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Transcript

The dark past in academia is probably a good place to start because, like Barbara [Ganley], I spend a lot of time working with university students making digital media. My previous life was the Head of Multimedia at La Trobe University where I taught in the School of Visual Arts and Design for a little under ten years and I taught my students many of the same things that Barbara was talking about with her students. But when I came to ACMI and left the chilly confines of the ivory towers of Australian academia and came to the public service, what I found was I no longer had continuity - a lot of you here are educators and teachers who work at secondary schools, TAFE colleges and universities - the one thing I found straight away when I came to ACMI was, none of my staff had the luxury of having the continuity of teaching the students that they saw. The students walk in the door here and we have to capture their attention, we have to engage them, we have to focus their minds and their thinking within between four to five hours, probably less if you take in toilet breaks, lunch, afternoon tea and wandering around the building.

So we have less than a day to take them from where they are to where we want them to go. I work with an amazing group of people and what you're going to see today is not my work, I'll claim that it's mine but it's not, it's the work of my staff here at ACMI who do the face-to-face work with our students. What happens at ACMI is that students come to this building, possibly unaware of what digital media really is, unaware certainly of what ACMI actually is, unaware of what they'll get out of the day when they arrive here. When they leave it is in every single case transformative, they've been changed by what they do in these spaces. That has a lot to do with using digital media, screen based media. It has a lot to do with the staff who teach them in these spaces as well. It has a lot to do with the way students can express themselves through this

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media. Because at ACMI, one of things we provide them with is, to a degree, a kind of democratic media creation environment. They can come into these spaces, into this building, have access to our equipment and they can make something (within reason) at their own pace and their own speed. They can communicate with a language that they already have some level of skill in because they've been brought up with television, with video, with computers, with information theory and the screen literacy that surrounds that. So we have already a language that we can work with which is pretty empowering. I'm going to show you a few examples of what we do here and again I'd ask you to ring up ACMI and come in for a visit if you're here in Australia and talk to me over the next two days.

I'm going to show you two different examples, and I might get the DV tape to run in the background please, because this is a great example of my staff at work in one of our spaces called the Screen Pit. There's no audio here because this is a documentation of the process, but this was a group of refugee students who came into ACMI through the Noble Park English Language School. These students came into this environment and in the course of a day were able to generate and make content in this space. They were able to perform in front of cameras, see themselves on screen, they were able to learn about how you construct story in a physical environment, in a screen-based environment, in a performing environment. And at the end of the day they take away the content, it goes back to the school, and the school can look at that content and can play that content back with their students with the support of educational materials we provide to inform the learning back in the school environment. Because we have them for a day - that's a small period of time - what we want to encourage is digital storytelling, the breadth of what digital storytelling can mean in the ACMI context: to encourage them to go back into the school to continue the learning after they've been to ACMI, to keep telling those stories in different kinds of ways.

This group of students visited ACMI over four or five sessions on different days and spoke little to no English. In some cases they walked into ACMI and the students actually stopped as they entered this cinema space because this was the first time they'd been in a cinema. This was the first time many of these students had experienced this kind of technology. The amazing thing is - when you see them in this clip and see the staff working with them in this clip - the way that over the course of the day they unpack, they relax, they start to perform and engage with the medium. Language ceases to be much of an issue. Lack of history with the medium ceases to be much of an issue. The digital medium provides them with the way to communicate their ideas and their concepts through performance, through the physicality of what you see on a screen and seeing yourself played back. One of the things you find with students in this environment as well is that they start off incredibly shy, then they see themselves on the screen and it's like a magic mirror, they watch themselves perform, they see themselves perform. Our Screen Pit environment has screens all around them, so they watch the screens sometimes more than they watch the people. The screen acts as this lovely dialectic that students work with, it's an amazing body of work.

