Case study

A scriptwriting incubator course in South Africa: the 'educational dividend' in a rapidly evolving media landscape

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Peer review
This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Open access
Film Education Journal is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

Increased competition among global media conglomerates entering Africa's largely underserved and potentially huge market in search of audience numbers results in increased demand for locally produced African stories. This article considers the educational and pedagogic approach to training screenwriters in a year-long script incubator course funded by a South African media corporate with involvement of industry and the Film and Television Department at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The article describes the incremental nature of the script incubator process, while providing anecdotal observations about how participants responded to course content and its roll-out. Grappling with the educator's role in such industry-funded training initiatives, the article avoids dismissing the 'educational dividend' as simply another path to profit for commercial broadcasters seeking suitable skills for industry employment. This raises important considerations for film educators working within local socio-economic realities.

Keywords South Africa; screenwriting; streamers; University of the Witwatersrand

Introduction

The realignment of screen production and distribution landscapes in southern Africa is prompted by the relatively recent arrival of US global streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Apple Studios. After claiming in 2023 that entering African markets would provide a voice for 'whole communities that have never even been able to see their stories on camera before', this year, Prime Video announced that it would cut local staff and end commissioning of local content across the region (Yossman, 2024). Despite this setback, Netflix continues to invest in local production, sparking strong competition for subscriber numbers with established African players such as MultiChoice. From my experience working across a range of training and skills development projects in diverse settings in Zambia, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, I see the increased demand for production of local screen stories accruing in new training and learning opportunities in the form of an 'educational dividend' – a term coined for a range of commercially funded training and educational opportunities aimed at skilling a new generation of African film-makers.

This article focuses on one such initiative, the MultiChoice Talent Factory Scriptwriting course that ran from March 2021 to February 2022, which I co-designed and facilitated. This 48-week screenwriting incubator was delivered by the Film and Television Department at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), situated in Johannesburg, South Africa. Although facilitated by the university, the participants were not enrolled in university degrees, and no previous qualifications were required for entry to the course. All 12 participants provided signed informed consent for their participation in this research, and they agreed to the use of data related to their work during the course. Signed consent also included summarised reference to key themes and story ideas developed by the participants during the incubation process. It was also agreed that no participant would be individualised based on name, gender or race. Explanation of the risk of participation in the research was communicated as low, and as no higher than their voluntary participation in the course, which had already been made public by the funder through various press announcements.

Reflective practice as teaching methodology often took a dialogical approach that encouraged co-creation of knowledge in advancing the creative screenwriting process over the duration of the incubator. This reflective practice was threefold, between mentor and student and among peers in the exchange of feedback in response to the creative written work produced. For this research, produced some two years following the conclusion of the case study, reflective practice serves its part in analysis and evaluation of the course.

MultiChoice, a South African media conglomerate operating a range of pay-TV channels and streaming platforms locally and across the African continent, funded the screenwriting incubator course. Tshedza Pictures, a prolific television production company producing commissioned works for MultiChoice, provided workplace experience and professional mentoring for the participants (Vourlias, 2023). Within this tripartite arrangement, Wits University's responsibilities included syllabus design and delivery, development of all learning materials, provision of qualified teaching staff, and oversight of student-related academic matters. From this standpoint, the case study questions the educator's role in these multi-directional exchanges, which are shaped by the educational dividend. Alongside the discussion of pedagogy, this article attempts a balancing of educational outcomes within corporate-funded initiatives requiring industry-ready skills to meet expanding demand for content in a rapidly evolving digital economy. Hopefully, the article raises insights useful beyond its singular focus on this case study to encompass similar initiatives across the sub-Saharan region, and those in other emerging economies, grouped under the same rubric. In discussing the pedagogy, specificities and internal dynamics of the year-long course, the article surfaces important questions for educators about who benefits most from the educational dividend when emerging African film-makers are trained for industry-specific needs, and how this might influence the stories they choose to tell if market dictates of supply and demand are given precedence.

