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Practical worlds: enskilment as pedagogical practice

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ABSTRACT

In 2000 Tim Ingold considered the nature of skill acquisition in physical locations where our attentive dwelling forms the basis from which learning occurs. He called this ‘enskilment’. Although generally considered in relation to ecological/anthropological study, enskilment has more recently been applied to areas like sports education (Woods et al. [2021]. “Enskilment: An ecological anthropological worldview of skill, learning and education in sport.” *Sports Medicine - Open* 7 (33).) and craft (Gowlland [2019]. “The sociality of enskilment.” *Ethnos* 84 (3): 508–524.). By extension, this article employs a case study to unpack the enskilment experience of six doctoral students who immersed themselves inside a feature film production (*Punch* – 2020–2022). The participants were all concurrently developing projects associated with narrative creation. Seeking opportunities for immersion across pre-production, production and postproduction phases of the project, they experienced a form of learning where skill acquisition was inseparable from collaborative practice and idiosyncratic environments, and insight emerged in non-linear ways. While the article draws correlations between their experiences and existing discourses on enskilment, it also suggests that this pedagogical model might contribute something useful to ongoing discussions around creative endeavours during, and after students have completed their degree studies.

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Introduction

Across a quarter of a century, I have supervised over 80 practice-led doctoral and masters research projects in narrative creation. Working in a New Zealand university with both local and international students, I have supported research journeys that traverse a broad landscape that spans documentary, poetic and short filmmaking, interactive game design, virtual reality narratives, podcasting, indigenous storytelling, and the design of polysemic and polyvocal novels. Residing at the core of these studies lies the craft of storytelling and to this I bring my background as an academic and a professional writer, production designer and film director.

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My pedagogical approach is shaped by a belief that learning environments are not prescribed by the walls of a university, nor are they defined by specified years of degree study. This said, when focusing on the design of learning environments for students who employ story telling as a form of research inside university degrees, I am cognisant of two features of New Zealand's recently revised Education and Training Act. First it states that in universities 'research and teaching are closely interdependent and most teaching is done by people who are active in advancing knowledge' (Education and Training (New Zealand) Act 2020), [ETA]. Second, it requires that universities engage in 'a wide diversity of teaching and research, especially at a higher level, that maintains, advances, disseminates, and assists the application of knowledge, develops intellectual independence, and promotes community learning' (ETA, 2021).

But what is 'community learning' in relation to media practice and education, and how might pedagogical approaches be shaped to promote and engage with such a phenomenon?

Media practice (along with disciplines like design, business studies, nursing, and hospitality), evolved outside of universities. In 2000, John Wood noted that such disciplines entered the academy 'from the street' where their values and methodologies had been shaped by professional bodies that concerned themselves with advocacy, standards, regulations and skill development. Such guilds and trade associations traditionally supported situated, practice-led research that was predicated on making effective, elegant interventions inside actual situations.

These professional organisations often pursue solutions to sometimes complex problems, through diverse realms of knowledge. Thus, a film production on any given day may be concerned with advancing the potentials of recording technology, negotiating legal issues relating to locations or investor finance, navigating cultural significance, maximising artistic performance, or engineering bespoke lighting rigs. These concerns need to resolve flexibly inside a dexterous environment where practice and discovery operate synergistically (Ings 2022b; Sayer 2003).

Given how such environments differ from the ritualised, discipline-regulated realm of university education, we might usefully consider how pedagogical bridges can be built between their learning cultures, given that both pursue an agreed desire for heightened professional quality. In fact, we might consider Darbellay's proposition that universities should embrace learning environments beyond the disciplinary to 'construct new cognitive spaces' (2016, 367), and develop pedagogical models that bridge academic and professional learning environments so our students enhance plural knowability, intellectual openness (Hollinshead 2016; Pernecky 2019) and embodied understanding. While cultures of 'professional placement' and report writing on a programme of study may move some way towards this, this article proposes an additional consideration, where building on Ingold's (2000) concept of *enskilment*, practitioner/academics can formulate and activate opportunities for bridging spaces so that their students become embedded in productive roles inside the film productions that they undertake. Behind this approach lies a continuity of experience where the teacher is aware of the student's learning trajectory and aspirations before they enter the field and there is facilitated space for reflection while the 'placement' is occurring. This is because a film set is often a needs-driven, non-unified and challenging environment that does not consistently foster heightened levels of critical reflection. Given this situation, the academy has the potential to examine spaces within it so collectively, we move towards increasingly effective production models.

