

Report on the GEECT “Teaching Documentary” Symposium

(USW Cardiff 5-7th November 2014)



Introduction

The GEECT Symposium on “Teaching Documentary” finally took place in November 2014, some three years after it was originally proposed at the CILECT General Assembly in Prague in 2011. Hosted at the University of South Wales in Cardiff and attended by some ninety delegates from twenty-three different countries around the world, reactions after the intensive two and a half days revealed a broadly positive experience (see appendix for detailed feedback). The general consensus was that a follow-up event should occur within the next five years.

Symposium Development 2011-14

Heidi Gronauer (ZeLIG) and John Burgan (USW / Newport Film School) collaborated on the development of the programme long distance over many months using Skype and Googledocs, and the date was finally set for

November 2014 after a couple of postponements (the original host institution University of Wales, Newport was merged in 2013 to become the much larger University of South Wales). Starting with a Masterclass given by filmmaker Kim Longinotto – open to students and delegates – on the afternoon of arrival day, the format of the symposium was a series of keynotes with invited speakers in the mornings, followed by individual break-out sessions in the afternoons where delegates could discuss issues in more depth with presenters. Each day concluded with the ever-popular CILECT tradition of sharing “Best Kept Secrets”.

As well as the core contribution of €10K from GEECT and in-house financial (approximately £5K) and logistical support from the Faculty of Creative Industries, University of South Wales, external funding for the symposium to the tune of £8K was also secured by John Burgan from the following sources:

- National Film & TV School, Beaconsfield - £2K
- BBC Wales - £2K
- National Association for the Moving Image in Higher Education (NAHEMI) - £2K
- Bertha Foundation - £2K

Additionally, CILECT offered a number of individual fee waivers to delegates from outside Europe, enabling colleagues from as far away as North and South America, Egypt, Lebanon and Ghana to attend the Symposium.

Programme

Wednesday 5th

Renowned documentarist Kim Longinotto (*Sisters in Law*, *Divorce Iranian Style*) gave a 3-hour Masterclass for students with illustrated examples from

her long and rich experience making films around the world for thirty years. Some delegates managed to attend, but as this was arrival day many were unable to make it. The evening meal at the Thistle Parc Hotel gave delegates a first chance to network and make new connections.

Thursday 6th

Professor Julie Lydon, Vice Chancellor of the University of South Wales, welcomed delegates to the symposium, followed by CILECT President Maria Dora Mourao who gave an introduction to the latest developments on the CILECT website and the forthcoming “Knowledge” Project which will have a particular relevance for documentary teachers. Rolf Orthel gave a brief account of the original VISIONS documentary project supported by GEECT in the mid-nineties.

Keynote 1

Mandy Rose (Digital Culture Research Centre): The new role of the documentarian

Digital has brought disruption to documentary. Radically new forms are emerging requiring new teams and skills. The market is changing. The audience is changing. But documentary has been a fluid form – reinvented by generations of producers taking advantage of new technologies and possibilities. So what’s distinctive now? Outlining key features of this moment of transformation, Mandy Rose suggests that, if we want to know what we should teach now, we need to think less about documentary production, more about the life of a documentary today.

Keynote 2

Paul Pauwels (European Documentary Network): Documentary in crisis?

Paul Pauwels treats the question of how the fast-changing media landscape is influencing the way documentaries are being prepared, produced and distributed and how this changes the competences that documentary filmmakers should acquire. What can film schools offer to the growing market of DIY directors who use the available cheap and easy- to handle technology and distribution platforms? From a democratic point of view this group cannot be denied access to the media platforms, but isn’t there a need for some kind of training for them too? Can the traditional institutes cover the needs of this

market or should it be the independent training institutes and organisations that deal with it? And finally: the audio-visual media are a powerful instrument that influences the worldview of many in a mediatised society. This instrument is now available to a much larger group of people than ever. The risk of abuse is also much more present than ever. Isn't there a task to be found for film schools, to train students to use the available technology in a responsible and well-considered way, thereby differentiating the professionals from the ever-growing group of non-trained enthusiasts who increasingly find their way onto the screens world-wide?

