



21st Century Artisans: Creativity, Craft and Techne in Digital Video Production

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Abstract

Student video production work frequently displays a great deal of what teachers often term 'creativity'. This article argues that within media production work creativity can be closely allied to ideas about craft, specifically those as defined by Martin Heidegger's use of the word 'techne' – describing as it does a craft skill which reveals some knowledge about the world. By examining the video production work of a small group of secondary school students the author argues that creativity in the production work process can be seen in terms of artisan labour which reveals conceptual knowledge, as well as being part of a wider metaphorical description for media learning which he terms a 'dialectic of familiarity'; a process whereby creative production drives conceptual and cultural learning from the familiar to the unfamiliar and back again.

Introduction

I started by inserting my film onto the editing software and placing it into the software's 'bin'. ...Once I had finished completing the editing transitions, to make sure they worked, I had to render my work by going to 'project' then 'render work area', this allowed me to see that the fades actually worked in the places I had put them in. (Vanessa, Year 12 student, AS Level Evaluation)

This detailed description of a student (given by themselves) editing a video project is probably recognisable to many media teachers in the UK and in other parts of the world. A student who has learned to edit video and is beginning to discuss what they have made in such terms is demonstrating not only a critical and conceptual knowledge, but also pointing towards the development of a craft skill - something that may not always be associated with media education. We tend to think about the term 'craft' as applying to





practical skills which involve individuals acquiring some kind of esoteric knowledge and then practising them in order to manufacture a product of some kind. Markowitz, for example, suggests that craft is concerned 'a great deal with materials and workmanship' (Markowitz, 1994: 55-70). I would argue that given the statement made at the start of this article, craft is concept that should be the concern of media educators, and particularly the kind of craft characterised by Martin Heidegger's (Heidegger, 1993: 318) use of the term 'techne'. I would propose that these ideas of craft and techne are closely connected to both conceptual learning and creativity and I have suggested elsewhere (Connolly, 2013: 161-172) that a particular model of creativity might need to be applied to media education in order to make some sense of how conceptual learning takes place. The formation of this model arises from the analysis of the video production work of a group of secondary school students undertaken across three years, which sought to understand the relationship between video production work and wider learning in cultural and critical terms.

These analyses, as already alluded to, invoke a range of seemingly quite disparate theoretical positions about craft, creativity and conceptual learning. However, the apparent incompatibility of the theoretical positions in which this work is grounded reflect the complexity of creativity and its connection to craft and conceptual development. Creativity here, in these students' work, is about craft; is about concepts; is about critical language. Making sense of these complexities has, then, involved looking at a range of critical ideas. Through a summary and evaluation of these ideas, I will explain why and how learning to make a digital moving image text can be thought of in terms of craft and that this kind of work can be seen as a kind of artisanal labour.

Research Context

The student work upon which these ideas were based was completed over a three-year period in a large Outer London secondary school, where I happened to be teaching a cohort of 25-30 students (this number varied across the period) GCSE, AS and A2 Level Media Studies in classes across the three school years of 11, 12 and 13. From this cohort a number of students presented rich data sets for analysis, in that they opted to produce a significant number of video projects (four or more group and individual projects) over the three years, as opposed to other types of media production – such as magazine or newspaper production – that they could have opted for. The research did not focus on all such students however; of the cohort of 25-30 students, 9 opted to do a majority of video projects, ranging from a group-made documentary to individual free choice projects. I then selected 5 from this 9 as a manageable number of case studies representing a variety of forms of engagement with digital video production. These 5 came from both genders (3



male and 2 female) and different cultural and academic backgrounds, suggesting that there might be different models of progression and different learning trajectories evidenced by their work. These students came from a broad range of backgrounds and abilities; however, all 5 students achieved in excess of 5 GCSEs at C grade and above including English and Maths. The male dominance of the core group reflects the male dominance of the wider cohort studying Media Studies in the school at the time. All the students had access to digital video cameras through the school and to editing software. In Year 11, this software constituted Windows Moviemaker, while at AS and A2 Level it consisted of Adobe Premiere. However, some students chose to teach themselves how to use Premiere and did use it for GCSE projects.

Video production work was analysed using a multimodal framework (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 4), which allowed for an analysis of the students' digital video across all its modes of communication (Discourse, Design, Production and Distribution) and the relationship between the creative and the critical and cultural aspects of learning. Precedents for the use of this kind of analytical framework when discussing learning (Potter, 2009: 125) have allowed for an exploration of the way that the video text communicates with an audience not only as a finished product, but also in its construction, and the creative effort that has been made therein.

