

## **Expanding practice: Script development with new Deaf screenwriting talent**

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### **Abstract**

In Deaf<sup>i</sup> film and television, modest production budgets and limited training opportunities present considerable challenges for emerging screenwriting talent. This article argues that orthodox approaches to developing screenplays must be expanded when working in this context. The analysis focusses on an individual case study: the development of a half-hour television drama between a professional hearing script editor and a novice Deaf screenwriter. The article discusses the creative and cultural complexity of the editor-writer relationship, drawing on Schon's 'reflective practitioner' concept, Ladd's analysis of Deaf culture, Gramsci's elaboration of the subaltern and the theories of Bourdieu, Foucault and Freire. More specifically, Macdonald's Screen Idea Work Group is employed to explore the dialogical process of shared creation, which expands out to include production team, actors and interpreters via a uniquely adapted 'table read' situated at the heart of the development process. Reflecting on the value of this powerful encounter, the aim of the study is to address a gap in knowledge about this practice phenomenon, and to contribute to Deaf filmmaking practice by proposing an original methodology. Overall it is contended that greater investment is required to develop assured screenwriting voices to serve Deaf film and television audiences.

### **Keywords**

Deaf  
screenwriting  
new talent  
script editing  
table reading  
experiment

### **Introduction**

My 20-year professional practice as a script editor and producer has focussed on developing new and emerging talent for broadcasters and screen agencies. Work on several projects with Deaf filmmakers led to my engagement as script editor on *Hope*, an original half-hour drama commissioned by the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT). The resulting film was broadcast on Film4, Together Channel and the BSL Zone in 2019, also winning the Deaf Shorts Award at the Encounters International Film Festival (*Hope* (BSLBT, 2019); Encounters 2019).

The project was notable for three reasons. First, it was a ground-breaking collaboration between Deaf director, David Ellington's VS1, a cottage-industry production company and hearing producer, Rachel Drummond-Hay's Drummer Television, a multi-award-winning mainstream independent. Second, it was BSLBT's first commission to deal with cancer, a subject still widely considered taboo. Third, it was also the first time BSLBT had commissioned a completely new Deaf writer, Lynn Stewart-Taylor.

The project posed significant challenges: a half-hour script requires significant screenwriting craft and makes substantial demands on a novice writer. The project was also intensely personal, inspired by the writer's niece who had died of cancer aged nineteen, with considerable impact on her family and friends. Consequently, there was an enormous emotional weight on the piece to act as a valedictory as well as reflect real events. In addition, both the writer and BSLBT wished to portray cancer treatment for Deaf audiences, as this community is often disenfranchised when it comes to understanding health issues and medical care. Thus, there was a risk of this education agenda competing with the dramatic storytelling. Finally,

there was an issue of language and the complexity of the translations required. My basic BSL (British Sign Language) required using an interpreter as an intermediary. The writer worked with other interpreters to write the script, as English is not her first language and BSL, does not have a written form. Then, once the script was finished, a whole set of translations was required in reverse, so that Deaf actors could perform in BSL. How, then, to develop this script?

Concurrent with the commission, I was offered research time by my Faculty. When I entered the academy from industry a decade ago, Schon's (1983: 68) '*reflecting-in-action*' had quickly become a touchstone, helping me to articulate my tacit understanding of how practice works. Here was an opportunity to use Schon's method of thinking, feeling and reflecting on a problem; to do research by doing creative practice. The study would be 'not just *about* practice, but also *for* practice', with the potential to lead to original insights that could be practically applied (Batty 2016: 63).

### **Deaf Film and Television**

Purely visual and linguistically complex, sign languages use the human body to create rich, three-dimensional communication (Banks 2019). As sign languages are uniquely captured through the moving image, Deaf film and television has played a vital role in reflecting not only the language but also the 'history, stories, [and] experiences' of Deaf culture (Woolcot and Hinks 2014). It also has a considerable history.

Deaf cinema began in America in 1902 with the first known sign language film, *Deaf Mute Girl Reciting the Star Spangled Banner* (Durr 2016: 157). During the silent film era, Deaf audiences (and actors) enjoyed equal access to cinema but with the advent of 'talkies', they were effectively excluded. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and amateur filmmakers such as Krauel and Marshall, took over the task of producing documentary and entertainment films for the Deaf community (Schuchman 2004).

