



# Engineering the Future of Media Education

AbelCine's Education Methodologies

AbelCine

# Contents

1. Executive Summary
2. Introduction: AbelCine's Experience and Qualifications in Education
3. The Shifting Landscape of Opportunity in the Field of Media and Entertainment
4. Technological Innovation and its Impact on Education Methodology
5. A Call to Change - Effective Distance Learning During and After Pandemic Times
6. Five Key Elements for Transformative Hybrid Education
7. Syllabus
8. Structure
9. Environment
10. Engagement
11. Inspiration
12. The End Game: Community, Connectivity, Career

## About AbelCine

AbelCine, established in 1989, is a technology and equipment service provider to cinematic content creators across the broadcast, cinema, and media production industries. The company's services include equipment sales and rental, training and consultation, tech services and integration. AbelCine has flagship locations in Burbank, CA and Brooklyn, NY; and a Learning Point in Chicago, IL.

AbelCine affiliations include:



## Contributors

The following individuals from AbelCine contributed to the authorship of this white paper:

Pete Abel - CEO and co-founder

Emily Walls - Educational Program Manager

Jeff Lee - Director of Education

Megan Donnelly - Director of Production Services

Geoff Smith - Camera Technology Specialist

© 2020 AbelCine



# 1. Executive Summary

Cinema is an art form like no other. Specialists of many disciplines and artisans of numerous crafts come together to create powerful stories about the human experience. Technology will always impact the evolution of the medium and play a vital role in how we create these stories as artisans and how we experience them as viewers.

Over the years, AbelCine has built a reputation for excellence in teaching the application of the tools and technologies of the filmmaking process. Our specialists are industry professionals with real-world experience, who move fluidly between the classroom and set.

But an effective media education model needs to go beyond the strength of its instructors. It must also shift in real time with emerging tech to prepare students for the requirements they'll face in the field.

Like many educational institutions, we have expanded our instructional delivery methods over the years, offering online and live stream classes in addition to in-person workshops. The recent COVID-19 outbreak, however, has brought about an unprecedented acceleration of the hybrid educational model for all of us.

Since the traditional classroom is currently off-limits, institutions have an unconventional but exciting opportunity to redefine their remote and blended education strategies, leveraging available technology to reach their students in creative ways and reimagining what the classroom can be.

AbelCine has identified the five key elements that are critical to maximum effectiveness within this new framework: syllabus, structure, environment, engagement, and inspiration.

We employ each of these elements in our professional instruction model and can assist media institutions with their own strategies toward hybrid educational migration. Through rigorous engagement with cutting edge academic approaches, AbelCine has developed a responsive, agile educational methodology that is adaptive to change and sustainable for the future.

## 2. Introduction: AbelCine's Experience and Qualifications in Education

As humans, we've tried to interpret our deep emotional connection to the cinematic image for over a hundred years. What is it about cinema that can transport us to another place and another time, that can weave a tale and suspend our disbelief?

Early filmmakers and Hollywood pointed to the shared theatrical experience, to the dancing silver halide crystals of film emulsion, or the physiological persistence of vision of the flickering projected image. Yet the medium of cinema has been able to transcend these physical elements and continue to entertain us in an ever-widening range of lengths, forms, and genres; and on any device we access for our information and entertainment.

Technology and its advancements are incontrovertibly tied to cinema and its evolution.

*The Jazz Singer* earned its place in history as the first feature-length talkie, but it could have slipped quietly into oblivion without the help of Vitaphone's sound-on-disc technology. The chaos and darkness of war depicted in *Apocalypse Now*, masterfully captured by Vittorio Storaro, was elevated to a hyper-sensory theatrical experience with the aid of the Technovision anamorphic format and 70mm Dolby Surround Sound. More recently, *The Mandalorian's* title character traveled to inhospitable wastelands thanks to the astounding artificial landscapes generated in real time on LED walls via the Unreal Engine.

As groundbreaking as such innovations have been on the film industry, the team at AbelCine believes that it's neither the tools nor technologies that define the craft; rather, it's what filmmakers do with the tools that is most important.