Ingold's concept of *enskilment* proposes that learning is inseparable from 'doing' inside the environments we inhabit. He argues that what is learned is not an established body of knowledge, transmitted by an authority into the mind of a passive recipient. Instead, it involves a 'progressively deepening embodied-embedded attentiveness, where an individual learns to self-regulate by becoming more responsive to people and environmental features by looking, listening and feeling' (Woods et al. 2021, 1).

Ingold suggests that by heightening attentivity in environments inhabited with others, we might 'dwell' in contexts where we learn to become familiar with a place's features, the tasks of other inhabitants and the 'patterns of activity of a community' (Ingold 2000, 325). If we apply this idea to professional practice in film, he would suggest that if students embed themselves inside the messy and complex world of production, they might learn in unique environments where the traditional role of lecturer is decentred. Such approaches might usefully supplement theoretical and technical analyses, programme-based group production practice, professional placement and report writing that form the substance of university degree study. In considering such potential let us turn to the context of this case study.

Context

Punch was a feature film that I wrote, designed, and directed. It moved into production in October 2020, before a six-week shoot period across November and December of that year. The film depicts six weeks in the life of a young gay boxer who lives with his alcoholic father in a small, contemporary, coastal New Zealand town. The work questions the veneer of acceptance that often accompanies narratives of LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion. At the same time, it traces the relationship between two very different gay men; a 'straight passing' adolescent and a *takatāpui* (Indigenous, Māori gay youth) who confronts the town's conventions of gender expression.

In November 2022, the film premiered in the Tallinn Black Nights film festival. Over subsequent months it screened in numerous international festivals prior to cinematic release in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe (Figure 1).

Method

This project employed a case study that considered the intersection of film production and pedagogical practice. As an experiment, across seven months of the film's preproduction, production and postproduction, I fused my university-located teaching with learning immersions inside professional contexts and undertook learning journeys with six of my current doctoral candidates.

A case study methodology was adopted so I could describe a systematic investigation into a community of practice (Woods and Calanzaro 1980). Using such an approach I was able to consider complex phenomena in the natural setting as a means of increasing understanding (Hamel 1993; Yin 2003). While accepting that case studies engage with researcher subjectivity and cannot be used to establish generalisability, the method was useful because it enabled me to 'provide a nuanced, empirically-rich, holistic account of specific phenomena' (Willis 2014, 4). In this instance it enabled me to illustrate



Figure 1. Posters for the Australasian, European and American releases of *Punch* in October 2022; November 2022, and April 2023 respectively Ings, 2022a. A trailer for the film is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSnrEUFomVc> The movie is available on multiple platforms including Google Play at: <https://play.google.com/store/movies/details/Punch?id=cocDrK8SupU.P&hl=en&gl=US>

and reflect on a context-specific unpacking of how tertiary student learning might be resourced inside a realm of professional practice.

Discussion

Before considering what happened I am aware that the study had specific limitations. As a director you cannot bring a class of 30 students on to a film set as part of a pedagogical immersion. The logistics are impractical. However, by timing a variety of opportunities and using the facility of the film 'extra', I was able to provide immersive opportunities for a small number of doctoral students with whom I was on a three to four year journey as a supervisor and professional mentor. The experiment was understood as a supplement to broader academic environments. In each instance each candidate had asked if there was some way that they could 'get inside' the body of the feature film's production. Because I have ethical concerns with unpaid student labour (even if we call it an internship), by using the facility of a 'paid extra' and small amounts of mentoring by generous professional colleagues within the production, the project was able to accommodate the students for extended periods of immersive, shared experience.

