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**Screenwriting, higher education and ecologies of expertise**

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Introduction

In March 2014 at the *Independent* newspapers’ Bath Literature Festival, Hanif Kureishi was quoted as describing creative writing courses as a waste of time (Dixon 2014; Flood 2014; Jones and Clark 2014). These comments sit within a longer standing debate concerning the value and relevance of higher education courses for ‘the media industries’ (Luckhurst 2007; Buckingham 2009; Curran 2013). A further twist to Kureishi’s comments come when noting that the talk was sponsored by a university Department of Creative Writing and that Kureishi teaches creative writing at another university. Kureishi is also a screenwriter, his credits including *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993) and *The Mother* (2003). Taking Kureishi’s comments on the possibilities and utility of teaching creative writing as a starting point, this article examines instances of instructional discourses and ‘how-to’ guidance (Ashton 2014; Conor 2014a) informing screenwriting practice. In this paper, we discuss emergent, digital ‘ecologies of screenwriting expertise’ (drawing on Stengers 2005), in order to examine screenwriting and higher education and we argue for the need to address the teaching of screenwriting both inside and outside higher education.

Part one focuses on higher education and considers the translation of industry practitioners’ expertise into learning and teaching with students. Higher education courses are however only one location in which screenwriting is “taught”. There exists a range of offerings intended to steer would-be screenwriters towards achieving their writing aspirations as writers such as Batty (2014) has shown. With our focus then moving on two sites of screenwriting expertise we are by no means offering an exhaustive or generalizable account of digital screenwriting platforms but we believe this comparison between two key sites and their ecologies of expertise is an important contribution to studies of screenwriting labour as well as screenwriting pedagogy. Specifically, part two examines instructional materials available on the Lynda.com online learning platform, and part three examines *The Blacklist* – a fee-based professional script reader service. These sources may be distinguished in terms of geography, access and financial models, intended audience, and the forms of interaction and engagement. They should not however be seen as mutually exclusive.

In examining the range of sites in which screenwriting is taught, we adopt Stengers’ (2005; 2010) concept of “ecology of practices” and extend this to examine an “ecology of screenwriting expertise”. Stengers (2005, 184) introduces the ecology of practices to ‘demand that no practice be defined as ‘like any other’, just as no living species is like any other.’ In relation to screenwriting expertise as it exists across higher education, online courses and professional evaluation services, this concept helps to caution against the veneration of one over the other, whilst recognising that they are in dialogue and tension. A further helpful steer adapted from Stengers (2010) comes from her discussion of ecologies as processual. On this, she states that in an ecology, ‘new relations are added to the situation already produced by a multiplicity of relations’ (Stengers 2010, 33). In terms of screenwriting, established forms of guidance and instruction, such as ‘how-to’ guides (Conor 2014a; 2014b) and higher education academic-practitioners (Ashton 2013), now sit alongside new, digital and networked sites for screenwriting education, such as Lynda.com and The Blacklist 3.0.

Associated with these different instructional sources, there are distinctive modes and styles of delivery and engagement, for example the face-to-face exchange in the university classroom compared to the interactive learning environment of the online course. By bringing these sources and materials together, this article will argue for the need to extend beyond questions of whether screenwriting can be taught or not in order to look at the multitude of sites where this already happens. In examining screenwriting and higher education, we argue for the need for screenwriting studies to address and explore the teaching of screenwriting both inside and outside higher education.

Part One: Practitioner Academics: Industry Expertise in Higher Education

In concurrently teaching within higher education and maintaining his industry practice, Kureishi might be described as a practitioner-academic (Clews and Clews 2009; Shreeve 2009; Ashton 2013). In this respect, Kureishi can be positioned alongside practitioner-academics from a range of creative industries sectors that work across ‘industry’ and ‘academia’. Within a UK context, the *Looking Out* report published by the Art Design Media Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy (ADM-HEA) identified teacher-practitioners, alongside student work placements and industry involvement in student projects, as key forms of higher education and industry engagement (Clews and Mallinder 2010). In terms of student engagement, a clear finding from extant research on practitioner-academics has been that advice from practitioners to students is well regarded and seen to hold distinctive value. Moreover, this advice would extend across different domains. For example, in a study looking at games design practitioner-academics (Ashton 2009) it was clear that advice extended beyond technical aspects of games development to what it is like to work in industry and how-to conduct oneself. Often with a commitment to creating space for reflection – Kureishi describes his role as ‘part-therapist’ (Jones and Clark 2014) –screenwriting within higher education extends beyond an instructional ‘how-to’ approach. There are though necessary claims to expertise, in common with our later examples, that are deployed by screenwriting practitioners in securing employment within higher education and engaging with students.

