Working with(in) Disruption: Remembering the Tensions in Pre-Covid Media Production Education

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Abstract

This article details research that aims to investigate how established and emergent methods for teaching media production have kept pace with the changing expectations, capabilities and needs of contemporary learners. To do this, the authors have sought to sketch out the vectors of disruption and transformation that have characterised media production across various higher education sectors. In-depth interviews were conducted with media production educators from universities in Victoria (Australia), Aotearoa New Zealand, the UK and Europe, examining the contextual factors that affect their practice and the guiding principles that influence teaching and learning approaches. Critically, these interviews were conducted immediately before the significant disruption presented by the Covid-19 pandemic (late 2019/early 2020), thereby crystalising the disruptions educators were encountering within the longer trajectory of media production education. We seek to revisit and remember the ways in which media educators were already encountering disruption, suggesting that this might be seen less as a threat and more as a catalyst for renewal.

Introduction

This article seeks to sketch out the vectors of disruption and transformation that have emerged within media production education, even before the crisis of a global pandemic. The pandemic has not erased the dynamics of disruption and transformation within the field; indeed, the need to address the pre-existing tensions is made more urgent by the long-term continuation of COVID's impact, which has led universities globally to reassess their teaching methods, use of space, and their very purposes. At such a time of re-alignment and reconsideration, there is a benefit to reflecting on the tensions that existed, in order that they

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may also be taken into consideration when changes to teaching approaches are designed and implemented.

A debate around established, and disrupted, methods of teaching media production is examined through the lens of educators working in universities across Aotearoa-New Zealand, Australia, the UK and Europe immediately prior to the outbreak of the COVID pandemic (late 2019/early 2020). Before detailing the first-hand experiences and insights of educators, this article will establish this pre-COVID ground by considering the relationship of disruption with the notion of transformation through varying contexts. These contexts include the persistent influence of digital technologies that challenge traditional barriers to participation in media production, the adaptation of learning and teaching practices in higher education to account for wider, external transformations, as well as the institutional complexity of contemporary universities.

Research methods

This article presents the experiences and perspectives of a number of academics and university staff directly involved in the broad teaching of practical media production across various sub-disciplines, such as filmmaking, radio, journalism and digital media. Participants covered a spectrum from seasoned discipline experts, such as journalism or filmmaking specialists, to lecturers who worked in a more converged manner across a range of sub-disciplines, and therefore professional identities often reflected the processes of convergence and transformation that had already taken place within academic institutions and the organised study of media production.

The researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 participants in total, across three distinct geographical regions: the state of Victoria in Australia, New Zealand and parts of Europe and the United Kingdom. To some extent these regions were selected for feasibility, however, the clustered geographic variation allowed for instances of both contextual similarity and global perspective. Critically, these interviews were conducted immediately prior to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, from late 2019 until early 2020. The sheer scale, severity and impact of the global pandemic can make it difficult to imagine disruptions that preceded the crisis; however, we contend that these interviews offer an important window into the pressures and priorities central to media production educators across a longer trajectory of disruption and transformation than the short-term horizon often considered due to the ongoing pandemic.

Convergence, disruption and transformation

The researchers are themselves representative of the study's participants, each having worked in varying contexts of media education in universities in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and the UK. As we recognised from our own experiences, one of the main challenges that faced contemporary media production educators immediately before the pandemic, was the rapidity of technological change in the sector. This included the specifications of equipment, like cameras, microphones, rigs and editing systems, but also included the ways

in which media texts were distributed and consumed. As mobile media distribution became dominant with younger viewers at the expense of the popularity of older broadcasting systems, the nature of the contract between maker and audience changed, and with that the nature of the media discourse, the technologies used and the actual form of media texts (for example, see Evens, Hendrick and De Marez, 2021). This was not, of course, a new situation. Whilst the changes themselves came thick and fast, the speed of these changes, and their general direction – towards a converged mediascape containing transmedia devices and narratives – had been with us for decades and has been thoroughly theorised and examined through the lens of the terms 'convergence' and 'disruption' (Jenkins, 2006).