Whanaungatanga

The practice of embedding opportunities for learning expansion formed part of the greater ethos of a project that employed over 300 people (Figure 2). Because the production engaged with the indigenous Māori principle of *whanaungatanga* (forming and maintaining relationships and strengthening ties between communities), the project had already factored in six paid, retraining positions across the lighting,



Figure 2. On-set cast and crew photograph (23 November 2020). People in this image constituted less than half of the 32 scripted actors, 171 production and postproduction crew, and 127 extras involved in the production.

costume and art departments. These positions were for people who had lost their jobs during the COVID pandemic. The initiative, funded by the Ministry of Social Development in association with Screen Auckland, sought to provide an immersive experience, where a feature film production might enable people with transferable professional skills to find new ‘homes’ within the industry.

The students’ enskilment process formed an additional manifestation of this principle. Their engagement inside a film production (while they were concurrently studying at university) permeated divisions between the academy and the profession, enabling new relationships to be formed and ties and understandings to be strengthened between professional and academic communities.

Preproduction

In the academy where practice-oriented study forms the basis of certain kinds of research development, we often encounter discussion surrounding the need to restore balance between the learner and their environment. Woods et al. (2021), suggest that some of this discourse emanates from ecological psychology and its theories relating to direct perception and action (Gibson 1966; 1979). Such views refute the proposition that skill acquisition can be explained through indirect symbolic representations of the world. Instead, they argue that it is associated with a dynamic, evolving relationship between our actions, the task to be achieved, and an environmental context (Davids et al. 2012).

In *Punch*, opportunities for immersion in filmmaking environments surfaced across all phases of the project. Because in preproduction the facility of a paid extra was not an

option, two of my PhD candidates (who were trying to develop auditioning skills for their film work) asked if they could work alongside me and the casting agency. Here, they dwelt inside an evaluating body where relationships between agents, actors, casting directors and an emerging film were navigated. While on the surface their involvement might be likened to an unpaid internship, their immersion differed because it was integrated with concurrent, critical discussion about their experience of auditioning as a process, and its resituated applicability to aspects of their current thesis project.

This was a world of protean spaces shaped by constraint and opportunity, where auditions were conducted away from the glamour of cinematic depiction (Figure 3). Prior to conducting auditions, I worked with the students to write character profiles, and we discussed sides (script segments used in the audition process), that might afford sufficient space for assessing actors' ranges. During auditions, headsheets were compiled, schedules managed, call backs wrangled, and live and self-tape performances evaluated. The students were not observers; they dwelt inside processes and learned through collaboration and guided attention, alongside a community of practitioners. Ingold describes this as, "Understanding in practice" [which involves] a process of enskilment, in which learning is inseparable from doing, and in which both are embedded in the context of a practical engagement in the world" (Ingold 2000, 416).

For these students the enskilment afforded a process of dwelling in the unexpected. Sharon said:



Figure 3. Working with the director and casting agency, students became an integrated part of a team where standards and cultures of practice became manifest. Through immersion in often insalubrious (but real world) environments, I crafted opportunities for them to consider the implications of what they were co-creating in their own research.

I had no idea you had to maintain such focused, unrelenting attention to detail. Everything has to be checked ... if an actor has tattoos, if they can take direction, if they can demonstrate range, if they are okay being filmed shirtless. The camera records everything and this was checked against what I watched live. Surprisingly, I realised that a camera actually does love some people - and acting projections that work in open space often don't translate onto film. Also, each day is 'full on' and you have to become part of a 'high trust' process. Things have to run like clockwork while feeling organic. As a director, what I will actually be doing, is checking my 'relationship' with an actor's potential. (Sharon Wilson, personal communication, 25 August 2020)

The second student recalled:

I had previously thought auditions were about directors examining and selecting, but I was involved in a very different process where we were working attentively *with* actors and *feeling* how they create a role. (Chen Chen, personal communication, 9 July 2023)

Production

Although two students spent time dwelling in preproduction spaces of the project, all of them wanted time immersed inside the film's six-week main shoot that occurred between the 9th of November and 20th of December 2020. Here discovery would be related to direct, embodied experience that unfolded in substantially more populated worlds. Instead of a top down process of transmission by way of isolated, abstracted or decontextualised teaching, students would navigate learning through performance landscapes, while being continuously guided, mentored and supported by experienced others (Ingold 2018; 2000; Masschelein 2010; Woods et al. 2021). In other words, instruction was no longer singular because learning would occur as a consequence of dwelling alongside skilled practitioners and operating in complex, co-creative environments. Ingold describes this educative process as 'attending to things, rather than acquiring the knowledge that absolves us of the need to do so' (2018, ix). In this world, students encountered and assimilated the unexpected details of mud maps, call sheets, rapidly renegotiated strip schedules, on-set health and safety, and the 2.00am fatigue slump on night shoots.