First, the article explains the current screen production landscape to provide local context for the educational dividend accruing from increased competition among streaming services, while also

highlighting the film and television industry in addressing broader developmental outcomes in the region. Following this, the development of the course, its curricular design and the engagement of participants is covered in detail, before finishing with reflection on the 'educational dividend' and its relationship to industry-driven skills agendas and liberating pedagogies.

Background

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that Africa and the Middle East represent only 3 per cent of global cultural and creative industry trade (UNESCO, 2021). According to UNESCO's Assistant General-Secretary of Culture, Ernesto Ottone, growing Africa's global share of this industry, and the film and audiovisual sector in particular, 'represents a major interest for sustainable development and the promotion of the continent's rich cultural diversity' (UNESCO, 2021: 4). While corporate strategies are driven more by profit than by social developmental agendas, the UN outcomes are not dissimilar to MutliChoice Talent Factory's (MTF) stated intention to provide 'a shared value initiative that provides a platform for the creative industries to develop their talent' (MTF, n.d.: n.p.). The 'shared value' term referred to by MTF is popular in corporate strategy to justify returns to the bottom line through social investment. Shared value reconnects business success with social progress, while advancing aspects of the company's value chain, thus increasing competitiveness, through internal management skills to lead social advancement (Porter and Kramer, 2006). With these overlaps in mind, the educational dividend accruing from the developmental agenda of corporate media in the region is viewed against the backdrop of increased competition for screen production within a rapidly evolving content distribution landscape.

Where state-funded broadcasters once dominated the national airwaves of African countries in the region, the stranglehold on analogue terrestrial broadcast is now liberated by 'over 1,000 private television channels operating across the continent – a number similar to India' (UNESCO, 2021: 7). South Africa's MultiChoice, with 20.1 million subscribers, dominates the marketplace, while China's StarTimes (7.8 million subscribers) and France's Canal+ (6 million subscribers) trail behind (UNESCO, 2021: 7). Showmax, a MultiChoice subsidiary, launched its regional streaming service in 2015, and it is now in direct competition with Netflix, which premiered its first African original production in 2020 (Vourlias, 2020). Amazon Prime's shuttering of locally commissioned sub-Saharan content has not dissuaded Disney, Paramount or Canal+ from aggressively entering the production and distribution market, which has disrupted consumption patterns across the region (Chianese, 2023). This race for dominance and market share has recently accelerated, with French media company Vivendi SE making an offer to purchase the MultiChoice Group and combine its holdings with Canal+ in creating a pan-African market leader with almost 50 million subscribers (Prinsloo, 2024).

Against this background, the very real challenges of low economic growth, persistent inequality and limited access to educational opportunity are compounded by high youth unemployment in South Africa. The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2020) estimates that South African inequality rates are among the highest in the world, with the top 20 per cent of the population holding over 68 per cent of income, while the poorest 40 per cent possess only 7 per cent of income. Even when compared to other emerging economies, unemployment is high, with 60 per cent of its youth (15–24 years) unemployed. Acknowledging these serious socio-economic issues, it is important for film and television educators to find a balance between the intellectual and creative development of students, while providing them with the necessary skills for future employment. This case study addresses this careful balancing act, while attempting to avoid reducing the work of screenwriters, and their stories, to the dictates of the new platform capitalism.

I was approached by MTF to develop the year-long screenwriting course with Tshedza Pictures based on prior participation in similar training and educational initiatives in South Africa, Zambia, Kenya and Nigeria over the last 10 years. Following the Film and Television Department's approval, Wits University's

Quality and Academic Planning Office reviewed and approved the aims, content and outcomes of the proposed course. Dr Damon Heatlie, a colleague in the Film Department, was closely involved in course design, which required adapting approaches to theory and praxis already in use in the degree programme to the incubator course.

University of the Witwatersrand Film and Television Department

The Film and Television Department at the University of the Witwatersrand is part of Wits School of Arts, which is situated in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. The department's four-year bachelor's degree in Film and Television integrates theoretical and practical teaching in courses ranging across cinematography, directing, screenwriting, documentary and experimental film-making, post-production and VR skills. During nationwide student protests in 2016 about financial exclusion, students demanded affordable access to quality and decolonised education. In response, the department's syllabus and teaching approach underwent important changes. These shifts included moving away from an uncritical reliance on dominant Western canons of film and towards decolonised learning that is more inclusive of African film-making in the curriculum. This expansion intends to make space for historically submerged narratives based on greater diversity of race and gender, while also noting cinema's discriminatory colonial origins in African contexts.

