Darren Coxon: Editing Middlemarch

My first report, on an earlier stage of this research project, highlighted the following areas:

The application of prior learning to new editing tasks (esp. the use of film language to structure discussion of editing)
Learning styles – the way in which different students learn (some are visual, happy to watch; some are auditory, talking through issues raised; some kinaesthetic, controlling mouse and pointing).
Difference between male and female approaches to task – esp. re risk-taking, sticking to plan.
The role of planning, and how important it is before editing begins.

Prior to intervention

With the above in mind, the intervention I set up was to observe a group of 4 film studies students (all year 10) embarking on a new piece of work that had not been planned beforehand. I wanted to see how this would affect their ability to work the equipment, how they would overcome any difficulties that arise from a more ad hoc approach, how quickly they would learn, whether their learning would be affected in any way from not spending any time preparing for the task.

The task was to take a set of rushes from a television adaptation of 'Middlemarch', and to place them in the order they thought they should go in. They had done a good deal of work on continuity editing, so should have had prior understanding of the principles of editing. I wanted to see whether they remembered any of this.

I allowed students to work in two pairs, decided by themselves. Each pair was closely monitored, but I would intervene in different ways with each group.

Group 1 was the control group: I wanted to intervene in the way I normally do, showing students what to do when they get stuck. They were going to receive a more detailed information sheet, taking them through the process step by step.
Group 2 was helped only by pointing them towards other ways in which they can help themselves, such as going to the help menu or asking another in the group with greater knowledge of the equipment. They received a less detailed sheet.

Each group were told of this at the beginning, so there were no shocks. I wanted to find out whether students learn more quickly if they are left

more to their own devices, or whether a high or low level degree of intervention allows for greater learning to take place.

Students were all given a sheet explaining in detail what it is they were being asked to do. During the session they were stopped and asked what they felt the learning was that was going on, how they felt they worked as a pair in tasks such as this, and how much teacher support they felt they needed.

Observations of First group

Alan and Harriet were given no help during the setting up of their project, other than to direct them to another computer when the one they were on originally only had a limited number of rushes on it. I was previously informed that all computers had the full compliment on, but this was incorrect. It made me realise the importance of checking fully before the students begin, to ensure that material that has been digitised has been done so correctly, to avoid spending the first five to ten minutes of the lesson trying to find the correct material.

Alan has used Adobe Premiere before, as he has it at home and is very much into film making. I paired him with Harriet as, although she is taking Media Studies, she has only used Media 100 thus far, so Adobe is completely new to her. However, she is a very intelligent girl, looking to get an A for her film studies AS, so she should be well able to pick up new skills.

When they are set up on a computer that has the correct material on, they begin to try and work out how to set the timeline up. Alan gets quite irritated by the fact that the project does not automatically open a timeline for him, and Dr Burn has to point him towards the function that selects new windows. Interesting, this, because he is well-used to Adobe – perhaps his PC at home always opens the window up for him. He does actually say 'I've never had this problem before', which shows that he is seeing factors that he is not in control of as problems. There is a sense of him wanting to prove to Harriet that he knows what he is doing, and getting annoyed if this looks like it is not the case. Throughout this she sits and quietly observes. It is clear that there is learning going on at this point, that by allowing them to work it out, to reach the point where they need help, they think more about the processes they are engaging in. I did wonder how long it would take for him to work it out if AB had not interceded. From this point onwards, however, they are very much on their own.

They sit and watch the first rush, not talking, just watching. At one point Alan says 'We need a cutaway while he's talking' – immediately he is

applying the technical vocabulary learnt in film studies, and analysing his role as audience. He is aware that he has been watching one character for too long, so needs to cut to another to add interest. Harriet nods her head, and a decision is made.

