

Teaching Media Production: Understanding Unconscious Bias in Creative Idea Development

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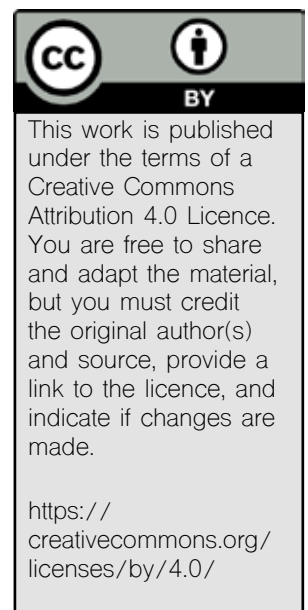
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Abstract

Drawing on initial findings based on observations, surveys and interviews with a range of new entrants and established television professionals, carried out during an 18 month period working with a talent development scheme, we discuss the perspectives these findings have given us on teaching practices within our own institutions and how we are seeking to bring these insights into changing these practices. In particular we discuss the way that the presence of unconscious bias and assumed consensus within the idea development process can reinforce structural inequalities, militating against the aims of broadcasters to produce a truly diverse range of programmes. We propose that it is equally important for media educators to be aware of the presence of unconscious bias and of ways of tackling it in relation to creative idea development within the academy. We discuss both the barriers and potential solutions for an inclusive approach to the idea development process.

Keywords: unconscious bias; ideas development; diversity; media



Introduction

Developing ideas in groups is a common feature of media production courses and can lead to derivative fiction and generic, safe factual programme ideas. In our own experience of teaching undergraduate media practice courses, we have found this can include assumptions about gender and race and include other biases and stereotypes, as

well as work that is highly derivative of existing genres and formats. These problems don't seem to arise to the same extent in individual work, where originality is much more perceptible and students draw more on personal experiences. This leads us to associate the issue particularly with the structures and processes of group work.

Other creative idea development problems we have found include students second guessing tutors' personal tastes in an attempt to achieve higher grades, and second guessing the tastes of other people in the group in order to adhere to a perceived norm. Such issues have been addressed within pedagogical theory (e.g. Serrano et al., 2018; Poort et al., 2020; Zaidi and El Chaar, 2020). Equally, the lack of sufficiently new and diverse content is an acknowledged issue in the media production industry into which students aim to progress (Ofcom, 2020, pp. 21-22).

The aim of our current project is both to add to the discussion about approaches to group work in general, and to focus particularly on the context of media practice education. Drawing on the findings from a case study of a television industry talent scheme that we carried out in 2018, we propose some potential solutions to group based idea development in media practice education, which we aim to test in our own teaching.

The Talent Development Scheme (TDS) that we studied was established to provide support for people aged over 18 from across the UK hoping to develop careers in the television industry. In particular the aim was to identify those who did not already have existing connections or work experience and, thereby, help to diversify an industry that has been widely acknowledged as predominantly white, male, non-disabled and middle-class (Cobb, 2020; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2017; Ofcom, 2020; Saha, 2018).

The scheme introduces participants to the industry, giving them training, contacts and experience in television. In addition to talks and panels from industry speakers and networking events, the scheme also introduced participants to the process of idea development in factual entertainment television through an intensive week of workshops led by development professionals. After working up ideas in small groups, they then pitched them to a panel of television commissioners, who selected a winning pitch. After this, participants remained part of a long term information network, through which they were offered unique access to a range of paid work experience and employment opportunities. None of these activities were designed specifically for our research project. Rather we designed our data-gathering around the existing structure of the scheme.