In Britain, the British Deaf Association's (BDA) film archive dates back to the 1930's (British Deaf Association 2015a). In 1980, the BDA set up the Deaf Broadcasting Campaign with the National Union of the Deaf (NUD) to lobby for television access for Deaf viewers (British Deaf Association 2015b). A year later, *See Hear*, BBC's monthly magazine programme for Deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences began broadcasting; it remains one of the longest running series on British television today. *The Listening Eye*, Channel 4's equivalent programme was launched in 1984 but later axed much to the Deaf community's dismay (Ladd 2007: 239 - 242).

Nowadays, UK broadcasters have a very limited duty to provide programming in BSL. Statutory targets require 80% of content to be subtitled but it is only 5% for signing (Ofcom 2017: 12). BSLBT was set up as a charity in 2008 'as an alternative way for independent broadcasters to meet their regulatory duty to provide programming in British Sign Language' (British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust 2018). It aims to be a global leader in BSL creative content production, reflecting Deaf culture for a wide viewership and to develop Deaf programme-making talent and skills (British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust 2015). However, compared to other UK minority language broadcasters, it has a modest annual programme budget of around £1.5million (British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust 2019).

BLSBT's lack of capacity to support drama production is particularly acute: over its ten years' history, it has commissioned around 250 programmes of which fewer than 10% are dramas (British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust 2020a). In addition, broadcast slots for BSLBT programming are limited. For example, the Film4 slot, which attracts the biggest audience, is at a time when young children might be watching. This presents significant compliance issues, inhibiting the range of content that can be commissioned. There are thus limited opportunities for Deaf filmmakers to work professionally in their own language and, when they do, they must work within significant constraints.

Although there is lively discussion of Deaf filmmaking practice through Deaf film festivals and conferences, there is a notable lack of written research on the subject, as the dearth of funding in the Deaf Studies field inhibits translation of recorded materials (Ladd 2003: 232). For example, the peer-reviewed Deaf Studies Digital Journal (DSDJ), is an important, scholarly collection of ‘cultural, creative and critical ... work in and about sign languages’ but it is currently unavailable, though a National Endowment for the Humanities grant will secure its bilingual dissemination in the future (Boudreault, 2017: 1).

An important exception is BLSBT’s repository of around fifty *Behind the Scenes* films, which document the making of their short film, factual and drama output (British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust 2020b) especially as, being both signed and subtitled, they are bilingually accessible. Focussed on lived experience than analysis, nonetheless these films vividly capture the creative intentions, processes, methods and achievements of British Deaf filmmaking talent in front of and behind the camera. The culminative effect is to reveal how little Deaf filmmaking differs in its methodology from the mainstream, as Deaf director, Bim Ajardi recounts, after receiving a congratulatory email from hearing members of his crew: ‘They never knew that there was a predominantly deaf cast and crew that could work to a professional level. They ... were really impressed’ (4: *Behind the scenes* (BSL Zone, 2020)).

Despite this persuasive individual accolade, and broader evidence that Deaf people have strengths in relevant creative skills, such as divergent and visual thinking (Stanzione, Perez and Lederberg 2013: 228), there is still a sense that Deaf filmmaking falls short. Woolcot and Hinks (2014) lament the basic stories, far-fetched plots, ‘empty characters’ and ‘false suspense’ of some American Deaf films, calling for films that deal with ‘the nuances [and] complexities of our community’ and ‘leave a footprint on [the] mind’. However, it is difficult for Deaf filmmakers to develop a maturity of storytelling when a critical mass of experience is so hard to gain. Such barriers are compounded in the mainstream.

### **Deaf Creative Talent Working in Mainstream Film and Television**

Currently there are still only a handful Deaf filmmakers working in the UK mainstream industry. For example, in television, Camilla Arnold is a broadcast documentary maker, Cathy Heffernan is an investigative journalist and development producer, and John Maidens is a freelance BBC drama director. In film, Ted Evans, dubbed one of the UK’s ‘most exciting, innovative’ creatives will shoot his debut feature in 2020 (Creative England 2018). Funded by the British Film Institute (BFI) and commissioned via the ifeatures initiative (2014), *Retreat* will be the ‘first British feature film to be made entirely in sign-language’ (Screen Daily 2017).

