

## THE CINEMATOGRAPHY OF MIND-SET- Creating an award-winning feature film with students & recent graduates

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### **Abstract**

*Mind-Set* (Dir Mikey Murray, 2022) won best UK Feature Film at the Manchester International Film Festival in 2022. It was shot in the summer of 2019 by Cinematographer & senior lecturer Jack Shelbourn at University of Lincoln, in a team consisting of students, recent graduates, and other University of Lincoln staff.

The students and graduates embodied Student as Producer and partners in practice, with their roles being key to the film's success. Key roles such as: Camera Operator, 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Camera and Digital Image Technician were important but without the students adopting these roles the film could not have been made for the budget and their practice directly contributed and impacted on the film's success.

This paper explores the concept of *the film set as a learning environment*, in an educational setting, but also, within the Film and Television Industry as a professional industry. The importance of this practice, its impact and the specific contributions made by the students and recent graduates are considered and presented, highlighting the focus on employability on this project as well as the creative freedoms and independence given to the students. Enabling students to be a key part of the creative, this paper is presented alongside a trailer for the film, with behind-the-scenes images and testimonial from the crew involved. Student as Producer is a natural fit to running the cinematography department on any set. As collaborative and inclusive working practices are key to a successful film. Inviting students onto any project and giving them the creative freedom can allow for the best work to be produced by all and the best experience to be had. The impact is evident in the film winning the best UK Feature Film award. An Award shared by the whole cast and crew. Award winning feature film *Mind-Set* (Dir Mikey Murray, 2022) was created by a crew made up of students, recent graduates & university of Lincoln staff. Student as Producer and partners in practice were at the core of this project with its impact shown in this film's success.

Keywords: Student as Producer, Cinematography, Film Production, Student Engagement

## Summary

As a practicing cinematographer and senior lecturer in film production I often question whether we are educating the students in real-life situations that occur on a film set. However, they are hard to recreate in class due to the large number of students and projects, meaning we are unable to come onto set with them during their assessed projects. Therefore, we as tutors, and our students, themselves may miss out on an aspect of their education.

Trying to devise a method of delivering this form of education, to be able to test that our teaching results in critical and creative practitioners on set, beyond the formal tests of critiquing their artifacts or their peer review/roll report documents, has always been a challenge. We are satisfied as a team that we conduct the assessment as well as we can within the resources and time we have. But there has always been a desire for me, and others within the department, to take students onto a live film production and to test them with the hope that they flourish. This is where the discussions around a large-scale student engagement project began.

## Project Background

Dr Murray and I had been conversing about a large-scale student engagement project, based entirely in a real-world environment of an active film set. We were aware of similar projects, such as *Lapwing* (Stevens, 2021) which utilised students as part of the crew, but they did not exclusively use students. They only made-up minor support roles and the equipment was rented in from a rental house. Once the BA Film production course had been validated at the University of Lincoln, we decided it was the right time to embark on our own project. Keeping in mind what Strudwick writes when concluding their article which debates the concept of Student as Producer:

*'Student as Producer has changed the relationships between students and academics by embracing core values of collaboration. Through the development of students as active participants, relationships between research and teaching are progressed. Opportunities for student engagement, Student as Partners and Student as Researchers, under Student as Producer, enhances the value of the student voice. Student as Producer, as a conceptual framework, can be continually reframed and revisited through its culture of teaching and learning.'* (Strudwick, 2017: 82)

It was the perfect time to run a large-scale student engagement project to help inform the creation of our core curriculum on the new course. We identified, as we progressed, it was clear there were two key challenges that needed addressing for our project to successfully shape our curriculum. Firstly, can you create a feature film, which can compete to a high level, with students and graduates as crew. Secondly, the quality of the equipment we have available at the university was used by the students themselves will be using on the programme.

By addressing the second challenge first, we wanted to showcase to the students that film production is much more than equipment. That their story and the locations are just as important, if not more than the equipment. This allowed us to learn about the equipment, recently purchased for the new BA Film production programme, which had an additional benefit as our lead technician, Steve Young, was a key member of my team, allowing us to stress test the equipment in a live situation. This practice allowed us to better teach the equipment's use in class.

More importantly the challenge was to see if our teaching really did create film set ready practitioners which was the focus of the film production besides creating the film itself.

## Discussion

From pre-production right up to the end of filming, our students and graduates were involved. They were given clear responsibilities, just as they would on any film and were expected to work to those roles. They have the positive experience of independence, trust and respect granted by the heads of departments, who were mostly senior academics. This gave them the drive to succeed, but also experience many pressures that are involved in real world film sets. In essence, someone's money was at stake, therefore we had to stick to schedule. Everyone had a role that was vital, so anyone failing meant the whole crew failed. An example of this was shown at an early stage when an SD card of footage was accidentally erased before being ingested. This resulted in a loss of footage, which is normally a devastating prospect. However, we were careful and understanding of what we had asked of our new crew, we made sure we always recorded to two cards, so nothing was lost. Instead of dismissing a crew member, we sat them down and discussed the positives of learning from this now, in this environment. We highlighted how important it is to stick to the agreed processes, even if it takes a little more time, to avoid situations such as this.