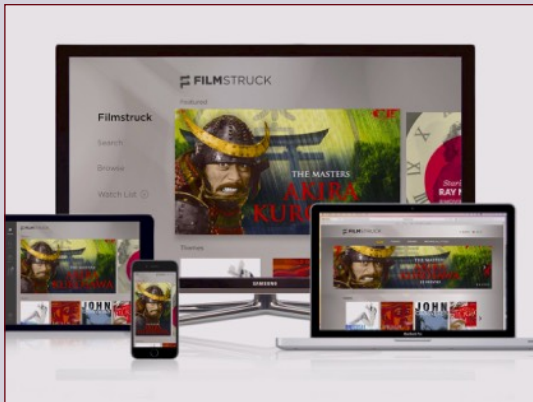
For over three decades, AbelCine has been providing the equipment and services that enable professional creators of all levels to achieve their cinematic vision. At critical periods throughout our history, we've been drivers of this change, harnessing disruptive technologies and helping to mold them into creative tools for filmmakers. The evolution of film to digital, the adoption of high-speed image capture, and high dynamic range (HDR) workflows are examples.

Often, a specific technological disruption brings about the need for a fundamental change to production process, skill sets, or roles of crew members on set or in post. This is why professional skills training and refresher education in the film/media industry are paramount to the advancement of the medium and careers in the industry. We must embrace an education that goes beyond how the tools work, focusing instead on how the tools are implemented and applied within an existing production ecosystem to achieve the creative intent of the artist.

Technological change means jobs and roles evolve, and the filmmakers and cinematographers who wish to evolve along with the industry must master the use of these tools so that they can continue to do what they do best: tell stories that evoke emotion, make us laugh and cry, and reveal something about the human experience like no other medium can.

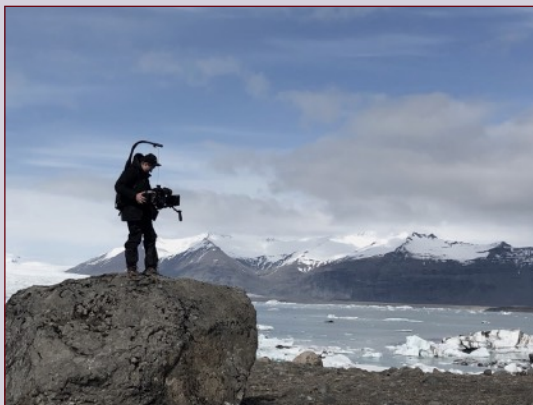
# 3. The Shifting Landscape of Opportunity in the Field of Media and Entertainment

Cinematic storytelling has transcended traditional theater and home screen viewing experiences and environments, shifting the landscape of opportunity within the field of media and entertainment. Diverse delivery methods and ease of accessibility to cinematic capture have changed the game for storytellers. No longer bound by the two-hour film or the hour-long television drama, they are free to explore story structure and character development within new avenues of creativity.



Theaters and home televisions dominated the market for visual storytelling in the 20th century, but advances in technology have introduced small, mobile screens to the playing field, and location and viewing environment have shifted to accommodate. With these new delivery vehicles, filmmakers can continue to generate material in traditional, recognizable segments, or they can exploit the small screen and mobile audience to carve out niche storytelling with bite-sized narrative content optimized for cell phones and other mobile devices.

Streaming services have further blurred the lines between traditional cinema and current offerings, allowing for wildly varying run times and formats. Content creators have taken to this new-found freedom, adopting the timelines and narrative arcs best suited for telling their stories, and bringing powerful, emotional experiences to their viewers. With the removal of pre-set time limits, commercial interruptions, and other constrictive parameters inherent to broadcast, we are seeing a burst of creativity and new formats in the streaming space.



Likewise, advanced technology has made filmmaking tools so affordable, compact, and sophisticated that cinematic capture is now available at every level of production. No longer the purview of movie studios alone, cinematic imagery has seeped into documentary filmmaking, broadcast television, live streaming, web content, and video games.

The production and post-production processes have been amalgamated and the lines between them less defined. In-camera capture, visual effects and post are no longer independent stages of production, but rather interconnected elements of an increasingly fluid filmmaking process.

# 4. Technological Innovation and its Impact on Education Methodology

Technology has enabled us to reimagine every stage of the cinema process—from story conception, through the production process, and ultimately, delivery to viewers.

It's important that film and media educators remain in step with these changes and adjust their education approach accordingly to effectively equip their students for the opportunities that lie ahead.

## **New Processes, New Roles**

As processes change over time, so do the roles, functionality, and specific skill sets of the production team.

There is now interconnectivity of camera, lens, and lighting on set, and virtual production elements like motion capture and in-camera visual effects are swiftly becoming a commonplace component of productions of all budgetary levels.