Keynote 3

Mark Atkin (Crossover Labs): Media training in the digital era

Never have we lived in such an over-saturated media environment and never has it been such a challenge to gain attention for our creative work. The rigid systems of distribution and exhibition of film and television are breaking down as audiences create their own pathways to the content that they like. Increasingly, we make media choices based on recommendations through social platforms, rather than from newspaper listings and on-air promos. Today's audience is in control of their media diet as we undergo a shift from a system of networks and distribution to a media ecosystem through which content flows. We now need to ask ourselves, how will our audience ever hear about our work in this globalised, complicated environment How can we allow our audience to participate in our work before, during and after the cinema or television moment. How can we create clear pathways through this ecosystem for our audiences by giving them the content they want, when they want it, on the platforms that suit them? And as soon as it is on more than one platform, even if it is only Facebook, a website and Twitter, we have become the designers of an interactive experience and this involves a new approach and a new set of skills and responsibilities. If we are to stand a chance of an audience discovering and participating in our content, we need to be able to describe, from the audience perspective, the pathways they can take in order to connect with it. And if we do it right, this will influence how and what we create, how we schedule and crew for the production. In an era of overwhelming media choice, when traditional methods of reaching the audience have broken down, we need to take responsibility for connecting with our audience or risk becoming invisible. This session introduces techniques derived from product and design and service design which, when applied to media, allows the content creator to be more in control of an experience that their audience is more likely to participate in.

Afternoon sessions

Delegates chose two consecutive one hour breakout sessions with keynote speakers

Best kept secrets #1

Daniel Lang (HFF München): “Collaborative Directing”

The second-year film in the Documentary Department at the HFF Munich is a group exercise. At least two directors work on one film 30 to 45 minutes in length. This short presentation will focus on the idea behind the exercise, that collaboration – with all its ups and downs and pitfalls – is an essential part of filmmaking – a skill that needs to be learned and honed.

Prof Grazyna Kedzielwaska (Polish Film School): “Character: the inner world of the hero”

Central to my teaching methodology is a series of exercises around character, how to convey the inner world of the hero, their unique values. The apparently simple exercises often take under an hour to complete, impacting on students from beginner to masters or professional level. For example, the 3-person exercise where students in turn take on each role: director, camera, hero. The exercises probe the director’s choices, relationship with the hero, and the format of the film, and how these factors impact on the creation of a new reality in the space between the hero, the director and the viewer. Creation of a self-conscious awareness of oneself and of the filmmaking practice are the most important aspects of this program. The documentary film holds up a mirror to the viewer where they can discover something about themselves, essentially perhaps that we know far less about reality than we may think. This possibility of the viewer perceiving something new, unknown, in particular values, I believe to be essential and the filmmaking practice, a consciousness they take on to their next films.

Friday 7th

Keynote 4

Charlie Philips (Guardian): “Crowdfunding & Crowdsourcing”

The 'crowd' are now key collaborators in funding, making and distributing documentaries. Find out how filmmakers are calling on their audiences to get their work made independently and collaboratively - what does it mean for audiences and the future of filmmaking and what skills to students need to harness to get the best from this new crowd-collaborating world, especially when it happens online?

Keynote 5

Arne Bro (Danish Film School): “Fault & Structure”

Regarding possible ways to participate in the constructive dialogue among documentary teachers, I would suggest to introduce the way we understand the complex relation between Fault & Structure, in pictorial composition as in editing structures, trying to invite the students to produce fault, claiming that fault might be the access to deeper motives in the directors individual language, as fault might be the most expressive mean of approaching the audiences sensation and thinking.

Keynote 6

Niels Pagh Andersen (Norwegian Film School): Film School or no Film School?