Jenkins' vision of convergence announced in his ground-breaking book *Convergence Culture* (2006) seemed to promise that digital technology's ability to standardise across hitherto siloed and separately established areas of work and expression, could deliver a new relationship between the audience and the maker, a relationship that fundamentally challenged and disrupted the top-down nature of mass entertainment and communication industries, where the user/consumer/viewer was often left dancing to the ontological tune of the corporation that controlled the means of publication. Fundamental to this emancipatory vision of convergence was the audience's ability to use the new communication technologies, their desire to engage in the work required to do so, and the transformations that such activity would bring. The early history of the development of online fora, and the later rise and ubiquity of 'user-generated content' pointed to a potential situation in which the media literacy required to make good on convergence's emancipatory promise was within reach, therefore placing media educators at the centre of such a vision, as the deliverers of knowledge, crucial to the mission of social transformation through pedagogic practice (Bolin, 2017).

Jenkins' vision of a converged mediascape, one where greater participation was afforded by changes in IT technology, and especially in the ubiquity and standardisation of digital media, was both enticing and elusive. In the time between *Convergence Culture* (2006) and the arrival of COVID, the utopian and emancipatory promise of Jenkin's vision has not fully emerged as many had hoped. In 2014, Jenkins differentiated his position from a broadly utopian one, in which "'Governments of the Industrial World' would no longer exert 'sovereignty' over digital citizens" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 272), instead settling on the position in which he acknowledged that "elites still exert a more powerful influence on political decision-making than grassroots networks, even if we are seeing new ways to assert alternative perspectives into the decision-making process" (ibid.). The relative optimism of this last claim was put under even more pressure by the covert role of social media in the USA Presidential Election campaign and Brexit referendum of 2016, in which participatory media were used by monied, vested interests to subvert the democratic process (Cadwalladr, 2017).

By 2019, according to Hesmondhalgh, the reality of participatory and socially transformative media had slid even further from Jenkins' prediction, and there seemed to have been four main outcomes of the convergence of media systems brought on by digital technology:

- Outcome one: An initial erosion of media industry revenues but limited challenge to copyright and labour systems.
- Outcome two: The rise of 'user-generated content'.
- Outcome three: Continuing power of corporations – including a new set of IT giants.

- Outcome four: A continuation of the blockbuster and few-to-many system.

(Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 9-15)

Of these four outcomes, perhaps only 'outcome two' reflected the transformative potential of digital media convergence; the others were a demonstration of how power was still all important, and that 'who is doing what to whom and with whom', and how that was stratified, was still of utmost importance in discussions of convergence and media emancipation. Hesmondhalgh focused in on the notion of 'democratisation' – perhaps the main emancipatory element within Jenkins' notion of convergence – and concluded that whilst digitisation has led to "damaging effects on media-industry revenues and on the retail sector", it had "hardly represented democratisation", with accessibility gains in the loosening of copyright regimes more than balanced by streaming services' containment of digitalization's challenge (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 11). Hesmondhalgh also argued that instead of an emancipatory/transformative effect, convergent digitalisation had increased the intensity of exploitation and poor working conditions, especially among young media workers, and any surface gains in this direction evaporated when compared to conditions within other, earlier, divisions of creative labour.

So, it seems that by 2019, the promise of Jenkins' participatory media utopia had been severely dented. Perhaps the only aspect that survived, as Hesmondhalgh noted, was the ubiquity of 'user-generated content'. This could be either conducted without monetary support, or contained in the stultifying industrial cage of what Caldwell terms "Spec World"; a division of labour "in which professional participants and production aspirants alike are expected to produce creative works "on spec.", involving processes of "gleaning and scavenging" the remnants of corporate media, often in the form of "incongruent mash-ups, filked music, and fan-vids", in an attempt to gain a foothold in "Craft World" and "Brand World"; the 'higher', and waged, echelons of the media industries (Caldwell, 2016, p. 41).