The screenwriting component of the four-year degree refocused on local story content, and raised awareness of the sensitivity and challenges of writing from within, and outside, a singular identity and cultural background. In furthering their understanding and practice of screenwriting, students are encouraged to challenge stereotypes based on easy assumptions about race, gender and class. This approach promotes reflective practice as integral to the embodied process of screenwriting, as students learn to apply the tools and concepts of narrative storytelling within their lived experience. As decolonial praxis, reflexive and embodied practice invites rigorous debate around the implications of writing character and story from different cultural perspectives while traversing race and ethnicity from the writer's perspective. These pedagogical approaches to learning and teaching, developed in the Film and Television Department, were adapted for incorporation into the year-long script incubator course.

Course design and selection process

From the outset, MTF and Tshedza Pictures required that aspirant screenwriters in the course would emerge with the necessary skills and knowledge applicable at industry level. Pedagogical considerations were mindful of these outcomes, while also ensuring that the course encompassed wider learning and theoretical aspects extending beyond these requirements. Tshedza facilitated the course's industry immersion, providing student access to working writers' rooms operating alongside the productions that they were contracted to produce for MultiChoice. This aspect is discussed further in the case study.

The course was structured into four blocks of 12 weeks each, a total duration of 48 weeks. Each 12-week block involved written deliverables, lectures, class presentations and self-guided work. The structured learning and theory covered in the course took place during weekly three-hour sessions facilitated by Wits film lecturers. Later in the course, mentors from outside the department were also included in these sessions. Each 12-week block culminated in student delivery of major milestones in the development of their original work. The script incubator worked towards a final 'pitch-ready' episodic drama series and a pilot episode script at the end of the course. The pedagogic implications of this design are discussed further in the case study.

A selection criterion was that applicants have a viable story idea for development prior to entering the script incubator. This was to avoid students spending too much time coming up with a story idea, which would have eaten into time available for development of their initial ideas. This was based on other screenwriting courses where students struggle with story ideas they are insufficiently passionate

about once the course commences and frequently abandon these halfway, forcing them to restart story development from scratch.

Suitable candidates were identified from the approximately 300 applicants who responded to the initial call for entry publicised across MultiChoice's various media platforms. From the initial entries, a shortlist of 48 candidates were invited to submit scriptwriting samples. Two scenes were required, each containing dialogue and action. For this, a scene description was provided from one of Tshedza's current productions. In a letter, applicants were directed to translate the prose description of the scenes into 'juicy, delicious, memorable dialogue that pops off the page, and echoes in the ear'. They were prompted to write fresh and contemporary dialogue reflecting local English usage mixed with their choice of the 11 official languages that are spoken in South Africa.

Once Tshedza staff filtered the submissions to a shorter list of 16 potential candidates, Dr Heatlie and I reviewed the scripts and devised a list of standardised interview questions for the final selection process. These questions evaluated the following criteria: ascertaining the applicant's understanding of the course outcomes and their passion for working as a screenwriter in the future; their ability to clearly explain their test scenes in relation to their existing knowledge of screenwriting principles; their thoughtfulness, point of view and level of creative engagement with the story idea they intended to develop during the incubator process; and their willingness to commit to the year of full-time study.

After deliberating on the racial and gender composition, 7 females and 5 males, all Black South Africans, were selected. MTF funded laptops, data and a monthly stipend to meet the participants' day-to-day expenses. These resources would allow them to concentrate on learning and writing for the duration of the 48-week curriculum.

Pedagogical specificities

The course pedagogy adapted relevant aspects of the Film and Television Department's dialogical approach to knowledge co-creation involving lecturer and student, and between peers. Screenwriting concepts introduced in selected readings, such as character, dramatic structure and narrative progression, offered an important balance between the course's educational outcomes and industry needs. Lastly, document templates were developed for all student tasks and assignments submitted for course assessment and story development. The value of using visual teaching materials in guiding learning and practical application was reinforced by prior experience of teaching in local contexts. These relevant pedagogical approaches would help students, including those using English as a second language, in their learning and progress through the course. Examples of these templates and modalities will be explained in greater detail in the relevant sections where they were used.