Why are we not seeing more Deaf talent break-through? The key obstacle is language. The mainstream industry requires a high level of written English for production documents, when BSL users are often not confident in this (Marchant 2019). In addition, BSL users may need to rely on interpreters to communicate. Interpreters can be funded through Access to Work (AtW), a government grant supporting employment, but awards are discretionary (Disability Rights 2019). Without AtW, the ‘additional expense’ of interpreters must be added to the production budget (Barton 2015: 262). In film education, students may be eligible for Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) but with shrinking budgets, in practice, university is not often a viable option for Deaf young people and, if they do progress, support is usually limited (The Guardian 2017; NUS 2019).

However, the major hurdle for Deaf film and television talent to overcome is the prevailing culture of the mainstream industry, where inequality is systemic. For example, a UK Film Council report on screenwriters in British films revealed most commissioned writers are white (98%), male (82.5%), over the age of 46 (66%), earning relatively high incomes, established within industry networks who gain work through their agent or personal relationships (Rogers 2007: 7). In other words, elite insiders.

Deaf people are captured within disabled rather than minority language statistics. The first *Diamond* report showed that disabled people are significantly under-represented in the UK broadcast industry (Creative Diversity Network 2017: 15-16). Ofcom's *Diversity and equal opportunities in television* report evidenced a slight improvement from 3% to 6% of disabled employees, but this is still a significant under-representation, as disabled people constitute 18% of the population (Ofcom 2018: 6). Other research suggests that 'workers with impairments' face 'qualitatively different sources of disadvantage' that leave them 'doubled disabled' as agents within the film and television industry (Randle and Hardy 2017: 447).

The BFI is a champion of the value of diversity; its Diversity Standards are designed to 'tackle under-representation in the film industry' and 'bring about real change', aiming to remove barriers through a strategy of skills training and determined talent development (British Film Institute 2016, 2019). The question is how these initiatives will be implemented in a way that is appropriate to Deaf filmmakers. This is essential if Deaf talent is to succeed.

### **Deaf Culture**

Any talent development process poses challenges. However, in a Deaf context, it throws up cultural issues of considerable complexity.

Though Deaf communities self-identify as a linguistic minority, they are often regarded a disabled group (Lane 2005: 291-294). The medical, deficit model of deafness reaches back to ancient times. Plato and Aristotle regarded those who could not speak as sub-human, incapable of ideas and unteachable (Avon 2006: 186). However, over the last fifty years, there has been increasing recognition that Deaf people have their own culture (Down, Adam and Tupi 2017: 2). Central to this is the 'role of sign language in the everyday lives of the community' as well as particular ways of being, common cultural practices and shared histories (Padden and Humphries 2005: 1-3). Nevertheless, the weight of the Deaf experience is one of marginalisation and discrimination; of being largely excluded from mainstream culture at the same time as having their own culture systematically oppressed. Deaf people have had to survive constant threats to eliminate their language, not least through Oralism, an education movement that started in the late nineteenth century and still operates today (Ibid: 7).

Postcolonial Studies analyses the effects of hegemony on culture and society and how language is central to colonisation (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998). In common with other minority ethnic groups, the language of the 'Deaf-World' has been engulfed by larger societies (Lane 2005: 291-294). Paddy Ladd, Britain's first and only Deaf professor regards the assault on sign languages as de facto imperialism; Deaf culture has 'undergone *colonisation*' (Ladd 2003: 78-81). Foucault's assertion that cultures are shaped by the '*political and strategic nature of...ensembles of knowledge*' is also pertinent (McHoul and Grace 1993: 60). When knowledge is regarded as 'naïve' and 'low down on the hierarchy', it is subjugated (Foucault 1980: 81-82). Ladd (2003: 76-77) uses Foucault's discourse theory to underpin his analysis that, as a minority group, Deaf people are particularly threatened by 'the discursive system's control of both power and knowledge' because it leads them to devalue their own discourses. Freire (1996: 45) notes that 'self-deprecation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalisation of the opinion that oppressors hold of them.' Ladd (2003: 417) cites Fanon's (1968) thesis that colonialism creates the conditions for a constant state of identity crisis that makes it difficult to counter the Grand Narratives of imperialism.