Creativity

Elsewhere, (Connolly, 2013: 23-52) I have developed the idea of a 'dialectic of familiarity' as a metaphor to describe how learning occurs in the media classroom. Within this metaphor, creative production is seen as an engine for driving critical and cultural learning, with students moving back and forth between familiar and unfamiliar cultural and critical experiences; learning about concepts and cultural ideas, experimenting with them, synthesising them and in some cases, rejecting them - in a way closely allied to Engeström's (1999: 7) expansive cycles of learning. In this dialectic of familiarity, students move from the 'thetic' (their own cultural and critical experiences) to the 'antithetic' (new cultural and critical experiences introduced in the classroom situation - sometimes by the teacher, though not always) towards a synthesis of these two positions. Creative production allows them to achieve this synthesis, because it allows them to experiment with new critical and cultural concepts while at the same time allowing them to combine this experimentation with their own cultural experiences.

As Banaji and Burn (Banaji, *et al*, 2012: 3-6) have pointed out, there are a range of interpretations - or 'rhetorics' - that one can place on the term creativity, but in terms of a dialectic view of media learning it is probably most appropriate to begin with Vygotsky's



cognitive creativity. For Vygotsky (1998: 163) creativity was fundamentally connected to the idea of conceptual thinking; that children moved into adolescence when they could move from what he terms 'visual thinking' to 'nonvisual thinking' (Vygotsky, 1998: 161-163). This imaginative transformation of the cultural resources that the young person has at their disposal involved their 'liberation from the concrete' (ibid.) and a move towards more abstract, internalised concepts. When Vygotsky writes that this movement brings with it, the 'possibility of creatively re-processing and changing' (ibid.) the elements of a concrete concept he is suggesting that conceptual and critical development are fundamentally linked to creativity.

As well as making this very clear link between creativity and conceptual learning he also connects creativity with the idea of 'fantasy' - any genuinely imaginative act. For Vygotsky, imagination, creativity and play are all closely connected. The difficulty with this characterisation of creativity for media education, is that learning does not take place in a purely conceptual or imaginative way - because it is most commonly harnessed to production work - necessitating a modified view; one that encompasses Vygotskian ideas of physical play and imagination (Vygotsky, 1998: 157), but also the notion of a set of skills that can manifest that imaginative and conceptual knowledge in practical terms. Such a set of skills would demonstrate the practical ability to process and reprocess conceptual knowledge through imagination allowing for a more specific application of Vygotsky's view of creativity to media education. In explicit terms, conceptual learning should be seen as inextricably linked to creative production and that models of learning in media education must take account of the fact that for a student to learn a concept, they need to implement it in a production (process it) and then take it back into the classroom situation to discuss and reflect on and eventually use again, perhaps in a different way (reprocess it). I have also argued elsewhere (Connolly, 2013: 125-132) that for media education, the term 'concept' needs to be viewed in quite a specific way, and as a consequence, there is a need to see terms that have previously been seen as purely technical as conceptual.

Creativity in the media classroom is about something more than just conceptual transformation. There is certainly imagination alongside the formation of new concepts, but there is also the way that these transformations are implemented in production work. In the view of learning offered by the dialectic of familiarity, creative production is essential for students to learn about and experiment with new critical concepts and cultural forms, because it allows students to synthesise these unfamiliarities with familiar texts and practices. For Kress and Van Leeuwen production as a stratum is 'always physical work, whether by humans or machines, a physical job of articulating text' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 66). In the video work analysed here, that articulation is realised in the





relationship between the student and the editing software. While the student may have an idea of how the shots they have taken can be used to tell a story or create a text, they must do the physical work of editing, sitting down at a computer, in order to complete that production. While this work might be digital in nature - moving clips along a timeline, applying transitions and effects - there is nevertheless, a physical, artisan nature to this learning, best described by the term 'techne', which is a very specific interpretation of the concept of craft, developed by Martin Heidegger. I use the term 'artisan' here because it contains within it ideas about both the aesthetic and the functional, the importance of which is explained below.