I have never been to a film school myself, but teaching has been very important in my artistic development. By teaching I have been forced to be conscious of what I was doing and put it into words. But after more than 35 years of editing I still don't have the recipe of filmmaking, I have some experience to share with the students which I see as fellow filmmakers in their process as filmmakers.

I see some dilemmas in teaching:

- *How do we pass knowledge and experience without ruining talent and creativity?*
- *Film's strength is to communicate what is in between the words, but we mostly use words to teach about films, isn't that a problem?*
- *Story is the new mantra in the documentary-world, we are pitching, casting and making storylines, this gives the financiers, the producers and us teachers a feeling of security, but is that the right path for the documentary film? Are we on our way to throw out the baby with the bathwater?*

These are some of the dilemmas I will talk about and discuss. I don't have the answers, I'm still learning.

Afternoon sessions

Delegates chose two consecutive one hour breakout sessions with keynote speakers:

Best kept secrets #2

Chris Morris (Newport Film School / University of South Wales): Unexpected injections

Running concurrently alongside the assessed modules and briefs, we constantly interrupt the teaching timetable at Newport Film School with

injections of unexpected, fast turn around film making 'challenges' (day or two day practical film projects). Often students have little or no warning and they are thrown very much onto their natural resilience – as for example we often ban them using university equipment and provide no budget. They are often making films for real clients or real briefs. They have to demonstrate their resourcefulness. These projects (made to strict deadlines) are sometimes run as competitions between year groups or differing film courses and therefore build course confidence, strengthen identity and help prepare the students for the 'unpredictable' nature of work beyond university. Alumni often write to us and tell us that the challenge days were the building blocks of their documentary careers.

Alexandra Anderson (Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada)

Drawing on our experiences in the MFA program in Documentary Media at the School of Image Arts, Ryerson University, I will look how pedagogical strategies and the responses of the students have refocused our program away from linear storytelling towards a hybrid, trans-media form. I will outline some of the challenges we have encountered (epistemological, pedagogical and practical) offering a two year practice based MFA to new media artists, photographers and filmmakers. The term “documentary” becomes hotly contested, defended or redefined as student-artists, usually from photography and new media, grapple with the idea of documentary and the “crude” truth claims of the reality based form. Meanwhile students engaged primarily with the moving image direct their focus toward a public discourse but can run aground on the shoals of self-expression. In my talk, I will present examples of student work and course design that I hope the conference will find interesting.

Heidi Gronauer (ZeLIG school for Documentary, TV & New Media)

Bring into play - get involved

Expose yourself, bring yourself into play, get involved are important abilities of a documentary filmmaker. ZeLIG has a series of didactic modules which help the students to develop these competences, to learn to bring themselves into play, not being afraid to get involved, understand themselves and their role in the process, find their point of view inside a process of sharing and become a team-player.

Final session

Everyone was quite tired by the end of the last day, so the planned final session (“Open Forum: Story & Ideas”) was shelved in favour of some concluding remarks.

Bert Beyens, President of GEECT congratulated the speakers, organisers and team for a successful conference and pledged that a follow-up

symposium on documentary would take place not longer than four years time, thus before 2018.

Professor Dr **Stanislav Semerdjiev**, Executive Director of CILECT and Professor **Maria Dora Mourao**, CILECT President, invited delegates to contribute to the documentary section of the “Knowledge” project. As all the sessions had all been recorded, the plan is to upload the audio-visual content to the newly redesigned CILECT website, enabling member schools unable to attend to gain an overview of the discussions. This material will be password-protected and access limited to CILECT member schools.

The group photo at the end of the conference is to be seen on the symposium website at www.teachingdocumentary.com, along with a good selection of materials and texts.

A final vote of thanks was made to sponsors for their support and also colleagues at USW, especially **Stacy Cutts** of the conference team as well as the Associate Head of Media, **Dr. Garrabost Jayalakshmi** and **Jane Davison**, Head of Media.