Harriet realises something she has not known before – that a scene is shot a number of times from a number of different angles. Alan begins to explain the process to her, but while he's doing so looks over his shoulder at Dr Burn, perhaps ensuring that what he is saying is in fact correct. Even though they are being left to their own devices, there is still a sense that they are aware of the teacher and need affirmation from them, even if it is only a look.

They sit for about five more minutes, just watching the rush. It is clear from their expressions that they are taking it in and thinking about it, and when I come across and ask them if they can see what is going on, it seems to disrupt their concentration a bit and Alan answers 'yeah, yeah' to my question, then looks straight back at the screen, eager to get on. This is something to bear in mind, I feel – that we often think that students need to be intervened with, but that actually they are better left to take the information in more slowly, perhaps having their understanding tested more sporadically.

After a few more minutes they begin to speak, Alan saying 'we'll have to edit the speech…' then Harriet finishing his sentence '…over the top if this.' We can see that she it tuning in to the editing process very quickly, understanding the subtleties of continuity editing and being able to apply her understanding in a practical way without too much trouble. They ask questions of Dr Burn, but they are more to do with the practicalities of the filming process, and not technical questions about the software.

As they move into the editing process it is clear that both are getting a tremendous amount of pleasure from what they are doing. Alan talks about his own filming experience, about having to shoot the same scene a number of times, and Harriet listens. Because of her intelligence she enjoys new challenges and ways to use her brain, so a task like this, which is both practical and intellectual, is intriguing her. She talks about the need for an establishing shot, so they both decide that the long shot of the room will come first. More application of film studies knowledge. From observing these groups and those previously, it does seem that a tremendous amount of knowledge of the practical processes of film making and editing comes from an explicit study of them in class, looking at examples of the various techniques and analysing their uses and effects. Perhaps more needs to be done in terms of analysis before we even step into the edit suite, to ensure that students have the technical skills and language to back this up,

enabling individuals to work efficiently with one another towards a common goal.

Alan wants to cut at a certain point, but Harriet disagrees. 'Let him sit down,' she says, 'so that when we cut back to him he'll be sitting down.' This is of course excellent practice, and she has picked up on this without any sort of intervention.

Once they get going there is almost constant dialogue, with one suggesting things and the other agreeing or suggesting alternatives. A teacher coming into this might not be able to offer much, as they will not have heard what has gone before. They have entered their own world, in a way, tuning into each others way of speaking and batting ideas backwards and forwards.

How are they interacting? Alan has the mouse, so one would assume he is more in control of the process. However, Harriet is there as a constant source of ideas and suggestions, and Alan is not making one decision without her. They phrase their ideas as questions: 'perhaps we should…' 'what if we…', suggesting the initial provisionality in what they are undertaking. This process is new to both of them, and they are relishing the joint challenge they face.

Every so often Alan looks over his shoulder, to the other group. Is there a certain amount of competition here, of both groups being aware of what the other is doing? I didn't see the second group look across at Alan and Harriet, perhaps because they were not as far ahead as the latter and so had less to compare with. I often wonder how much competition there is between members of a class all undertaking the same task. I'm sure that boys in particular relish this competitive edge, especially when it comes to technology.

At one point they do something they are both particularly pleased with, that is actually quite a sophisticated technique – to cutaway from a long shot of the speaker to a reaction shot, then cut back to the character speaking in close up. Alan says 'ah, look at that,' and Harriet laughs. The speed with which you can turn a set of rushes into a recognisable, professional-looking edit is a tremendous motivator, and when they do this once they are hooked.

More indicators of the way in which they play around with the clips are the constant references to 'I'm not sure whether it will work, but…'. By qualifying their decisions in this way they are able to take risks, knowing it doesn't matter if it doesn't work, as they can always undo their mistakes.

At one stage the sun streams in through the window and blocks out the screen. Alan gets rather cross with this, and attempts to cover the screen with his arm, then moves the monitor. I intervene by closing the blinds, but they aren't of a very high quality and don't do a particularly good job. I think we often overlook the working environment, investing in technologies without thinking about the logistics of their deployment. I have learnt a good deal about the importance of ensuring that cables are tied up and there is adequate ventilation, as things like this make a huge difference to the smooth running of a lesson. It did waste about five minutes, and disrupt their concentration, so it is of interest.