Careful consideration was given to the series format used by students in developing their stories through the incubator process. Various factors informed this choice, including the telenovelas and daily soap formats currently in production at Tshedza, where students would have their industry immersion. The telenovela is an episodic drama format usually running for a year or longer, and written with a finite dramatic resolution in mind. This, and the soap format, are the most popular formats in South Africa. The main difference between them is that the soap format is usually broadcast five days a week, and is written without a predetermined end in mind. Usually, the world of the story drives the soap, while the characters may change over the life of the series. The telenovela, however, is protagonist-driven and follows a central idea interwoven with secondary storylines.

Mindful of these commissioned formats, Dr Heatlie proposed the 10-part episodic drama as a format for the course. This seemed an appropriate choice for two reasons: it would avoid the easy recycling of story formulation picked up in the writers' rooms; and it would help balance learning outcomes with the funder's industry-focus on skills transfer. Agreement was reached that pedagogic use of a different format would also widen student exposure in developing an understanding of dramatic structure, character development, theme, genre and the principles of scene craft.

Block 1 – screenwriting theory and analytic skills

During the course orientation week, students and colleagues from the Film and Television Department met online and introduced themselves with a brief explanation of their work experience and research interests. After the course outline was presented, the key milestones required of students and the course assessment outcomes were explained. Some participants raised reservations about the relevance of theoretical concepts in relation to screenwriting, and wanted to know how this would help them in finding future work within the industry. These responses were not unexpected, and they prompted further discussion about how the course incubator process was designed with industry in mind. Once students understood how screenwriting theory integrated into the process of story development, they accepted this aspect.

Topics covered in weekly three-hour classes ranged from the difference between commissioned and licensed works to lectures about the world of the story and story premise, and the differences between writing these for feature films and for episodic drama. In these classes, the 10-part drama series was introduced, and the structural differences and similarities between telenovela and soap formats were explored. The first block required a fair number of selected readings to introduce key screenwriting theoretical concepts, and this was always reinforced through discussion in structured lecture sessions. These covered the development of complex and layered characters equipped with strong goals and clear motivation; genre, plot and story setting, along with story theme, were also introduced. Finally, audience demographics and market analysis of local streaming and broadcast environments were presented.

The first assignment was a short essay applying the concepts covered so far in the course in analysing an existing drama series of students' choice. Of the 12 series selected by students, only one was a local drama series, while the rest were from the US. Considering the high level of screen content from the Global North consumed by South African audiences compared to local content, this was not unexpected. However, it did signal the need for adjustments in the following block.

Not until the ninth week of the first block were students required to present a written version of their story ideas. This allowed reasonable time for them to settle into the process and apply some of the screenwriting principles introduced so far. As with all assignments and tasks required for the course, a template was provided to guide students in their first story presentations. The template explained each of the visual slides required, to function alongside their verbal presentation on the following key areas:

- A logline requiring a single sentence explaining the formula for the whole series.
- A few sentences describing the dramatic situation in terms of the protagonists' main goals and the obstacles standing in their way, within a clearly defined story setting.
- A sentence describing the dramatic issue at the core of their story, which was to be expressed as a moral debate.
- A paragraph explaining how they saw their story standing apart from existing comparators, along with descriptions of the four main characters, including a brief explanation of backstory and the present conflict they faced, which would drive their story forward.

Students were encouraged to accompany these descriptions with images to illustrate their ideas; this was intended to get students to begin thinking visually about their storytelling, rather than becoming bogged down in long written descriptions. Over the duration of the course, as students repeatedly presented versions of their work, a notable improvement in self-confidence and reduced anxiety in these pitch sessions was evident.

