

## **From hills to halls: A modern parable of transitioning to academia**

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*Abstract: This reflective essay tells the story of the transition of a Hollywood director to the professoriate.*

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Traditionally, the trajectory for most faculty careers has been straightforward: from PhD to tenure to retirement, the latter two often at the same institution. As many studies have noted, however, the conventional path is becoming less and less the norm as higher education faces a myriad of marketplace challenges (Simendinger, Pula, Kraft, & Jasperson, 2000; Webb, 2009). It is becoming more commonplace for academics to change institutions or even change professions in mid-career, and a growing body of literature documents and analyses these transitions. There is another transition, however, that has received less scholarly attention. Particularly in professions in which there are shortages of trained faculty, more and more faculty are coming to academia from a foundation as a successful professional. While this phenomenon is not entirely new, particularly in applied fields such as health, business, law, and education (Barber, 2006; Butcher & Stoncel, 2012; Clement, 2012; Crane, O'Hern, & Lawler, 2009; Smith, & Boyd, 2012; Tysinger, Diamanduros, & Tysinger, 2010; Watson, 2008), the transition in the arts has not been addressed. This is the story of one such conversion.

Jack Sholder's name may be familiar to those of you who are film buffs. As a filmmaker in Hollywood, he directed such films as *Alone in the Dark*, *Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, and *The Hidden*. In addition, he won an Emmy for his editing on the acclaimed PBS series *3-2-1 Contact* and has had three of his screenplays turned into feature films. His career is sufficiently extensive that the *Oracle of Kevin Bacon* rates him as a Bacon number of 2 (Oracle). It has been nine years since he made his last film, however, and today he serves as program director of Motion Picture & Television Production in the School of Stage & Screen at Western Carolina University, a medium-sized regional comprehensive university located in the rural mountains of western North Carolina. The story of his transition from the Hollywood Hills to the halls of academia, told in his own words and through scenes as if in film, provides us with a modern parable for the challenges and opportunities inherent in moving from professional to professor.

### **Jack's Story**

When I graduated from Antioch College, I basically had two things going for me. First, I had a degree in English literature and secondly, I was a very serious musician (a trumpeter). What I discovered was that film integrated these two facets. Film has a narrative structure, a story, and it has a kinesthetic element—a rhythm or flow – that is similar to music. Antioch did not have a film program at the time, so I just went ahead and shot some short films on my own, figuring it out as I went. A few weeks after graduating and moving to New York, a friend of mine, also an alumnus of the college, called me up and said that his girlfriend was working for a fledgling film distribution company, New Line Cinema, and maybe I should show them my films. I met the

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owner of the company. He wasn't interested in my short films but asked if I knew anyone who could edit a trailer for him. I immediately volunteered. My friend and I gained access to someone's editing room after they went home Friday night and by the time we emerged early Monday morning, we were close friends and remain so to this day. After years of minor successes New Line decided to start producing feature films. I pitched an idea to them and ended up directing my first feature film, *Alone in the Dark*. Then, after their success with *Nightmare On Elm Street*, I reluctantly directed the sequel, never seeing myself as a horror film guy. It was a big hit, and next thing I knew, I was in Hollywood.

Up to that point, I had never had a steady job in my life. When you work in film, you usually do one film at a time and you never know when, or even if, your next film is going to happen. A common strategy is to have three or four project going at a time and hope that at least one of them will get made. As a director, if I could do one film a year, I was doing alright. It was great when you were working, but when you are not working it could be very stressful. I managed to keep it up over the next twenty years, doing movies and TV for most of the studios and networks. Periodically, as the work started to taper off, my wife would encourage me to look for a teaching job so we could have some stability. Largely to mollify my wife, I would occasionally apply for these jobs with no real expectation of success. I do not have an advanced degree and I have never taken a film course in my life. Every six months, however, I would look at the job ads to see what was out there. One day, I saw this job at a school I had never heard of. They were looking for someone with a background in directing/producing to start a new motion picture program. Knowing it was a long shot, I sent a letter outlining my experience. They considered my life experience to be equivalent to a terminal degree and offered me the job. In 2004, we moved from Hollywood to Cullowhee, NC. I was a professor.