More production teams are collaborating on projects regardless of their location, employing tools for previs, virtual scouting, remote production, vfx, and post collaboration.

These new methods of communication and process, as well as the rate at which technology now changes, need to be fully appreciated by educators. As with other tech industries, there should be a direct connection between formal education and the professional industry, so that emerging tech can be understood and effectively incorporated into programs in a shorter period of time, thus empowering students to enter the field effectively.

## **New Ways of Storytelling**

Although traditional narrative remains the norm for features and episodics, there are opportunities for screenwriters to push past previous boundaries and embrace the wider range of narrative forms that have emerged.

Many of the great cinematographers of our time, including Haskell Wexler, Roger Deakins, Ed Lachman, and Ellen Kuras, have their roots in documentary film, and with today's compact cinema tools, recent documentaries such as *Free Solo* and *Honeyland* are elevating the genre to a cinematic art form.

Today, top cinematographers are also bringing their talent to musical and theatrical performance capture. A genre that was trailblazed by Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz* is now on the rise, thanks to technological capability of today's cinema tools.

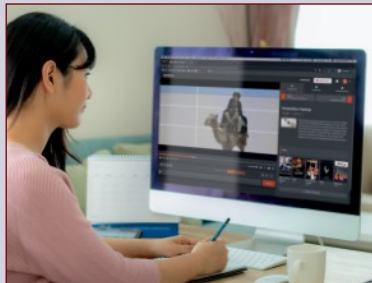
Opportunities abound for creatives within these specializations, as there is an increasing demand for high-production cinematic content from streaming studios in these non-scripted genres.

# 5. A Call to Change - Effective Distance Learning During and After Pandemic Times

The COVID-19 crisis of 2020 has been an earthquake to the traditional educational infrastructure in the US and around the globe. The effects have been far-reaching, but for those who have been responsive to the seismic shift, the pandemic has provided an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine how we approach education as a whole. We can leave behind the old models that no longer serve our interconnected world and build a new framework that makes sense for the present and future. Hybrid education, above all, is rising from a fringe feature to a necessary pillar of collegiate and continuing professional education.

When a profession requires as much hands-on experience and collaboration as media does, distance learning can seem impractical and insufficient to hybrid educators, with classes related to film production and the application of its tools presenting particular challenges.

Through our longtime experience, AbelCine has learned to minimize the limitations of remote education and leverage the technology of connectivity available. Instead of being bound to a single classroom in a single time frame, our students can connect with us across the globe digitally to enter our professional studio environment. There, they have access to the latest gear available, amassed and refreshed through our long-term partnerships with manufacturers and vendors in the high-tech cinema space, and they can benefit from our stable of top-notch educators and guest lecturers.

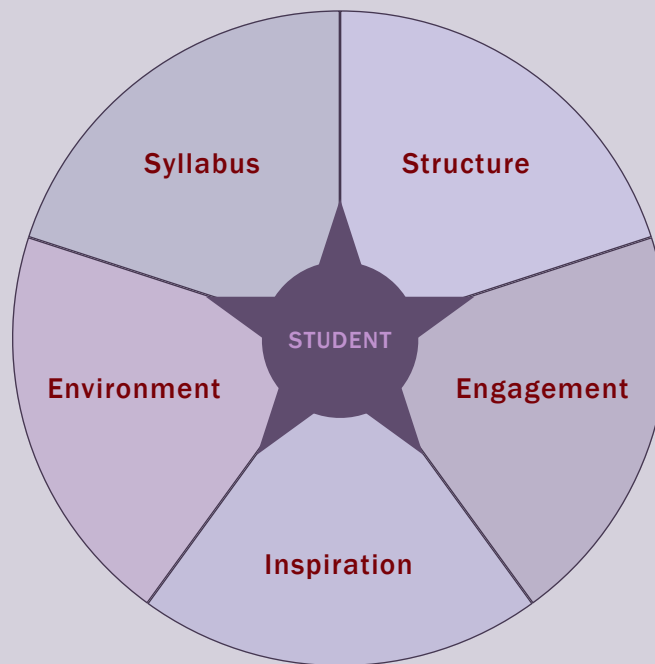


Through synchronous and asynchronous instruction, self-guided learning via online modules, and interaction with their peers in an online community, students can still get the quality education that they've always sought from film schools, but now with greater opportunity. A student in Texas, for instance, might color correct a project in real time with her professor in Australia, get simultaneous feedback from her classmates who are working alongside her from Maine and California, study further through resources available in online learning modules, and post her revised project to an online forum where her classmates can comment and give suggestions on their own time.

