University of St Andrews

Learning & Teaching Case Study

Department of Film Studies: Using archives in Film Studies - FM4109: Film and the Archive, but also incorporated into sub honors teaching on FM1002: Film and Historiography.

In 2010, I joined the University with Dr Josh Yumibe. We both had a background in film history and had worked on major international archival projects. Recalling what initially drew us both into film studies and recognising a gap in the existing curriculum, we wanted to provide students with the opportunity to conduct primary research, to make their own discoveries and develop their own research projects.

With the support of a University FILTA grant, we set up the Cinema St Andrews project. The project examines the history of cinema in St Andrews, while also using St Andrews as a case study; a way of understanding and examining all aspects of cinema history through this specific local example. The project is divided into five research areas (exhibition, stars, audiences, production and culture) and we have established links with local and national archives to allow students to conduct research in these areas.

One of our first tasks was to set up a website (http://cinemastandrews.org.uk) which would serve as an archive. The site houses a significant collection of newly-digitised materials (both local and international in scope), which are used by scholars and archivists beyond St Andrews, but which are also tailored for our own students to use across a variety of classes and projects. For example, early advertisements, photographs, and accounts from local newspapers have all been incorporated into the first year film history module as a way of localising, and making relevant, international film history. Materials that we digitised in collaboration with the British Film Institute (BFI) formed a prominent part of an assessment on FM4104: Film and History.

Our students are, however, not just using this site but contributing to it, writing many of the site’s short historical essays on aspects of local film history. In doing this, the students gain experience of working through the editorial process with a member of staff (from editing their script to selecting images to digitise), adapt their writing for different audiences and finally see their work published. Students at all levels (honours, mlitt and, most recently, subhonours) have contributed to this, not only as part of courses but also as extra-curricular work for students keen to gain practical experience in film research.

The Film and the Archive course included field trips to archives (The Grierson Archives, University of Stirling), while students also worked with the St Andrews
Preservation Trust Museum in curating a two-week exhibition on local cinema history (Lights! Camera! Action!). In these ways, the course provided students with practical experience. Furthermore, the assessments included a short piece for the Cinema St Andrews website, an extensive research essay and a public presentation held at MUSA. The course encouraged students to tailor and present their research for different audiences, helping to develop ‘transferable skills’ beyond the traditional essay format.

The students on the Film and the Archive course developed projects throughout the term and showed enormous initiative in accessing materials on an incredibly wide range of subjects. Such was their enthusiasm for primary research that we had to establish an online booking chart for the library's microfilm machine! Within a year, a number have gone on to work in related areas, whether taking on PhDs, working in libraries or, in one case, pursuing a masters in Archiving. For some of our junior honours students, the course provided a grounding in independent research which proved valuable when pursuing their final year dissertation.

As staff, the project not only helps us to develop close working relationships with students but also serves to foreground and promote film within the town. As the University’s newest department (still less than a decade old), the website and ongoing events allow us to connect with local groups and individuals and to promote our own position and work within the town.

**Student testimonials:-**

‘What I enjoyed most about the course was gaining hands-on practical experience. Rather than simply reading a book by someone who has already done the research for us, we did the research ourselves, and this was pretty exciting. It made the whole course more open, too. I love this way of studying because it means that I can follow my instincts and work independently. The course was a great opportunity to see what primary research involves, and it was nice to be involved in ’writing’ the local history. You don’t do this every day as a student and it was fantastic to be a part of something that felt worthwhile and valuable.‘

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