Beyond this, there operated a professional culture of *whanaungatanga*. As the director, at the outset of the project, I discussed this principle of building richness through the development of new relationships. All cast and crew (many of whom had worked with me on other productions), were aware of the importance I placed on the approach and how deeply I felt that this should become part of the culture of the production. While students were careful not to put undue pressure on departments, 'good will' became a palpable feature of the shoots. Consequently, observation, assimilation and discussion grew inside people's day-to-day working processes.

In this context, Pálsson (1994, 904) proposes that we no longer learn as 'autonomous individuals separated from the social world by the surface of the body [...] who passively internalise the mental scripts of the cultural environment.' Instead, he suggests, we are whole people 'acting within the contexts of an activity' (Pálsson 1994). Inside this state, Ingold observes that an 'ensemble of tasks [are] mutually interlocking' (2000, 195), and enskilment is both cognitive and sensory. In practice this meant sheltering from intermittent rain while a director and camera crew wait anxiously for a unique kind of light, being pursued by a safety officer with sunscreen spray to protect you from burning, returning to

unit with eyes like stewed rhubarb because the wind has blasted sand through every pore of your body ... these things constituted the visceral context of 'coming to know'.

Enskilment's sensory, environmental emphasis may be differentiated from conventional concepts of film apprenticeship (Jones 1989; Marchand 2008; McFarlane 2019; Udden 2003), where individuals learn alongside a skilled practitioner in 'a world beyond their competence' (Hastrup 1995, 17). This is because it places emphasis on the bodily and being attentive to, and reflective about, what is being learned formally and informally inside an environment.

In addition to the heightened appreciation of the environment, the enskilment model developed for Punch interfaced context and expertise with guided reflection and discussion. For example, when the set for a character's *whare* (retreat, home) was designed and constructed, based on provisional sketches I had made (Figure 4), two students worked with the art department to source materials, create artefacts and groom environments into which the building would be integrated (Figure 5). Although reflection and discussion occurred during construction processes through the guided attention of the production designers, at the end of each day we would gather together over tea and sandwiches and talk through what had been experienced, considering each student's evolving insights into the film's culture, drawing resonance between what they encountered and issues arising in their current doctoral projects.

While preproduction environments generally offered relatively uncongested opportunities for dedicated, reflective discussion, in the heat of a production there is rarely time to devote to anything other than maximising opportunities to realise a vision inside a tight schedule. Because the students had asked for opportunities to be immersed inside the visceral intensity of a production, we found opportunities for indwelling in a three-day shoot, in one location dedicated to filming a small town boxing match and the social pressures that unfolded round it. Because I was directing complex performances and crowd scenes, there was no time to facilitate reflection. To get around this, the students stepped into paid roles as extras. This brought them into the intensity and fragmented



Figure 4. Sketches I created of the proposed *whare* and its environment two months in advance of its design and construction.



Figure 5. Exterior and interior photographs of the completed set – created across October, November and December 2020.

nature of a complex shoot and also gave them time embodied in the ‘behind the scenes’ world of other actors, assistant directors and crew who were waiting (sometimes for hours at a time) to be called on set. In this environment separate and rarely seen layers of experience became accessible. Here, unvarnished histories, insights and techniques were shared, cultures described and the experience of being an actor, intimacy coach or production facilitator unfolded in rich, personal detail.

However, inside their performance roles on set, the climate changed. Working alongside other actors, crew and directors, the students became immersed in a process of wayfinding. None of them had previous acting experience (although three had directed short films). Given that we were shooting in the midst of a pandemic, the environment was complex, the schedule pressured, and the spaces strategically demarcated.