To oppose this Discourse, Ladd adopts Gramsci's (1999: 2002-8) concept of the subaltern as a strategy. If subalterns, society's low status, marginalised members, can tell their own stories, they will create more authentic histories that can redress the record of human experience (Ladd 2003: 86). With this in mind, it seems essential to me that a new Deaf screenwriter, a bona fide subaltern, must 'have the right to say his or her own word' (Freire 1996: 15); to be a 'master of their own description' (Padden and Humphries 2005: 8).

## Script Development

On the face of it, the role of the script editor is straightforward: to support the writer to successfully tell their story. Script development enables the exploration of the potential of a 'screen idea' to become a 'screenwork' whether working with a solo writer or a writing team (Macdonald 2013). The aim is to progressively improve the idea so that it becomes 'dramatically satisfying' (Cleary 2013). A good script editor, it is said, is one who '*never imposes their ideas onto a project, but helps the writer cultivate their own ideas*' (Griffiths 2015: 17). However, the reality is more complex.

Batty et al. (2018) propose script development as a 'wicked problem' because, although there are no definitive solutions, there are many stakeholders. There is also an imbalance of power. Rather than being led by the inclinations of the individual writer, the activity is driven by an 'industrial methodology' where the creative idea must make sense in an 'economic and cultural context', for any investment requires a return (Cleary 2013). The pressure to deliver to an industrial specification exerts considerable pressure on the creative process, creating a gravitational pull towards developing the script according to accepted codes and conventions.

Bourdieu's conceptual framework of *agents*, *cultural capital*, *habitus* and *fields* explores the 'contested terrain' of cultural life (Bourdieu 1977, 1993). Macdonald (2004: 10) uses Bourdieu's theories to propose that script development also operates in a 'social framework', where development happens according to 'the habitus of those working in the field'. The 'embedded practices' are in fact based on the 'social and educational histories' of the script developers (Lyle 2015: 66-74). Their perception, judgement and taste are 'cultural preferences', rather than immanent knowledge or immutable fact (Murdock 2010: 64). Script editors, as with all of those involved in the industrial system of script development, are '*conditioned agents*' who have internalised 'the rules of the domain and the opinions of the field' (Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 332).

Hence, for the script editor, there is an inherent tension between the desire to nurture an emerging talent and the need to develop conventional craft skills; between privileging the individual writer's 'voice' and fulfilling the imperatives of an industrial system. But in the case of new Deaf screenwriters, must a dominant industry methodology be imposed? Given the vital importance of ensuring Deaf writers' agency, is it possible to find a more distinctively Deaf creative process and a Deaf way to tell a Deaf story?

## Working on *Hope*

Ladd (2003: 220-201) calls for individuals to become conscious of the dispositions generated by her or his social background. Approaching the work on *Hope*, I was aware of the potential mismatch of status between the so-called novice screenwriter and apparently expert script editor. I wanted to keep in mind my *habitus* ('feel for the game') and *cultural capital* (power and prestige) by dint of my industry experience and English-as-first-language, so that they did not trump the writer's lived experience and rob her of her voice. In this way I hoped we could undertake the script development as equal Subjects, 'co-intentional' in our collaboration (Freire 1996: 51). I started learning BSL to gain a better appreciation of Deaf culture. I hoped this would give me a deeper understanding of the story from the writer's Deaf perspective and assist our mutual collaboration, where script development and research project intertwined.

As participant observer I occupied a dual role: as script editor, I would be immersed in the creative development process; as embedded researcher, I would be critically analysing it at some distance (Lewis and Russell 2011: 398-401). This ethnographic work needed an ethical foundation if it was not to be Janus-faced. I borrowed two visual concepts from the work of psychotherapist Lynne Gabriel, formulated as a way of managing dual relationships. The 'process sentinel' keeps an 'eagle eye' on complex ethical issues and is the 'guardian of the

relationship and relational processes' (Gabriel 2008). The 'boundary rider' works thoughtfully on the 'limit line' to create a safe space for collaboration and creative growth (Gabriel and Davies 2000). I imagined myself as a cowboy on horseback, riding over a contested terrain, checking and mending fences. In this way, I hoped to balance the complexity of my ethnographic role, as well as serve the competing creative-industrial demands.