Where did this leave the teaching of media making in higher education in 2019? If this was the terrain that most media production students faced after, and in some cases during, their education, what implications did this have on the teaching of media production? Many of the transformational changes in universities had been catalyzed by emerging approaches to teaching and learning in general (such as the increased adoption of problem-based learning and the emphasis on generic or '21st Century' skills) (McWhinnie and Peterson, 2017; Morris, 2019; Wright and Wrigley, 2019). However, there were broader institutional and systemic pressures reshaping the tertiary education environment, represented in the convergent processes of marketisation, unbundling, and digitisation (Czerniewicz et al., 2021). The marketisation of higher education had seen universities function as competitive enterprises providing education as a commodified service to consumers (students). The external competitive pressures of marketisation were mirrored by internal competition within the entrepreneurial university (Krücken, 2021, Martin, Warren-Smith and Lord, 2018). Higher education institutions also competed for higher fee-paying international students in a global market, and these students represent a significant proportion of university income. As the following sections of this article will illustrate, taken together, these dynamics of convergence, disruption and transformation can be further examined across varying priorities and tensions for academics and university staff engaged in media production education.

Industry relations: Managing external pressures and preparing graduates for uncertain futures

For the participants of this study, the relations their institutions, programmes and practices held with external industries were a reoccurring site of tension amidst disruption. As the industries that university programs had traditionally prepared students to engage with experienced their own disruptions in the form of changing work responsibilities, new technological standards and practices, and the shifting needs of contemporary audiences and users, universities were met with various pressures to adapt teaching and student preparation for this changing landscape. Thus, disruption also generated opportunities for transformation, but tensions emerged as academics grappled with the urgent need to keep up with or potentially lead and inform processes of change.

One screen production academic introduced these tensions by discussing the rise of several online digital distribution platforms for video content. In the case of Netflix, a kind of arch-disruptor, they explained that they:

> Go to any country, put in millions or billions of dollars, bring in top directors, get them to make films for them. But then they are also taking really small firms and then having a revenue sharing proposition (Participant 1).

The perceived challenge for university programs was to be able to account for this disruption as it was taking place, to simultaneously capitalize on its transformative potential for the benefit of students' futures. As the academic further explained through the example of "Betacam" and the earlier shift away from film in broadcast industries, such disruptions were not fundamentally new: "every wave of new technology creates – it forces a number of people out of the business. But it creates opportunities for a new wave" (Participant 1).

Technology-driven disruptions that had the potential to transform work roles and practices in the industry were not as easily located in the context of the university. Many of the participants – and colleagues that they discussed – had existed in both worlds: the industry and academia. One participant working in the areas of game design and creative media reflected on the combined merits of their 20-year career in the industry and their Master's degree. They endorsed their program's strategy of employing educators from the industry whilst also pursuing academic rigour through the expectations of, and opportunity for, academic qualification. Their view was that this ensured the program they had developed was neither hands-off like a "traditional film theory school," nor entirely practical in the sense of a training institute: "We didn't want that. We wanted to find some path through the middle" (Participant 2).

Beyond reimagining the positioning and structure of university programs, the participants involved in this study cited various examples of direct, practical relationships with external industries, which presented both opportunities and challenges in varying contexts. One journalism academic was particularly motivated by the high employability rates for their graduates:

> We have employers constantly asking for our students. They have paid internships for our students… the opportunity to turn out quality students, gives absolute quality jobs (Participant 9).

However, for this academic, a large-scale, university-wide initiative to transform and align the way that programs were designed and delivered was itself a form of disruption that had the potential to unravel a strong and consistent relationship with their industry, and by extension the employability of their graduates.

Conversely, as two participants at different universities explained, while certain tenets of journalism were still critical to the way students were taught, the production skills that accompanied this teaching had been subject to digital convergence and were now highly transferable forms of digital storytelling. Such transferability meant that students studying journalism might not end up working in journalism (Participant 3 and Participant 10). As one academic that had a background in journalism and radio reported, the needs of the metropolitan and regional sectors of relevant industries varied and they had received:

> strong industry feedback that graduates likely to head into journalist and broadcasting positions in smaller regions, were increasingly expected to be across all of it (Participant 11).

Practically this meant being able to use traditional skills, like radio broadcasting, while also preparing content for the web and other content forms like video – previously unconventional features of radio training and education.