Last but not least, a warm round of applause for the students from the USW documentary course who had recorded all the sessions for the benefit of future generations! Thanks to Simon Pax McDowell, Santa Aumeistere, George Morris, Matt Chaney, Zak Campbell, Matt Neale.

We, the organisers – John Burgan and Heidi Gronauer – were greatly relieved that everything turned out so well in the end. We were lucky that, despite the distance between UK and Italy, we managed to work together so effectively over many months and after several obstacles. Let’s say that the organisational spirit and drive of Newport Film School, founded by John Grierson in the mid 1960’s, was complemented by the creative energy and passion of ZeLIG, a school devoted to documentary and a child of GEECT’s first VISIONS project back in the early 1990’s.

Let us look forward to brand new initiatives, adventures and partnerships that took seed in Cardiff in November 2014!

John Burgan / Heidi Gronauer March 2015

APPENDIX - FEEDBACK

38 responses (Percentages are rounded up to whole figures)

1) Rate the main presentations on a scale from from 5 (excellent) to 1 (very poor) or n/a = didn't attend.

	5	4	3	2	1	n/a
Mandy Rose	30%	46%	19%	-	-	5%
Paul Pauwels	21%	37%	32%	-	2%	8%
Mark Atkin	24%	38%	24%	6%	-	8%
Charlie Philips	46%	35%	8%	5%		6%
Arne Bro	63%	23%	9%		5%	-
Niels P Andersen	47%	33%	14%	6%	-	-

2) Concerning the presentations, how do you rate the overall balance between New Media and Pedagogy?

Too much new media	17%
Too much pedagogy	3%
About right	80%

Additional comments (Q2)

- *More "Best Kept Secrets"...*
- *Teaching strategies for New Media were missing. We know what is out there, but need to talk about what and how to teach it!*
- *I really enjoyed all the sessions but wanted to know more about how others teach*
- *Weak "Best Kept Secrets" sessions, apart from Lodz film school. Sessions where we are able to compare and exchange were sorely missed. Other omissions: discussion of theory & practice; installation work...*
- *I would have like to hear (or read) from many schools about how they teach doc, their approach and perspective, teaching aims and how it is incorporated into their course or institution. This would help me advise students for future study, developing partnerships and collaborations and perhaps influence our school's approach. I liked having some new media but it's also something I can catch up with at Sheffield Doc/Fest.*

3) What did you think about the format of the symposium? Key-notes (morning) > Break-out sessions (afternoon) > Best Kept Secrets (late afternoon)

Prefer longer keynotes + break-out sessions, fewer Best Kept Secrets	11%
Prefer shorter keynotes + break-out sessions, more Best Kept Secrets	24%
The balance between all the sessions was just about right	65%

Additional comments (Q3)

- *More time for the breakout sessions and "Best Kept Secrets" would allow better interaction with keynotes and participants.*
- *Having breakout sessions led by the keynote speakers seemed to work really well: a very good format.*
- *The break-out sessions were a great idea.*
- *Break-out sessions could be longer*
- *Keynotes were the right length, break-outs could have been shorter and secrets a bit longer.*
- *Would have been good to have more time for discussion*
- *For the keynote speakers it was tiring to have two break-out sessions and they felt to repeat. For the delegates it was good to have a more intimate meeting with the speakers*

4) Do you think the fee was good value on a scale from 5 (excellent value) to 1 (very poor) or n/a

5	76%
4	13%
3	3%
2	-
1	-
n/a	8%

4) How do you rate the accommodation / meals / organisation from 5 (excellent) to 1 (very poor)

5	78%
4	16%
3	6%
2	-
1	-

Additional comments (Q4)

- *Loved the location*
- *The acoustics at the 2nd and 3rd restaurant were terrible and it was difficult to have a conversation. Other than that, everything was great!*
- *Perfect, great job and appreciate all the hard work that went into making it happen*
- *Excellent. Congratulations to the team. Hotel staff was also lovely and competent.*
- *Everything was really excellent!!! But I am sorry that I am not introduced in the catalogue.*

- *Outstanding organisation and team*
- *The 5 is for accommodation and organisation rather than the meals themselves! Well done to you all!*

Q5) Was the symposium overall of use to you, did it satisfy your expectations? On a scale of 5 (excellent) to 1 (not at all).