Filmmaker Margot Nash (2014: 98-99) argues for a 'mysterious and...messy process' to give ideas 'time to ferment' and a 'discovery-driven uncertain process in search of originality, story and meaning'. Beginning the development, we adopted a visual, kinaesthetic methodology, creating a wall of movable coloured post-it notes of characters, settings, scenes, actions, emotions and motivations to explore the potential of the story. This approach helped to get us away from the rigidity of the written prose outline and treatment which is so often experienced as inimical to the new writer. The process also needed to foster 'the screenwriter's connection to expressive form and point of view' (Regan 2018: 78). The writer carefully selected BSL interpreters who understood her as a person – her way of being and her use of language – to support her to express her ideas in written English. They became part of the creative collaborative process. This more inclusive, less hierarchical way of working fitting with the principles of subaltern stories.

The development of the script then progressed following industry norms from synopsis to step outline, treatment to first draft. The next few drafts were spent whittling away unnecessary material. We jettisoned competing secondary characters and ditched dramatically inert events trading them for scenes with emotional conflict that built the central dramatic journey. As the script shaped up towards a film, in the spirit of continued experimentation and collaboration, I suggested that we do a table read. In my mind, this was a natural next move to assist the writer's development. However, the proposal was met by consternation by the writer and the director alike – how could that possibly work in a Deaf context?

### **The Table Read**

A 'table read' is a term for the process that brings together actors and production team to read-through a script, bringing it alive for the first time. It is a tried and tested tool within the film and television industry, where typically reading the production draft happens just before filming. Veteran television dramatist Andrew Davies explains: 'All the actors are there in one room and they're all reading their parts. You get a real feel for it ... It's our best chance to see how it's going to turn out' (*Andrew Davies: Rewriting the Classics* (BBC, 2018)).

A table read can also be instrumental during the development process. For example, *The Simpsons* is team-written with 'input from the cast following table readings of draft scripts' (Wells 2014: 160). The practice has been used extensively in the context of emerging talent. In the UK, The Script Factory, founded in 1996, pioneered the use of Performed Screenplay Readings both for screenplay development and talent promotion (Script Factory 2018). TAPS, The Television Arts Performance Showcase, performed a similar function for television drama scripts for nearly 20 years (Lyle 2015: 69). In the practice-based teaching of screenwriting in the academy, table reading is routinely used as part of peer-learning, where students read and feedback on each other's work as part of the drafting process.

In my experience as a script editor and educator, the table read is a transformative experience for the writer helping her or him to identify and solve problems in the script. Invariably, it is a powerful encounter between the writer and their work. The effect of hearing the whole script spoken out-loud by others is qualitatively different from the writer imagining it in his/her own head or even reading it aloud alone. In the table read, the writer is an observer/listener rather than creator/participant. This enables the script to be experienced in a physical and feeling way. What works, what does not – previously hidden - is clearly revealed,

enabling an effective next stage of script development. This appears to be an intuitive process, responding to the words coming to life off the page.

Based on this widespread practice, I imagined literature on the table read would be readily available, but this is not the case. Internet sources abound but their content is shallow; in contrast, there is very little academic literature on the subject. To construct a picture of the practice, references must be pieced together. A survey of screenwriting books, from those focussed on the art and craft of dramatic writing to those offering industry and business insights, reveals a basic script reading orthodoxy.

*Reading Screenplays* (Scher 2011) considers in depth how readers should produce script reports ('coverage') for companies as well as give feedback to writers in writing or face-to-face. Reading is proposed as part of the re-writing process that the writer undertakes at the end of a writing stage to review an element of the screenplay, especially dialogue. A 'skim' is a reading aloud of the script that leaves an 'impression' of what the film is about (Weston 1996: 165). Writers should take a break from writing before such a reading to ensure objectivity whilst readers must bring a fresh pair of eyes. The whole script should be read in one uninterrupted sitting and notes must be made on the script in preparation for feedback to the writer. American screenwriting manuals particularly encourage writers to join a group that facilitates peer-to-peer read-throughs and feedback on work in progress. Writers are encouraged to listen non-defensively to suggestions (Dancyger and Rush 1995: 253). In the UK, *Introduction to Screenwriting* offers a robust rubric for such activities in education settings (Parker 2003: 109–112). However, only a handful of the books reviewed mention table reading explicitly and then in passing. Grove's (2001: 87-88) page and a half of practical advice on how to undertake a table read is the most expansive account. There is very little qualitative analysis of the power of table read for the writer; how it operates 'affectively' to provide insight that assists the next stage of writing. Epps' (2016: 23) advice is typical: 'Don't just read it, feel your screenplay'.

