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DV101: To Film School Or Not?

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Students of Film: (from left) Steven Spielberg, Steven Soderbergh and Quentin Tarantino.

By Jay Holben

This is one of the most controversial topics for aspiring filmmakers, with fervent supporters on both sides of the debate. The question I get asked most is, Should I go to film school? In truth, the answer is a personal decision that no one can make for you. A harsh reality of the film business is that there is no certain path to success. Each and every person in the business has to follow his own career trail. Some are lucky enough to stumble into the business (Quentin Tarantino) or start in entry-level positions (Steven Soderbergh); some are graduates of a prestigious film school (Robert Zemeckis), some attended less prominent schools (Robert Rodriguez), and some applied to film school but never got in (Steven Spielberg).

Two issues to keep in mind:

- a) Film school is extraordinarily expensive.
- b) Many film schools don't teach you what you really need to know.

All higher education is expensive, without a doubt, but most trades, industries and professions reward that expense with the possibility of better salaries and greater career potential. The motion picture industry, unfortunately, is incapable of caring less whether you have a degree or not.

Although an institution may vaguely reassure its student body that it can assist with job placement in the industry, believe them not, fellow "filmies." No college can guarantee any form of placement in a creative field; it simply doesn't work that way. At best, your alma mater can set you up with a production assistant gig or internship in a selected discipline paying barely minimum wage for the length of a single project (from a single week to three months, on average). The reality is, no matter where you get your degree, be prepared for 5 to 10 years of scrambling, scratching and scrounging for work (at the very least) before you can establish yourself. In those 5 to 10 years of scrounging, what do you have to show for your grand education? A

humongous debt! A King Kong of fiscal responsibility saddled firmly on your shoulders, the likes of which forces most film school graduates to take full-time jobs outside the film business just to pay their bills. If you're paying more for your education than you can comfortably afford to pay for a car, then you're paying too much, in my opinion.

On the second note, many "film schools" don't teach you what you need to know. As institutions of higher learning, most colleges often "shoehorn" a film education into the same pre-made academic mold that they use for law, mathematics, *chemistry* or business degrees. They balance out categories of classes and credits exactly the same as they would for any other major, but filmmaking isn't an academic industry; it's a creative business and it works very differently. The education necessary cannot simply be shoehorned into an 18-credit semester.

So what do you do? Just move to Hollywood and suddenly you're a big director?

No.

The bottom line is that you need an education in the art and science of filmmaking, no matter what your chosen discipline; however, you don't necessarily have to learn those ins and outs from a formal institution. If you're a self-starter, you can learn on your own. If you're dedicated, motivated and focused, then there are resources galore to give you the solid education in film that you desire.

With your mind firmly set on your future profession, start with *books*. One of the best publishing houses out there is *Focal Press*. There are myriad *books* on every aspect of the film industry, and I suggest starting with three basic *books* in your selected field. Get three that cover the same territory (read through the tables of contents and compare before you buy). Choose one of the three as your first and read it cover to cover. Take notes. Seriously. Keep a journal every day as you read through the *book* and jot down the ideas expressed in each chapter. Work along with your *book* by testing out the concepts discussed with your own practical examples, if at least on paper. For instance, if you're reading a *book* about screenwriting and the chapter discusses character histories, then write a history for a character in a script you're planning to write.

If you come to a part of the *book* that just doesn't make sense, open the second *book*, find the section that discusses the same topic and read that. If it still doesn't make sense, go to the third *book* and do the same. Nine times out of ten, with three separate *authors* discussing the same topic, the subject will become clear to you. If it still isn't clear, you can turn to the Internet. Wikipedia is an extraordinary resource (although not always accurate on obscure subjects; as with anything online, you need to multi-source). There is also the Movie Making Manual. Nearly every discipline in the industry has a forum and online society dedicated to it — and answers can be found to nearly all of your questions. The more educated and specific you are with your questions, the better responses you'll get from forums. Asking "What is an f-stop" in a cinematography forum is likely to invoke snarky responses like "Google it!" but "How might shooting a scene at f5.6 achieve deeper blacks?" should elicit much more detailed and thoughtful answers. When you have a clear understanding of the previously confusing or vague topic, return to the first *book* and pick up where you left off. Be sure to journal your findings.

