Strategies for Independent Producing

Class code: FMTV-UT 9092 – 001

Instructor Details: Helen Bowden  
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Office Hours: Consultation by Appointment  
Please allow at least 24 hours for your instructor to respond to your emails.

Class Details: Fall 2015

Strategies for Independent Producing  
Monday 12:00 – 3:00pm  
31 August – 7 December  
Room 202  
NYU Sydney Academic Centre  

Prerequisites: None

Class Description:  
Today’s filmmaker can no longer just be a content creator, but must become an entrepreneur, navigating and setting his/her own course in a dynamically changing frontier. Never before have the modes of making and distributing stories been as accessible and affordable. Our goal is to prepare students for today’s realities, challenges and opportunities, while pointing towards the unknowns that will emerge tomorrow.

We will consider storytelling formats including but also beyond the 90-100 minute narrative movie. As vibrant and vital storytelling opportunities emerge in webisodes, branded content shorts and non-fiction programming, we will explore nimble ways to create filmmaking coalitions, identify innovative funding sources and analyse revenues from digital platforms.

We will explore opportunities in the digital age along with established traditional models of theatrical followed by ancillary release. We will review established funding sources (equity, foreign, presales, production companies) as well as maverick DIY modes like crowd sourcing. We will consider how digital production and release increasing effects the conceptualization, funding, marketing and distribution of independent films.
Students will explore opportunities, develop flexibility and core competencies while planning specific strategies for sustainable careers in the independent film market of today.

**Desired Outcomes**

At the completion of this course, all students should be able to:

1) identify the most appropriate format for a piece of content
2) analyze marketplace value, distribution and marketing routes for independent films, television and webisodes
3) demonstrate a working knowledge of funding sources and differences between them

**Assessment Components**

The class will be graded on the following basis:

- **Class Participation 10%**
- **Presentations 20%**
- **Midterm Report 25%**
- **Final Project 45%**

**Presentations**: Individual student presentations about something viewed (TV show, web series, film), identifying where it fits in the marketplace. Consider the marketplace response - both performance and distribution platform, who is/are the producers, and research as much history as possible about how the producer brought the project to fruition. THIS IS ORGANISED SO EACH STUDENT PRESENTS TWICE IN THE SEMESTER at the start of each class before guests/lectures. This will be part of our ongoing current examination of the landscape and marketplace of independent film/content.

**Midterm Report (Session 7)**: In teams of 3-4, students will be assigned to prepare detailed reports and resource contact lists for various professional services; distributors, sales agents, grants, equity investors, funding production entities. These reports which will be distributed and 25%)shared with all classmates. Students will not only be graded, but accountable to their fellow students to provide useful, practical tools.

**Final Project (Sessions 13 and 14)**: Presentation of a creative project. In teams of 2-3 students, create an innovative model of independent film production and distribution -- using a fictitious film of your own design, you will be expected to outline the ways in which the film will be financed, produced, distributed and marketed.

In the last two classes each team will present their proposal as a five-minute talk, which will be followed by class discussion. A written overview as a formal business plan (including synopsis, team bios, budget top sheet, funding and distribution/marketing strategy) must be handed in at the time of presentation/pitch.

Teams will be formed in the class after the midterm. Each team will have two weeks to prepare and then present the film idea that they will work on during the rest of the
Strategies for Independent Producing

Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component will result in failure of the class.

Assessment Expectations

**Grade A:** Excellent performance showing a thorough knowledge and understanding of the topics of the course; work is highly accomplished in form, content and technique.

**Grade B:** Good performance with general knowledge and understanding of the topics; the potential for excellent work is visible and skills and knowledge have been grasped but are not fully realised or developed.

**Grade C:** Satisfactory performance that demonstrates an understanding of the course on a basic level. Students performance reflects a lack of insight into aspects of the course’s topics.

**Grade D:** Passable performance showing a superficial and limited understanding of the course’s topics; work lacks satisfactory insight, analysis or skills.

**Grade F:** Unsatisfactory performance in assessed criteria. The minimum requirements for the course have not been met.

Grade Conversions

NYU Sydney uses the following scale of numerical equivalents to letter grades:

- **A = 94-100**
- **A- = 90-93**
- **B+ = 87-89**
- **B = 84-86**
- **B- = 80-83**
- **C+ = 77-79**
- **C = 74-76**
- **C- = 70-73**
- **D+ = 67-69**
- **D = 65-66**
- **F = below 65**

Submission of Work

*Should work be submitted as a hard copy, or electronically?*

Unless otherwise specified, all written work must be submitted as a hard copy. The majority of written assignments must also be submitted electronically via NYU Classes. All in-class presentations must be completed during class time.