Macdonald's (2013: 11) theorised approach to Screenwriting Studies proposes the broader idea of the 'screen-reader' working within the 'Screen Idea Work Group' (SWIG), whose 'discourse' facilitates the formation of 'the screen idea', and the table read could be placed into this framework. Could articulating this industry practice as a collaborative conversation offer the different perspective that would help us to find a more culturally appropriate way to use the process in a Deaf context?

## **The Experiment**

The writer and director's initial scepticism about the idea of a table read seemed to be in response to its framing as a hearing experience. How could a Deaf writer, who cannot hear, access a spoken reading? If it was interpreted, where would they look: at the character speaking or the interpreter signing? In addition, there were bound to be difficulties for the Deaf participants working from a script written in English, as this would involve reading in a second language, whilst simultaneously undertaking a translation into BSL.

There were also questions about the timing of the table read. To be useful for script development, the table read should happen within the development process before pre-production proper. However, in Deaf filmmaking, the translation of the written English script into signed BSL is central to the interpretation and effectiveness of the drama and so must be undertaken by the actors who are cast in the roles. This process usually happens during a workshop involving the actors, director, dramaturge and a BSL coach, who facilitates the translation as part of rehearsals for filming. However, a table read at this point would mean that the script was largely resolved.

For me, these questions were totally unexpected and underlined how little I understood the Deaf perspective and how powerful my hearing assumptions were; the actualised operation

of my own *habitus* and *cultural capital*, despite my best intentions. However, the interrogation of the process turned out to be a gift. Schon (1983: 18) talks about ‘problem setting’ as a way of exploring practice. The writer and director had problematised the practice in a way that I could not because of my tacit knowledge. Intuitively, I know a table read works, but bound to ‘an epistemology of practice’, I could not really articulate what the benefit might be (Ibid. 19-20).

As we explored these questions and issues, the idea of the trying out a table read took hold. We decided it would be a ‘productive and purposeful *experiment*’ (Gibson 2018: viii), offering the opportunity to make a shift in understanding through the process of ‘handling materials in practice’ (Bolt 2007: 27). As Deaf people have been so often forced to adopt hearing ways, it was vital to ensure the method was collaboratively developed. We took a dialogical approach, inspired by Freire’s (1996) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Conquergood’s approach to ethnographic practice as a ‘shared process of knowledge production’ (Hartblay 2018: 158).

We agreed to undertake a reading of draft 4 of the script – roughly half-way through the script development process. The objective was to test whether the table read could be a useful tool in a Deaf context and to answer the main question: what are the qualitatively measurable benefits to be derived from this process for a new Deaf screenwriter? We would also consider:

- What are the challenges in translating a table read into a Deaf context?
- What adaptations need to be made to the traditional process for it to work?
- In what ways is a table read an effective strategy for a Deaf writer?
- How does it work within the wider context and processes of script development?

The aim of the study would be to address a gap in knowledge about the operation and power of this practice phenomenon and, therefore, its value to the script development process. It would also contribute to Deaf filmmaking practice by creating an original methodology.

The participants would be a mix of hearing and Deaf: cast actors and stand-ins, members of the production team and BSL interpreters. A participant discussion about the script and the experience of the event would follow. This would be filmed to produce an audio-visual record for analysis. We agreed that in order for the writer to have a fresh experience of the script she needed to be an observer rather than a participant. The director would also watch rather than take part in the reading. I would occupy my dual role – as script editor and researcher.