With the movement into and between higher education and expertise, a sense of professional identity is reconfigured, and expertise is (re)articulated. Comunian and Gilmore’s report (2015) emerging out of the *Beyond the Campus* project pointed to a new breed of “creative” and “engaged” academic workforce. Specifically, Comunian and Gilmore (2015, 16) suggest that the core requirements for this workforce are seeing the lines between teacher and practitioner become increasingly blurred through ‘new hybrid roles and skillsets, and shared practical experiences.’ In several respects, there are strong parallels between academic labour and creative labour that include networked and multivalent working experiences and trajectories, a plethora of flexible, contingent and casualised forms of employment, and the significant barriers to entry which ensure that both academic and creative sectors are exclusive and unequal (for example see Gill 2009; Ross 2009) Indeed, attempts to understand the nature of this “hybrid role” are usefully served by taking a step back and looking to the conditions of screenwriting practice in both higher education and industry.

In examining screenwriting as creative labour, Conor (2009, 38) addresses how, ‘the material and frequently brutal conditions of the screenwriting labour market have profound effects on how screenwriters themselves function – their career trajectories, their creative and craft practices, their daily working lives and their self-perceptions are shaped by these specific dynamics of cultural production.’ In considering screenwriting practitioner-academics with reference to the broader experiences and practices of cultural work (perhaps most notably the question of career trajectories), productive links can be made with extant research on practitioner-academics (Ashton 2013). This research, engaging with a range of creative sectors (Ashton 2013) and screenwriting in particular (Ashton and Soyinka 2014), considers “push” and “pull” factors.

Pull factors into higher education include the desire to share expertise and insights with students, and greater space for reflection and research. Practitioner-academics have contributed to a growing body of practice- and theory-led research on screenwriting and this is reflected in the growing body of work referred to as ‘screenwriting studies’ as well as to dedicated journals such as the *Journal of Screenwriting* (see also the other contributions to this special issue). More specifically in terms of ‘pull’ factors, Ashton’s (2013) interview with a practitioner-academic filmmaker explored the types of projects they could undertake within a higher education context compared to within their former industry work. Specifically, this practitioner-academic identified, ‘the institutional support available to apply for research council funding on a wider range of content’ (Ashton 2013, 180). Noting other contributions to this special issue, there are clear parallels across creative sectors/academic disciplines on the ways in which working in higher education can facilitate reflective practice. In turn, there remain tensions, as Norton (2013) addresses, concerning the status of practice research, including how different types of scholarly outputs are regarded.

Factors identified underpinning a push from industry include greater job security and stability in working conditions (Ashton 2013). On security and stability, Jones and Clark’s (2014) article in *The Independent* flagged up Kureishi’s comments on his personal circumstances:

Kureishi said that having three sons meant that he has had to earn money from writing in any way he can. “You start off wanting to be an artist, and once you’ve got children, you’ve got to work in the market. You look at them and think: ‘I’ve got to support you through writing.’ It’s a real nightmare trying to make a living as a writer for a long time... It’s been touch and go.

In these comments on ‘making a living’, motivations around sharing expertise and insights give way to more pressing concerns around the precarious nature of screenwriting labour and putting expertise to work in ‘any way’. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive and a diversity of motivations can be in operation. That said, we would argue that this financial concern and motivation positions the higher education practitioner-academic within a ‘how-to’ economy of instructional discourses and guidance materials. Academic-practitioners now routinely teach creative writing courses but can also write ‘how-to’ manuals or other textbooks, develop ‘how-to’ seminars or masterclasses, and offer their own script consultancy or development businesses. The ‘how-to’ genre operates via a range of techniques. For example: the expertise of the ‘guru’ author; the proliferation of lists, steps and rules; the use of self-help discourse drawing on the tropes of humanist psychology (Conor 2014a). They build up and perpetuate the aspirations of budding or ‘wannabe’ screenwriters in an economy in which supply greatly outstrips demand - even very experienced screenwriters may struggle to secure consistent screenwriting work, hence why the teaching and ‘how-to’ economy are often the source of alternative and reliable income streams.

