



# Narrative comedy screenwriting: the role of critical reflection in creative practice

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## Abstract

Larger classes, reduced class contact time and increased use of casual staff pose challenges to holistic, project-based approaches to teaching screenwriting in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. This paper examines the impact of critical reflection on the process and artefacts of writing a narrative comedy series “*Fighting Fit*”. It is argued that script writing, as creative practice-led research facilitates a transformative learning process. Transformative learning (Mezirow 1998) refers to a type of learning specific to adult education in which epistemic assumptions are challenged and revised, leading to increased individual agency.

A reflection journal—which increases opportunities for creative choices to be examined—is used to document the ideas for scripts, build character profiles, and experiment with dialogue. Reflection on critical feedback from industry perspectives is also documented in the reflection journal, then incorporated into subsequent drafts and cycled back through the scriptwriting process. Iterative scriptwriting practice and cyclical critical reflection interweave in a spiralling process of action and reflection, creating a systematic approach to writing narrative comedy scripts.

Excerpts from the reflection journal are examined to identify the relationship between critical reflection and scriptwriting processes. The impact of scriptwriting as practice-led research indicates that critical reflection on both the sources of inspiration and scriptwriting processes can facilitate a deeper understanding of the craft of scriptwriting and lead to transformative learning. This research demonstrates the complex interaction of critical reflection which weaves in and out of scriptwriting practice and lived experience which inspire the themes and story concepts in *Fighting Fit*.

## Introduction

Teaching screen production requires strategies of continuous improvement and innovation. The collaborative constructivist approach to teaching screen production within the vocational education and training sector (VET) is challenged by increased class sizes, reduced class contact time and increased use of casual staff. The constructivist model engages students in all stages of production: concept and script development, pre-production, production and post production processes. It is a student-centred, project-based approach which “places learners at the centre of an interactive and constructive learning environment” (Majumdar 2011, 51). Majumdar (2011) argues this teaching model is essential in preparing students for the rapidly changing and complex work environment of a knowledge-based economy.

In the early stages of this creative practice-led research, writing narrative comedy scripts was proposed as a method for *identifying principles which may be applied to the development of learning resources which support online blended delivery*. That is, principles of storytelling and humour incorporated into digital learning resources to support a mix of face-to-face and online learning. However as Mafe and Haseman (2009) suggest, practice-led researchers may find that “problem definition is unstable for as long as practice is ongoing and it is only when the practice is done...that the final research problem will be decided” (Mafe and Haseman 2009, 214). In remaining open to possibilities created by writing narrative comedy scripts as practice-led research another question which seeks to examine *the impact of critical reflection in and on creative practice* has emerged.

This paper focuses upon the impact of critical reflection on scriptwriting as practice-led research facilitating a transformative learning process. Transformative learning (Mezirow 1998) refers to a type of learning specific to adult education in which epistemic assumptions are challenged and revised. This paper includes a synopsis of the narrative comedy series “*Fighting Fit*”, written by the author, and briefly outlines the sources of inspiration to establish the creative practice-led research. Humour theory and narrative comedy is then examined to provide insight into the creative choice behind writing narrative comedy. In the methodology section, journaling critical reflection is proposed as a methodological tool for bringing assumptions about screenwriting practice into awareness. Transformation theory is examined as a framework for critical reflection on creative processes such as ideation, experimentation with dialogue, building character profiles and drafting. By drawing attention to the sources of inspiration for the screenplays, the practitioner is challenged to examine the reasons for creative choices. In this context, critical reflection on creative practice becomes more than writing and critically reflecting on the *artefact* of the screenplay alone. The analysis section examines examples of critical reflection to illustrate how transformation theory can provide new perspectives which inform the creative practice of scriptwriting.

In order to examine the role of critical reflection, it is first necessary to provide a brief outline of the creative work and the sources of inspiration.

## Screenplay artefact

“*Fighting Fit*” is a narrative comedy about Tom, a lazy narcissist, who has to turn a rundown gym, with its staff of misfit trainers, into a going concern. This eight-part television series explores themes of bureaucratic folly and how we deal with changes in our bodies, our relationships and our workplaces. As the manager, Tom applies his narcissistic charm to influence the trainers but his laziness means he only partially understands the various management theories he thinks will save his business. Lean management, blue water thinking and core values take on a whole new meaning and it’s up to the staff at “*Fighting Fit*” to keep the gym wheezing along. [Lean management does *not* mean firing fat people!]