Craft and Techne

For Heidegger, techne is about physical action or skill which reveals knowledge about the world – what Heidegger refers to as the 'essences' of being, a term that implies some kind of ideation or representation of it. For Heidegger 'knowledge' here meant a complete understanding of something, what he calls an 'opening up' and by definition, this must include conceptual knowledge (Heidegger, 1993: 184). Techne also involves a sense of the aesthetic; that the craft effort can reveal beauty as well as practicality, though the artist's own imagination. These elements of techne mean that as a term, it is not simply restricted to making stuff, but rather that making stuff reveals particular things about the world. This is why techne is more appropriate than simple 'craft' because it contains within it some sense of the relationship between doing something functional in order to obtain, or present, knowledge. Heidegger is clear that it refers to the 'arts of the mind as well as fine arts' in addition to practical skills and is something different from just 'manufacturing something' using craft skills. Rather, these skills are being used to reveal knowledge about the world – a sort of 'craft-plus'.

The notion of craft in discussion of digital video is not an entirely new idea, though. Lankshear and Knobel ascribe particular qualities to the craft of remix (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008: 1), and talk at some length about the way young people use Photoshop to manipulate new photo-texts, or creating Machinima. For them, the craft of digital remix is very much about technical knowledge, which is why I see an important distinction to be made through the use of term techne, in that it makes a connection between that technical knowledge and conceptual knowledge that reveals something about the student's world.

Digital Video: Materials and Workmanship

It may seem curious to think about digital video in terms in those terms of 'materials and workmanship' used by theorists such as Markowitz (Markowitz, 1994: 55-70) but I see these





ideas as really being the basis for Burn and Durran's notion of the 'affordances' of digital video (Burn & Durran, 2008: 45-46) These affordances – iteration, feedback, convergence and distribution – rely upon the malleable nature of digital video as a material and the way it can be worked by the student. Perhaps more important though, is the way that these affordances allow for a sense of play which, I would argue, is essential for learning progression. Students frequently describe themselves 'messing around' or 'playing around' with the film. Consider, for example, these two comments made by the same student (Mark) when discussing his Year 11 and Year 13 project work respectively:

I wanted to just mess around with it [the film], like trying different angles and different places for shooting.

I had never used Premiere before and this project was a chance to muck about with it.

This description of the production process as 'messing around' suggests something playful about the work that students are doing. In what I have described elsewhere (Connolly, 2013) as the antithetical stage of the learning process, such play is important - a significant part of making a film 'properly'. This blurring of the lines between work - the job of completing the production in order to satisfy the teacher and/or the assessment criteria - and play – having fun, engaging in imaginative effort and perhaps even competing with others - can be seen as part of learning progression and a move towards criticality. I would argue here that this play is vital for the formation of critical concepts and thus an integral part of the creativity discussed above. When Mark states that he wants to 'mess around' with different camera angles, he is implying a kind of experimentation with the critical concept of camerawork, which involves both work and play; in this case something that is both fun and imaginative. Here, this creativity is being facilitated by the medium of digital video. Manovich suggests that the medium itself (Manovich, 2001: 325) allows for the visiting and re-visiting of the concepts, which can be picked up and put down – rather in the same manner as the digital clips themselves – in order to create and recreate meaning. It is the malleability of the digital video that links creativity to concept formation here. While this kind of play and experimentation was, to some extent, possible with analogue technology, the limitation of a linear editing system would, I believe, mean that this learning process would be much slower, and for many students, stall altogether.

Learning about the affordance of digital video through this kind of play results in a revelation of conceptual knowledge, illustrated by the more sophisticated kinds of



comment of students like Rob (below). In turn, as conceptual knowledge develops, a particular set of craft skills in digital editing arises which demonstrate that conceptual knowledge - the *techne* with which Heidegger is concerned. I would argue that a particular manifestation of creativity arises from editing digitally and that it is both part of and an aid to, the dialectic move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. This quality arises from the affordances that Burn and Durran ascribe to digital editing. For example, the affordance of convergence allows them to synthesise what I would term *thetic* cultural material, such as their own music tracks or imported images, into their work alongside these *antithetical* concepts into a new product. This is not to say that digital technology is essential for learning progression from the *thetic*, to the *antithetic*, but rather that it allows this to happen in a more fluid way, allowing for the easier development of craft skills. Creative production should always be seen as the engine of learning progression regardless of the form it takes.