Cecelia said:

I recall this as an exciting, new thing where I was helping a friend while being able to involve my children. We were part of building something together and my family and I observed a living example of *how*, when you are generous in the world, generosity is returned to you. We were inside something living that was being created; a big team effort on a scale that people would not normally get to be part of. Everyone had a part to play and everybody had to be very organised. Time and people cost money. Even though Tim Roth was a ‘star’ on set, I saw and felt how everyone had a part to play and every piece was important.

Spending time with other extras I learned how some people make a career of this. One guy lived his whole life in a caravan travelling the country (being an extra), another woman was an author who wrote in her down time on set. In this world, there were multifaceted, living examples of how people I would normally never meet, shaped unique and wonderful lives. (Cecelia Faumuina, personal communication, 9 July 2023)

Joseph recalled:

I learned more in three days on set than I had in three years. It looks like chaos but it's run like an army and everything relies on what happens around you. As a director I can see that I will have to be much more aware of time – but also protect myself from pressure that might result in a bad decision. Clearly, your vision has to be sharp and you need to be able to communicate it quickly – to lots of different people. If you do that, then things seem to work. But it is so intense. You can smell the adrenaline and oil in the gears. (Joseph Carter, personal communication, 25 November 2020)

Chen said:

I have worked on sets before but always on the inside. Being an extra meant I could watch from the outside, examining in a less intense atmosphere, things like lighting design and camera work. I had also been a First Assistant Director on advertisements but what hit me was how much the culture of a production varied. Embodied inside the role of an extra I felt how the nature of a First AD who is friendly and humane, lowers stress and intensity so actors can focus on their performances. Also, for the first time I saw a director come outside and talk with extras. I think this makes people's commitments to a project more meaningful. (Chen Chen, personal communication, 9 July 2023) (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Group photograph of five of the six PhD candidates who took part in the enskilment initiative and shots of the production environment inside which they dwelt.

Postproduction

Woods et al. (2021) propose that enskilment has five features. It is inseparable from doing and place. It is replete with contextual information. Understanding emerges somewhere in our entanglement with the taskscape. Learning is supported by guided attention and ... the overall process may be viewed as wayfinding. These features are all identifiable when we are working in a consciously facilitated environment, but I suggest that they also permeate instances where we are engaged in learning beyond the parameters of degree study, where the roles of educator and learner transform into a co-creative partnership model that spans new projects and opportunities. For example, there are instances where two artists (like a VFX designer and director, or sound designer and score writer) work together synergistically to realise a solution. Here both parties are educators, and both are learners (despite any past teacher or student position they may have occupied). Both leave the project enhanced by the other party. In such co-creation, there is no perceived hierarchy of expertise and there is an appreciation that both artists bring unique abilities (and opportunities to learn) to the environment.

Many of the people I have taught over 25 years moving between the profession and the academy, now work as practitioners in the field. My commitment to them is an extension of what it was while they were engaged in their formal tertiary education. I see learning as a way of 'being' in the world; a desire to pursue the unknown and bring stories into the light in unique and resonant ways. As a consequence I am often called to collaborate on their projects and I sometimes ask if they can be brought on board productions that I direct. Among these practitioners are a few people who are deeply sensory and can work without a template, exploring metaphorical abstractions like grading a colour palette to the taste of bile, composing music that expresses the nature of light, or designing titles sequences that touch the poetics of the melancholic. Such thinkers I understand as poetic and their approaches often sit outside of conventional production models. However, I have immense respect for their 'conceptual shorthand', because when working together we are able to use abstract vocabularies to create unexpectedly original solutions.

On *Punch* I had the opportunity to work again with one of these ex-students. Robin graduated almost twenty years ago, and he has become a highly respected artist and animator. We both work poetically, and I am reminded when working co-creatively with him that, ...

in the case of human beings and other social animals, the self-creating process [...] is embedded in close and continuing relations with conspecifics. In other words, I can become myself only in relations with other humans who are also becoming who they are. (Toren 2009, 136)

When dwelling in projects, we seek out each other's subjectivity (Downey 2005; Gieser 2008) and respond to each other's work, in an environment where 'communication is not the deciphering of meaning between interacting parties, but co-creation of meaning, a constantly evolving process of situating the other, and situating the self with reference to the other' (Gowlland 2019, 515).