The cinematography crew was made up of students, recent graduates and University staff. They were partners in my practice, which is a physical representation of what Neary describes as Student as Producer: '...involves working with academics, students, and professional and support staff in a collaborative and consultative fashion, generating processes and protocols...' (Neary, 2014: 28)

The camera operator was Callum Mitchell, a recent graduate. This role is an artistic one and he was granted artistic freedom and all the pressures which come with it. He took ownership and part of the film's success was down to his work. Lucy Robbins was the camera assistant and was a current student at the time. This was a very high-pressure role and included the management of the data on set from SD card to Hard Drive. Both clearly learned on the job and by the end of the shoot were ready to work in this roll on another film. Lastly there was Jay Russel-Kent, as current student at the time and taking on the Digital imaging Technician (DIT) assistant roll. Huge

pressures came with this role, making sure files are backed up and the data is not corrupt. Jay took over from the main DIT, Jon Holmes, often on the shoot as Jon had calendar conflicts. All three worked directly with me and independently, as well as with the rest of the cast and crew. They experienced all the real-world pressures of a film set, but on a smaller scale to films such as Star Wars or Titanic.

In the end the film set is a learning environment. Something I based my HEA application on and the key to this is pressure. Without real world pressures, it's impossible for a student or recent graduate to fully understand a film set environment. This is similar to the discussion by Neary et al who describes Student as Producer in the context of employment as supporting '... a clear focus on the experience of students when they leave the university. Student as Producer supports the career preparation and aspirations of students, in the form of a traditional route into graduate jobs and the professions, creating a new start business, finding employment within the growing third sector or going on to further study.' (Neary et al, 2014a: 14) Therefore, it's vital that they experience these real-world pressures as part of their education, to complete their experience to be ready for the careers ahead of them.

### **Outcomes and Impact**

In March 2022, the film won the best UK Feature Film award at the Manchester International Film Festival. This award was down to the hard work of our student and graduate crew, just as much as it was down to the screenplay, acting and direction. This award confirmed our theory, that it is possible to create award winning work with a student engagement project.

The pressure of the live set, and the independence granted completed their learning journey with us. Utilising their skills learned on the course, allowing them to experience the challenges of the live scenario, and most importantly learning via this experience and building resilience and stamina for the feature film industry. This is adding key employability skills which the film industry is after, especially in the crew areas which are currently short staffed.

As stated in the 2022 BFI Skills Review.

*'It is estimated that continued film and HETV production growth will require between 15,130 and 20,770 additional full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) by 2025.3 Input from across the production ecosystem is needed to address this, along with an uplift in investment in skills and training within a reinvigorated overall skills strategy.'* (BFI, 2022)

Our student engagement project has given our students and recent graduates real-world experience to better place them to help fill this skills shortage. An additional outcome of this is that it has highlighted the power of Student as Producer, giving the students the independence and trust to succeed. I aim to

incorporate this even more into my own workshops. Often, they are on the timetable to reinforce the reading, viewing or lecture from that week. But instead, there should be a place for students to drive and test what has been discussed. I hope this will help address the BFI's call for more highly skilled new entrants heading into the industry and to give the students a closer to real-world experience, whilst in the classroom.

Lastly, we had proven our second aim, which was to show that the equipment is not the driving force to success. We provide our students with the cameras and lights etc, to create award winning work.

## Conclusion

As seen in my outcomes and impact, this project has directly informed my teaching. Incorporating Student as Producer as the key driving force within my workshops, we have seen improvements in the skills and quality of the students' work, though some do desire a more handheld approach. The film industry is not a handheld place, so workers in the industry need to be able to navigate the workplace themselves and everyone on a film set needs to bring their own ideas, and their own drive, to make the film happen. Therefore, Student as Producer in workshops is also helping some students realise cinematography is much more than just the equipment, and it is perhaps not for them. This is an equally valuable lesson to learn, but I often feel we fear too many students using our modules to realise the subject isn't what they want to do, but this should be a welcome outcome.

Since the filming of *Mind-Set* (2022) in 2019, the COVID19 pandemic took place. Our plans to run similar projects every summer had to take a back seat. But as we are now in 2023, plans are in place for more film projects soon, and other colleagues have embraced this model and involved Student as Producer on their own films to great success. Some have even begun running Student as Producer based masterclass series outside of the timetabled classroom. This shows that best practice is being shared and this method of working is seen as a positive and is being embraced.

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