Overall, the presentations indicated a diverse range of themes, genres and premises. One was a family drama motivated by sibling rivalry over control of the family business following the death of the patriarch; another was a crime thriller, in which a rookie woman detective working the case of a missing girl is hindered by an older male colleague covering up corrupt links between law enforcement and the underworld; another was a teen coming-of-age drama set in an elite high school, which forced the young

protagonists to confront complex issues of race, class and identity; one explored the private versus public lives of a powerful church pastor and the terrible secret that threatened to destroy his family; a police procedural invited a compelling exploration of spiritual and secular themes through the cop's personal ties with albinism as they tried to bring the perpetrators of ritual murder to justice in a rural African setting.

While all were in local settings, the reliance on mainstream commercial genres such as political thrillers, police procedurals, teen coming-of-age drama and tragicomedy, was clear. While this was not a problem in itself, considering the dominance of such genres in small-screen content, it was raised and agreed that the issue of local story relevance would be addressed in the next block.

Block 2 – story proposal development

After a week's study break, the first meeting of the new block offered an overview of the next 12 weeks, and introduced a third course facilitator, splitting the cohort into three groups of four students each. Smaller groups allowed more detailed feedback and greater attention to each student's story development, while also diversifying teaching interaction and exposing students to fresh ideas. Discussions around the reliance on genre informed the introduction of the new block. Having had the study break to think about their story ideas, students queried how these familiar genres might influence their story development. Addressing this pedagogically, we explained that emphasising local content in the second block teaching examples might inspire deeper thinking about their development process in adapting these narrative conventions to local contexts, rather than changing the premise of their stories. Where existing series were used to illustrate relevant concepts and applications, international examples were included alongside local ones.

This approach was successful in moving students away from an easy and less critical adoption of imported ideas, towards more analytical focus on their story ideas. For example, when looking at story setting within imaginary worlds, Afrofuturism in Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018) was viewed alongside the fantasy world of a local series called *Blood Psalms* (2022), both of which depict compelling African futurist storyworlds. In another example, analysis of social power relations around race, gender and class in the US medical drama series *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–present) was compared to *Durban Gen* (2020–3), a South African series set in a hospital in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

The remainder of the block strengthened the development of student pitching skills and improved their collaborative soft skills. These skills helped those students who tended to limit peer feedback to superficial observations to avoid appearing critical of others. Online chat groups proved useful in these feedback sessions, allowing time for students to review peer work before offering their input and suggestions via text interaction. A facilitator reviewed responses and flagged important or controversial suggestions for further discussion in synchronous session, as required. These forums were effective in tracking student understanding of concepts covered in the course, indicating the level at which they were able to apply these ideas in peer feedback. This was also apparent in the increased confidence with which they approached their own stories in working towards the Detailed Series Proposal assignment due at the end of the second block. Reflecting on student feedback received from the initial story presentation at the end of the first block, the next presentation required responses to a range of provocations outlined in the assignment template.

Designed to get writers to think about the relevance of the theme, story setting and impact of their stories, the assignment prompts related to relevant and current local topics. This assignment also required students to provide a historical perspective through which their story premise might be understood. For fantasy or futuristic stories, writers were asked to create an origin myth for their story. As an exercise in reflective practice, encouraging writers to think about their stories and characters within the current socio-political context resulted in valuable insights into their stories and local relevance. Where previously engagement had been primarily with story and theme at a surface level, the new presentations went deeper into character interaction and the relevance of topical social issues, and showed a clearer grasp of narrative arc across the series. One example of this was the family drama, which had initially portrayed

a somewhat superficial conflict based on the family succession battles over the mining business. Now the story treatment was noticeably deeper, as characters confronted environmental and weightier social issues in motivating the family rivalry. The story had expanded to include an embittered relative living close to the mine, forcing a confrontation among the family over the health consequences of the coal mine for the local community. Pedagogically, an important outcome of this assignment was sensitising students to appreciate the social impact of storytelling, beyond pure entertainment.