Methodology

Initially, we observed a sample of workshops that were used as a component of the scheme's selection process, in which participants worked in self-governed groups to develop ideas. At this stage, we carried out anonymous surveys of participants (involving 50% of the 300 shortlisted applicants) about their experience of working in these groups at this stage, including their perception of the impact of diversity or lack of diversity within the group. Sixty of the shortlisted applicants were selected for the scheme. We then observed development workshops led by development professionals for successful participants, as well as the resulting pitches to television commissioners. We carried out semi structured interviews with a representative sample of participants from different genders and cultural backgrounds, again focusing on how participants experienced the process of working in teams to develop ideas and their perception of the impact of diversity or lack of diversity within the group. After the scheme itself had concluded, we interviewed participants who obtained work experience through the talent scheme about how it had gone and how it related to their experience on the talent scheme. We also interviewed television development professionals working with the scheme in a range of roles (such as helping to select candidates, running workshops, giving talks, offering internships or mentoring) about their own experiences of working in television idea development.

Discussion of Initial Findings

Both our own observations and the experience related by participants, suggest that some of the same forces were in operation in group idea development within the talent scheme as we had observed with our own students. As with the students, second guessing was in evidence. In this case, however, the external gatekeepers that participants were trying to please were the television commissioners who had set the brief and would judge the pitches, rather than their tutors. One participant on the scheme expressed the view that these gatekeepers had certain biases that they needed to be aware of:

They say that they want a show that appeals to everybody [meaning] if it's skewed towards men then everybody would watch it. That's the assumption. If it's skewed towards women, even the commissioners would kind of go "oh that's really for women". (TDS Interviewee 2)

One of the creative directors acting as a mentor for the scheme expressed the view that this system of second guessing was not unique to the TDS participants but was actually endemic in the industry itself. He articulated frustration with the risk averse environment of which it is part:

The word 'risk' is bandied around too much and is often used as an excuse for failure of commissioning: safe, bad ideas

that are then re-packaged as risk because they didn't work... You've got this army of commissioning editors who are all trying to second guess what their department head is gonna say... It then has to go to the director of programming but then it has to go to the chief executive of content, there are so many layers... (Creative Director 2)

Some participants also raised a further concern that people within their groups seemed to have internalized the perceived views of the gatekeepers:

As soon as you had two or three women, they were like, "why do you need an all female panel?", but the prior panel was like four men and nobody said "oh it's all men on the panel". And quite interestingly it was women in the group that were making this comment. (TDS Interviewee 2)

Another participant noted:

The shows we pitched, the majority of them did not have a person of colour as a host. The majority of them did not have a person of colour in the judging panel. The majority of them did not have women hosts, right. And that's something very obvious. And it's not due to maybe a lack of diversity in the scheme, because I think the actual TDS is very diverse. But it's just like a lack of diversity in thought, in understanding and in what people think... the public need, you know. (TDS Interviewee 1)

Communications scholar Ien Ang, uses the term "the imagined audience" (Ang 1991, p.16) to describe the way that:

Those in television programming are pressured to imagine an audience that is reflective of the actual television show audience (...) practices that, in one way or another, ultimately revolve around one main objective: to come to terms with television's invisible addressee. (Ang, 1991, p. 16)

More recent scholarship (Litt, 2012; Napoli, 2008; Saha, 2018) also discusses the 'audience' as a construct that functions as a form of rationalisation to "deal with the inherent unpredictability of the cultural market" (Saha, 2018, p. 132). Arguably, the slippery concept of 'the audience', despite the fact that it is couched as a commercial, rather than cultural imperative, normalises or masks the drive and reinforcement of dominant cultural norms.

The participants' comments above can be understood as pointing to the fact that the groups they were working in appeared to share the same view of the imagined audience that they attributed to the

gatekeepers and that this limited their ability to come up with new ideas, because they felt that their ideas needed to conform to the dominant cultural norms embodied in this imagined audience. In the cases they described, these norms were either explicitly or implicitly racialised and gendered. They appeared to have been internalized even by some of those whose experience would seem to position them differently (e.g., women feeling that an all male judging panel on a game show is acceptable, but not an all female panel).