To give you an idea of what this space looks like in reality, let's have a quick play through this PowerPoint presentation. I'll skip through this little bit of text because I've already spoken about it. That's the outside of the building, which you've all seen. But the digital studio space that some of these students work in looks like that, it's a space that actually engages the student with the screen, they come in, they generate their

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content, they're surrounded by imagery. We can see all their screens in that space there, we can control their screens, we can send content to their screens, we can present their content onto large screens in that environment, so they become saturated with the moving image, immersed in the moving image. In this space, it looks fantastic, it looks wonderful but the technology is pretty much low end equipment - they're low end e-Macs - so whether you're using e-Macs or PCs, this is equipment that schools can actually purchase relatively easily (even if it's only one or two work stations) and put into their classrooms. These days this kind of equipment would probably cost you less than \$1,000 [Australian] to install in a classroom, and can be integrated quite quickly into the classroom.

The Screen Pit is a different environment; this space is not what you find in your typical school classroom. It's a completely digital environment, it's a broadcast environment, it's a web-cast environment. When students come into this space, they engage with the staff in both literal and televisual worlds. In the Screen Pit we have a chroma key environment where the students actually perform in front of a green screen, but see themselves dynamically dropped into 3D virtual sets. Here they play the part of newsreaders, news broadcasters, put together television shows, TV dramas - engaging and performing with the screens. I cannot do justice to these programs by talking about them - you actually have to see them in action to really understand how they work. The students get to engage in really amazing kinds of ways. Those programs we're looking at are run predominantly by Annemaree O'Brien, Christine Evely, who are sitting in the third row, hands up guys, ask them lots of questions, they'll answer them all for you. These programs are available to kids from Grade 1 through to Year 9, which is a really a nice broad spectrum of students who would engage within this environment. The programs involve multiple spaces as well: when students come to this environment they're working with computers in this production part of the classroom, they're working in front of the camera in the second part of the classroom and the students get to mix and match all the way through, it's really engaging.

The second part of our program that I'm going to talk about quickly, also relates to what Barbara talked about before as well. I was sitting here thinking, amazing, here in Melbourne, Australia and over in Vermont, there are similar kinds of programs taking place using digital storytelling technology. The work that Barbara was showing where her students use poetry and imagery relate very much to a program here that we call *Digital Diaries* - a single day experience for secondary school students. They come into the classroom environment and they re-tell an intimate moment of their life, an important moment of their life, like a diary entry. *Diaries* was based around the work of the American film maker Sadie Benning, and her lovely work, *If Every Girl Had a Diary* shot on a Fisher Price pixel vision camera. Do any of us know what those are? The Fisher Price pixel vision camera was a toy, it had a plastic lens, it recorded video onto audio cassette, so it's inherently low resolution, it's monochrome, and these works reflect that intimate kind of nature, that abstract kind of Benning's work. In this environment these students come to ACMI and like Barbara's students, they record their voice, they record their story, they record their narrative.

So, over the course of a day, they produce a minute to a minute and a half story. They've got to write, craft and produce an audio story, and then bring that story into one of the e-Macs, and then ornament that story with footage that we have in our stock library. Footage that doesn't necessarily provide an explicit visual link

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to what they're story is about because; although we have a large stock library it's not exhaustive. So if someone tells a story about falling down a ski slope and tumbling through the snow, unfortunately that's not in our stock library, so what they've got to do is use imagination, metaphor and use imagery from the stock library that evokes the feeling of what they've talking about. The story becomes a literal telling of their voice linked to this visual, evocative montage of 'found' footage that sits within our collection. So they take the concrete, literal story, match it to abstract imagery and produce digital diaries.

The great thing about this program is that at the end of their one-day session they walk away with their product, a DVD or CD of their performance, of their work. Like Barbara's students, what's the thing they hate most when they first get here? They hate the sound of their own voice, which is quite surprising when you think most school kids love the sound of their own voice. In the classroom you can't shut them up, I think the best way to keep the kids quiet in the classroom is give them a microphone and tell them that you're recording them, they won't say a word. Fantastic! We all hate the sound of our voice. However, once you sit there for a while and you listen to your voice, you start to get past that superficial hatred of your voice when you first hear it. You start to get engaged visually with the work and in an audio sense with the work and you start to craft that piece of work to a finished completion point and it's incredibly powerful.