Likewise, educational institutions benefit from expanded enrollment and the opportunity to pull guest speakers and instructors from the industry all over the globe. By leveraging the capabilities of an online platform and studio-style learning environment, they can offer a premium learning experience to their students, not simply translating current curricula, but rather reimagining educational delivery entirely.

# 6. Five Key Elements for Transformative Hybrid Education

In order to create the most impactful remote, online, and hybrid educational experiences for film and media students, we believe there are five key elements on which to focus: syllabus, structure, environment, engagement, and inspiration.



- **Syllabus** – the creation of consistently relevant subjects and programs based on specific educational objectives
- **Structure** – the adaptation and design of existing curriculum elements into the delivery formats that are most effective for each component of the syllabus
- **Environment** – the appointment of purpose-built and optimized learning environments conducive to the top-level objectives of the program, encompassing both physical spaces and online environments
- **Engagement** – a paramount focus on generating a high level of student participation and collaboration in all aspects of the program
- **Inspiration** – the inclusion of program materials, projects, and professional creatives and speakers intended to motivate and inspire students

In the chapters to follow, we will explore each of these five elements in depth and identify the points we strive to address in our own educational practices. The degree of focus of each point will always be determined by the specific area of study and the objective of the program.



# 7. Syllabus

As an organization focused on professional education, AbelCine's objective is to equip students and faculty with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a role within the industry that meets their interest, passion, and skillsets.

One of the most challenging aspects of education within a rapidly changing industry is to create a syllabus that includes subjects and instructional topics relative to current production processes, as well as the emerging innovations of tomorrow, in order to arm students with the knowledge and skills that will be most applicable for their future.

Yet, how do you prepare students for job functions that, in many cases, haven't yet been fully defined?

## **The Critical Balance of Craft and Tech**

At AbelCine, we maintain that the most effective syllabus design achieves the appropriate instructional balance of craft and tech. We are in a creative industry, and as such, it is important to lead with intent. What good is a perfect technically executed film or a flawlessly balanced audio mix if it fails to engage or move its audience?

## **Teach *What* and *Why* at the Core; Acknowledge that the *How* Will Always Change**

We believe the core subjects of a syllabus should strive to nurture the development of craft, intent, and creative process, while the teaching of tech and the application of tools should be treated as agile components, with syllabus topics changing and evolving over time to match industry dynamics and innovation.

In order to keep agile components refreshed, educators must keep their ears to the ground to advancements in media technology and consider partnering with the innovators, market leaders, and tech companies leading this change.

Programs should also be designed with the future of cinematic storytelling in mind, fully embracing the way, as a society, we now consume and engage with our entertainment. This opens up the need to teach cinematic storytelling process for non-scripted content, games, performance, personal devices, virtual reality, mixed reality, and any other medium we've yet to realize.

# 8. Structure

In order to fully exploit the advantages of hybrid education, it is essential that the curriculum is holistically designed, and includes a balanced syllabus, engaging and well-produced content, and robust asynchronous materials to support lecture and discussion sessions.

In addition, each component of the curriculum must be administered to students utilizing the delivery method most impactful for effective remote learning of that particular topic. The appropriate combination of live, synchronous sessions with asynchronous materials that the students can absorb on their own time will provide a dynamic experience for the students.

This balance is essential and will vary based on the subject. For example, production-based and hands-on experiential classes will likely require more synchronous sessions than cognitive or information-based topics.

For our professional hybrid courses, we follow the general synchronous vs asynchronous delivery method outlined below.

	CURRICULUM ELEMENT	DELIVERY FORM
<b>SYNCHRONOUS</b>	intro and core instruction	instructor delivers presentation with student participation
<i>in-person and/or live stream</i>	discussion	group discussion and review
	hands-on demonstration	instructor demonstrates tool or technology
	live content review	instructor reviews content with class, group or individual
	group collaboration	students work together in groups
	one-on-one	instructor to student, instructor to groups
	guest speakers	guest lecturer or speaker engages with the class
<b>ASYNCHRONOUS</b>	lecture	instructor on camera, delivered in online module form
<i>online</i>	lessons	lessons delivered in online module form
	reference materials	PDF articles, reference charts, video content via LMS platform
	film / content review	video content via LMS platform
	assignments	delivered and executed via LMS platform
	individual content creation	via student
	individual practice	via student

# 9. Environment

Frequently overlooked or under-valued factors impacting the effectiveness of hybrid education are the environments in which learning takes place. We can think of these as three distinct environments: physical spaces, virtual spaces, and personal spaces.