A clear and critical articulation of the link between the demand for advice from aspiring screenwriters and the responding supply economy can be found, perhaps rather contradictorily, in such a guidance text, *We Can Be Superstars: Public Relations and Self-Promotion for the Playwright*:

Hollywood is full of screenwriting instructors who have never sold a script. Their trick, as far as I can tell, is to come up with all sorts of rules about how-to tell a story […] These instructors make a lot of money, because unskilled writers want rules they can clutch like a totem while they write the worst script ever written  
(Ultramod 2011)

Again, the investment in ‘how-to’ teach screenwriting cannot be reduced to profit goals. As Stengers notes in her original conception of ecologies of practice, these ecologies are processual: ‘new relations are added to the situation already produced by a multiplicity of relations’ (Stengers 2010, 33). Thus, we need to examine how these relations of expertise are being multiplied, developed and repurposed in newer digital platforms. In the next two sections, we develop a fuller understanding of what advice is given, by whom and why, in two networked, commercial screenwriting spaces. These are important avenues for understanding the on-going formation of expertise, the rituals of breaking into industry, and the nuances of screenwriting as a form of professional practice.

Part Two: Online Learning and Lynda.com

Beginning life in 1995 in California, Lynda.com is ‘a leading online learning company that helps anyone learn business, software, technology and creative skills to achieve personal and professional goals’ (Lynda.com, ‘about us’). At the time of writing, it offers 3,963 courses with 158,663 video tutorials for subjects including Design, Web, Photography and Video. The ‘about us’ section explicitly addresses the importance of the expertise of those contributing content: ‘through individual, corporate, academic and government subscriptions, members have access to the Lynda.com video library of engaging, top-quality courses taught by recognized industry experts’ (Lynda.com, ‘about us’). Also of note here is the subscription of academic institutions – echoing our earlier point on connections within ecologies of screenwriting expertise.

The acquisition of Lynda.com by LinkedIn in 2015 (LinkedIn 2015) signals how this resource is positioned as a service for professionals. The corporate communications from LinkedIn discussing the acquisition included the following comments from Jeff Weiner, CEO of LinkedIn: ‘The mission of LinkedIn and the mission of lynda.com are highly aligned. Both companies seek to help professionals be better at what they do.’ In the case of Lynda.com, it is the tutorial courses and videos created by industry experts that are produced to help professionals “be better”. Whilst there is a considerable range of similar sites/services, including those that are free-to-access and those based around content aggregation, Lynda.com is singled it out for our discussion in terms of industry expertise and the subscriber relationship that many higher education institutions have.

A search for screenwriting content on Lynda.com returns 141 results, including a mix of ‘how-to’ videos on different software, videos of expert panels from film festivals, and a more comprehensive *Screenwriting Fundamentals* course that, along with an introduction and conclusion, includes seven sections that address: generating ideas, structure, character building, screen direction, and legal. Within the course, there are frequent references to ‘professional screenwriters’ and the authenticity of these references is established in part through the status of the tutor, Mario Tapio Kines.

Tapio Kines presents a 150 word biography which includes his time in industry (‘over 20 years’), a resume (‘I have written and directed two live- action features and over a dozen shorts’), an indication of how is expertise has been gained and the evidence of it (‘I am the author of eight full-length screenplays of my own’), and an explicit reference to his status as a keen evaluator and experienced judge of quality (‘I have read hundreds of scripts written by other people, from Oscar winners to first-timers’). Further steps to establish expertise are set out in the ‘welcome’ video to the *Screenwriting Fundamentals*. Here Tapio Kines provides an extensive resume to establish his status and expertise. With the wide availability of guidance materials on YouTube, Lynda.com provides a gatekeeping role for learners/consumers in which the quality of content and contributors is assured. For contributors, part of the pull to Lynda.com comes through the revenue stream based around viewing figures (Singel 2011). Bringing both these points together, the question follows as to how ‘experts’ are selected.

The recruitment of experts can be through application to the website and, according to a source with assumed experience of Lynda.com (Actipis 2012), through ‘visibility in the community […] through prominence in their field, speaking at conferences, writing books, and/or teaching.’ The ways in which teaching and publishing can act as the evidence-base for establishing the necessary expertise for contributor status, helps to show how ecologies of screenwriting expertise exist not only as a plethora of sources for aspiring screenwriters to track down content, but also for screenwriting professionals engaging in patterns of portfolio working to develop multiple sources of income (Leadbeater and Oakley 1999; Taylor and Littleton 2012). Moreover, Lynda.com is an opportunity for screenwriters to establish another income source *and* a further platform in which to extend their resume and establish expertise. The concept of ecologies of screenwriting expertise helps to reveal an iterative process of multiple claim making. Claims to industry expertise deployed by screenwriting professionals securing employment within higher education circulate alongside claims deployed to establish expert status on Lynda.com. The diverse platforms for ‘teaching screenwriting’ are also platforms for constructing expertise. A complex negotiation unfolds where potentially competing sources of advice and instruction for aspiring screenwriters become connected together through a shared function in establishing and evidencing expertise.