When you finish the first *book*, read the second *book* cover to cover and repeat the procedure by referencing the third (and re-referencing the first *book*) if you get confused. By the time you get to the third *book*, it's your choice to read cover to cover (never a bad idea) or skim through the chapters to glean new information or insight. It's also never a bad idea to re-read the first *book* when you're done with the third. You'll be surprised how much more you'll pick up on a second read with a new perspective.

In addition, such Web sites as Lynda.com or classondemand.com offer extraordinary training videos for specific software key to many film disciplines. Look for forums, such as dv-forums.com, where other aspiring filmmakers and professionals are discussing your specific interest. There is a wealth of information out there to be had. Google is your friend, my fellow filmie.

A common suggestion is to take the money you'd otherwise invest in a film school and invest it into your own filmmaking. While I support this concept of get-out-and-do-it wholeheartedly, this application of it is often unrealistic. Most people can't afford college to begin with and will need to take out heavy loans to pay for college. Taking out large loans to fund your own films is not recommended. Getting into debt, however you do it, is not a good way to get an education.

However, I do highly recommend making your own films — as many as you can: shorts, music videos, commercials and features (if you can) to gain experience before you try to make it in Hollywood.

The best investment you can make in your career, and the best place to invest your money (besides building your library), is to get the tools of your given trade and to study/experience that trade before you try to make a professional go of it. If you're planning on becoming a screenwriter, you need script formatting software and you need to READ scripts. If you haven't read at least 200 screenplays, you haven't even started your homework yet. Scripts are available online: script-o-rama.com or simplyscripts.com are just two sites with a wealth of past screenplays available. Additionally, you should write at least 10 feature scripts before you attempt to get one made or sold. The experience you gain from this process will be invaluable.

If you DO decide to go to a film school, then it's best to pick a school in a major metropolitan city with a strong film production community: Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Austin, etc. I recommend finding a smaller college within those areas with active film programs. Study the faculty resumes; have they been or are they still active professionals? What kind of equipment does the school have? Can they provide you with access to tools and resources that you cannot otherwise provide for yourself?

Once you're in school, it's your job to educate yourself. Utilize the school's resources as often as you possibly can. Read on your own; ask the teachers/professors educated questions. You need to take an active role in your education whether you're in a formal setting or not. Participate in as many productions as humanly possible — both in and out of school. Nothing can beat practical filmmaking experience. The three best things that you can get out of any film school are: connections with fellow students who may become your best allies in the "real world"; access to professional equipment and resources you cannot otherwise afford; and networking with working professionals (affiliated with or alumni of the college).

Contrary to some popular critical opinions, you simply cannot make it in Hollywood without a solid idea of what you're doing, but just like the multitude of paths to filmmaking success, there is no one way to achieve that education.

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Read dozens of technical *books*? Hundreds of screenplays? Figure everything out on your own and write ten screenplays? Does the *author* actually know any college-age human beings? College isn't just access to gear (though it is that), it's also intense collaboration and guided study. It's history, culture, art, language, music,

drama. It's mentoring. It's a vehicle for opening the mind, and freeing the creative juices, and instilling personal discipline -- well beyond merely acquiring technical chops. Thankfully, the industry doesn't care about the diploma. Which leaves the student free to concentrate on the knowledge. There will always be genius autodidacts that can figure things out on their own. For everyone else, there's school.

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This article, while seemingly well intended is all-but useless. Why didn't the *author* provide some actual insight into the film school process? A discussion of the merits of various programs would have been of much more use. I mean buy three *books* and read them? That's it, that's all you got? People who can tie their own shoes generally understand that *books* are a relevant and useful supplement to one's own educational pursuits. I read this with an open mind and felt I had been had at the end....give me back my 10 minutes please.

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