The themes in *“Fighting Fit”* are inspired by challenges encountered while teaching screen production within a rapidly changing VET sector. The screen department was situated within a large government training organisation and had more than twenty managers over a seventeen-year period, each with different managerial styles and approaches that impacted upon teaching. The screen department grew, restructured and contracted and at the end of 2013 all permanent staff had been replaced with casual or contract staff.

“Fighting Fit” is also informed by research into management theories, observations and discussions of large organisational workplaces and personal experiences in gyms and working with personal trainers. Bolton suggests “writers draw upon memories of experiences which have touched them deeply: art is nearly always a working out of complex unresolved, unsorted-out areas of experience” (Bolton 2010, 214). The scripts themselves are purely fictional but critical reflection on scriptwriting processes and the stressful work environment which inspired them has enabled assumptions about creative choices to be examined. Among those creative choices is why *narrative comedy*?

## Humour and narrative comedy

The early stages of this research aimed to identify principles of narrative comedy that might be applied to the development of online learning resources, so the literature review focused on establishing the efficacy of applying humour within educational contexts. Humour has been shown to increase students’ ability to recall and understand information (Hackathorn et al. 2011), grab attention and improve disruptive behaviour (Powell and Andresen 1985). Skinner (2010) claims humour promotes learning, creates a constructive learning environment, maintains students’ attention, and reduces anxiety. In a series of interviews with filmmakers, McDonald (2009) identifies three filmmaking storytelling principles that can provide strategies for instructional designers to improve learner engagement: conflict, three-act structure and authenticity. He says, in citing Seger, authentic stories have the capacity to “change a long-held belief or behaviour” and affect “some type of personal transformation or self-improvement (Seger, 2003)” (McDonald 2009, 117). There is no doubt that humour has “the potential...for positive affective impact” (Teslow 1995, 22). Most studies acknowledge that certain types of humour can have a negative effect and argue for the “judicious and appropriate use of humor” (Skinner 2010, 21). Superiority humour for instance, can be used “for criticizing opposition or unifying a group” (Wilkins and Eisenbraun 2009, 350). These studies support the use of humour to enhance learning and provide some explanation for the creative choice of narrative comedy.

Humour theory from the discipline of psychology, provides greater insight into the creative choice to use narrative comedy as a device for exploring the sources of inspiration for the screenplays. Humour has been identified as a valuable mechanism for coping with stressful situations by replacing negative with positive affect. “Humor based on incongruities, or things that appear inappropriate for their context, is particularly well suited to reappraising negative situations from different, less threatening perspectives” (Wilkins and Eisenbraun 2009, 349). Kline suggests that humour’s “largest function is to detach us from our world of good and evil, of loss and gain and enable us to see it in proper perspective” (Kline 1907, 438). Morrison proposes that “learning to use humor as a lens for life challenges can increase your confidence in your own internal ability to adapt” (Morrison 2008, 2). Similarly, Berk’s extensive analysis of research into the psychophysiological effects of humour and laughter identifies numerous benefits such as “reduces negative emotional consequences of stress, anxiety and tension” (Berk 2014, 36). Dormann and Biddle suggest that “subversive humor challenges conventions and norms and beliefs” (Dormann and Biddle 2009, 818).

Writing “*Fighting Fit*” as a narrative comedy creates opportunities to reflect on the source of inspiration, challenge beliefs and place a difficult work situation in *proper perspective*. Mills’ (2009) extensive research on the evolution of the sitcom acknowledges the complexity of formulating a single definition of narrative comedy, and instead suggests that it can be identified by its *intention* to be humorous. Critical reflection on writing narrative comedy also creates opportunities to identify how sources of inspiration incorporated into scripts manifest as narrative comedy. As incongruity theory suggests, using inappropriate juxtapositions to defeat expectations serves to both create humour and shift perspective. In this respect, the intentionality of writing narrative comedy as a choice is explained by the role humour plays as a coping mechanism in helping us deal with stress. It also suggests that humour has a role to play in facilitating a perspective shift, something it shares with transformative learning. Before exploring transformation theory in more detail, this next section outlines the methodology underpinning this research.