But the extent to which university programs fulfilled the needs of the industry, as future employers, could be a concern. One radio academic believed that "industry always wants a robot" and that a recent change in the expectation of university programs, that graduates would emerge "work ready," had promoted an industry view that universities merely provide focused training to meet industry demands (Participant 6). But without fully adhering to the requests of the external industry, they recognised that graduates progressed quickly to management roles, owing to the broad knowledge they acquired within their university education:

> Part of our job with managing the industry relationships is to point out that this is a university, we're teaching these students all these skills… I think you'll appreciate in a broader sense what they've learned once you get them in the door (Participant 6).

This academic's concern aligned with Hesmondhalgh's (2019) critique of the realities of media convergence, where the democratic and emancipatory potential of changes in the media landscape were compromised by the entrenched industry labour structures. For some participants, there was an ongoing need to identify an ideal blend between work and learning that served both the industry and graduates without perpetuating exploitative structures presented as internships.

The prospect of a stronger partnership with, rather than in service to, industries, presented an opportunity to overcome the challenges of an uncertain future for universities and their graduates. One journalism academic recognised the opportunity for an online student newspaper to contribute meaningfully to their local market (Participant 10), and an academic working in the area of experimental film believed that universities had made more progress in some areas of practice than was commonly acknowledged. They cited an example of an industry project partner eagerly learning from students about social media tools during on-

site presentations (Participant 17). As another senior academic explained, previous experiences with partnership presented a pathway towards genuine collaboration:

> Often, we think of industry informing university courses. But equally, because media is moving so fast, it's about the students informing industry...It's really, really exciting because it's a real validation of the next generation coming through and involving them in creating the future (Participant 3).

They further explained that industry in this context matters because they are external, and best practice for the constant exchange of ideas and communication between the external and the internal (from within the university) was still to be developed in their region.

Overall, the experiences of the academics presented in this section, highlight nuanced tensions in the relationship between the university and external industries as both were challenged and redefined by various forms of disruption. As an outcome, universities tend to offer a mix of what might be considered conventional industry training and critical areas of exploration. Crucially, universities were not wholly replicating or critiquing industries, they were trying to survive within an ecosystem that contains many agents with competing agendas. As one academic argued:

> Anybody who says at a university they are building a course that exactly replicates the way it all works is bullshitting. Because you replicate the way you survive within a university system (Participant 1).

This statement, as well as the experiences contained in this section, precisely reflect the difficult position for neoliberal universities and the gravitational pull of the full commodification of education practices.

Technology disruptions: Accommodating a priori knowledge and considering production standards

Central to the question of how academics were impacted by and responding to recent, fundamentally technological, disruptions was a preconception that students entering university programs were more readily equipped with key skills and tools to begin producing media content than in previous generations. This preconception was informed largely by notions of participatory media culture, facilitated through processes of digital convergence that have dramatically altered – whilst not fully alleviating – the resource burden required to produce media content. Potential and opportunity are not readily equated with realised outcomes, but it begged the question of to what extent did students of media production programs embody any transformation of audiences into makers, and did they possess a priori knowledge that disrupted and potentially surpassed established teaching methods?

Participant opinions were somewhat divided on the extent to which students coming into media production courses were more knowledgeable or equipped in a manner that impacted the structuring and delivery of teaching. Some academics recognised without hesitation that contemporary students had inherent exposure to digital technologies that influenced their abilities with key skills like editing: "I think they're digital natives, they just take to it. Because

they're used to editing Word documents… it's the same kind of conceptual skills" (Participant 12). Another recognised a generational shift in technological readiness, that extends from "the very fact that those technologies are ubiquitous, they don't need to master razor blades and chalk" (Participant 7).

Several participants instead reported that they did not believe students were inherently more knowledgeable or recognised the added complexity of the a priori knowledge they did possess. A technician that worked closely with one media production course believed the student skill levels were not better, simply different: "They use technology more, but they don't necessarily understand it any more than they used to" (Participant 13). As a consequence, students had become less effective at troubleshooting problems with technology, "because most of the time stuff works for them" (Participant 13). Two academics that work together also suggested that the ubiquity of the Internet has made students "less homogenous" with "vastly different experiences" (Participant 4 and Participant 5).