### **Scene 1: The Story Matters**

When I first arrived on campus, there was no film major, so I was faced with building a motion picture program from scratch. In some ways, I was hampered by the fact that I had never gone to film school, and so I didn't know how the subject was taught. I looked at syllabi from several major programs and spoke to colleagues who'd gone into teaching, but I came to realize that my lack of background may actually have been an opportunity because it forced me to think very intentionally about every element of the curriculum design. First and foremost, I had to ask myself: what did I want students to learn? Like many people in Hollywood, my view of film schools was not very favorable. I had looked down on academics, believing that you would not really learn until you went out and practiced, as I had done. That being said, if I was going to take people's money to teach them film making, I needed to figure out what was important, how to teach it, and what they should know before they went into practice and learned the rest. There's a technical side to motion picture production, and students do need to be proficient at these, but technical aspects are constantly changing. What I chose to focus on was story. I have worked with top people including Academy Award winners, from actors to sound mixers, and what differentiates the run-of-the-mill from the really good ones was not just a mastery of the technical skills, but an understanding of the story that was so deep that they could make the technical side work its magic. The first class I created for the program was called Storytelling for the Screen.

## **Scene 2: Academia is not Hollywood**

Even before I started teaching, I would soon discover that I had some hard lessons to learn: academia is not like Hollywood. As a director and editor, my primary responsibility was to the film and its audience. I wanted my films to appeal to a wide audience, and to earn their love, respect, and, of course, their money. In academia, it's less about the product than about the process. And ultimately it's about the student. My new goal was to turn out the best possible student that I could, and I began hiring colleagues for the program, starting with a screenwriter, a cinematographer, and a film studies specialist who could support me in that endeavor. A colleague once accused me of caring more about the program than the students. This is absolutely wrong. If you're a director, you have an enormous amount of ego attached to film you're working on. My ego is now attached to the program, but in a very different way. On one level, it's my program. On another and more realistic level, it's not just mine, it belongs to the faculty, the university, and the students. They've all been instrumental in getting it where it is, and I never could have gotten it there on my own.

As a film director, if I moved, someone would move my chair for me. Directors get many perks, from first class airfare to hefty per diems. That does not happen at a university, which is a much more bureaucratic institution. One of the first mistakes I made as a faculty member, for example, was to not understand how to navigate the hierarchy. In Hollywood, who you know and have access to is very important. If I can call the Chairman of the Board of New Line Cinema, I'm in a much better position than someone who can't. When I was hired, I developed a good relationship with the Chancellor of the University. I could, and did, call him for consultation on a variety of issues. At an early college meeting, someone asked a question, and I mentioned that I had learned the answer in a personal conversation with the Chancellor. It took me a while to realize that I was making everyone in the room pretty angry, especially the Dean. I've since learned that the Dean is an important person in my life and it is a good idea to keep him happy. I still have meetings with upper administrators, but not without letting the Dean know beforehand and debriefing him afterwards.

## **Scene 3: What Students Know (and Don't Know)**

In my second semester at WCU, I taught my first classes and realized that my students had no technical background to do the work, so we added a course in introductory production skills, taught by our cinematographer. We would later add intermediary courses in each of the technical areas as well as courses on film history. In every technical course, it was always story first: "Here's how to use this camera and these lights. Now go out and tell a story with them." Beyond the curriculum, though, I began to understand more about teaching itself. I thought that I was well suited to being a teacher because I always liked to talk about what I did, even though much of it was instinctive. As both an editor and a director, I was always given an assistant, and I felt a responsibility to educate the assistant not only as payback for the grunt work but also to further his or her career. In an academic setting, I quickly learned that war stories and enlightened advice wouldn't cut it; you needed a pedagogy. At one point, we hired an adjunct who had a great deal of professional experience, but he made assumptions that the students should just know what he knew because to him it seemed obvious. If they didn't understand, he just assumed they were stupid. What I realized was the students didn't have any context for

understanding his stories. They were all told their work was no good, but not *why* it was no good. So they had to teach themselves.