*Who may submit a student’s work?*

Each student’s assigned work must be handed in personally by that student. The student may not nominate another person to act on his/her behalf.

*When and where should the work be submitted?*

The hard copy of any written work must be submitted to the instructor at the beginning of class on the date the work is due. If the assignment due date falls outside of class time, work must be submitted to the Staff Member on duty in Room 2.04 during prescribed Office Hours (11:30am-12:30pm and 2:30-3:30pm Mon-Thu), or by appointment with the Academic
Programs Coordinator. Each submitted item of work received in Room 2.04 will be date and time stamped in the presence of the student. Work submitted in Room 2.04 will not be considered “received” unless formally stamped.

**What is the Process for Late Submission of Work?**

After the due date, work may only be submitted under the following conditions:

- Late work, even if an extension has been granted, must be submitted in person by appointment with the Academic Programs Coordinator. Each submitted item of work must be date and time stamped in order to be considered “received”.

- Work submitted after the submission time without an agreed extension receives a penalty of 2 points on the 100-point scale (for the assignment) for each day the work is late. Written work submitted beyond five weekdays after the submission date without an agreed extension receives a mark of zero, and the student is not entitled to feedback for that piece of work.

- Because failure to submit or fulfil any required course component will result in failure of the course, it is crucial for students to submit every assignment even when it will receive a mark of zero. Early departure from the program therefore places the student at risk of failing the course.

**Plagiarism Policy**

The academic standards of New York University apply to all coursework at NYU Sydney. NYU Sydney policies are in accordance with New York University’s plagiarism policy. The presentation of another person’s words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism.

Penalties for confirmed cases of plagiarism are severe and are dealt with by the Director, NYU Sydney, not your instructor. Your home school will be notified and you will be dealt with according to the standards of that school. The codes of conduct and academic standards for NYU’s various schools and colleges are outlined in the respective school’s academic resources.

**Attendance Policy**

Study abroad at Global Academic Centres is an academically intensive and immersive experience, in which students from a wide range of backgrounds exchange ideas in discussion-based seminars. Learning in such an environment depends on the active participation of all students. And since classes typically meet once or twice a week, even a single absence can cause a student to miss a significant portion of a course. To ensure the integrity of this academic experience, class attendance at the centres is mandatory, and unexcused absences will affect students’ semester grades. The class roster will be marked in the first five minutes of class and anyone who arrives after this time will be considered absent. Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence.

For courses that meet once a week, one unexcused absence will be penalized by a two percent deduction from the student’s final course grade. For courses that meet two or more times a week, the same penalty will apply to two unexcused absences. Repeated absences in
a course may result in failure.

**Classroom Expectations**
This is a seminar subject and requires the active participation of all students. It also requires engaged discussion, including listening to and respecting other points of view. Your behaviour in class should respect your classmates’ desire to learn. It is important for you to focus your full attention on the class, for the entire class period.

- Arrive to class on time.
- Once you are in class, you are expected to stay until class ends. Leaving to make or take phone calls, to meet with classmates, or to go to an interview, is not acceptable behaviour.
- Phones, digital music players, and any other communications or sound devices are not to be used during class. That means no phone calls, no texting, no social media, no email, and no internet browsing at any time during class.
- Laptop computers and tablets are not to be used during class except in rare instances for specific class-related activity expressly approved by your instructor.
- The only material you should be reading in class is material assigned for that class. Reading anything else, such as newspapers or magazines, or doing work from another class, is not acceptable.
- Class may not be recorded in any fashion – audio, video, or otherwise – without permission in writing from the instructor.

**Religious Observance**
Students observing a religious holiday during regularly scheduled class time are entitled to miss class without any penalty to their grade. This is for the holiday only and does not include the days of travel that may come before and/or after the holiday. Students must notify their professor and the Assistant Director, Academic Programs in writing via email one week in advance before being absent for this purpose.

**Provisions to students with Disabilities**
Students with disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations in a class are encouraged to contact the Moses Centre for Students with Disabilities at (212) 998-4980 as soon as possible to better ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion. For more information, see Study Away and Disability.

**Required Texts**
- Think outside the box office, Jon Reiss
- Celluloid mavericks: a history of American independent Filmmaking, Greg Merritt
- Variety presents filmmakers and financing, 7th edition, Louise Levinson

**Periodicals/ Online Blogs and Websites:**
- Deadline Hollywood
• Indiewire
• Filmmaker Magazine
• Box Office Mojo
• Hollywood reporter
• Variety

Recommended Additional Materials of Note:

• Producer to producer – Maureen Ryan
• Spike, mike, slackers & dykes – John Pierson
• Down and dirty pictures, Miramax, Sundance and the rise of the independent films, Peter Biskind
• Are movies dead? David Denby
• Ted Hope’s blog ‘Hope for Film’

Session 1  Historical Context 1
Monday, August 31

• Review the syllabus, course structure and expectations.
• What is Indie Filmmaking?
• Brief overview of Indie film from 70’s to now; indie wave in 90’s, then appropriated by studios, expanded until the bubble burst in 2008. Where are we now? What opportunities are emerging for current indie filmmakers?