These observations raise two questions. Firstly, what kind of knowledge do students acquire in learning about editing – in effect, what is the *techne* of editing? Secondly, how do they apply their conceptual and cultural knowledge once they have learnt how to edit and how does this application change over time? To use Kress and Van Leeuwen's term, how do they articulate the text? I want to explore the idea that editing acts as a sort of *fulcrum*, pushing the student from the familiar to the unfamiliar by confronting them with the need to apply *antithetical* concepts in a practical situation. In order to explore this idea, I focus here initially on the production work of two students (Mark and Rob) and how these ideas about *techne*, craft and digital editing are manifested.

Analysing the Data: The Craft of Digital Editing – Mark

Mark, by his own admission, acknowledges that the difference between what he knows at the start of Year 11 and what he knows at the end is huge:

When we did the documentary I didn't use any of the equipment really, I was just helping out... I guess I was the director of sorting out stuff. I didn't use Adobe Premiere then, and so all of this was one huge learning curve for my film-making. (Mark, Year 11 interview)

It is when he begins to speak in depth about the differences between Adobe Premiere (an advanced, prosumer video-editing package) and Moviemaker (see figure 1), which is more basic, that the difference in the application of knowledge can be seen:

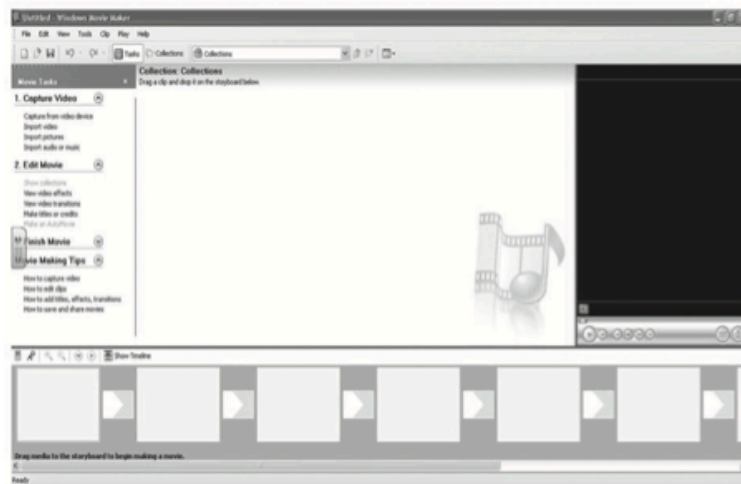


Fig. 1 caption: *The Windows Moviemaker editing interface*

[Moviemaker] had the instruction bar at the side of the screen, so I just used that to help sort out where everything goes...but when I got it into Premiere it was a totally different world. There was just so much to do on the screen.

(Mark, Year 11 interview)

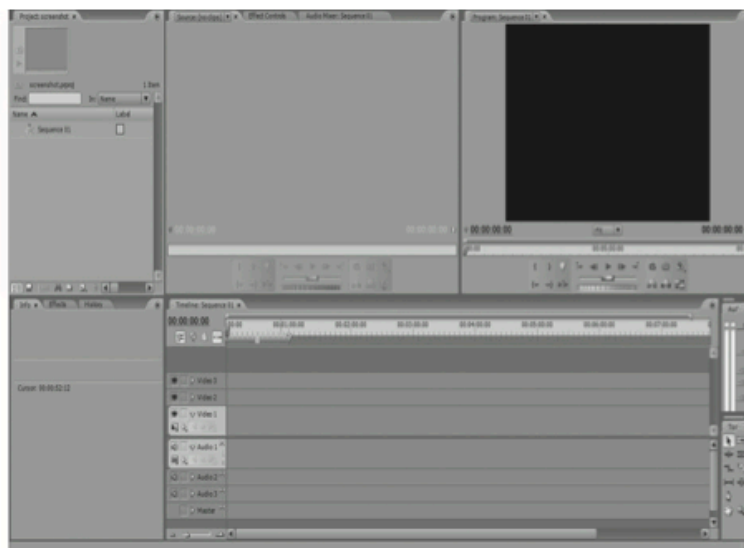
Here Mark is using Moviemaker to assemble a rough cut of the film and then produce a more polished version in Premiere. This conscious decision to use different tools for different jobs is evidence of techne at work – the initial version, intended to demonstrate a practical implementation of the concept of ‘the transition’, followed by the second version designed to demonstrate concepts such as ‘the voiceover’, ‘titling’ and ‘soundtrack’ - with the creative production revealing both the conceptual knowledge and something of the students’ cultural experience. These kinds of concepts are, at this stage of his learning, still relatively unfamiliar and antithetical – while he uses them in his work, he does not, for example, appear to have a vocabulary with which to talk about them in his evaluation, and they are at this stage of learning, constantly being reintroduced and reinforced by his teacher in class. The techne skills involved in mastering the software imply knowledge of the different modes that the text is working in, but not necessarily the conceptual language to fully describe it. It seems that techne at this point is about assembling the shots in the ‘right’ order and realising the imaginative effort of the story.