These attitudes speak to the tensions within any broader claim to the democratisation of media use through digital convergence. Younger media students, or indeed workers, might have been experienced in the use of a wider range of digital technology, but was their engagement in line with a 'DIY' ethos that overcame entrenched media power? Or were they passive participants in the wider attention economy, where making media was just another form of consumerism? Considering the qualification of different forms of media participation as "meaningful", Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) suggest that accessible modes of participation online contrast with "the conditions of production that surround mass media, where an elite few have the skills, knowledge, and motivations required to make meaningful contributions and where most of us remain observers" (p. 158). Technology, then, could be both transformational and disruptive; its increased accessibility and familiarity had the potential to provide a head-start that could reprioritise teaching away from intensive instructional training, but it could also interrupt established methods of instilling a certain standard of production. Some participants reported the need to introduce students to technology to delineate between a consumer level and "the professional equipment to get that professional standard" (Participant 11).

The level of technology that could be provided in a university program was, however, constrained by available resources and general expense. The technician mentioned previously described a course approach to technology as the "high end of low end" when compared with film-specific courses that used high-end cameras (Participant 13), while another academic emphasised the shift to the Adobe suite of software as reflecting common practice in the smaller-scale industries they were increasingly preparing students for (Participant 12). For the latter participant, there was an ongoing struggle to convince students of the merits of specialist equipment when they could so readily use personal devices like smartphones, but technology that existed in a kind of middle-ground, such as webcams in a radio studio, were still helpful in developing a conceptual skill like the visualisation of radio. The academic that previously mentioned a professional standard of equipment shared a similar sentiment:

> Why come to university when I could just look it up and use my phone and take all these shots?" Well, it can take you part of the way, but using the professional equipment will take you the rest of the way. And so you will understand how that world actually works (Participant 11).

The previous statement reveals a nuanced divide that still exists for educators grappling with the themes of this research: which world are they preparing students for and to what extent are they venturing into the world that students are arriving from? Spec world, brand world, or craft world? (Caldwell, 2016).

A screen production academic explained that the tasks set for students had increasingly shifted from a minimum 20-minute duration to a new form of "micro stories" (Participant 1), in response to changes in textual forms and viewer (notably, student) practices. Another academic, who had experienced a tradition of theory-based film schools, and was increasingly trying to expand practical teaching in spite of resource constraints, was also attempting to conceptually bridge newer, technologically-defined, genres of screen content (e.g., Snapchat and Instagram – the student world) with the established principles and values of "third cinema" (the academic's world):

> The students are going to have to take the principles of third cinema, which is Latin American radical cinema, which is all about using cheap technologies, being political, and they've got to try and then make a short creative work here that applies those principles (Participant 14).

Even as a disruptor, technology was generally not the foremost concern for the participants of this study. The a priori knowledge of students entering media production courses created some certainty around a base level of technical skill that most young people would possess, but any familiarity and engagement with a certain consumer-level of technology had as much potential to interfere with the introduction of standards and approaches, often aligned with professional practice. Adapting teaching to account for new resources was less about keeping up with new techno-literacies and more about articulating the relevancy and importance of established theory and methods.

Teaching and learning practices: Dealing with spaces, students and colleagues

Where the previous section dealt with the tensions around technology, and the a priori knowledge of students, another area of discussion and tension in our sample was around the way students and teachers encountered and related to one another within teaching spaces. There was a consensus amongst the sample that the establishment and use of suitable spaces for teaching media production were of crucial importance. This importance was further enhanced by the unavoidably varying needs of students at different levels of experience, and teaching within different disciplinary contexts, as noted above. However, there were clear obstacles to establishing these spaces in institutions that were often not primarily concentrated on the resources needed for teaching media production.