## Methodology

In *Doing Practitioner Research*, Fox, Green and Martin (2007) suggest that the primary goal of practitioner researchers should be to “use action research to facilitate change in themselves” as the first step in trying to effect change in their field (Fox, Green and Martin 2007, 7). Writing narrative comedy scripts, as action research, enables a deeper understanding of the craft of screenwriting which directly benefits teaching practice and screenwriting skills. However, increased individual agency is not the only goal. As Christie et al. explain, “if enough individuals within a field change, the field itself has a chance to change” (Christie et al. 2015, 22). Action research shares similarities with the creative processes of scriptwriting. “Action research involves a spiral process of planning, acting, observing, analysing, reflecting and then evaluating” (Christie et al. 2015, 15-16). McKee describes the writer’s method as, “You write, you read; create, critique; impulse, logic; right brain, left brain; re-imagine, rewrite” (McKee 1998, 26). The writer’s method is embedded within the cyclical process of action research where teacher-as-screenwriting-practitioner is both researcher and site of professional practice.

Critical reflection on “concrete engagement with art practice as performance” generates a “communicable knowledge of art practice” (Bell 2006, 99). Using a reflection journal is a valuable method for documenting critical reflection on creative processes and scripts, as well as lived experiences which inspire the themes, characters and stories in “*Fighting Fit*”.

In order to maintain reliability and authenticity, critical reflection is mediated through an interpretive framework. This framework encompasses other interpretive communities including industry perspective of script editor / producer /director and a critical community. Industry feedback is provided by John O’Grady, executive producer and script editor on “*Mother and Son*” (Atherden 1984-1994) and Geoff Portmann, head of discipline for Film, Screen and Animation at Queensland University of Technology and producer and director on *Mother and Son*.

The critical community also provides an important source of feedback data. Campbell, and Gilroy describe a critical community as a group of friends, colleagues or fellow researchers who act as “peer reviewer, asking questions in supportive yet challenging ways” (Campbell and Gilroy 2004, 85). Critical feedback on characters, scene breakdowns and drafts of scripts provided by these perspectives ensures personal critical reflection is informed by other social and cultural contexts.

Feedback from both critical community and industry perspective is collated and compared and responses to specific questions provide a common reference point for reflecting on the screenplays. The collaborative perspective ensures perceptions about the creative practice are authentic and reliable. Critical reflection on feedback is documented in the reflection journal, incorporated into subsequent drafts and cycled back through the scriptwriting process. In this way, iterative scriptwriting practice and cyclical critical reflection interweave in a spiralling process of action and reflection that creates a systematic approach to the creative practice.

Within the journal, critical reflection on scriptwriting processes, such as ideation or critical feedback on scripts, often triggers reflection on lived experiences, which inspire the scripts. Personal reflections triggered by “emotionally charged images” (Dirkx 2001, 64) are documented in the journal but do not always find their way into the creative work. However, these reflections create a connection or dialogue for reflecting on deeply personal or emotionally charged areas of experience that are thus brought into awareness by the creative process. The visual metaphor of intertwined spirals reflects the way in which creative and reflective practice interacts.

McKee (1998) believes the key to successful writing is the capacity for “deep reflection” combined with an awareness of screenwriting craft skills. Writing scripts, which incorporate reflection on experience creates authenticity in the storying process as well as opportunities to challenge assumptions about lived experience. Challenging epistemic assumptions is a fundamental aspect of transformation theory, which is briefly explained in the following section.

## Transformation theory

Transformative learning “may be defined as *learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change*” (Mezirow, Taylor and Associates 2009, 22). Critically reflecting on the premise (or norms) underpinning a problem “has the potential to lead to transformation of our meaning perspectives” (Cranton and King 2003, 35). This type of reflection requires openness and a willingness to identify and question the basis of one’s beliefs, attitudes, values or judgements from which the interpretation of a given problem originates. Although other theorists such as Nohl (2015) suggest fewer, Mezirow identifies ten phases in the transformative learning process:

## Mezirow’s Ten Phases of Transformative Learning

1. *Disorienting dilemma*
2. *Self-examination*
3. *A critical assessment of assumptions*
4. *Recognition of a connection between one’s discontent and the process of transformation*
5. *Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action*
6. *Planning a course of action*
7. *Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan*
8. *Provisional trying of new roles*
9. *Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships*

10. *A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective*

(Mezirow, Taylor and Associates 2009, 19)

The trigger for challenging one's traditional perspective comes from what Mezirow (2009) refers to as a disorienting dilemma. "Transformations may be epochal (involving dramatic or major changes) or incremental and may involve objective (task oriented) or subjective (self-reflective) reframing" (Mezirow, Taylor and Associates 2009, 23). There are interesting correlations between the ten stages in transformative learning and the twelve stages of the hero's journey, distilled by Vogler (1998) from Campbell's "*Hero with a Thousand Faces*" (1968) into a guide for mapping narrative and character progression in films.