In contrast, the Adobe Premiere interface is more complex (see Fig. 2) and presents the student with many other options. Here, there are multiple bins and timelines. Now, the techne is about not only assembling the shots in the required order, but also making



changes to volume levels, shot opacity, visual effects and motion – forcing the student to confront these new, antithetical concepts. In other words, the craft skills are not only more numerous, but require judgements to be made continuously. This is one aspect of progression, in terms of creativity. The increasing complexity of the software is meant to complement the developing familiarity with previously unfamiliar, antithetical concepts. In other words, in order to use software like this, the learner requires a degree of comfort with a wider range of concepts, while at the same time using the software reinforces knowledge of those concepts.

This kind of oscillation reflects the movement back and forth between the familiar and the unfamiliar does not necessarily happen in a neat and tidy way; I have suggested elsewhere that there are ‘some’ students who do not progress through creative production work (Connolly, 2013: 263-64). Rather, they find the synthesis of concepts and production skills too much, and retreat back to a kind of thetic comfort zone in which they only work with technologies and texts that they are familiar with. This contrasts with the kind of synthesised learning progression characterised by the ability create a production which not only demonstrates technical proficiency, in that it is well constructed, but also in that it reflects something of their own personal cultural disposition and that the student can talk about it comfortably in conceptual terms.




'Fig. 2 caption: The Adobe Premiere editing interface

Additionally, for Mark, the affordances of the editing software, particularly those of iteration and feedback, are what allow him to apply his increased conceptual and cultural knowledge. In his year 13 project he makes a music video, (see Fig 3). In it, the ‘messaging



around' he discusses above is still there – but what it actually involves is a range of experimentation with concepts such as *mise-en-scène*, transition, colour grading and audience. But also present is a sense of development and improvement:

Originally it was just them [the band] performing in the hut, but after feedback I was told to either put in a change of location, or to 'sharpen it up' and then I thought a change of location would sharpen it up... I changed the bit with the middle eight in it to black and white because I was told that this would give it a better effect. (Mark, interview Year 13)

	Fig. 3	Shot	Low Angle
		Dialogue	"None"
		Movement	Singer at microphone
		Location	Shed
		Music	"Another number" by The Zoos

'Figure 3 caption : Multimodal Analysis of Mark's Music Video

What contrasts here is the difference in language used to describe the two projects. In Year 11 the software allows Mark to experiment with the text and to play with it. In the Year 13 project, however, the software allows him to improve his work, to make it better. This difference can be described dialectically, in that 'messing around' or playing about is part of the domain of both the *thetic* and the *antithetic*. In this particular example, the *antithetic* concept of editing, or perhaps something like an 'online edit' (something conceptually different from a 'rough edit') is being explored through the difference in the two pieces of work. Mark is working through the differences between his own cultural knowledge and experience and the problem of the cultural and critical concepts introduced in the classroom, accepting some things and rejecting others. In Year 13, however, improvement can be equated with synthesis. Here, Mark's *thetical* cultural interests are being synthesised with the *antithetical* cultural experiences of his teacher and peers, who have given him feedback. Figure 3, a multimodal analysis of one of the 'improved shots' from his Year 13 project demonstrates this, having been re-shot in a new location and changed to black and white in order to give a sort of DIY aesthetic to this segment of the video, exploring concepts of editing, *mise-en-scène* and audience. Interestingly though, even in this new





'improved' version of the video, 'mess' is still important, but it is the way it is synthesised with conceptual and cultural knowledge that has changed. For example, when asked about cultural influences, he states:

One of my big influences was the Libertines and their ad-hoc, random approach...
I really like the way they mess around. (Mark, Year 13 interview)