One of the ways in which this issue was framed was through the notion of "studio", as a nexus of different overlapping spaces – technological, industrial, and social – and as a mode of teaching and learning. Informed by both design and media production uses of the term studio to describe collaborative production spaces, the term had been increasingly adopted from the fields of architecture and design into the context of media production education. Spatially, the studio might typically be described as a larger, multi-use space, designed to break down

the hierarchy of the traditional classroom and to facilitate emergent learning and trans-disciplinary project-based work and assessment (McLaughlan and Lodge, 2019). These spaces were challenging on a number of fronts, as they required a commitment flipping the classroom in terms of power relations, teaching time organisation and student buy-in, and a keen sense of balance between student autonomy and pedagogic structure. As two participants explained:

> The studio was a huge change. It was a much more conscious sense of, we'll do a lot more of the work in class... You're getting stuff done in the time together and prioritizing things like the kind of interaction around feedback, iterative kind of approaches, over the lecture demonstration kind of approach (Participants 15 and 16).

Consequently, participant views and experiences of studio provided some insight into the ways in which educators navigated the challenges and opportunities of disruption.

Particularly for educators working within schools or programmes that encompassed a range of disciplinary pathways, studio had a significant disruptive or transformative resonance in that it represented the fertile interplay of specialised and generic skills and capabilities, flexibility and structure, adaptability, and social connectedness. In these contexts, studio was a possible vehicle for the furthering of radical, transformative, and trans-disciplinary teaching, of the kind that we have already seen was both being asked for by industry and which suited the largely more fluent a priori technical knowledge of prospective university students.

One programme mentioned in the sample had completely embraced a model inspired by design studio education, heavily grounded in the idea of praxis. Students would opt into a studio that is often run by industry professionals, and learning was centred on responses to a particular problem. This model required a high degree of flexibility, responsiveness, and autonomy, but a degree of structure was also required to support this openness:

> It takes a particular kind of pedagogy and a particular confidence in the teaching... you don't get a course set of guides... We have built an infrastructure to support the sessional staff or the industry staff coming in. There's a strict criterion around when assessment tasks are due, how much they're worth, what kind of assessment you would be expecting. But that content itself is completely up to the individual studio leader to deliver (Participant 15).

However, for another educator, who saw studio as an institutionally imposed structural model, the studio represented a sense that their discipline was being "subsumed" (Participant 9) by another discipline with whom they were expected to collaborate and share time, space, and resources. The new model brought new pressures and expectations around external partnerships and less autonomy around assessment and delivery formats (such as a shift from lectures to tutorials). Although they recognised that the new model reflected an industry expectation that students "produce content in different, maybe transmedia ways", they struggled with the challenge to adapt while also recognising the distinct importance of different disciplines. An educator at an institution that had transitioned from a trades-focused training institution to a university described similar institutional pressures to conform to rigid guidelines, "You have got to have an assessment task out on the fifth week and it's got to have this rubric," but saw studio as a free space more akin to previous approaches to teaching and

learning, and described trying to "hide parts of that idea within a more structured thing" within the current system (Participant 1).

For those who welcomed a shift to a less siloed approach to media production education, studio represented an opportunity for fertile disciplinary cross-pollination that was not only desirable, but essential in a changing media landscape. A programme leader in a cross-disciplinary media programme described how thinking across disciplines erased distinctions that were no longer necessary:

> Any film nowadays is going to be using digital VFX. Any film. Regardless of what it is. It could be the mildest of rom coms ... Any game that's being made is going to be using cinematography and cinematographic techniques to tell that story. So, we want to say that there are specialisations you can make, but the purpose of this course is to be thinking across those disciplines and to be realising what you can do by merging them and mixing them up (Participant 2).

Although some educators expressed concerns about perceived threats to dedicated, specialised training, most interviewees articulated the value of transdisciplinarity and the importance of flexible, generic skills in preparing students for an uncertain future. As one educator described it, "the industry is clearly in a phase of change. Digital disruption has brought with it the creation of new terminologies, new job descriptions" (Participant 5). Similarly, a UK-based educator described a shift in the nature of media industries and media work that necessitates a broader skillset:

> When I started doing this, we were training students for jobs within the BBC, within ITV, within big established broadcasters. Bricks and mortar buildings with expensive studios, expensive editing systems. What's happened with technology is, that's been more democratised. A lot of those jobs in big broadcasters have gone, they're casual, they're freelance, they're in independent sectors (Participant 12).