One thing that is noticeable, over working with some of the other technologies (such as word processing), is the speed with which the new processors work, allowing for much more rapid thinking to be done. It is always a problem when students want to go at a particular speed but the technology will not allow them to do so. Here, though, everything is rapid, so they are able to work with the software at the same speed they are thinking, which is tremendously beneficial.

They play around with sound at one stage, keeping audio and video linked at finely cutting between different audio. They get it right, and Alan says 'I don't know how that happened.' Rather modest, I feel, as they have taken on board one of the most important of all editing rules; to concentrate, once the rough edit is done, on the tiniest of details, constantly revising and reviewing until it is exact, and not settling for 'that will do'. The satisfaction on their faces is evident –and all of this without any teacher explaining to them the importance of this attitude. Perhaps this is why they are so satisfied, as they found this out on their own. There is so much more learning in this approach, it seems.

AB and I interview them, to find out a little about the decisions they have been making, and the sorts of things that are going on while they edit. Both agree that a lot of it goes on in their heads and so is difficult to explain. He asks them what they are hoping to achieve with the task. Harriet wants it to 'look as unobtrusive as possible' , Alan says it needs to look 'natural'. An interesting word to use, as nothing about continuity editing is natural!

When they discuss the process of continuity editing both are very animated, using gesture to explain the positioning of clips and decisions being made. When they are asked about what has influenced their decisions, Alan talks about how he positions himself as audience, a thinks about when he would want to see a cut, when it is necessary to change shot to maintain variety. He talks about his own film watching, about how he has become aware of the editing process through studying film, and about how this is now informing his practice. By analysing our own position as spectator, a number of things seem to

be happening. We are not, as one might think, merely the passive recipient of a moving image text, rather we do actively engage in the process of understanding the messages this text is delivering, and through practical tasks are able to make explicit this understanding in a way that might be more problematic if we were to merely talk about it. Perhaps then a process like this enables students to realise more fully their own learning, making clear to them why a shot is cut at a certain point, what the factors are that govern this.

Andrew then asks if it is different 'doing' continuity editing from analysing it. Harriet talks about the usefulness of applying prior understanding, and repeats the fact that she didn't realise 'how it was done' before.

The thing they say they have found most difficulty with is sound. This is something that I feel we take for granted a little when we analyse moving image texts – but it is the smoothness and continuity of sound that makes or breaks a film. Not having the correct buzz track, or having breaks in ambient noise, can tremendously affect the flow of a film, so a task like this, in which they have to consciously think about how to use sound, is very useful, and an excellent learning experience for them.

After the interview they swap places, as Andrew says he is interested in seeing how this affects learning. Harriet seems a little dubious about this, but agrees. From this point Alan will become the teacher.

They begin, and Alan has a very clear idea as to what to do next. Harriet says 'this is where it's going to get annoying, cos you know where it is.' Already she feels like she is holding Alan up, but she takes verbal cues from him and they find it quickly. She says 'if we have to do this quickly perhaps you should do it, then we can swap back.' Almost immediately she is concerned with her role, thinking that the most important thing is speed. Alan is excellent here, not taking her up on this, even though it is clear he wants to. Harriet says 'bear with me', and they continue.

Alan is continually speaking in editing jargon to Harriet, but she understands completely as she has been paying very close attention to him before. He uses terms like 'razor', which is not something Media 100 has, but she needs no further explanation even though Alan has not mentioned this term before. The icons on Adobe are fairly clear, so she is able to pick things up quickly.