5	60%
4	35%
3	5%
2	-
1	-

Additional comments (Q5)

- *Gave me insights to a lot of things that I didn't think I should include in my teaching*
- *General presentations, as well as personal discussions were really useful for me.*
- *Very thought provoking and refreshing*
- *It was very useful to me as a teacher and a filmmaker and i look forward to the next one.*
- *I get most inputs out of meeting people from different countries /schools. This worked well!*
- *It exceeded my expectations, because these affairs can often be very conservative and self-satisfying: I thought this event captured the balance between industry, pedagogy and technological evolution very well.*
- *Of overall use, of course. Could have been more on teaching practices, filmmaking itself, markets and distribution in different national contexts. Poster sessions? Links to major doc festivals worldwide on website? 2 1/2 days might have allowed for shorter days and more ground to be covered.*
- *Meeting people is the highlight of these things for me and I wasn't able to do that as much as I'd like due to complications of travelling with a toddler. My problem not yours but definitely changed my experience. Also November/December is the worst timing for me due to teaching and projects so it was a pressured trip.*
- *Very useful - stimulating and thought provoking*

6) On a scale of 5 (extremely likely) to 1 (never again!), would you be likely to attend a follow up symposium within the next 5 years?

5	73%
4	24%
3	3%
2	-
1	-

Additional comments (Q6)

- *I suggest these kinds of meetings (practical ones) to do more frequently - maybe every 3 years!*
- *The importance of keeping your own practice going - and how that feeds and fuels teaching.*
- *More case study, less autobiography.*
- *I am always interested in more social impact*
- *Maintain the emphasis on challenging film schools to understand and deal with the impact of the Internet and technological evolution on the documentary form.*
- *Analysis of major changes over past five years and a look to the future - how documentary is taught in schools in the light of national and global practices...*
- *More exchange of ideas on curriculum, focus, approach and teaching/learning aims. Maybe I'm in the minority, but I feel I can learn from and be inspired by others who teach documentary and I want to take advantage of that when we're all together (as we did on the 2nd day) rather than have something I can get somewhere else. Sorry if I sound critical, I thought it was great! I'm just passing on the expectations I had and what I'd hope for next time in case it's useful.*
- *How to teach documentary for the new media could be one of the most important point to develop in few years.*
- *Methods of teaching and best practice: I would find very useful to have a presentation of documentary programmes from Lodz film school, and short presentations from Italian and German schools about how they run their documentary courses, including what exercises they use.*

Additional comments received by email

Thank you for organising a most excellent Documentary Symposium.

Daisy Gili (London Film Academy)

Your choice of people, organisation of the flow through the conference and team were brilliant, hence the great energy. Rarely been to one so good.

Lucy Allwood (Polish Film School)

Thank you once more - for the hospitality and well-organised meeting. As I wrote I could propose these kinds of meetings - based on practical terms - to be every 3 years.

Prof.Dr. Lubomir Halatchev (NATFA, Bulgaria)

It was not only a pleasure to participate in this well organised and professionally run conference, but to meet all those long time friends and colleagues, making new contacts and last but not least to get feedback on the state of art of our beloved métier.

Gyorgy Karpati (Hungary)

Thanks for a great conference with much food for thought and where opportunities for networking were plentiful.

Michele Bergot (ENS Louis Lumière, Paris)

Thanks so much for hosting such an enjoyable and useful symposium - so good to meet many docs teachers from across Europe. I thought the breakout sessions were especially informative.

Peter Gordon (London Film School)