This program was built initially as an outreach program working with kids who were outside mainstream education, in detention centres, kids who might have been taken out of school because they were too hard to handle or too hot to handle in a typical classroom. But it's become a mainstay of our program here internally as well.

I'm now going to show you a clip from a program we undertook in conjunction with IBM and the Department of Education and Training here in Victoria. The program brought kids from specialist schools from across the state to ACMI for a two day Diaries workshop. The program gave those students access to ACMI staff and ACMI expertise. In many cases the students had a variety of specialist needs, and the staff at IBM - also with a range of disabilities - worked as mentors for those students over the two days as well.

Let me just show you a quick, funky little clip that will jazz you up a little bit and then I might show you some samples of their work.

[clip transcript]

"On the way to Australia I thought the aeroplane toilet was going to eat me. When I got to Australia I couldn't speak English and I felt left out at school and felt like I was a log to them because I couldn't understand what they were saying and I couldn't make them understand what I was thinking."

[end clip transcript]

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Sorry, in the interest of time I'm going to stop it there. It was an amazing experience for those kids who came with their carers from their schools. They came in groups and they produced their work over two days. Because I'm running out of time I'm going to show you an example of only one piece of work,. The amazing thing was for these kids, was that we'd made the work with them at ACMI, they came in, had a great time, had a fantastic day, then they came back for the screening event at the end of it. The kids that came back were absolutely over the moon, they were talking to representatives from the Department of Education and Training, from ACMI from IBM. They were engaging with people at every level, proud of what they'd achieved and what they'd done. *Diaries* are really evocative, powerful pieces of work. The most common comment we get from a *Diaries* feedback form is, "I didn't think I was going to be able to do it, this has empowered me, I feel powerful after working with this medium." And that's a very rare thing to hear from kids in a classroom; that they've done something in the classroom that makes them feel powerful!

So how important is that as an educational tool for educators? If you're empowering your students to think, to learn, to move forward, you give them the knowledge that's going to actually take their careers further into the future - that's empowering. One of the Department of Education and Training representatives made a comment at a recent presentation, that kids will have jobs ten years from now we don't have names for yet. What we've got to do is give them the skill set to let them get there. We don't know where they're going; but if we give them the skills to get them there, to have flexibility of thinking, to have deep thinking of how they get there using digital media - whether it be blogging, video, audio - then, by God, they've got some skills.

I'm going to finish with this one last piece of work, it goes for one minute, and then I'll hand it back over to Gael.

[clip transcript]

"My scariest moment was when I was nine; my mum, me and my little brother and sister lived all together, then my mum had another baby boy and his dad come to live with us. When my new baby brother was a couple of months old his dad started to get violent, he would say stuff like he was going to kill my mum and I used to get so scared I would hide in my bedroom that I shared with my sister. I would hide for a long time until he stopped yelling, but he would start again. Then he stopped being violent all of a sudden. Then when my baby brother was three he started being violent again, mum decided to move us out, he tried to find us but he couldn't. It's good he can't find us, I don't have the scary feeling anymore."

[end clip transcript]

Okay, that's a thirteen/fourteen year old girl in a classroom with people she'd never met before in her life. If you empower someone to feel comfortable telling that story and to get that story out, that's a really

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important process. One of the things about *Diaries* in many respects as well, is they're conceived as an anonymous story, so in this case students put their name to them, but *Diaries* allows the students to make those works and not put their name to them. They can say things that they probably don't feel they could say normally and have an output for that kind of work. It's an incredibly powerful process.

Media has transformed my life as an artist, as an interactive media maker, and kids today absolutely blow me away because they can take this medium so far incredibly quickly. So, I'm now going to stop talking, but thank you very much and any questions you've got, please feel free to ask.