In Class Media: Watch clip of Ted Hope’s interview at Disposable Film Festival

Required Reading: Merritt, Ch. 1-6 and Timeline, Levinson; Ch.4

Session 2  Historical Context 2
Monday, September 7

Guest Lecturer: Marian Macgowan

• Current digital revolution; How do we watch? What do we watch? Why? We are our own audience. What new storytelling forms are emerging? What opportunities and challenges do they offer?

Required Reading: Merritt Ch.7-10, Reiss Ch.3, 6, 7, 8, 15, 16; Levinson Ch. 6, 7.

Session 3  Distribution
Monday, September 14

Guest Lecturer: Marian Macgowan
• Mini-major/specialized divisions of studios, indie distribution company release patterns, theatrical and ancillary.
• How has the digital revolution impacted established industry standard patterns of distribution?
• Examination of multiple platforms, release patterns (Day and Date), waterfalls and monetization.

**Required Reading:** Reiss Ch. 1, 2, 12, 24

### Session 4  Production
**Monday, September 21**

• How has the digital revolution impacted fundraising, marketing and audience building and storytelling formats, such as Webisodes/Channels.
• How to use YOUTUBE and Twitter to become your own brand.
• Branded content as funding source for creative storytelling/short films, long form and episodic.

**Required reading:** Reiss Ch.35, 36; Levinson, Intro, Ch. 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 11

**Assignment: Research and develop a step outline**

### Session 5  Fundraising
**Monday, September 28**

• A survey of available routes and sources: Traditional industry sources such as Production Companies, Distribution MG/Pre-sales. Equity Investors, Tax incentives and rebates, grants (Cinereach, Sundance Institute, San Francisco Film Society, Tribeca, etc), crowd-sourcing, friends and family. Setting up an LLC, etc.
• What legal apparatus needs to be in place to access these options, and what are the obligations of each?

**HOMEWORK:** Begin work on Midterm. **MIDTERM TEAMS AND TARGETS ASSIGNED.**

**FALL BREAK:** October 5-9

### Session 6  No Budget/Low Budget Filming
**Monday, October 12**

• The importance of working together as coalitions, Ultra Low Budget Union deals and cost cutting strategies.

*In class Media:* Watch documentary about The Making Of Beasts Of The Southern Wild and discuss

**HOMEWORK:** Continue work on Midterm.
Session 7  Midterm  
Monday, October 19  

Assignment:  
• Resource Reports presented and circulated.  

SECOND HALF - CLASS WILL DIVIDE INTO GROUPS FOR FINAL PROJECTS.  

Required Reading: Remaining chapters in Reiss and Levinson. Particularly Reiss Ch.27, in preparation for Session 8.  

Session 8  Non-fiction Context  
Monday, October 26  

Guest Lecturer: TBA  

• Where are the opportunities for non-fiction storytelling, as documentaries segue into reality shows.  
• How do production concerns, funding/distribution opportunities differ, than for narrative fiction?  

Session 9  Pitches  
Monday, November 2  

• Groups present their rough ideas for final projects.  

Session 10  Made in New York  
Monday, November 9  

• The variety of important resources offered in NYC and NY State, including MADE IN NEW YORK facility in DUMBO, run by IFP. Explore tax incentives, rebates and New York based grants.  

Required Reading: Reading assignment, Reiss Ch. 13, 14; Levinson Ch. 12  

Session 11  Film Festivals  
Monday, November 16  

• Where to submit? Why and how? Dos and don’ts. How to make the most of the festival opportunity. Festivals as theatrical release.  

Homework: Work on Final Presentation Project  

Session 12  Case Study
Monday, November 23

**Guest Lecturer:** TBA

- **Webisodes, STARTING FROM NOW....**

**Homework:** Work on Final Presentation Project

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**Your Instructor**

Helen Bowden is one of Australia’s leading film and tv drama producers. She has produced three multi award winning dramas in the last five years: *Devil’s Playground* a miniseries about the cover up of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, starring Toni Colette; *Underground*, the Julian Assange story, starring Anthony LaPaglia and Rachel Griffiths, and *The Slap*, starring Melissa George and Sophie Okonedo. Helen was an EP on the US version of The Slap made for NBCU. She has produced three feature films and her 2006 documentary *Girl in a Mirror* was the first Australian film ever to win the prestigious Rose D’or Award in Montreux.