There is a lot more pointing at the screen done by Alan than there was by Harriet when she was in his position. He is directing much more than he was when he had the mouse – I wonder why this is. Harriet, being a

little nervous with the mouse, is now much more reliant on Alan, whereas before she could take more of an advisory role, not worrying about making mistakes.

While she works she is really concentrating, aware that she doesn't want to get it wrong. She seems to be feeling the pressure of succeeding, even though she can undo any mistakes she makes. Alan begins to speak in the imperative, something he hasn't done up to now, saying things like 'now press play', and 'put that there'. It was, in fact, far more interactive when he had the mouse, which is a very interesting discovery. Perhaps if Harriet was more confident with the software this would not be the case, but at least initially it seemed like more of a two-way thing with him in charge of the mouse.

Alan moves in closer, and begins to press the play button. He then leans across and operates the mouse. It seems he cannot keep his hands off! He apologises, and they begin to take turns with the mouse as well. Is this something to think about? Maybe we could set it up so that the mouse is central and the keyboard to one side, as really you don't need to keyboard. That way there is no hierarchy, and students can share operation of the mouse without there being this right to left hierarchy. After all, the mouse is set up for a single user, so it should change for groups. Either this, or have cordless mice on a board that can be passed around. Food for thought.

Harriet has now taken a purely functional role, in many ways becoming an extension of Alan, doing what he says and when. We do have an idea that all should use the mouse – but is it necessary? What sort of learning do we want them to achieve? The technical expertise seems to be able to be passed on simply by observing, shown by the way in which Harriet is able to use the basic functions without too much bother. I guess that she will pick up more when using the mouse, but it seems that this is at the cost of any creative input. I'll monitor this further as this is a key area for further study.

As they get further into the edit and Harriet picks up more skills, she begins to smile a lot, pleased that she is getting it right and that Alan seems happy with the end result. I ask her whether they are using anything more than the basic functions at the point they are at. Harriet says that they are assembling the whole programme and then going back and 'fine tuning' it later, which is exactly how it should be done. I have not told them that this what they should do, and Alan has not made this explicit, yet Harriet has picked up on this idea very clearly.

Possibly the most interesting discovery, and one that links back to my initial idea, is that whenever I intervene, even if it is only to ask a question, they seem to want to get back into it, so don't really

disengage to speak to me. I later ask what sort of help is best, and Harriet says that it is better to be there to watch what they have done and make suggestions, rather than intervene during the process, when they are more focused on the screen than the teacher.

Andrew then asks Harriet a few more questions, about her role in all this, what she feels she has learnt, and how she has been getting on in control of the mouse. She calls Alan a good teacher because he 'doesn't get frustrated'. Andrew asks them what is the best way to learn how to use the software. Harriet says that they need the 'freedom to make mistakes'. Learning by getting it wrong is something we overlook, that very often it is s good thing for them to do it wrong then understand why it is they have done this, and in so doing be able to more explicitly understand the correct way of doing things. Andrew then asks whether it is better to learn through doing, or by watching and analysing. Harriet says 'both', and that 'you think about it [the process] in a different way'. What does she mean by this? What different ways of thinking are going on here? The differences between the different learning styles is evident here, with Harriet making the distinction between auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic ways of learning. She is thinking about the process in a different way if she is watching or doing, and a combination of these seems ideal. This leads on to thinking about group size – how big is the ideal group? In this case two does seem ideal, and pairing those with prior experience with those with none, the learning is quite great. From never having used the software before to being able within less than an hour to operate it confidently, shows how peer tuition and 'getting it wrong' can be enormously beneficial.

Alan talks about how this task makes them think about the 'when, where, how and why' of editing, whereas analysis is more about the 'what' of the process. In other words, analysing others makes you concentrate more on what you are seeing, and 'doing' it makes you deconstruct more actively. The smile on Harriet's face shows she is clearly pleased with what she is discovering!