Although most of our interviewees felt that they had gained positive knowledge and experience of the television development process through the scheme, they all said they had found aspects of the group work to be challenging. One participant expressed her discomfort at the way in which her own experience and values seemed to be at odds with that of the rest of her group:

I felt uneasy when it was time, for example, to look at cast and people we'd have on the show, or at times with the use of language, um, the assumption that if somebody's accent was not British it was funny for example... Or making lots of suggestions of people that could be on screen and being met with a very dead silence because they were probably not the norm... for example that all the suggestions of Black women were just not accepted at all... it was quite uncomfortable to talk about anything that wasn't of the norm... I remember coming out of that thinking hmmm – do I really want to work in development because am I going to be working in teams where I'm going to be this minority where I can't say anything that isn't the popular opinion. (TDS Interviewee 2)

This participant, a Black woman, was perceived as shy by workshop leaders, who moderated the groups throughout the week to facilitate productive discussion and fine tuned the make up of the groups to encourage all participants to fully contribute. However, she told us that her reticence was not an innate personality trait. Rather, it was due to her feeling the need to “walk on eggshells” (TDS Interviewee 2) because of the group dynamics. Another participant felt unsure about suggesting talent that the members from the dominant cultural group might not be familiar with:

So, I might be like, oh I know this comedian who's really good and he's someone I watch a lot, but no one might have heard of him, so he might just kind of get pushed away, because if no one's heard of him... well, people I know have heard of him, but people in the group might not have. (TDS Interviewee 4)

These statements suggest that, while some members of the group

may have perceived a greater continuity between the imagined audience and their own personal experiences and cultural references, other group members' personal experiences meant they identified less closely with this imagined (racialised and gendered) audience. This led them to come up with ideas that diverged from dominant cultural norms and at the same time it made it harder for them to get these ideas valued or even acknowledged by members of the group who had internalized those norms. This was particularly problematic where those latter members made up the majority of the group. Furthermore, this situation, or even fear that this might be the situation, could make participants hesitant to suggest ideas in the first place. As one of the assistant development producers running a workshop on the scheme said, with regard to their own professional practice, "your life really dictates a lot of where your ideas will come from" (Development Producer 1). If these ideas are not appreciated or even recognized by the rest of the team, because they differ from the 'norm', then this is likely to produce not only discontent and othering within the team, but also to result in a further layer of self-censorship, on top of that already encouraged by the abiding concern to satisfy the gatekeepers.

The informality of ideas development processes, such as brainstorming, which often rely on participants' willingness to take the initiative and speak up, can further compound these issues. In response to our survey of the initial selection workshops, while many participants reported successful and inclusive group work, recurring problems were also reported by others, who felt that they were sometimes silenced and steamrolled by other members of the group. Through an anonymous survey we received the following responses:

"Two personalities dominated the discussion and were not open to listening to understand – they listened to reply, which resulted in a few people keeping quiet."

"'X' dominated with great ideas and passion but was not great at listening."

"Two members of my group tried to posit themselves as leaders, but this tended to end up as talking over others."
(TDS Survey respondents)

Survey respondents also highlighted ways in which their group addressed some of these issues:

"A couple of people seemed to try to take leadership, but instead it ended up as everyone on an equal platform."

"Someone wanted to be [leader] but the group didn't really permit it!"

“I think a few were good at being heard but usually the quieter people came up with great ideas that led the idea forwards.”

(TDS Survey respondents)

These survey responses highlight the importance of listening, as, otherwise, a subtle process of silencing can occur, resulting in the exclusion of some members, particularly those with marginalized group identities.

The findings outlined above suggest that explicit and implicit adherence to dominant cultural norms, especially when combined with informal collaborative processes that assume everyone is equally free to express their views, can simultaneously produce and mask exclusion and self-censorship in group based ideas development. These findings also suggest that the persistence and insistence of dominant cultural norms are facilitated by an implicit or unconscious bias. Unconscious bias is defined as:

A bias of which we are not in conscious control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013, p. 1)

These processes enable us to make efficient and snap decisions which are perceived as natural and valuable (Kahneman, 2011). Building on Kahneman, we suggest that such decision-making is widely practised and trusted in the media industry and this makes the impact of unconscious bias particularly significant.