As will become clearer in the next section, sources of expertise for screenwriting work may also be invisible and contested as much as they are named and celebrated on sites such as Lynda.com. New digital and networked sites that purport to evaluate scripts via instructional how-to discourse are also expanding the demand for low-paid script reading and assessment work. On sites such as The Black List, conflicting discourses of expertise and legitimacy become visible within a space that, like Lynda.com purports to provide exclusive expertise and in particular, access to industry experts and insiders.

Part Three: The Black List

*The Black List* began as an informal, annual industry survey (and a source of ‘buzz’) of the year’s most liked, unproduced Hollywood screenplays. The survey was founded in 2004 by Franklin Leonard and involved industry executives and script readers voting for their favourite screenplays; thus, its design and purpose has always been partly an evaluative and a speculative one (see also Batty 2014 for his discussion of Firstlook, a similar albeit smaller digital script assessment platform developed in the UK, both for commercial and pedagogical purposes). The Black List has rapidly grown and in particular, has expanded into a multi-layered digital space (The Black List 3.0 n.d).

*The* *Black List* has expanded further into The Black List 3.0(hereafter referred to as BL 3.0) becoming a full-service evaluation tool in its own right and a commercial site for speculative screenwriting work. Screenwriters can now sign up as members, pay $US25 per month, and upload their “spec” scripts onto the site. The BL 3.0 then hosts the scripts and makes them available to a subscriber base of over 1000 “industry professionals” (see The Black List 3.0 n.d.). The BL 3.0 describes its professional membership as ‘ranging from major and mid-major agency assistants to studio presidents of production and A-list directors and producers’ (The Black List 3.0 n.d.). The BL 3.0 also has a stable of hired readers who, like the other experts discussed above, are sources of expertise and evaluation. They read and evaluate single scripts for a $US50 fee so a baseline cost for the evaluation of an uploaded screenplay is $US75 (The Black List 3.0 n.d.).

The script evaluation service involves an overall rating and ratings for: premise, plot, characters, dialogue and settings (all rated from 1, the lowest score, to 10, the highest). The BL 3.0 then “spotlights” the highest rated scripts (single or multiple 8+ overall ratings) each week via emails to their pool of anonymous industry insiders. Scripts are identified via familiar criteria to those used in other forms of screenwriting teaching from higher education courses through to Lynda.com: title, author, genre and logline. At the same time, the site offers some control to its screenwriter users – evaluations of individual scripts are only made visible if the writers choose them to be, and privately, writers can keep track of their views, downloads and ratings. Self-reported statistics from the BL 3.0 offer some preliminary insights into the expansion of the site: numbers of scripts uploaded (7375 since the site’s launch) and rated (the mean rating in their most recent 2013 annual report is 5.1), and downloaded (12,002 downloads scripts in the first year) (The Black List 2013). Like Lynda.com, the site is trading on its reputation, its evaluative function(s) and its access to a pool of anonymous experts referred to simply as ‘industry professionals’.

The ways in which scripts are being evaluated and thus, the avenues by which expertise is being materialised in the BL 3.0 site is in line with traditional ‘how-to techniques’ observed and documented in off-line spaces such as manuals and seminars (see Conor 2014a). The rating system utilizes familiar markers of “success”: catchy loglines or ‘hooks’, memorable characters and settings and fluid and realistic dialogue. And the parts of the site that do not require a subscription – particularly the blog “Go Into the Story” (Go Into the Story 2015 n.d) employ many of the discursive features visible in screenwriting manuals themselves – lists, steps and rules, pseudo-psychological discourse, and routine exhortations to “work on oneself” via weekly “Writing goals” or ‘Daily Dialogue’ study guides (Conor 2014a).