No one had ever taught me editing or directing—I learned it by doing it. A normal career path for a film editor used to be you started as apprentice. You watched, learned, then moved up to assistant, and after some years to a full-fledged editor. As a director or editor, you work on instinct and feel. If you're off by a frame, a 1/24<sup>th</sup> of a second, it doesn't feel right. So my biggest challenges was taking my experience and moving it into a set of articulated principles that could be taught. I had to take all of those things that I used to do without thinking and give them a name. On one level, it felt like it had the mystery taken out of it. Part of, maybe even the best part, of the creative process is the non-rational aspect of it, but that can't be taught. I needed a blueprint for what and how I wanted them to learn so they could get to the next level. As an example, one of the things that I began to notice was, in editing there are a set of basic questions you ask yourself: when do you cut and why do you cut. When I first taught, I saw that often the students would cut to a shot and not hold it long enough, particularly in wider shots. I thought about why it didn't feel right, and then I realized: It's like reading. In a wide shot there is more information to take in so you need to hold it longer as a rule (often broken) because it takes more time to read than a close-up where there is less to scan. Students can get that.

Perhaps the biggest revelation I had was that the students didn't just need imparted knowledge. They really needed to know what to do with that knowledge. I feel that I was successful in my career because I learned in college how to think and how to learn. And everything I learned I've used on a film set. That's what I want my students to understand, and that's why I favor a liberal education background rather than a conservatory approach.

#### **Scene 4: It's About Process**

When the students made mistakes, it was tempting to take over and start directing their films for them. I learned from one of my experienced faculty members that there is a delicate balance between when you intervene and when you leave them alone to make mistakes. If they're about to step over the edge of a cliff, you have to stop them, but if they're about to step onto a cow pat, you have to let them. When I critique students' work, I tell them that filmmaking is not math. There's not always a right answer—but there's a better answer and a less good answer. I explain to them that this is my opinion that is based on my own experience, and here's *why* I have that opinion. I then give them a way to test those answers so that they can choose the better answer. Because we deal with creative processes, our egos are often wrapped up in our work. Blunt criticism can feel like a personal attack, and students have to learn to tell the difference. I always say it's about the work, not about you. The truth is that every step of a film production, from script to shooting to editing, starts off flawed, and you need to make it better through the process. So I only grade the final output. In class we screen everybody's work, and critique it together. I always give my interpretation last, because I don't want to influence what the students have to say. As a result of this process, of seeing film exercises that work and others that don't work, the students develop an ability to critique their own work. And they develop a point of view, which is essential to becoming an artist. The critical skill is the ability to look at the work and make it better. In film as in teaching, you have to be able to erase your mind, as if you've never seen it before, then look at it and say is it perfect? Does it work? Does it not work? Why not? And what can we do to fix it?

## Scene 5: How Students Learn

When I first started teaching, I would often find myself pigeonholing students: this one has promise, this one does not, and so forth. As I began to teach over several years, however, my opinions began to change. While some of them had struggled as freshmen, I found that by the time they got to be seniors, all of them had become good filmmakers. It was a big revelation for me to see that students learn differently, and those that appear hopeless as sophomores can still become good students, solid filmmakers, and even leaders. Watching their transformations changed the way that I perceived students. It may seem obvious to those who have been in academia throughout their careers, but students can and do learn.

Because film production is inherently collaborative by nature, we usually assign team projects in our courses. It was my feeling that some people are good collaborators and some are not. Early on I had student team members critique the collaborative efforts of each other. At a conference I showed a student's negative evaluation of another to a colleague, and he asked me why I, as a teacher, had let the situation come to that point. My response was to say the student being evaluated was a bad collaborator. After some reflection, I realized the situation was more complicated than that. I needed to intervene in a way so that it *didn't* get to that point. More importantly, I realized that collaborative skills can be learned. Some people are naturally good at it, but others can develop collaborative skills over time. Part of my job – in a field where good collaboration is essential to making a living – was to teach those skills. Now, instead of refereeing accusations and counter-accusations, I listen to all the stories and watch as the stories become less emotionally charged and more focused on constructive criticism. We had a female student, for example with whom no one wanted to work. As a senior, she finally figured out what she needed to do, and it's like working with a different person. During her internship (on a low budget feature), she was given a great deal of responsibility and became very close to the director. This creates a kind of mutual reinforcement loop—she changed her behavior, the reward for her was great, and now she has become a leader in the program. Stories like hers happen again and again, which shows that even less tangible skills or traits can be learned.