At this point the filming ends, as does the session. However, both groups continue on after this, Harriet and Alan staying for another hour to finish off. This is interesting in itself, the fact they wish to stay on in their own time to get the task completed. Editing is such an interesting and engaging discipline that it is not unusual for students to give up their own time to do it, and this should be actively encouraged and facilities available for them to do this, as without any teacher support they are more likely to get on and learn more quickly.

What are the conclusions from observing this group? Primarily it is the role of the teacher, or rather the lack of a role, that is of interest. Aside

from the obvious things like ensuring they know the basics, they should be allowed to find their own way and only ask if they really are stuck. A climate in the classroom whereby they are allowed to make mistakes and enjoy this process, and that they should ask for assistance only if they are certain they cannot get out of the problem, might enable them to become more autonomous learners, less reliant on the teacher as both prop and final arbiter of what is right and wrong.

Second group

Holly and Frank have both used Adobe before, and I decided that I would intervene with them more, helping them with setting up the project and telling them what they should do. I would then overlook their progress and offer suggestions. The helpsheet I gave them was much more detailed, but was immediately noticeable was that they didn't really look at it in any detail. How much we can teach them by simply giving them a sheet I'm not sure – better to give them helpsheets that they can dip into if they need them, rather than expecting them to read everything you give them.

Another technical problem: the rushes had all been digitised in total, rather than each camera being a different clip. So they had four slips all exactly the same, and had to separate them before getting started. It is so important to know that any technical support knows what it is you need, as by getting others to help set up projects means that you might not get exactly what you want. I had to try and find my way through this, which put me in an awkward position, something which has happened a good deal when coming to grips with the new technologies. It is clear that they are both quite bored while they wait for me to sort everything out, which is not an ideal start to the lesson.

There is a lot less talk going on between them, with both seeming a bit unsure about the process. By taking the students' point of view, my interceding is quite annoying, and I can tell by their reactions that they would rather just get on with it and make their own mistakes.

Even though Frank has used Adobe before he does not know how to split clips up. This might be because, as was discussed in the first report, he had less to do with the technicalities of the previous project, seeming happier as the joker of the group. Now he is in control he seems less at ease. Holly, on the other hand, is more knowledgeable, showing him what to do by pointing at the screen. Frank is not doing what she thinks he should and she looks a bit frustrated – she has been used to taking control of the mouse so this is new to her.

At one stage I intervene, thinking I know what I'm doing. As it happens I don't, and I have to ask Andrew. Shows that it's better if they find out

through mistakes rather than the teacher, although a healthy dose of 'I'm not sure myself' is never a bad thing. That way students don't automatically think that you know everything. Perhaps 'playing dumb' is a useful ploy sometimes.

Whenever I take hold of the mouse it is clear that Holly switches off a bit. She plays with her hair and at one stage yawns. Neither, it seems, are as motivated by the task as the other group. Is this because of my intervention, or something else? It might just be a personality thing, that they find it more difficult working together as Holly is quite shy so might find working with someone who is not a friend more difficult.

Once they get going there is a lot more talk, but none of it is quite as engaged as the other group. They seem rather hesitant to take risks, perhaps because they haven't done this sort of exercise before.

It is interesting to note Frank's body language. He sits with both his arms outstretched, one on the mouse, one on the table, effectively blocking Holly from coming right up to the screen. Why does he do this? It isn't conscious, but might be telling us something about him feeling nervous about being in control and not wishing to allow Holly to dominate ideas-wise, which she would probably do given the chance.

They find it difficult to match audio, so I bring up the audio window. However, I do not talk them through the process, so am not sure whether they really understood what I had done.

They continue to have problems caused by not having the rushes pre-split, something Frank calls 'extremely annoying'. They have effectively spent about half an hour just sorting this out, and as a result are significantly behind the others. It is so important to try and eliminate technical hitches, so that students can get on with the nuts and bolts of learning without having to correct mistakes which never should have been there in the first place.