In designing the titles sequence that opens *Punch*, we talked about the dust of memory, the parchment of a world I was sketching, and the fatigue of paper. As he

began assembling treatments and I continued filling pads with drawings (Figure 7), we filmed elements for the opening sequence. These three mutually interlocking processes resourced an environment of dwelling where two people's poetics of practice refined and became attuned in such a way that skill became the substance of language.

Alongside numerous projects we have worked on, we talk about politics, storytelling and relationships with the world. Our films become intellectual and artistic intersections that connect two very different lives. At the base of this, is a common understanding that we will both leave each project more skilled and more reflective. Dwelling inside such story making contexts I have come to recognise Geoffrey Gowlland's assertion that within enskilmment models, 'the attention of the learner is not limited to learning techniques. Attention can expand, beyond hands and tools and the meaning of works, to include attitudes and ethics' (2019, 516).

The final title sequence for *Punch* began with a single pencil line that made its way across a damaged piece of paper. It integrated the debris and filmed action inside a decaying world, amalgamated it with type and graded everything to the colour of dust (Figure 8). In the process of designing this sequence (and the credit sequence that closes the film), the features of enskilmment were constantly present, but morphed. 'Doing and place' became action inside the physical *and* envisioned, skill acquisition and application emerged from entanglements of potential, attention was guided by questioning, and the process in overview constituted a form of mutual, reciprocal wayfinding.



Figure 7. Landscape sketches and details in locations I considered for the film's opening sequence.



Figure 8. Frame grabs from the 90-second title sequence for the feature film *Punch* (2022).

Conclusion

In discussing how enskilment was applied to learning inside a film production, it has not been my intention to posit a manifesto. Such an approach can only be a pedagogical supplement, so long as we teach large numbers of students in formal, tertiary education contexts. The case study discussed in this article emanated from a specific intersection where, as an academic and a professional film maker, I sought a connection between the educative potentials of two worlds. Enskilment was environmentally focused and guidance surfaced through processes of attentive reflection. For the students, this pedagogical approach cohabited with more formal academic models they experienced at the university, including theoretical and technical analyses, programme-based group production practice, professional placement and report writing. An experience of enskilment was a supplement to this. I accept that such an approach has limitations, but it also has considerable potential.

This is because, as Woods et al., suggest, enskilment is more than skill acquisition, it is a ...

relational, interactive way of being. It is a worldview that calls for humility, genuine inquiry and an embracement of the unknown. This approach accepts that at any time, an enskilled individual is both prepared and unprepared for the demands of the taskscape - prepared in

that they are responsive or ‘tuned in’ to the opportunities for action, but unprepared in that they appreciate nothing is a given in an environment that is constantly changing. (2021, 8)

It is difficult to determine the specific extent to which the enskilment model developed for Punch ‘washed down’ into each of the student’s later work. Such learning because it is immersive and assimilated cannot be easily measured. However, all the students completed their doctoral degrees and all instances, their exegeses contained highly reflective critical commentaries that unpacked both the content of their storytelling and the processes that shaped the work they created. All five are now making film (some as film poets, some in television, and some in roles that are extensions of the professional backgrounds that they brought with them into their degree studies). They all remain connected. They attend each other’s screenings and work on each other’s productions. This may be the greater consequence of learning in shared environments – in embodied ways. An enskilment model proposes a decentering of ‘the teacher’ as a repository of absolute answers, and it suggests that we might navigate knowledge immersively.

Because of this, for those of us who bring professional and academic contexts (and bridges between them) into our purview, enskilment suggests rich territory for thinking about alternative approaches to professionally based, pedagogical practice and reflection.

... It is to this idea that this case study makes a small contribution.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Welby Ings is a professor of narrative construction at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. He is an award-winning filmmaker, author, designer and illustrator. In 2001, he was awarded the Prime Minister’s inaugural Supreme Award for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, and in 2013 and 2022, university medals for his contributions to research and education. His academic profile can be accessed at: <https://academics.aut.ac.nz/welby.ings>.

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