

Film-making as Writing a Guided English Composition

Corwin Mhlahlo

Introduction

I am an English education practitioner. The English classroom and lecture theatre have been my context of practice for over twenty years. Understandably, therefore, my comprehension of most things is largely via the prism of my English education and training. At present, I am in the United Kingdom studying towards a postgraduate qualification in English Education. Soon after my arrival I noticed the influential role that film in particular and digital technology and related media in general are increasingly playing in contemporary British English education. It is in the light of this and the foresight that this will eventually (if not already) be the trend in Southern Africa, when I embarked on my current programme of study I selected and enrolled for a taught module in moving images production. In this article, from a constructivist perspective, I suggest that if learners from Southern Africa and indeed other Anglophone African countries who are not familiar with filmmaking are to be successfully introduced to it, English teachers would do well to introduce film-making to their learners by linking it to the process of writing a guided composition.

A Constructivist Approach to Teaching Filmmaking

The constructivist theory of teaching and learning posits that, when teaching, a classroom practitioner should remain cognisant to use teaching methods that incorporate prior knowledge and learning. In this regard, the theory advises that before embarking on the teaching of any new knowledge, the knowledge base that

learners already possess and bring with them into the classroom should be creatively drawn out, built upon and used to introduce them to the new knowledge they are about to acquire. This is vital if they are to arrive at the meaning of any new content presented to them.

At present, new advancements in digital technology and the resultant cross-fertilisation of English and media studies continue to modernise the traditional English classroom as we have known it. For some learners in both developed and developing countries to whom technology in the English classroom generally and specifically filmmaking is a new phenomenon, there is therefore need for some kind of scaffolding if they are to better understand and indeed appreciate the evolution English education and the English classroom are undergoing. In what follows, I reflect on a filming task and group activities some of my classmates and I undertook last autumn at the British Film Institute (BFI) near Waterloo Bridge, London. As I do so, I revisit the task via the lens of my English education and training by juxtaposing film production to the process of writing a guided English composition as I have taught it in the English classroom. In the process, I highlight what I perceive as parallels and differences in the techniques/stages that are involved in both which might be helpful to learners who are neophytes to the filmmaking process.

Composition and Film: forms and types

A composition, sometimes known as an essay, is defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as “a short piece of writing about a particular subject, done by a student” on paper. There are two main forms or categories of compositions. These are the free response and the guided. As the phrase “free response” suggests, this particular category of composition calls on the writer to creatively respond to a given topic. On

the other hand, the guided form steadily directs the writer as to what to write. This guidance can be provided in the form of ordered or random notes and/or visual representations such as pictures, graphs, pie-charts and cartoons. Different types of compositions can be said to align themselves to either the free response or guided composition. Under the free response category are such composition types as the narrative (i.e. one requiring the writer to tell a story), the descriptive (i.e. calling for the writer to describe), the persuasive ((i.e. requiring the writer to persuade a reader to their point of view) and the argumentative (i.e. requiring the writer to weigh contending views and ultimately support one side). Falling under the guided composition are such writings that should, as I earlier mentioned, be based on a series of pictorial/visual representations and notes and arguably the expository or factual composition, which because it should be based on concrete, established facts, leaves little room for creativity on the writer's part. Most common, however, are the guided composition.

Film: forms and types

A film (at times called a movie) is also defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as “a series of moving of pictures usually shown in a cinema or on television and often telling a story”. Akin to compositions, films also take different forms and types. According to the elementsofcinema.com site, there are three such film forms. The first of these is interestingly the narrative form that “tells stories” and “often presents facts in a chronological order”. The second is the documentary form that “exposes reality” and is “a collection of scenes and moments assembled in a non-linear fashion.” Last is the experimental form. As hinted, this form “experiments on the medium” of film by “trying something new, different”. Within these film forms are film

types. The Macmillan dictionary.com outlines and describes some of these as: animation or cartoon, biopic (“a film based on the events of someone’s life”), a pornographic film or “blue movie” (“that shows people having sex”), a “buddy movie” (“a film that is mainly about the relationship between two people”), a docudrama (“a film based on events that really happened”). Others that students might be familiar with are: a feature film (“a film of standard length”), a filmstrip (“a short film that gives information rather than one that tells a story”), a horror film (one that is “intended to frighten people: - often “one about murders, frightening creatures, or evil people”). It is contrasted by romance, dramas as well as western films (“about the Western United States in the 1800s usually with cowboys”) More recently, just as compositions often appeal to the five senses, the advent of 3D and 4D movies has gone a step further by presenting cinema audiences “with additional in-theatre physical interactions”. Such interactive films give audiences “an added element of interactivity” that essays can only try to.

Composition writing and film: Groupwork

A composition is often the product of an individual creatively or academically responding to a topic or subject. Innovative teachers such as myself have at times, however, controversially assigned composition writing tasks to groups of students. This is especially since for some teachers, such an approach is just a way of avoiding marking too many exercise books. While for others, the argument they have at times put forward is that no matter how advantageous group guided compositions might be it is unlikely that every learners’ point of view will be accommodated. However, while some teachers might perceive assigning something demanding individual creativity as composition writing to a group of students as a counterparts’

way of shirking loads of marking, in my opinion this is not so at all. It is instead my view that a guided group composition as a method of teaching composition has both its advantages and disadvantages. In the classroom context, group composition writing can occasionally be deployed not only to encourage collaborative learning but also to inculcate a spirit of teamwork and creativity.