Just because learning can now occur remotely and asynchronously doesn't mean that the appointment of these spaces should be outside the scope of a curriculum strategy. We contend that the opposite is true; that the proper implementation and interconnectivity of all learning environments are keys to high-level engagement and collaboration.

## Physical Spaces – lecture halls, classrooms, training theaters



Primary instructional rooms and lecture halls should be thought of as broadcast spaces, not merely as classrooms, and equipped for hybrid delivery of lectures and class activities. Ideally, these spaces should be acoustically sound, allow for multi-cam capture of sessions, and facilitate in-person and live-stream simulcasting.

This enables synchronous class sessions to seamlessly conjoin in-person and live-stream students, record sessions for later reference, and build instructional materials for asynchronous use. Physical spaces with this capability foster engagement and participation from students regardless of their geographic location.

AbelCine Learning Points in NY, LA, and Chicago are technically equipped with these features and capabilities.

## Virtual Spaces – online communication tools, remote collaboration tools, learning management system



Online environments that cultivate collaboration and engagement are of equal importance, the impact of which should not be underestimated.

Live stream platforms like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google are technically effective platforms for communication and general video collaboration, but they are not specifically designed for the unique requirements of film and media education. These platforms currently fall short in key aspects that are vital components of media-based education, such as media sharing, content review, and group project collaboration.

# 9. Environment

Robust learning management systems such as Moodle, Canvas, D2L, Sakai, and Blackboard are now integrating livestream and video conferencing tools to effectively address the specific needs of film and media-centric education.



**Personal Spaces** – *instructors' and contributors' homes, offices, and remote locations*

The third environment that should be addressed is that of the instructors holding live stream sessions, as well as the spaces of any co-instructors, guest lecturers, or contributors.

Care should be taken to furnish remote contributors with the basic tools to deliver a consistent and relatively high production educational experience to the class. This includes independent or wireless mics, controlled lighting, proper room acoustics and, in some cases, an independent camera.

A small investment in the personal environment of instructors and contributors will go a long way to ensure maximum engagement with the students and better enable the recording of live-stream sessions for later, asynchronous use.

# 10. Engagement

For hybrid education to be as effective as the most successful in-person programs, there needs to be a principal focus on all-around engagement. This means keeping the students engrossed, involved, and connected.

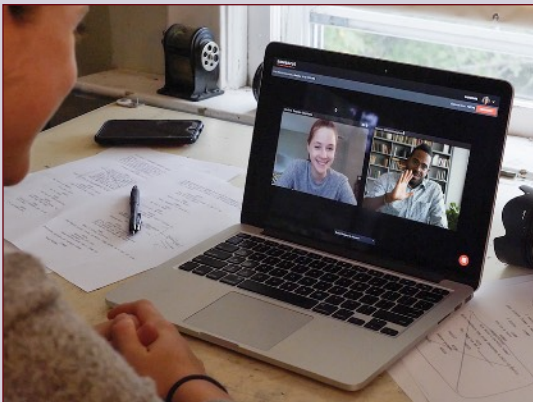
A blended instructional program should be treated like a multi-media production, designed with the student's overall experience in mind. This begins with a compelling, well-structured curriculum.

Asynchronous elements of the program, such as lesson modules, reference materials, and viewing assignments, should be compelling and well-produced, designed to hold students' attention and foster curiosity.

In a blended program, there is little reason for instructors to spend synchronous time delivering lectures, unless the topic draws lots of questions and needs clarification along the way. If this is not the case, these lectures should be converted to lesson modules, intercut with examples and visuals referenced in the material.

Synchronous sessions should be treated as valuable assets —the time for the instructor to bring students together for discussion, Q&As from previous online lessons, guest lecturers, and group participation.

Instructors should go out of their way to encourage participation in all synchronous sessions. For all live-stream sessions, the instructor should be accompanied by a moderator, whose role is to manage students' questions via chat and prompt students to engage. Students should be directed to leave their cameras on during live-stream sessions if the platform and bandwidth can support, in order to foster involvement.



The program should also include ample opportunities for student networking, relationship-building and social bonding.

