

Workshop presentation by Christine Becker
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Avids Versus Steenbecks: Do Film Production Schools Still Need Film?

When I first formulated the title for this presentation – do film schools still need film – I was largely thinking facetiously. Of course film schools still need film. After all, these are schools, and schools prepare students to work in professions, and film is still used in professional filmmaking. Further, who says digital and film won't coexist well into the future? Film and video have stood side-by-side on television for four decades, and given that Hollywood filmmakers rely heavily on non-linear editing systems, not to mention CGI effects and such, film and digital already thrive together in the industry.

But one simply can't ignore all of the talk that someday digital media will completely replace film and thereby revolutionize the production, distribution and exhibition of everything from television commercials to theatrical features. In fact, the dean of USC's School of Cinema-Television, Elizabeth Monk Daley, told a *Boston Globe* reporter in January that sooner rather than later, "It'll all be digital. We'll quit using the word [film] because it'll be assumed that what you're doing is digital."

If true, how would this revolutionize the teaching of media production? What of pedagogical worth would be lost in a wholesale shift to digital media and what would be gained? What has already been lost or gained to this point? After thinking through these questions, I decided that my title was appropriate after all; we truly do need to ask if film schools still need film, and ask it before the industry decides if it still needs film, since the needs of one are not necessarily or entirely the needs of the other.

I don't expect to come up with definitive answers in the next ten minutes, and I hope you'll also pardon the technological determinism inherent to this as a starting point. Instead, in

true workshop style, I'd just like to advance a few preliminary thoughts that we can then build on in discussion. Finally, because I am not a production instructor, I felt a need to turn to sources more knowledgeable than I on this topic, and I additionally had the intent of actually finding out how fully our nation's film schools have already turned to digital media.

To those ends, I composed an online survey which I e-mailed to representatives of 43 different undergraduate and graduate production schools in the U.S. The response was relatively small – 23 people from only 14 different schools responded to the survey (with two anonymous responses). But of course if I were the Nielsen company doing TV ratings, that proportion would be overly determinant, so I will at least advance a few tentative generalizations based on those responses I did receive.

First, in sheer numbers, those who responded estimated that about 40-50% of their overall film production instruction relating to content acquisition – cameras, in other words – involved digital media. Most programs indicated a roughly even mix of 16mm and DV production, along with some analog video technologies. As far as editing, though, the balance was heavily weighted toward digital non-linear editing systems over flatbed instruction, with about 80% being non-linear. One respondent, David Lyman of the International Film Workshops, even said, “Editing is all digital now, and I see no reason to even own a flatbed.” However, the majority of respondents, including Lyman, also indicated that their schools would in fact never completely eliminate the use of film technology, and even those who do foresee such an elimination don't expect it to happen for at least seven years or more.

While it won't be obsolete anytime soon, film is already being crowded out of schools more and more each year. Indeed, my (albeit limited) survey results do indicate that flatbed editing is already becoming a rarity. So what does this mean in terms of what students learn aesthetically and artistically from both digital and film?

First, without question digital has already brought substantial innovations to the production school landscape. Just as the professional production industry will benefit from the cost savings of digital, so too have film schools. These cost savings potentially allow schools to service more students and then grant those students the freedom to experiment widely with the acquisition of footage. In fact, a number of survey respondents said that they prefer to use digital media when working with beginning students for this very reason, as the cheapness and ease of use of digital, plus the students' generational familiarity with the technology, allows them to begin making movies from day one without intimidation or fear of wasting footage and money.

This ability to experiment also benefits post-production, perhaps the arena where digital media has had its most substantial impact in the classroom. As Michael Frierson of UNC-Greensboro notes, with the proper software "you can potentially control every pixel of every frame," allowing students to learn instantly the effects of changing edits or adding filter effects. As such, with digital media students have at their immediate disposal more visual possibilities than they've ever had before, and they can see within minutes how substantially a film can be changed by rearranging, shortening or altering shots. If the results are problematic, they can just go back and restore the original footage with a few clicks.

These points indicate that time saved is another crucial benefit of digital media. An anonymous respondent to the survey said he valued the ability with digital to spend more class time on aesthetic issues rather than on teaching his students how to handle a splicing block. Non-linear systems also allow for valuable, short lessons on editing effects, and the lack of processing time allows for immediacy in instructor critiques, as well.