We emphasise that recognizing unconscious bias is not the straightforward silver bullet for achieving full group participation and inclusion in the industry, however we cannot ignore its negative impact on the television ideas development process. The issues that emerge from the experience of participants on TDS point to the way that overtly risk-averse practices of second guessing are underpinned by unexamined and unacknowledged assumptions. Not only does this mean that original and new ideas can often be too speedily dismissed, but it discourages their emergence. As long as explicit commercial imperatives continue to find their tacit foundation in cultural norms established by dominant social groups, there is a limit to the impact that diversity policies within the television industry can have on both the nature of the ideas that are developed and the lived experience of those from minority and marginalised groups who work within it.

As scholar-practitioners, there is a tendency to replicate ideas, pro-

cesses and systems in our media courses, but if we are to change, we need to be mindful of not replicating problems from the industry, such as those discussed above, but instead promoting new habits with the new generation, helping them to gain the confidence and experience to bring new practices into the industry. This builds upon the work of US scholar-practitioners such as the members of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Teaching Media, a website dedicated to researching, developing, and educating about best practices in inclusive teaching in college-level media production (Edit Media, 2021). Without these changes, a diverse group of people may not produce new and diverse ideas.

Ideas Development Framework

We have begun to develop an ideas development framework, as a way of trying to address some of these issues as they emerge within group idea development in media practice education. Figure 1 illustrates the five areas that we have identified that are crucial to consider.

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| INDUCTION | an ethic of care, everyone needs to do the work. |
| DISRUPT | be suspicious of consensus which is often based on unexamined norms. |
| EXPLICIT | the implicit needs to be made explicit. |
| ACTIVE | it never stops. It is not just a policy; it is a cultural shift. |
| SPACE and TIME | if we don't make space for diverse experiences and take time to make sure they are heard and acknowledged, nothing will change. |

Figure 1. Ideas Development Framework

In using the word **induction**, we refer to what Haslam et al. have termed:

...an *inductive* process of identity formation, wherein group members interact with one another to develop consensus around new group norms and new understandings of shared social identity – thereby constructing these from the bottom up. (Haslam et al., 2013, p. 394)

We propose, however that educators need to take a role in guiding this process and making sure that it involves an ethic of care (e.g., Bunting, 2020; The Care Collective, 2020; Tronto, 2013),

by which one does not just assume that equality and inclusion are the automatic foundations of every group and that everyone is equally free to just shout out. The mutual interdependence of all group members needs to be acknowledged and material steps need to be implemented to actually make sure equality and inclusion are practised within the group and by all participants.

The instinct to produce consensus is often what silences and excludes different voices. There is a need to focus on the divergent stage of idea development and put off convergence, in order to **disrupt** the norm. Again, this is not only about the student group, but the input of the educator. We are representatives of the official consensus on what makes a good idea, we need to be suspicious of our own judgement, and about the norms we are conforming to.

Making principles and processes **explicit** is particularly important in the informal culture of creative production, which tends to operate according to tacit hierarchies, rules and assumptions. Examples of how this might be done include:

1. Explicit articulation of inclusivity, and disruption of norms as necessary practices within group idea development.
2. Documentation of and feedback on processes of idea selection.
3. Decolonization of the curriculum – a formal dismantling of the curriculum. Presenting students with an explicit frame of reference within which to develop ideas.

We need to be active in constantly checking and evolving these processes to avoid this process becoming an exercise in ticking boxes. In order to make space for diverse experiences it is important to allocate sufficient time to implement the necessary processes for making sure diverse voices are heard and acknowledged.

Future Directions

As the next phase of the project we will try to apply this framework in our own teaching, and develop ways to measure its success in creating a more inclusive learning environment that better supports students working in groups. In particular we would like to further develop the idea of care and the perspectives from The Care Collective (2020) as this will combine well with the discussion of unconscious bias. We are particularly interested in how ideas of care could be practically and effectively included within both the talent scheme and our Ideas Development Framework.

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