They continue to find it tricky to work out how to use sound, so try to unsync the sound from one clip and overlay the video from the different angles onto it. However, they soon realise that this makes getting audio and video to link up very tricky, so have to go back to the drawing board and start again. This could be seen as a failure, but they need to realise that it is not, that they have learnt a valuable lesson about the technicalities of continuity editing. Holly asks me if it is a good idea to keep a constant audio track and I tell her to try it and see, as I am not sure myself. When they go back to the original method we have all learnt something.

Andrew asks them the same questions as the other group. They talk immediately about the problems they have had due to the rushes not being pre-split. They agree that their method might prove problematic, with lip-syncing being difficult to obtain.

The ideas I have don't really go down that well, as I am coming into their discussion sporadically without a sense of what has gone on before. We do have to be careful of this, ensuring we know where they're at, and what they need to know to move them on, or whether they can actually find their own way.

I ask them to swap over, but don't really say why I want them to do this. This is bad practice, I think. Andrew made much more explicit the reason for us wanting to see both partners in control of the mouse.

At the stage where they decide to go back to square one, morale is quite low. They have spent nearly an hour on it and have got nowhere, and are clearly quite frustrated. They needed more specific, detailed help at the beginning, and then be able to get on with it. It seems that different groups need different levels of intervention, that there is no one default model of teaching this, that we need to take each group on its own merits and seek to tailor our instruction accordingly. How we do this depends initially on how large the class is, and how much prior knowledge and confidence they bring into the process.

As soon as they get started and see the fruits of their effort, motivation goes up. Perhaps we need to show the whole class an example (laptop linked to an OHP or interactive whiteboard) and get them to copy this, so that they can see an immediate result and feel the motivation that comes from this. Or maybe it's better if they find it out for themselves, as much by serendipity as anything else, and therefore feel more ownership of this learning. The former would be quicker, but the latter might be more learning-centred.

It is noticeable that Holly looks towards me far more for ideas than Harriet or Alan did. Because I intervened from early on, they see me as being able to offer them the correct way forward. However, because my understanding of the software is unsophisticated, I'm not sure how useful my intervention was.

I ask them what they feel works best in terms of teacher intervention. Holly says that giving examples at the start would help. I suggest that learning through making mistakes might prove better in the long run. She says that this does take a while, though, and that it's better to learn the skill then practice it on their own. Frank says that a 'push in the right direction' is a good idea, and that different find it better to learn in

different ways. Holly says that suggestions made if they are going in the wrong direction would help, to eliminate spending large amounts of time doing the wrong thing. This is teacher as troubleshooter rather than facilitator, a role which I am less used to but need to feel more comfortable with and knowledgeable in.

A conclusion I would draw from this is that my direct, physical intervention might do more harm than good, that by moving in and taking charge of the mouse I am disrupting the flow of the work. Harriet and Alan, with no intervention at all, moved on far more quickly, feeling that they were very much in charge of what they were doing, whereas Holly and Frank never quite took control of the process, and as a result did not get on nearly as quickly.

Having asked both groups what would work best in terms of teacher intervention, it seems that, rather than the default model of teacher talk and student listening, that allowing them to find their way into problem areas and then offering them alternatives if they want them, rather than assuming they can't find their way out of difficulties, is more productive. Harriet suggested that helpsheets would be useful as a simple way in, but beyond that it is up to them to learn about how to use the software. What very often happens is that, because they are using the technologies more than the teachers, they become more proficient, therefore are better off teaching one another than the teacher stepping in and frankly getting it wrong. By giving them the option of a set of laminated helpsheets and mini-tutorials, they decide when they are ready to move on, not the teacher.

With this in mind I am currently developing a set of sheets, one colour for each specific aspect of the software, such as setting up, working in the timeline, working with audio, and adding transitions and effects. A few of these are included. If each PC, or each pair of PCs, had these cards in a plastic holder on the wall, students would be able to refer to them when necessary, which might allow them more autonomy over the process.

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