In Mark's video what we see is a mixture of random, hand-held video footage of the members of the band generally 'messaging about', alongside a range of shots of the band playing instruments. These shots are deliberately posed (and in some ways conventional, in that they show Mark's awareness of the concept of the convention of a music video), and present the audience with an obvious contrast with the hand-held material. The menu screen for the DVD Mark made shows Polaroids of the band arranged seemingly randomly on a noticeboard. This is clearly a conscious choice on Mark's part and suggests that along with the impression of 'messaging around', he wants to create the impression that there is a good deal of thought and order in his work. The nature of the change here is both about the nature of the concepts being explored (the conventions of a music video, editing, colour grading, synchronous sound) which are more complex; but also the way that they are being explored through the cultural experiences of the student, who is more confident in the way that they can be combined with those previously antithetical, complex concepts.

The digital editing software is one of the things that has facilitated this synthesis of cultural mess and conceptual order, and it has driven Mark to explore alternative ways of demonstrating his cultural knowledge of music video and his conceptual knowledge of audience – in that he altered the video in order to appeal to that audience. This observation is about the way that the students use digital editing software to apply conceptual knowledge and how that changes from being about play and mess, to being about improvement or development.

Analysing the Data: The Craft of Digital Editing – Rob

This realisation, that digital editing both facilitates conceptual knowledge and allows for increasing complexity in the production of texts, reached an interesting conclusion with the Year 13 evaluations. Rob, who used both Moviemaker and Adobe Premiere in Year 11 and 12, decided to use a different package for his Year 13 music promo video package, namely Sony Vegas. What is interesting about this is that he is using a vocabulary which is common to all editing to describe the way it works:





Whilst editing my footage in Sony Vegas. I did not come across major problems, which affected my progress. I found the program relatively simple to break down in terms of functions. The trimmer and timeline tools were good to use, as the keyboard could be used for most functions. Therefore, no faults were made with the syncing. (Rob, Year 13 evaluation)

Here, a term like 'syncing' has a revealing story to it. This word, which refers to synchronisation of sound and image (a particular kind of editing concept), has been introduced to Rob at the start of Year 12, when he began to do the kind of textual analysis required at that level. As he has moved through Year 12 and 13 he probably began to use it to describe his own work as well as the work of those professional producers that he watched. At this point – the end of the three-year-course – he is using the term transferably. This is not the uncertainty demonstrated by Vanessa in the quote that opened this article; she, after all, puts speech marks around the technical vocabulary that she seems uncertain of. Rob however, shows an assured, familiar, command of a term which he knows is important in all editing regardless of which software is being used. This command of the conceptual language indicates an ability to generalise, showing how far this term has become synthesised in his work. This marks the concept formation element of creativity out as something that has been drawn out by the techne of the digital editing process.

The comment also demonstrates that, by learning about syncing sound and the craft and vocabulary associated with that, he has been able to execute a professional, finished product. Again though, the affordance of iteration has allowed him to deal with these problems, and the software's ability to let him visit and re-visit the concepts of sound that are important to his work here that he comments upon later in his evaluation, such as ambience.

By demonstrating that the skills of editing are transferable, he seems to have reached a point at which the combination of imagination, concept development and techne have allowed him to become familiar with the knowledge and practices necessary to create a text. Here again the engine of creativity, with its three constituent elements is driving the dialectic process of learning. I would want to argue that here the role of digital technology lends this creativity a peculiar quality; there is a combination of learning concepts and techne which creates something accomplished. This has some connection to the iterative and convergent affordances of digital editing tools, but also to the student's imaginative ability to see the possibilities of the medium and dialectically become more adept at demonstrating their knowledge and practices.





Conclusions

These students' ability to apply critical concepts through the techne of digital editing suggest that they are learning to take advantage of the affordances of the digital medium – particularly its iterative and convergent natures – in order to practise the application of those concepts: moving cuts, transitions and sounds around on the timeline until they have fully synthesised the imaginative, semiotic tools of their original idea with the concepts they have learnt in class. This synthesising action is the kind of revelation that is the nature of the techne of editing. The creative production process, which helps students to move between familiar and unfamiliar concepts and helps to make them familiar, does so through a revelation of how these concepts work both academically and aesthetically. In dialectical terms, techne is an important aspect of the way that creativity helps students adapt to the unfamiliar and antithetical cultural and conceptual knowledge that they encounter in the media classroom. Moreover, it attempts to give some form to the creative labour done by students such as Rob and Mark that often goes unidentified and unrecognised by media educators..

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