Deciding how to read the script, so straightforward in the hearing world, was challenging. Potential solutions for Deaf participants were complicated by the fact that many of the production team had no or limited BSL. We needed to find an equitable solution to accommodate everyone’s needs. Questions of whether the screen directions would be signed in BSL and then voiced over in English by an interpreter or spoken first and then signed, as well as whether the hearing characters would speak or sign their dialogue, were difficult to resolve. Whilst the hearing participants could easily access a script in hand, for the Deaf participants this was impracticable. For this reason, we decided to project the script onto a large screen. Rather than sitting around a table, the cast sat in a semi-circle facing the screen. The screen directions were read by the producer who sat to one side of the screen whilst an interpreter standing by the other side did a live signed translation. When it came to any dialogue, this interpreter pointed to the character’s lines on the screen. When a hearing character spoke, this interpreter translated the dialogue into BSL. A second interpreter sat with cast and voiced the dialogue delivered in BSL for the benefit of the hearing participants. This



complex triangulation of components evolved slowly without certainty that it would deliver the desired experience. But, to coin a Deaf expression, we decided to ‘give it a go!’

## **Findings**

Stanley Kubrick, reflecting on his writer-director role, talks about the value of rehearsal: ‘However carefully you think about a scene, and however clearly you believe you have visualized it, it’s never the same when you finally see it played’ (Kubrick 1982). This also sums up the benefit of the table read.

For the Deaf director, the read-through brought the story and the words ‘to life’; he was able to see the character journeys ‘in real life’ and ‘how things fit together’ (Development Table Read 2018). He valued the table read as ‘a kind of practice arena’ where he could start to visualise the film for production and in the edit (Ibid.). For the hearing producer, the balance of humour and sadness communicated in the read-through in a way it had not on the page, comforting her that the script would resonate with its intended audience. However, for the writer, the process was a more mixed experience:

For me, the run-through was great but there was a bit of disconnect between people verbalising and people signing, and I did expect that. I knew I wouldn’t get that total immersion and feel completely included ... [It might have helped] if the interpreter had moved a bit closer to the actual main actors because I was ‘table-tennis-ing’ a bit, with having to look between the to and fro. Maybe characters that were [speaking] in sign language and [those] doing it in spoken English...should have been fixed [so] that everybody did it in sign language. I just wanted to see what it would be like in terms of facial expressions ... I wanted to see ... the energy and chemistry and so, next time, I think we would say just sign all the way through or speak all the way through – one or the other (Ibid.).

Fortunately, the discussion following the table read was much more fruitful for the writer.

This feedback session has been much more vital. It’s been really useful getting your input – the bits that worked, the bits that don’t work so well ... Thank you for your ideas and suggestions about the scenes ... That’s made it much clearer in my head ... seeing what works for you guys ... that’s boosted my confidence in terms of individual scenes, so that’s been great (Ibid.).

As we discussed the script, the ‘Screen Idea Work Group’ whose ‘discourse’ facilitates the formation of ‘the screen idea’ came to life (Macdonald 2013: 11). The creative collaboration, previously focussed on the writer and script editor expanded out to include production team, actors and interpreters. Together, the group thoughtfully considered key issues: were there too many stories for the length of the script, and if so, what could be cut; were the character arcs clear and the relationships credible, did the medical scenes depicting the cancer treatment enhance the drama and were they feasible? The discussion produced valuable insights, such as this exchange between the actor playing the protagonist, Hope and the actor playing her mum, about the balance of dialogue and visual storytelling appropriate to this Deaf drama:

Mum: I feel a lot of it’s in the signs, in the visual ... when I’m with you (points to Hope) ... I don’t think we need words for some of that ... you can just drop them.

Hope: Yeah, that's really interesting ... It's not really about the words when I am having dialogue with my [real] mum. It's about facial expression and the mood really.

Mum: It's the touch, isn't it and the look ... that's very powerful, I think. (Ibid).

The process also enabled team members to give voice to individual concerns, such as the producer's long-standing worry about the plot timeline in relation to the conflict between two characters, the teenaged Hope and her friend Naomi. The discussion between the actors playing those roles helped to resolve how this would be taken forward in the script.

The read-through also played an important role in cementing the new collaboration between the Deaf director and the hearing producer. Development can be disadvantaged when the director arrives late to the process 'after the themes of the story [are] developed in detail' by the script development team (Bloore 2014: 47). In contrast, good development ensures the core creative team are 'on the same page' to tell the same story', saving 'time, creative energy, conflict and ... money' later down the line (Batty 2015: 115). In this instance, the table read brought together the director and producer, galvanising them to engage with the project in a way that they hadn't been able to before. The shared experience was a milestone in their ongoing collaboration and a good basis for negotiating story decisions later on in pre-production and the edit.