In Vogler's model the first stage establishes the hero in his *ordinary world* with a *limited awareness of a problem* before he receives his *call to adventure* where he becomes increasingly aware of the *need for change*. This is followed by a *refusal of the call* combined with *fear or resistance to change*. Within transformation theory, these stages align with the disorienting dilemma leading to the second stage of "self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame" (Nohl 2015, 36). Batty (2011) argues a redefinition of the model which proposes a "physical-emotional journey framework...that enhances, not replaces the model of the Hero's Journey" (Batty 2011, 83). Batty explains the second stage of the hero's journey (*awareness of need for change*) "draws upon the protagonist's need to transform into someone more than he currently is" (Batty 2011, 84).

It is outside the scope of this paper to explore these similarities in more detail but it is worthwhile noting the connections between character transformations in films and the transformative learning experience. Films in which the protagonists emerge emotionally transformed by their experiences (Batty 2011) share with transformative learning the common goal of a shift in perspective.

The third stage in transformative learning involves a critical assessment of assumptions (critical reflection). Critical reflection is important in facilitating "learning within awareness" which requires a critical awareness of one's own beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world. Dirkx (2001) argues that perspective shift can be facilitated not just through rational, critical analysis but through engagement with one's unconscious via imagination. For Dirkx, this means being attentive to our *inner world* of thoughts, dreams, deep feelings and emotions, which complements Mezirow's critical rational approach (2001). Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton propose "an imaginal approach to connecting and developing a conscious relationship with emotionally charged aspects of experience that remain unconscious and unavailable to everyday awareness" (2006, 137).

Using a reflection journal as a methodological tool to document creative processes such as ideation, exploring characters and experimenting with dialogue have enabled *emotionally charged aspects of experience* to be brought *into awareness*. This next section seeks to examine how critical reflection on the creative practice of scriptwriting can facilitate transformative learning.

## Analysis

Excerpts from the reflection journal are used to examine the interdependent relationship between critical reflection and scriptwriting processes that indicate a transformative learning process. Mezirow's ten phases are used as a framework for a larger study, however the scope of this paper limits the focus for analysis on the third phase, a critical assessment of assumptions. The first two phases are outlined briefly to provide background context to the analysis.

Mezirow (2009) refers to the first phase as a disorienting dilemma, which challenges one's traditional perspective.

### 1. Disorienting dilemma

My disorienting dilemma was triggered when our screen and media teaching team was directed to lose two permanent teaching positions. The most highly (doctorate) qualified teacher was made redundant and replaced by casual staff. The screen and media department had been working to establish a bachelor degree program. The staffing decision did not appear to make sense and made me question the nature of management processes. This enquiry is the inspiration for “Fighting Fit” which explores themes of power and control in management practices.

### 2. Self-examination

Mezirow’s ten phase model suggests that a disorienting dilemma will often lead to self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame (Nohl 2015, 36). The reflection journal documents self-examination and attempts to adapt to the changing work environment. Re-writing course materials and assessment tasks to cater more directly to a university pathway was a false start in trying to adapt to the changing workplace. This period of “self-examination” also encompassed Phase 5: exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions. During this time, I approached Queensland University of Technology to find out more about the Doctorate in Creative Industries and began planning a course of action which aligns with Phase 6.

### 3. A critical assessment of assumptions

Reflecting on the replacement of permanent staff with contract staff forced me to reconsider my assumptions about my role in, and the future of, the Screen and Media department. Dirkx (2012) recounts an example of a student who had a transformative learning experience when she realised she was projecting a previous dysfunctional relationship onto a group dynamic. This entry from my reflection journal documents reflection on critical feedback about the main character Tom in “Fighting Fit”, highlighting a similar transference.

*I was aware on a conscious level that the premise of the scripts was to poke fun at bureaucratic folly. It was only when the critical community and focus group questioned the likeability of the main character that I became aware of the unconscious transference of the alienating relationships I experienced within the bureaucratic environment I was mocking.*  
[Reflection Journal 21/09/15]

The critical community and industry advisors identified that I had written Tom, the manager of *Fighting Fit* gym, as thoroughly unlikeable. This was a conscious decision on my part, based on my contextual review which identifies pompous, narcissistic characters such as David Brent in *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2001-2003) and Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* (Booth and Cleese 1975-1979). While not necessarily requiring Tom to be likeable, the feedback suggested that an audience would need to have some sympathy for him. The extract above does not demonstrate critical reflection of assumptions but it does indicate a “bringing into awareness” where critical feedback on scripts triggers critical reflection on the sources of inspiration.