Block 3 – simulating the writers' room

The collaborative soft skills introduced in the previous block were helpful to the storylining process in the third block. This required students to perform various functions, including taking turns as head writer in leading their own writers' room for two weeks, with their peers contributing as storyliners. In this simulation, the head writer leads the other writers in developing viable storylines within the guidelines of the series proposal. Based on the main characters, story setting and controlling idea (or theme), these guidelines must serve the series narrative arc. The storylining process requires the head writer to learn to use their collaborative skills effectively to encourage others in the writers' room to work towards a desired direction. This must be done while diplomatically redirecting, and sometimes rejecting, proposals detouring too far from the guidelines. For the head writer to succeed, they must learn to navigate a delicate balancing act, encouraging brainstorming within a safe creative environment to ensure that the storylines serve the intended outcomes, while avoiding shutting down creative suggestions in ways that may lead to some participants withdrawing into silence. Collaborative soft skills learned in these simulations provided students with practical experience useful in any professional writing environment.

This pedagogical approach depends on reflective practice, as students receive and respond to feedback while developing storylines with input from their fellow writers. For this part of the incubator process, students continued working in groups of four, each supported by a facilitator. A fourth facilitator, with experience of writers' rooms, was introduced, and the composition of the groups was again reshuffled to diversify collaboration and avoid cliques emerging among some writers. Facilitators met once a week with each group for a three-hour session. Students continued to meet at least three more times each week, outside of this contact time. After two weeks, the head writer role rotated to the next student to run their storylining process.

Before commencing the writers' room simulation, myself and another facilitator with experience of storylining shared approaches used in professional situations. As head writer on a political drama series, I explained the ABC process that I had used to develop and track storyline development across the series. This breaks the storylining process across each episode into: (A) primary; (B) secondary; and (C) minor storylines. Secondary and minor storylines may resolve at the end of each episode, while the A-line narrative continues across the series arc. This segmented approach relies on cohesive themes for each episode to help link the ABC storylines, while building the controlling idea across the overall narrative of the series.

The peer feedback process in the writers' room simulations presented some notable learning moments. When students felt that their ideas were challenged or redirected in ways that they had not expected, the head writer sometimes rejected the input without reasonable evaluation. This often resulted in retreat, and a questioning of the whole process. Alternatively, differences of opinion, point of view and cultural backgrounds enriched story ideas and inspired deeper evaluation of story and the underlying messages they conveyed. While this provided potentially fertile opportunities for the students to gain greater insight into their work, and to expand on the collaborative process, this was not always the case. Here, the facilitators were important in guiding and encouraging discussion when disagreement resulted in defensive retreat into self-protective silence. At times, facilitators intervened to keep the storylining process moving forward. When exchanges became too combative, it was necessary to reinforce the ways in which the effectiveness of a writers' room is enriched by its diversity and differences of opinion. This

required mutual respect to create a safe place for open reflective practice in which the writers could express themselves freely and without fear of judgement.

At the end of the third 12-week block, students submitted a final draft of their series using the ABC storyline template provided for this purpose. While the students took a second study break, the facilitators read the story outlines and prepared detailed written feedback.

Block 4 – pilot episode and series pitch

The study break afforded students the chance to recharge their creative energy before embarking on the most rigorous, final block of the course. The writing schedule was intentionally pressured to give students a sense of timelines that they may encounter in local industry situations. Following the customary introduction to the block, a class was presented on writing the pilot episode. This explained the use of 'story beats', or what is sometimes referred to in industry parlance as 'beating out the episode'. This stage is where the story beats are worked out in advance of writing the first draft screenplay, which includes the action and dialogue. In this preliminary stage, each scene in the pilot episode is concisely outlined as a story beat, conveying the narrative progression and structure of the overall episode. A template for the beat sheet was provided for this stage in the writing process. The template provided a four-act structure for the episode, with sequential numbering for each story beat. Space in the template allowed for a location description of each beat, followed by a short description of the main action in each scene.

Some students voiced frustration over the feedback received on their first draft beat sheets. These concerns were usually in relation to feedback about excessive and unnecessary detail provided in the description of the beats, so examples were then provided to illustrate the concise writing required for this purpose. Perseverance paid off for some, but less so for others, as a range of proficiencies were apparent in writing the beat sheets. While some were able to work out the narrative logic and structure of their pilot episodes, others struggled to focus their writing on only the most essential elements for each beat. Writers who continued to include unnecessary story detail, and even backstory, in their beats, struggled with the flow and clarity of their story progression, resulting in numerous drafts before they were ready to begin first draft scripts.