The changing nature of media work, rapid acceleration and multiplication of new production technologies and the accessibility of resources that provided technical skills training, such as YouTube tutorials, LinkedIn Learning or other web-based training, had also brought about a shift from the instructional teaching of specific technical skills (such as mastery of a software package), to an emphasis on a broader set of generic skills and competencies such as critical and creative thinking, problem solving and teamwork:

> I've always disliked teaching software because it is, it's mechanical. It's not really what a university is for ... I'd rather they thought constantly about narrative, content, mise en scene, thinking about the story. That's what a university does. Universities create original knowledge, and artefacts which are original. So that's our job, to get them to think like that. (Participant 6).

The notion of generic skills here was deployed to solve, or at least to hide, the tension inherent in the agendas of both media students and media educators – that they must be both agile and disciplined simultaneously, that they must both prepare for work situations and prepare to challenge those situations.

Conclusion: Working with(in) disruption

We have seen that our sample of interviewees can be described as having views regarding disruption and its effects on their work as media production educators across three main areas: industry relations, the use of technology, and teaching practices. In terms of industry relations, we see that both universities and the media industry have their own challenges to face, albeit form a teaching perspective within this particular sample. As reported by our participants, both industry and universities seemed to be coming to terms with the disruptions and transformations in their areas of influence, with both to some extent having to balance the need for their short-term survival with the need to reach out to develop a longer-term future.

In terms of technology, disruption had introduced an element of doubt into calculations around working practice and production values. On one hand, these made the work of teaching harder because of a loss of standards, and on the other hand, opened doors into new formal possibilities. But the sample did not see this in the binary way one might have expected, rather this disruption/transformation was seen mostly through the filter of the adaptation needed to make the training relevant to students who might pursue multiple pathways after their studies.

In terms of teaching, the temporal, and especially the spatial, arrangement of the learning had changed recently, partly in reaction to industry and technology concerns outlined above. The studio space in particular emerged as a conception of teaching space that bifurcated responses; some were emancipated, some felt imposed upon, and some were indifferent. This variety of responses is an indication that disruption was at least a two-way street, and that a modish adoption of studio across a sector could elicit a variety of different transformations. Where does that leave us in terms of understanding where media production education stood, immediately before the pandemic, in terms of its collective experience of working with, and within, disruption?

Perhaps the answer to that question is to note the steady refusal of this sample of educators to conform to any of the standard stereotypes around disruption, which cannot be thought of without also considering its twin, transformation. These two concepts can be thought of as opposites; disruption caused by the piecemeal and gradual digitalisation of established fields, promising democratisation, but delivering intensified centralisation of control; transformation, the goal of progressive educationalists, who saw their field as an engine of social justice. To an extent, our research approach went looking for a coherent narrative of change in this specific area of education and media literacy. However, time after time in this sample, educators talked about blurred and shifting boundaries between these two seemingly opposite concepts, and what comes out of this analysis is a multiple sense of simultaneous disruption and transformation, nearing what might be called a continually evolving situation, a shifting site of action in a field, with no clear spatial or temporal pattern across these different sites.

In addition, the duality of disruption/transformation shows that people see the same events as being symptomatic of either one or the other, assigning positive or pejorative meanings to such events, which to some extent is as much an indication of their point of view. Therefore, disruption/transformation becomes an interesting way of seeing the changing power dynamics within systems or organisations, as much as denoting key moments in the

development of material circumstances. Media production education, therefore, worked with(in) disruption in a multitude of ways, far from the simple stereotype of ancient rigour struggling in a time of neoliberal excess.

Epilogue: responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

Whilst our sample is limited to before the pandemic, it is useful at this point to reflect on the as-yet limited literature on the effects of COVID on higher education, and on our own observations as workers in the media production sector. However long the pandemic's conditions last and whatever the conditions of COVID-19's future endemicity (Ioannidis, 2022), however much these conditions might be unequally distributed globally (Rydland, Friedman and Stringhini, 2022), and whatever the damage done to universities in the meantime, at some point something nearing a 'new normal' will emerge, and the challenges of the past will come back into focus. In order that the temporary emergency measures do not become permanent and anachronistic, keeping these in mind is essential. Indeed, as universities globally are gearing up to identify the transformative potential in the disruption of COVID-19 (Raj Kumar, Mukherjee, Belousuva and Nair, 2022), it is more important than ever to keep these background tensions in mind.