But beyond this and as recent online commentary has highlighted, both the expertise of The Black List itself has been critiqued and the hidden registers of ‘how-to’ labour upon which the site relies, have also been highlighted. In this context, the script readers of the BL 3.0 are another source of expertise although unlike gurus or practitioner-academics, they are unnamed and largely invisible. In their 2013 Annual Report, the Black List reports that 81 readers had completed 9729 script evaluations (The Black List 2013). In a widely posted advertisement on industry job boards and on their own ‘Jobs’ page, the Black List also provided an indication of what is required of these experts in early 2014 and how their expertise is rewarded:

To meet still rising demand as 2014 begins, the Black List is hiring more professional screenplay and pilot readers to evaluate screenplays and pilots and write brief evaluations…Applicants must be strong critical readers, elegant writers, and have minimum one year previous experience reading as, at least, employed first filters (i.e. not interns) for major Hollywood financiers, studios, networks, production companies, agencies, or management companies. Expected workload is minimum 15 screenplays/pilots per month, though the reading and evaluations can be completed at your leisure from wherever you are. Readers are paid on a per script basis. Screenplay and pilots longer than 30 minute readers currently receive $25 per script (Jobs at the Blacklist 2014).

Subsequent discussions amongst screenwriters about The Black List 3.0 have questioned its value for money, its’ user-pays system and most interestingly for our purposes, the status of its readers as sources of legitimate knowledge and expertise. For example, a widely circulated post from ‘TheRangeMatters’ on screenwriting message boards called into question the efficacy of the site and its script evaluations. TheRangeMatters argued that the site relies on a “dangling carrot system” and after re-printing the script reader advertisement above, goes on to say: ‘For $25 per script, the Readers at Black List are most likely part-timers or unemployed and destitute college students just starting out, or trying to get a foot in the door themselves… .’Thus the script readers here are tagged as illegitimate sources of expertise, as students rather than practitioners or teachers themselves (Screenwriting Goldmine 2014).

The Black List 3.0 is a paid, subscription-based and proprietary service, relying on traditional forms of ‘how-to’ screenwriting expertise whilst also propagating new and more intricate forms of ranking and rating; ‘new relations’ between scripts, screenwriters and experts proliferate in this ecology of screenwriting expertise (as Stengers 2010 terms it) but these very much build on previously established relations, both pedagogical and commercial. These sites are monetizing speculative screenwriting labour and, at least in the case of the BL 3.0, are expanding on the backs of the very low-paid workforce who are reading and evaluating all those scripts. Script-writing and script-reading are forms of creative production and expertise that are materialized, measured and circumscribed in the The Black List 3.0and Lynda.com as they are in higher education and ‘how-to’ screenwriting manuals.

Conclusion  
As we have shown, both established sites for screenwriting education and expertise and newer digital platforms are premised on forms of professional expertise that are located both in individual workers and their reputations: academic-practitioners, gurus, ‘name’ writers and script readers (see Gandini 2015 for more on self-branding in the freelance knowledge economy) as well as in particular tools or forms of ‘expert’ knowledge. Each of these expert sources is built around different relationships, from face-to-face interactions within learning and teaching environments to paid services based on remote relationships between expert and learner. Stengers makes clear that these kinds of relations are processual in ecologies of practice, that established relations do not replace older relations but accrete across an ecology: ‘a multiplicity of relations’ as she terms it (2010, 33). In this respect, there is a diversity of sites and relations that we have not been able to address and that are, of course, still emerging and gaining visibility and public traction.

In this paper we have sought to map some of these relations in order to consider the ways in which screenwriting has and is being taught across a broad ecology of practices that encompasses a huge (and multiplying) range of locations and platforms. Bound into this are complex and overlapping questions about, for example, how these varying professional boundaries are policed, about who has or claims to have industry access, and about how and where efforts are made to ensure that aspiring writers are supported with relevant insights and advice. What we have highlighted are the various ways in which expertise is revealed in the teaching and assessment of screenwriting – that expertise is often deployed to legitimate both the locations themselves, and individuals working within these locations. Across our examples, expert biographies and profiles are created and operationalized as a necessary part of how screenwriters establish portfolio careers. What we have also shown with respect to our cases are the varying levels of visibility such experts have – which seems to correspond with authority and legitimacy, especially from the perspective of those aspirants and amateurs who are paying to use these sites and spaces.

Examining the multiplicity of relations around ‘teaching screenwriting’ in terms of ecologies of practice is crucial and much more research is needed to understand the ecologies of screenwriting expertise. This is needed not just in order to track the increasing diversity of guidance materials that circulate but also to account for the common elements in how and why these are produced. In a squeezed labour market in which higher education courses and digital platforms continue to proliferate we need to continue to critically examine screenwriters’ common circumstances, working environments and practices that drive the production of guidance materials and the corresponding production of expertise.

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