In the closing weeks of the course, as pressure mounted, students again voiced frustration over uncertainty about how to resolve script issues with the pilot episode. It was helpful to refer them to the stages of the creative development process already covered. Reflecting on the process bolstered their confidence as they found answers to story questions from the work they had already produced. Trust in the rigour of their work over the duration of the course was an important realisation in completing the pilot episodes. This reminded students of what they had already achieved as they approached the incubator's end goal of a final series pitch document along with a pilot episode script.

Prior to presenting the final versions of the pitch document, students had the chance to submit a draft version for feedback. According to one student's comments, this was helpful in providing an opportunity to fine tune their final submission: 'I also felt like the pitch was not really as captivating as I had wanted it to [be], I felt like I was missing something, and your feedback has really given me what it is that I was missing.' Readiness for the final pitch presentations was stressful, and some participants admitted that immersion in the Tshedza writers' rooms had consumed more of their time than anticipated, and had distracted them from their own writing.

Following presentation of the final pitch document, a student raised an important point about the clarity of the template provided for this purpose. This concerned the explanation of how visual images, accompanying the verbal presentation, were to be used. The course had repeatedly stressed the importance of visual images to illustrate verbal presentations and pitches. The student's concern was that their final presentation had been assessed unfairly, considering that they had followed this guideline in the montage of images presented. However, they had provided only visuals without any on-screen text, relying purely on verbal explanation to provide context and meaning for their visuals. The result was

somewhat confusing in the pitch presentation, and it was explained that to work effectively, minimum text is required, even if only in the form of subject headings, to help order the selected images and guide the verbal presentation. Due consideration was given to their criticism of the template document, and the final assessment outcome was adjusted accordingly.

This raises the importance of precision in explaining each assignment and ensuring that the accompanying templates are clear. This case also illustrates how small details or omissions may result in misunderstanding of key concepts.

Script incubator delivery challenges

Originally intended to commence in March 2020, and to run for the planned 48-week duration, the Covid-19 pandemic forced a delay until the following year, with the hope that in-person participation might be possible as the pandemic receded. As new variants emerged, the level of contagion required that the course proceed online. Where positive Covid-19 tests impacted deadlines, adequate recovery time was allowed, and students were able to continue without too much disruption to the timetable. In-person meetings were only possible in the last month of the course, when students travelled to Johannesburg to attend set visits for the Tshedza TV productions, in early 2022.

Funding for the course allowed for laptops and mobile routers to be couriered to all 12 students in different parts of the country. They were also provided with a monthly mobile data allocation and a stipend. This ensured an equitable baseline for equipment and online accessibility, which may otherwise have hindered equal participation in the course.

By commencement of the course in March 2021, the Film and Television Department had been teaching online since the start of the pandemic. This allowed a valuable opportunity to develop and test our online teaching tools and modalities, providing a level of comfort in the ability to deliver the screenwriting incubator remotely. However, almost daily electricity cuts caused by insufficient capacity of South Africa's national grid presented recurring challenges. Referred to locally as 'load-shedding' these rolling blackouts impacted connectivity. During severe periods of load-shedding, power was off for up to eight hours a day, causing laptops and mobile routers to fail due to inadequate recharge time between outages. Flexibility and adaptation were necessary in responding to these problems across the duration of the course. One approach in addressing these challenges was moving from wholly synchronous online classes in the first block, to a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning in subsequent teaching blocks.

One participant withdrew from the course, citing personal health reasons. While their original story had shown potential in its early stages, personal issues interrupted their writing delivery in the third block, and they finally decided to leave the course. Communicating their decision by email, they also included a grateful acknowledgement for 'the chance to have learnt from all of you'.

Conclusion

This case study invites an opportunity to evaluate the 'educational dividend' – a term introduced at the start of the article to group a range of commercially funded training and educational opportunities intended to address local skill shortages. As with other similarly funded training initiatives, this script incubator emerged out of corporate media's need for more screenwriters to meet increased demand. This is the consequence of increased competition among streaming services to build subscriber numbers in the region.