Mezirow’s (2009) ten phases suggest a linear progression however the extract below supports Taylor’s (1997) findings that the transformative learning process is more recursive as concepts are re-visited and re-examined. This extract demonstrates how critical reflection on creative practice triggers an examination of hegemonic processes. The ellipses indicate where sections of the reflection journal have been omitted for the sake of brevity.

In writing Tom, he embodies all the awfulness of a manager who is a bully and incompetent. He is thoroughly unlikeable and I have been struggling to find any redeeming quality to him at all. Earlier in the week I wrote the final episode outline in which Tom has to acknowledge to the team that the finances are in a mess and there will be redundancies. In one scene he rants to Roald that no matter how hard he works or tries to change his approach, the numbers just don’t add up...

*...The scene where Tom complains to Roald that he ‘works and works’ but can’t seem to improve the numbers resonated with me. These words reflect exactly how I felt in the last couple of years at ----.*

*...This is where the background research into management techniques and styles to inform the creative practice provides a different perspective. I can see that the casualisation of the workforce is an attempt to become ‘agile’ by employing staff on an as needed basis...*

*...In re-reading my reflection from 12/10/15 and my frustration in trying to make sense of the decisions around redundancy I wonder if the decisions have nothing to do with making the courses more financially viable than fulfilling a political and economic objective? In targeting long-term permanent staff, the organisation managed to move a significant number of people off the Defined Benefit superannuation scheme onto the Accumulation scheme.*

[Reflection Journal 17/10/15]

This extract demonstrates the complex interaction of critical reflection which weaves in and out of scriptwriting practice and lived experiences which inspire themes and story concepts. The writer’s method draws on these experiences and creates a narrative which in turn is reflected upon. Tom’s dialogue as an “emotionally charged image” (Dirkx 2001, 64) resonated with the scriptwriter and produced insight to create empathy for the character. Taylor suggests that

*“the written format potentially strengthens the analytical capability of transformative learning. The material sphere opens up new forms of communication, creating artifacts [sic] of ideas of the mind, making them available for others beyond the individual writer to analyze and contemplate” (Taylor 2007, 182).*

Insights drawn from reflection on Tom’s dialogue trigger critical reflection on management practices as the sources of inspiration for “*Fighting Fit*” and create an alternative perspective which challenges epistemic assumptions. Research into management theories, as part of the creative process, provides additional insight for reflection on lived experiences, ultimately leading to a questioning of hegemonic processes influencing workforce management. These insights are fed back into the iterative scriptwriting process which adds authenticity to character motivation and themes. Cranton and King (2003) suggest that transformative learning

*also leads back to authenticity as we express our views in the community. Being authentic leads to further transformation and individuation. We no longer run with the herd; we make choices based on who we are. The spiral moves upward (Cranton and King 2003, 33).*

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that critical reflection on creative choices can prompt an examination of the sources of inspiration that can facilitate transformative learning. Documenting the ideas for scripts, building character profiles, and experimenting with dialogue in a reflection journal increases opportunities for creative choices to be examined by creating “artifacts [sic] of ideas of the mind” (Taylor 2007, 182). Humour theory provides insight into the creative choice of narrative comedy and transformation theory suggests a common framework and systematic approach to critical reflection. Using critical reflection to draw upon authentic emotional experiences and incorporating them into ‘imaginal’ texts via screenwriting suggests an additional method for engaging in transformative learning and, arguably, for creating meaningful emotional experiences for the narrative comedy audience. Challenging epistemic assumptions about management practices as the source of inspiration for the narrative comedy series has enabled the disorienting dilemma to be identified and examined, creating empathy which informs character development and authenticity in “*Fighting Fit*”.

The challenges to the constructivist teaching model of teaching screenwriting, which prompted this research, such as increases in class sizes and the reduction in student contact time are not easily resolved. McKee suggests the key to successful screenwriting is “self-knowledge...life *plus* deep reflection on our reactions to life” (McKee 1998, 21). Encouraging screenwriting students to document critical reflection on both the sources of inspiration and scriptwriting processes can facilitate a deeper understanding of the craft of scriptwriting and provide “the opportunity for a more profound access to the world by inviting a deeper understanding of ourselves in relationship with it” (Dirkx 2001, 64). The spiralling process of scriptwriting and documenting critical reflection can facilitate transformative learning, improve screenwriting craft skills and is, arguably, a strategy for re-positioning students at the centre of a constructivist learning model.

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