A few short weeks after the sampling was completed, the COVD-19 pandemic brought about a massive disruption across all sectors of human activity, including that of media production education. This led to an immediate halt to face-to-face teaching activities across universities globally. Teaching then 'pivoted' as emergency, flipped, electronic classrooms were designed overnight to work on a variety of platforms, each of which had differing affordances, and differing limits. This was a case of "emergency online teaching" rather than "online distance teaching", with an important differential, that:

> Online distance education has a more flexible, hybrid, and more functional structure besides the simple transference of teaching content; whereas online "emergency remote teaching" is predominantly a teaching-learning strategy with a focus on knowledge transfer (Karakose, 2021, p. 9).

Media production education's sudden, wholesale move online was a shock to an inherently group and project-based, and often field-based activity. The shock was also to be felt in the industry that influences this area of teaching, and in which many of the students following such courses aspire to work.

Therefore, in the context of our sample from 2019-2020, tensions that pre-existed this 'state of emergency' have been either suspended, or hugely exaggerated. Questions around the a priori nature of students' technical knowledge, instead of being a source of observation and working hypothesis, now formed the basis of the everyday organisation of teaching/learning. Students had to fall back on their skills, not least in terms of managing their digital attendance at online lectures. But that question has not gone away, instead morphing during COVID condition into a more urgent question of the equity of access to technology that mere participation in an online course requires. Lecturers also had to adapt and learn a new set of techniques quickly, despite some of the fears and reluctance regarding the feasibility of doing so that the sample exhibited in 2019-20.

This requirement will have put further pressure on the loads of teachers seeking to maintain profiles within the industry as well as their teaching positions, rather than easing that problem. Studio spaces, however they were regarded, were replaced by often ad hoc, off-the-peg online environments, denuding the face-to-face studio experience of its ability to flatten hierarchies and promote discovery and emergence. The return to the classroom, whether it is traditional or studio, will take some time to adjust, especially in terms of students' and lecturers' social and emotional well-being.

However, as our sample suggested, transformation seems to follow close on the heels of disruption. Arguably, many of the tensions discussed in this article have been decisively shifted by the 'emergency measures' of COVID, towards a possible progressive way forward. Blended learning is now a part of daily working life, not least for the high-school children who will soon be university students for the institutions in our sample. A priori technological knowledge, rather than being a monolithic or static factor, will have been radically affected by the online nature of university students' high-school experiences. In turn, an enhanced a priori technical fluency and online habituation can work towards the development of blended 'studio' spaces where discovery and emergence are further enabled. The industry's pivot towards more online work might also lead to a closing of the gap between 'spec', 'brand' and 'craft' worlds, and may yet contribute towards enabling the democratisation that Jenkins foresaw.

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Appendix: Interviewee Table

Participant 1 – Personal Communication, Nov 11, 2019

Participant 2 – Personal Communication, Feb 11, 2020

Participant 3 – Personal Communication, Nov 15, 2019

Participant 4 – Personal Communication, Feb 17, 2020

Participant 5 – Personal Communication Feb 17, 2020

Participant 6 – Personal Communication, Feb 19, 2020

Participant 7 – Personal Communication, Nov 14, 2019

Participant 8 – Personal Communication, Nov 13, 2019

Participant 9 – Personal Communication, Nov 12, 2019

Participant 10 – Personal Communication, Feb 14, 2020

Participant 11 – Personal Communication, Feb 12, 2020

Participant 12 – Personal Communication, Feb 20, 2020

Participant 13 – Personal Communication, Nov 12, 2019

Participant 14 – Personal Communication, Feb 11, 2020

Participant 15 – Personal Communication, Nov 13, 2019

Participant 16 – Personal Communication, Nov 13, 2019

Participant 17 – Personal Communication, Nov 12, 2019

Participant 18 – Personal Communication, Nov 13, 2019