorge suggest the explicit use of films by women in class, a use of female teaching assistants and the invitation of female role models from industry (50).

Moving away from the four main themes listed above, other suggestions from respondents note the inclusion of "gender sensitivity training" in the curriculum, and of "script readings in class" to generate discussion around gender and diversity (Dooley et al. 29).

Discussion and Implications for Screen Production Educators

The responsibility for the creation of learning environments that actively promote and foster inclusivity and diversity rests with screen production educators. The four themes identified from the qualitative responses of the survey indicate that educators need to consider the kinds of interventions that need to occur in undergraduate and postgraduate media and screen production degrees to promote greater diversity and gender representation. Here, we tease out these themes from the point of view of how they might be made manifest in screen production pedagogies. We also highlight the challenges associated with some of the interventions suggested by educators in the report in terms of logistical and resourcing limitations.

In relation to students being made aware of their own and others' biases, one survey respondent advocated the use of established industry tests. The use of short tests and exercises to facilitate in-class conversations relating to how unconscious bias and prejudices can influence story development and production processes can provide a productive educational tool. There are several examples of these teaching resources, and the impact that assumptions could have on the students' filmmaking practice. One example of an in-class test with exercises to spark such conversations is the Gapminder Test, which is a short online test that aims to challenge assumptions and misconceptions about global trends from a fact-based stance. After taking the test, students may be encouraged to discuss how the media has shaped their perceptions of global issues. Student results from the test tend to highlight how they presume global issues are much worse than statistics indicate, thus inviting students to question what and how these assumptions have been formed in a different way.

Another useful resource, "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Adichie, argues for the need to resist perpetuating "single story" stereotypes and suggests these narratives "rob people of their dignity, and emphasize how we are different rather than how we are similar." As a short in-class exercise, students could watch Adichie's TED Talk presentation and then be asked to create a personal identity chart that responds to ideas raised in the talk by listing all the possible labels which could be used to create a "single story" about them, such as: female, filmmaker, tall, sister, immigrant, Australian, etc. The student is then asked to consider how all of these labels intersect to produce multiple and diverse narratives and to apply this learning to future assumptions they may have of others' narratives in their filmmaking practice. This provides an accessible and engaging way to highlight unconscious bias, including gender.

Overt curriculum design and direct intervention by teachers in class was suggested by a number of survey respondents. The idea of direct intervention affecting the composition of student crews is one that calls for careful consideration. There have been numerous industry funding initiatives established in recent years that aim to address issues of gender and diversity behind and in front of the camera in film productions. These initiatives have primarily employed checklists and quotas as a method for measuring issues of representation, including Screen Australia's Gender Matters, British Film Institute's The Three Ticks and The Swedish Film Institute's Fifty Fifty by 2020. Possible strategies for the classroom could involve the development of KPIs that directly relate to diversity behind and in front of the camera on student productions in order for productions to be green-lit. There are industry models taking this approach. To pass Screen Australia's Three Tick Test and be green-lit, the student productions would have to achieve at least three ticks from the following roles: female director, female writer, female writer/director (counts for two elements), female protagonist, and female

producer. Additionally, an adaptation of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' representation and inclusion standards for Oscars could be applied to student productions. However, these industry assessment models could prove challenging to implement as a method for green-lighting and/or monitoring issues of diversity in student production teams due to the gender and diversity of cohorts being fixed within specific class groups.

On the subject of assessment practices, we note Banks's suggestions for equal access, with formative assessments promoting the creation of opportunities to learn and experiment in a low-stakes environment, which goes some way towards reducing potentially gendered practices. It may be that for some programmes there are resourcing issues, such as poor equipment-to-student ratios, when including individual assessments of this nature but prioritising equity of "hands on" early access to technology is a tangible method of reforming curriculum. This approach advocates that we do not accept and then design for limited student access to technology but seek to work with that problem to improve access, despite national trends to reduce delivery hours or allocated staff time.

Survey responses confirmed a need for more diverse texts to be made widely accessible. This extends from traditional publishing covering academic and trade texts through to screen-based texts that offer students exposure to a greater diversity of creative work from a more diverse group of creators. It can be difficult to measure the positive impact of this inclusion as learner engagement can present in myriad ways and this may not be the only diversity measure the programme and educators are promoting. Key to securing and maintaining students' attention is to require engagement with diverse texts when designing assessments and to do this not at a single point in the curriculum but throughout. Also, we suggest that educators contextualise the inclusion of more diverse screen-based texts through discussions of varying production cultures and aesthetic standards so as to avoid superficial understandings and othering of cultural content. Students need to better understand that texts are a reflection of the production cultures in the societies from which they are drawn, and not consider them according to understandings of their local culture.

As suggested, an extension of diverse (especially film) texts to which students can be exposed is a commitment to choosing women as key industry role models as well as practitioner guests presenting their own work to students. This strategy can be coupled with a focus on those creative roles that the survey shows are skewed along gender lines in screen production units in universities.

It is acknowledged that making systemic changes to higher education curricula can be slow, so what has been discussed here may not be able to be implemented in wholesale ways. Institutional contexts and student cohort composition may drive the identification of most effective strategies to employ. Screen production educators are therefore invited to consider interventions or changes that might be made at a local level—weekly curricula, summative assessment, for example—in order to incrementally address some of the issues that "Diversity On and Off Screen in Australian Film Schools" reveal. Screen industry changes, such as shifting policy and new initiatives, will also be important to the continuous development of screen production curriculum, and educators are also encouraged to reflect these changes where contexts allow.

Proofs

Conclusion

Our investigation of how educators at tertiary education level might attempt to address gender diversity behind the camera in student productions, based on an analysis of data from the "Diversity On and Off Screen in Australian Film Schools" report, reveals the complex nature of screen production education. Based on this analysis, we conclude that gender and diversity in film crews should be explicitly addressed in the screen production curriculum. Aligning with the work of ASPERA, Miranda Banks and others, we suggest that students be encouraged to reflect on any possible biases of their own, particularly in relation to gender norms, that a greater diversity of texts and industry role models be adopted, and that equality of resources be considered. Perhaps most importantly, inherent assumptions and unconscious biases about gender must be interrogated in relation to student crew role selection.

Student demographics, varying styles of production (e.g. documentary, drama, corporate), as well as institutional factors such as student contact time and resourcing, all impact on the educator's ability to challenge industry norms and enact interventions. While there is no "one size fits all" approach, diversity behind the camera in student productions is an issue that needs to be actively considered and fostered. In taking this stance we recognise that the gender of student film crews has ramifications not only for the types of stories that appear on screen. To quote again from Banks:

> There are deeply seeded discriminatory and exclusionary policies, procedures, and practices embedded in educational systems […]. If pre-industry programs continue to be popular majors at universities, then the opportunity is there to build on pedagogical innovation for inclusion and help establish more equitable pipelines into the media industries and change subsequent industry behaviors and expectations. And if our students find other professional pathways, then the skills they learn in a more inclusive and equitable department will doubtless serve them well no matter their given field.

Addressing gender diversity in the screen production classroom is not a means to an end; it is something that can and perhaps will have far-reaching impacts beyond the classroom—in the industry itself, and also through the cultural artefacts produced by that industry, in and for society at large.

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