## Scene 6: The Classroom and the Studio

In Hollywood, everyone from the director to the production assistant tries to produce at the highest level on set, which is one of the pleasures of working in film. There are unwritten rules and etiquette that surround the hierarchy on a film set, just like in any business. There is an iron clad chain of command. If you break that chain, you'll lose your job. You have to learn when to talk and when to stay silent. Aspiring film makers need to know these rules. Because our program is taught by practitioners, we know what those rules are. We have it in our bones, so we can model that to our students, and I believe that is something that practitioners have to offer to the field.

We try to teach these values in such a way that it becomes an intrinsic part of how the students work. Seniors in the program, for example, have to complete a thesis project and even though they are heavily mentored, they run the entire production. It has been fascinating to watch how they come to own the process and how they begin to do our work for us. They're in charge and it's their job to show the upcoming students how to fit into that world. A major component of this is not just the transfer of technical skills, but also the attitude. On a set, there's always something to do. In Hollywood a production assistant who just sits around would be

unemployed, so on our sets the students call each other out if someone is not doing enough, isn't dressed properly, or is violating the rules in some way. The students are often tougher on each other than we are on them.

### **Scene 7: Assessment is not the enemy**

When I first started, I thought writing a syllabus was basically a hoop to jump through; an unnecessary administrative affectation. By my third or fourth year, the value of good course design began to become more and more apparent. I met with one of our university's instructional developers to talk about my syllabus, and the experience opened my eyes. I began to see my course from the perspective of the student and made considerable revisions to the syllabus to reflect how I wanted them to spend their time. I think that there is often an assumption that students have nothing else to do besides our course and that everything we say is of equal interest.

Perhaps my biggest professional transformation as a teacher has been in assessment. Like many of my colleagues, I believed that I was the best judge of the quality of the students' work and that I knew good work when I saw it. That assumption slowly began to change because of several experiences. When students complained to me about an adjunct instructor, one of their primary objections was the fact that he required enormous amounts of work from them, but they would receive only a grade (usually a low one) in return and they did not understand what they needed to do to improve. One of my colleagues described this style of grading as "the Karnak method," i.e. simply imagining the grade out of thin air like Johnny's Carson's psychic. Despite this, I still found it difficult to believe that you could assess the quality of creative work in a structured way. What changed my mind? I had a very good student who started doing really poorly on all her quizzes. I asked her what was going on, and she said that because I had dropped the quiz grades from 10% to 5% of their grade, she decided that they were a lower priority for her and that she had to focus her time elsewhere. I started to use rubrics and grading structures as a means to provide clarity to the students on what they should value, what's important, and what they should spend their time doing. In my editing class, for example, we switched this year to a new editing software system. I needed to spend a great deal of time teaching them how to use it, so for that semester I pushed the quiz grade up to 40% because they needed to spend their time practicing in order to develop a baseline for the higher-level work. They realized that they'd better study. Rubrics are not the enemy of creativity, but rather a means of communicating about what matters in developing high-quality creative work.

### **Scene 8: From One Profession to Another**

Even after teaching for several years, I remained a professional filmmaker but an amateur teacher. It took me quite a while to consider the idea that teaching is a profession and that you have to become as professional as a teacher as you were as a creative professional. When I first started, I was guilty of thinking of my new job as a step down from the old one. No one moves my chair anymore. Instead, I'm teaching students, flying coach, and seeing my name on committee rosters. Over time, though, I have been able to find a deep sense of satisfaction in what I do. I'm taking people and giving them opportunities that they wouldn't have otherwise. I'm teaching them things I wish that someone had taught me when I first started. It would have saved me much grief.

The ultimate goal of our program is to get students to think like filmmakers. We even have a freshmen-level course called “Thinking like a Filmmaker”. If I can get them to do that, then I think we have been successful. Now that we have had several cohorts of students graduate, we can see that they tend to do well in the industry. Feedback from employers indicates that they know how to behave on a professional film set and they understand what is expected of them, and not just on the technical side. They have the right attitude towards their work, from knowing the rules to seeing opportunities in even the most menial tasks.

In a sense, then, I have two professional identities: as a filmmaker and as a teacher. I confess that I had, and continue to have a great deal of respect for faculty in fields that seem to be naturally suited to the academic environment. I was less certain about academics in applied fields, particularly my own. Now, I hold them in much greater value. Some practitioners are awful teachers, inculcating methods and thinking that were around when they were learning and may now be out of date or out of use. And many academic filmmakers are fantastic at teaching and are on the cutting edge, both aesthetically and technically. I’ve learned from them and have really come to value them in a way I had not before.