However, there were challenges around the methodology. It took a considerable amount of time to negotiate the sight-lines of communication to enable all participants to access the reading, so we ran out of time to try an alternative format where the cast, rather than sitting down, would stand up to deliver their lines. The director felt the three-dimensional experience of a standing reading would have offered a different perspective and 'another angle on [the character] relations' (Development Table Read 2018). The writer added, 'I think we would have got more of a connection and felt the energy a bit more' (Ibid.). The actor playing Hope's brother agreed: 'Hearing actors can mumble through, but Deaf need to move and feel'; 'when you stand up, that's when the fires start' (Ibid.).

Nevertheless, the experience was sufficiently successful that the writer and director persisted with it in for Rehearsal Weekend working with draft 6. Here, they adopted a hybrid of the industry norm, working around a table with script-in-hand, but also using a white board to capture the key script moments as a bullet-pointed outline. With everyone reading around a small table, this seemed to create a greater sense of intimacy and connection and, overall, a more immersive and fruitful experience.

We also ended pre-production with a read-through of draft 7, the day before shooting began, as per the industry norm (Production Table Read 2019). The actors either signed or spoke according to their character. An interpreter voiced the dialogue of the Deaf characters and signed the dialogue of the hearing characters. By this time, with everyone was more familiar with the script, this method solved the mix of communication needs. The stage directions were signed by the director whilst another interpreter voiced the text for the benefit of the hearing crew. This worked much more smoothly, confirming that a BSL-led reading is a better basis for Deaf production.

## **Conclusion**

The table read experiment was a partial success. It certainly proved to be an effective script development strategy. Together, the read-through and discussion promoted a greater ability in the writer and script development team to judge the work in process and a deeper level of understanding about what to do to solve the script problems so as to enhance the drama. The

table read enabled new knowledge and transformed practice through its sensory, ‘embodied and enacted’ methodology (Austerlitz 2008: 17-19). In the traditional method hearing the script brings about an emotional, feeling response but for Deaf, a kinaesthetic approach is required to produce an analogue, immersive experience. Ideally, experimentation with a standing rather than sitting table read will be undertaken to test this further. With more development, this could offer an expanded, culturally appropriate and, therefore, more effective method of using this industry practice. Overall, the experiment affirmed the value of *reflecting-in-action* as well as the benefits of enlarging practice boundaries by prioritising process change over confirming conventional method (Schon 1983: 155).

However, there were challenges in translating a table read into a Deaf context. If BSL-led, it is possible to adopt the traditional round-the-table script-in-hand format, though the challenge of live translation from English written script to signed BSL remains. However, there is value for Deaf filmmaking talent to be able to operate within the industry norm, especially if they want to work in the mainstream. In this experience, the mix of Deaf and hearing communication needs meant the adaptations required to make the process work were rather unwieldy and resource heavy. The potential costs of securing a suitable room and assembling appropriate readers might make this form of table read difficult to implement as a regular part of Deaf script development, as budgets for Deaf projects are often modest. A more financially viable way of achieving similar benefits could be to implement Writers’ Groups, precedents for which exist in industry and the academy, where writers can support each other through reading each other’s work and offering peer feedback.

According to McNamara (2018: 104), the ‘defining gesture’ of ethnography is ‘to give voice and presence to the disarticulated or silenced subject’. I hope this study contributes to the case for greater investment in new Deaf talent. We need to enable the development of assured Deaf screenwriting voices that can craft compelling stories that will powerfully connect. How vital it is for these stories to be seen and heard – not only for the Deaf community but for us all.

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### **Biography**

A former Executive Producer and Commissioning Editor for an ITV broadcaster, Abigail was instrumental in developing new drama and documentary talent as well as supporting the emergence of independent production companies in the South West of England. Now, an Associate Head of Department at the University of the West of England, Abigail teaches screenwriting and producing as well as researching in the field of film production. Alongside, she continues her professional script editing practice, working for broadcasters, film companies and screen agencies. She is currently working with the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust on a number of their drama development projects.

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1. This article uses the term Deaf with a capital 'D' to refer to people whose first or preferred language is a sign language, who identify themselves as culturally Deaf and have a strong Deaf identity. It uses the term deaf, with a lower case 'd' to refer to the medical condition of hearing loss.