The nature of media production makes groupwork particularly helpful. This is especially when one considers that filmmaking is in itself heavily reliant on collaborative creativity and teamwork. It is perhaps for this reason that, prior to our arrival at what was to be our “studio and its various sets”, the BFI Southbank and its environs, we had been put into groups. Each group’s brief or guide was to “produce a short film which features an [planned/chance/accidental] encounter between two people.” In the same vein, a guided composition or essay can also be seen as a creative writing brief in which learners, either individually or as a group, are presented with diagrams, pictures or notes to guide and assist them with their writing. Notably, therefore, both film-making and composition writing have and rely on specific subject matter, themes or primary ideas which assist to develop and tell some kind of story.

In both filmmaking and composition writing the understanding is that filmmakers and learners should use the brief or guidance provided to assist them to brainstorm and eventually expand the ideas into either a film or composition. It is perhaps for this reason, that Dskystra and Paulston, writing as early as 1967, report how the guided composition as an “approach is being applied to materials for grade 2 up through college composition”. (p.1967:137) This is particularly as the method is invaluable to helping learners brainstorm for ideas. Businessballs.com highlights how:

“Brainstorming with a group of people is a powerful technique. [This is especially as it] creates new ideas, solves problems, motivates and develops teams.” Akin to the brainstorming guidance that a guided composition’s notes, diagrams and/or pictures give, the brief that our group received equally did the same.

In filmmaking, as in guided composition writing, at the briefing stage, both filmmakers and learners have some flexibility to expand on guidance or the guide material given. However, totally deviating from what has been initially provided is unacceptable. Looking back at the film practical we undertook, as our group read and re-read the brief, comparable to a group of excited learners working on a group guided composition, we soon found ourselves brainstorming for ideas and jotting them down.

Ordering/Sequencing vis-à-vis Scripting, Storyboarding and “Shot listing”

In the English classroom, once learners have been provided with notes and/or pictures and successfully brainstormed, their next task is to order or sequence the clustered brainstormed ideas in the direction they would like the essay/composition to develop. Similarly for us, therefore, having brainstormed, it was time to script as well as compile the storyboard and shot list our portmanteau of ideas into the shots vital for our short film to take shape.

Although today the word ‘scripting’ once located in filmmaking has become quite ubiquitous and is now also found in computer programming and gaming to mean other things, in film production it refers to the writing down of some of the ideas and

dialogue to be included in the film. On the other hand, as both storyboarding and shot listing suggest, the former refers to visually organising ideas for a story to be filmed on a board, while shot listing entails outlining the central shots to be included during the actual filming of the story. Reminiscent of a group of learners who have sequenced their ideas in the direction they would like their composition to progress, we too soon also had a “script”, storyboard and shot list for our pending video shoot. Thus analogous to Burn and Durran’s students: “The activity [became] familiar through text sequencing tasks in English lessons” (2006, p.277) especially that called by the English guided composition.

Drafting/ “fleshing out” vis-à-vis Shooting and Collecting shots

In guided composition writing, successful brainstorming and sequencing of ideas often leads to expanding and developing the sequenced framework into a draft essay. This stage in the process requires that students engage in what I would like to call “fleshing out”. That is, learners have to further develop the sequenced ideas into fully fledged meaningful draft paragraphs. For some able students, the sequenced ideas are enough guidance for them to embark on writing a meaningful fully fledged final draft. For the less able, a first, and at times a second draft, is necessary. However, no matter how many times learners might compile their drafts, as they expand their ordered notes into a draft, the intangible images in their minds are externalised via the tools of writing, the page and words to appeal to their readers’ senses.

In comparable fashion, once our rudimentary storyboard had been compiled, we set to “write” our sequenced plan into life by filming it into existence. As such, no sooner

had our group begun implementing our storyboard and shot list of planned shots, than it became apparent that film “creates” by means of a camera, digital Polaroid and sound equipment. Indeed it is at this point when like pen and paper, digital media assists in “extracting and concretising” what ordinarily a would have remained a part of the learner or film-maker’s mind’s eye and makes it real. However, as with guided composition writers’ drafts, this too required that we engage in filming our scripted and storyboarded ideas into various shoots that could eventually be edited into a film.

Fursteneau and MacKenzie (2009) highlight how “various technological and software innovations in moving picture production and editing have over the years not only increased the scope of editing interfaces, they have virtually tamed [...] an entire apparatus for the production, editing and exhibition of moving imagery.” (2009, p.2) For instance, close up to extreme close shots of the actor’s facial expressions were taken to clearly show the varying emotions on her face. Thus, as filming progressed not only did my digital cultural experience increase, so too did my grasp of technological innovations and the effect of style in guided composition writing. Further evidence of the resemblance between the guided composition and filmmaking was to come during post-production.