However, the very same characteristics viewed as innovative by some are seen as potentially problematic by others. First, a common lament is that the ability to shoot more lends to the problem of shooting too much. Andrew Garrison of UT-Austin notes that while non-linear editing frees students up to experiment, it also can lead to sloppiness and a lack of discipline,

both a sense that anything can work and that so much revision is possible that “one never has to exactly finish something.” Michael Frierson terms this “the problem of excess production,” and says, “If I can cut and paste it like text, it’s as cheap as any web page on the internet.” From this viewpoint, the “cheapness” of digital media has a much different meaning. Along these lines, my colleague at Notre Dame, Jill Godmilow, pointed out that students using digital cameras tend to have a more casual approach; they hike the cameras on their shoulders and start shooting, without planning out shots or even thinking of reaching for a dolly.

Due to this “casual factor,” many instructors note that film works much better for lessons on shot management and efficiency. Because of the very fact that film stock is expensive, the students learn valuable skills of pre-planning. J. Stephen Hank of the University of New Orleans even says, “We will probably continue to teach traditional film as an acquisition format at least for our beginning courses, because we feel that the medium helps us establish the importance of extensive preplanning, which we feel is central to developing a true ‘filmmaker’s mentality,’ [and] that will carry over to the professional world, when extensive preplanning will always be necessary because the major expense is people’s time.”

Similarly, Adrienne Carageorge of the Rochester Institute of Technology argues that 16mm is in fact better suited for beginning students than digital, as it forces them to understand the concept of the frame right away: “Digital is easier and more accessible to students who come in with years of computer experience. But the danger here is that they rely on software to compensate for their lack of technical and theoretical understanding of basic photographic processes. With digital media (especially post-production), they are [merely] learning software.” In fact, a number of instructors point out that film forces students to truly and patiently understand the nature of the photographic image and its subtleties. From this viewpoint, the complexities of lighting, exposure latitude, lenses, color, and depth of field are better taught

through film. For instance, Nathan S. Epley of UNC-Chapel Hill argues that his students light better for digital once they've learned to light for film.

And while non-linear editing truly is becoming the norm and brings tremendous advantages, some do see the loss of the flatbed as a loss for production pedagogy. An anonymous respondent said that just as shooting film forces students to think more seriously about what they're shooting, cutting on film forces them to think more precisely about their cuts. Similarly, Cauleen Smith of UT-Austin claims that cutting on film helps students "learn more efficient ways of organizing their materials, and gain a more subtle sense of the function and power of different cuts and transitions because visual effects are not readily available. They learn to solve editorial problems via the images they have gathered rather than through filter effects that can cover or alter poor planning or disappointing results or distract the maker from the content of their piece." And while it certainly the case that you can do just about anything on an Avid that you can do with a Steenbeck, and obviously a lot more, Jill Godmilow argues that because editing and shot manipulation on DNLE systems is so quick and easy, "the thinking doesn't happen" for students who use the new technology as much as it does for students who edit on film.

In sum, while film and digital certainly can co-exist and each offers unique benefits, as with film and video in television, or as Herman Lew of City College of New York points out, oils and water colors in painting, it does seem clear that digital's progressive encroachment has come at the expense of certain unique characteristics of film and will very likely continue to do so. [And while the time and expense benefits of digital are major positives, as Jill Godmilow points out, speed and cost aren't supposed to be the defining elements of an artistic medium.] But one potential ideal is that the low cost and ease of use of digital technology will bring about the democratization of filmmaking, even in the professional industry. As Michael Frierson describes, "The thing we dreamed about [with] super 8, that the people will control the means of

production, is actually coming true.” And in fact, Brian Patrick of the University of Utah says that “the bad part is that film schools may lose their uniqueness. After all, everyone now has access to DV—and most believe they know how to use it.”

But of course, professional filmmaking isn't just pushing buttons and flipping clips around on an Avid machine. Students need knowledgeable guidance on principles of storytelling, aesthetics and representation, and a production school is still an important place to get that. Ultimately, then, perhaps the bottom line is that we must trust our production teachers. Escaping from my technological determinism here at the end, no matter the technology being used, there are core principles that instructors need to pass on to students, and they will presumably continue finding ways to teach those principles, no matter if they're working with a Bolex, an XL-1 or a Barbie Video Magic camcorder. Thus, to answer the question of my presentation title, film production schools may not necessarily need film, but they certainly do need the ideas of film.

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