In my mind, I remain a filmmaker first. I’ve always seen myself as an artist. I’ve always been attracted to things that are beautiful, from music and literature to art and the art of living. That’s been the thrust of my life since I was a child and it’s at the core of who I am. I wanted to make films not for money or fame, but because of the transformative power of the medium and its ability to move people emotionally and intellectually. Will teaching ever have as much power/meaning in my life as making films? Probably not. That does mean that it’s not something that I care about. Do I see myself as an educator? I take as an example the fact that almost every great musician has taught. It’s virtually an obligation to pass that knowledge on. I see myself as a filmmaker who’s teaching film making and who is hopefully good at it. If I can clarify and inspire and share my passion, then I am doing a good thing. When I walk onto a set of a senior thesis film, and I see students working cooperatively, creatively, together, I’m not only proud, I’m moved.

## **Scene 9: Professional Development**

I made my most recent film in 2004 (though my contract does allow me time off to make more, so it may not be the last). My point of reference for films is the forty years around my professional career. Technically, filmmaking is a very different world today. I’ve only shot film, but the world has gone digital. From a practitioner perspective, I’m not as up on that field as I should be and probably never will be. The current environment is not part of my experience. On one level, I acknowledge that to some extent I’m teaching an older paradigm, but I think that the basic principles of filmmaking, like storytelling, are eternal and this can be seen in the continued relevance of such different genres as Shakespeare and Hitchcock films. Filmmaking techniques are changing all the time. Hitchcock films had a slower pace than the Bourne movies, but the basic principles remain unchanged. Regardless of the software or tools you use, you still are photographing light and you still have to be able to convey answers to questions such as what is the scene about? What is the theme or spine of the story?

There are things about storytelling that are profound. Story and character are what matter and resonate with audiences. If you think about the movies that you love, it’s the emotions that you remember. We strive towards teaching our students how to do that. That is what good directors direct. I am aware of the fact that on one level I’m not a current practitioner as a

filmmaker, but now I learn from my students. I have them talk to me about what films they value, what moves them, and I am able to develop my own professional awareness through them. When I give more of the teaching learning process over to them, we all get more out of the experience.

### **Final Scene: Lessons Learned?**

This has been the story of the transition of a Hollywood filmmaker to university educator. As this essay shows, personal reflection has been an essential part of Jack's professional development as a faculty member. When he first shared his story over coffee, we became convinced that it could also be powerful if shared with others, as others have shared their reflections with Jack. Many of the revelations that have impacted his teaching career may not be new to those of you who also teach, but he had to learn them through experience and not from reading articles such as this one. The promise of the scholarship of teaching and learning is to bring reflection to a shared, collaborative level. We were initially uncertain about how this article would work and whether it would be of interest to others. We knew that higher education follows a constructivist model, i.e. the principle that knowledge is constructed and that different people construct it differently. While this is frequently applied to ideas about how students learn, it can also be applied to how faculty develop. As more and more faculty are drawn from the ranks of other professional careers, our perspectives on what we do and how we convey that to others, can hopefully move others to reflect on their own values, assumptions, and practices.

Jack is not the first person to reflect on turning from professional to professor (Faulkner, 2007; Fogg, 2002; LaRocco, & Bruns, 2006; Kinsey, Coleman, Christie, Culver, Erickson, Hunt, Williams, Smith, & Tareilo, 2006; Mangan, 2006; McCluskey-Tits & Cawthon, 2004), nor is this the first attempt to look at faculty development support for professionals in transition (Crane, O'Hern, & Lawler, 2009; Griffiths, Thompsons, & Hryniewicz, 2010; Thomsen, & Gustafson, 1997) but just as disciplines have signature pedagogies, so do professionals. Many of the lessons learned from his individual story reflect the distinctive challenges faced by faculty in the arts, from tensions between professionals and academics; effective peer critique; and assessment of creative work (Haugnes, Holmgren, & Springborg, 2012; Klebsadel, & Kornetsky, 2009). As we continue to examine and reflect on the increasing variety of routes toward academic careers, we should perhaps be cautious in aggregating these experiences, as the stories do very much matter.

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