Post-production: Guided composition vis-à-vis Film Editing

Interestingly, both guided composition and filmmaking have a post-production phase. Although some secondary school learners may disagree with me, a good English composition must undergo three drafts. In guided and free composition writing, editing is essentially correcting, revising or amending what has been written. At this

point in their writing, learners still have the option to re-sequence what they would have initially written by adding and/or removing – editing what had been written in earlier drafts. However, in light of the fact that filmmaking is relatively more recent than writing, editing arguably has its origins in the English classroom. It is perhaps because of such echoes between the two, that West and Dickey (1990:10) note how “aspects of Media Education and Drama [...] are [now] undertaken by the English department”.

Comparably, while in writing, editing refers to different versions of the essay. In film, I have learnt this is a compilation of various shots that can also undergo more than one edit. Film editing has been defined differently by many (cf. Branston and Stafford, 2003; Philips, 2000; Hayward and Turner, 1993). To Bordwell and Thompson (2001:np) “Editing may be thought of as the co-ordination of one shot with the next.” To Hayward (2000:np), it is “literally how shots are put together”. Therefore, in perhaps another case of film imitating the English essay, after our group’s filming, it was finally time to edit - arguably in more or less the same way as it is also done in the English classroom.

In the English classroom it is usually the responsibility of each learner to draft, write, edit and submit the final version of her/his essay. Although in film-making it is quite possible for an individual to sequence film clips and edit them, this is however not always the case. The endeavour is instead often a team effort from beginning to end. In the spirit of teamwork, everyone in the group literally has a “hand” in the editing - though, because of exposure and experience editing with MacPro, some did more than others. Very much like when a learner is writing a guided composition, this task

not just guided creativity, it also sought to draw creativity out by constructing and innovating on what had been provided.

Since we had filmed without sound equipment, to assist with this, available were such resources as Incompetech.com. This is a website from where film-makers are at liberty to obtain copyright free soundtracks. Thus in the absence of diegetic sound, incompetech.com enabled us to for instance to edit in extra-diegetic sound effects in the form of our “main character’s footsteps” as she walked along the Queen’s walk. Once this and other sound effects had been added in, I realised that as in a guided composition, it was time to “proofread” our film, as it were.

Proofreading vis-à-vis Compiling, Saving and Private Review

One of my often unheeded advice in the English classroom has been that once a piece of writing is complete, it should be proofread. In an English composition, this would entail reading through and tweaking a piece of writing before its submission for assessment and evaluation. The same pertains to film editing. As such, before saving our film, we added the title and credits. Indeed, the resonances between writing and film-making are uncanny. More so when one considers that as in any form of composition writing, a film is equally “submitted” for assessment and evaluation -what the industry calls “premiering”.

Submission vis-à-vis Premiering

They say, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” In the English classroom, once a learner(s) has(ve) completed proofreading a writing task, it can finally be submitted

for marking and grading by the teacher. Equally, in film-making, once editing is complete and the film has been saved as a final production, it too is submitted to “the teacher”. In the case of a film, however, it is shown or in film production jargon, premiered, to the public and film critics for viewing and review as to merits and demerits. In this regard, once our film *Awkward* had been edited and saved as a complete and final product, we too submitted it for premier and scrutiny by a group of our peers and educators, *cum* critics. Interestingly, just as when a student has his/her work assessed by a teacher do the strengths and weaknesses of their writing become apparent, watching our short film through the eyes of others helped us critique our production.

Conclusion:

For learners, and I sure for us all, a seamless transition from the familiar to the new is always better managed and appreciated than one that is totally disjointed or fractured. In this essay, I have suggested and tried to demonstrate that the teaching of filmmaking is best introduced through the prism of guided essay writing. I trust it has provided a footing on which fellow English practitioners faced with the prospect of teaching filmmaking in the English classroom can employ to scaffold their English learners understanding of film-making in the English classroom.

Bio

Corwin L. Mhlahlo is a graduate student of English Education at the Institute of Education (IOE) of the University College London (UCL). His current academic and research interests include, but are not limited to, contemporary issues in English education (especially Methods of teaching English) moving image production;

materials development for Language teaching; Language teacher identity and development.

Reference List

Bordwell, D., Thompson, K. (2001) *Film Art: An introduction* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Burn, A. & Durran, J. 2012, 'Digital Anatomies: Analysis as Production in Media Education'. In Buckingham, D., & Willett, R. (eds), *Digital Generations: Children, Young People and New Media*. Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah: NJ.

Businessballs.com <http://www.businessballs.com/brainstorming.htm> [accessed 13/2/2017]

Dskyastra, G. and Bratt Paulston, C. 1967 *Guided Composition*, eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/XX1/2/136.full.pdf [accessed 13/2/2017]

Fursteneau M & MacKenzie, A (2009) "The promise of 'makeability': digital editing software and the structuring of everyday cinematic life". *Visual Communication*, 8:5

West and Dickey (1990) *Redbridge High School English Department Handbook*, London: Borough of Redbridge Advisory Service

www.elementsofcinema.com : a Students guide to the fundamentals of filmmaking

Macmillandictionary.com