The research surfaces important questions for educators about who benefits most from the educational dividend, with its primary focus on skills development to meet industry needs. This consideration arose over the decision to use the 10-part drama series as a pedagogic tool in the

incubator process. Near the end of the course, students raised concerns about its relevance in the context of future industry work prospects; they questioned whether their interests might not have been better served by the opportunity to develop series with formats such as telenovelas and soaps, which align with broadcaster commissioning preference. The reason for opting for a less commercial format has already been explained; however, a few closing thoughts on this matter are warranted, as far as the educator's role in the educational dividend is concerned.

With such industry-facing courses, it is accepted that knowledge creation and learning must be aligned with industry skills development needs. This requires an understanding of the powerful hold that commercial forces have over what stories are written and acquired for production. Interpreting these forces within pedagogic considerations, the choice to apply the less commercial 10-part drama series format is viewed as a way to deepen learning outcomes without bowing completely to commercial demands, which might restrict or narrow the range of voices and ideas available. This is important, considering the opportunity to develop a new generation of African screenwriters and film-makers for whom independence of imagination and creativity are not curtailed in the pursuit of profit.

Before rushing to conclusions about who benefits most from the educational dividend, it is important to consider local contexts. As noted earlier, when evaluating the educational dividend and its preference for industry-ready skills, the levels of job scarcity confronting young South Africans between the ages of 15 to 24 years offers a sobering reminder, even in comparison to emerging economies, of the challenges facing young people, with unemployment running as high as 60 per cent (IMF, 2020).

The mini-graduation hosted by MultiChoice and MTF on 13 April 2022 was the first opportunity to meet the students in person after a year of online engagement. Most were genuinely thankful for the experience and enriched by what they had learnt through the process. Sharing their views after graduation, they spoke about how much they valued the new knowledge that they had absorbed and contributed to. They were excited about the prospect of working in the industry, and they believed that the course provided them with a level of theory, practical application and self-confidence with which to do so. Of the 11 graduates, 7 had already received offers, or were currently interviewing for writer positions in the industry.

This was encouraging recognition of the pedagogical outcomes, which, by all accounts, had adequately equipped students and aligned with potential industry employers. Reflecting on the course, the decision to use the 10-part drama format appears vindicated, as it widened the range of learning and creative opportunities outside mainstream commissioning guidelines, while balancing funding expectations.

The year-long incubator format offered emerging writers the opportunity to experience development of their stories from initial concept to series outline and pilot episode. While shorter courses are useful in writing a short film script or feature film outline, the longer format was necessary for the development of the 10-part series. The extended duration of the course, made possible by the educational dividend, allowed writers adequate time not only to see through the development process, but also to build confidence in their newly acquired skills and abilities as screenwriters.

Balancing tensions arising between the industry need for skills and the educator's role in knowledge creation is especially relevant considering current practice among streamers, where story and content decisions are increasingly based on predictive algorithms. Once adopted, these formulations tend to assume almost unassailable status. These commercial forces, as Soshana Zuboff (2019: 8) points out, result in the 'reorientation from knowledge to power', which in the realm of 'surveillance capitalism births a new species of power' that not only predicts human behaviour, but is also instrumental in shaping it to serve profit. As cautionary statements, they are worth noting in rounding out understanding of the educator's role in balancing the educational dividend against the potential for shared knowledge and educational outcomes. It is important in the uptake of these new technologies in the region that African screen stories are not fashioned only in the pursuit of profits and market share, but also that the schemes that exist to

support the industry offer opportunities of expression for aspiring writers to tell their own stories, against the inevitable curtailment in an industry dominated by US streaming platforms and content.

Acknowledgements

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author has informed consent from all participants.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – without use of their names – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

Black Panther (US 2018, Ryan Coogler)
Blood Psalms (ZA 2022, Jahmil X.T. Qubeka)
Durban Gen (ZA 2020–3, Zuko Nodada, Meshack Mavuso and Sabelo Ndlovu)
Grey's Anatomy (US 2005–present, various)

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