The LMS, integrated with zoom-like video conferencing tools, is rapidly developing into an ideal space for this to take place. The most effective platforms enable one-on-one and one-to-many communication, project feedback, and virtual collaboration on media projects. Through the platform, students should also be able to upload their work and collaborate on projects with their classmates in smaller group chats.

# 11. Inspiration

Henry David Thoreau famously said, *“It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.”*

Successful education of the arts lies in the educator’s ability to move beyond what is strictly taught, and tap into the student’s creative inspiration.

Many opportunities exist to provide these sparks within the design and delivery of hybrid programs. One might even argue that there are more such opportunities in blended programs versus the traditional in-person model.

## Stimulating Artists, Inspirational Work



There’s nothing more stimulating for students than listening to artists speak about their work, their craft, and their creative process. In a hybrid model, such guest sessions can be produced as live-stream events, with student participation via Zoom, Teams, or an appropriately integrated LMS platform. Sessions can be recorded and turned into lesson modules for later use.

The most ideal platforms have the ability to host live-stream sessions with multiple participants and serve multiple pieces of minimally compressed content. This enables guest sessions to serve high-quality visual examples during the program to further add to their inspirational impact.

Since sessions are live streamed, more students, regardless of their locations, can participate than could in person. For guest lecturers, it’s less of a commitment of their time and travel, which increases their availability and likelihood of future participation. It’s also less of an expense per-instance for the program, which can use this savings to increase this type of programming in the future.

## Community Participation

Live-stream and in-person events don’t need to focus on singular artists for them to be inspirational. Using the same model, students should be encouraged to take part in industry and community activities that fall within their particular areas of interest.

Some of the best opportunities for students to make industry connections and support causes they believe in are during community events such as this. In most cases, these events are free to students, and producers of these events, such as AbelCine, will accommodate student attendance and participation.

# 12. The End Game: Connectivity, Community, Career

Ultimately, the chief objective of our education methodology is to impart knowledge and offer experiences to students that will set them up for success within the film and media industries.

For the hybrid model to be successful, educators need to treat this as a whole new educational form, and not a linear translation of what works in the classroom, by employing the five key elements of the hybrid learning experience: syllabus, structure, environment, engagement and inspiration.

## **Mentorship**

But education must go beyond an ideology and be effective in practice, which comes down to the strength and capabilities of the instructors.

Nothing replaces the impact an educator can have on a student when they connect on a personal, philosophical or emotional level. Mentorship in craft-based fields such as the cinematic arts is often the key that unlocks a student's deep creative potential.

## **Industry Connection and Experiential Learning**

Despite these unsettling times and the restrictive new realities of our (post-pandemic) world, it's an exciting time to be working in cinema. Opportunities in film and media abound, and transformative innovations are rapidly being adopted throughout the industry to address new production paradigms.

As educators, it's our responsibility to know where future opportunities will lie for students and enable them to compete for these emerging jobs. Up until now, one of the most effective methods for colleges and universities to provide their students with real world experiences and exposure to opportunities has been through internships.

In a hybrid learning model, we envision that key internship objectives, such as experiential learning and industry connections can take on new and exciting forms.

Companies like Parker Dewey and Riipen have been helping to redefine these connections in other businesses, and have championed project-based trials, micro-internships and remote job placement. As the film industry moves towards more remote collaboration in all aspects of production, this is an opportune time for such a change.

In a remote learning model, students can have access to innovative people and companies that they may not have otherwise. The class field trip to a film set, production studio or rental house can be replaced with more purposeful virtual tours and beneficial discussions with key industry professionals. In other words, more of the student body can have access to the creatives, mentors, executives and companies that are driving the industry than they would have through a class trip or single internship.

# 12. The End Game: Connectivity, Community, Career

This reimagining of student connection breaks down the barriers of geography and scale, and fully leverages the advantages of remote learning by building an effective connection and a bridge to jobs and opportunities.

## **The Only Thing That is Constant is Change**

We have demonstrated that the media industry will perpetually be impacted by technological change, and that cinema is an ever-evolving art form. This requires a responsive and agile education model that changes along with it.

With diligent attention given to syllabus, delivery, environment, engagement, and inspiration, educators can identify which components of their programs to consistently reassess and refresh. These components may include technical aspects of syllabus, emerging processes, the application of new tools, project examples, and guest artisans and lecturers.

We believe that hybrid programs built in this way will be most adaptive to change and consistently deliver the highest educational value to their students.