

Educating the Next Generation of Animation Professionals

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Figure 1: Animation students hard at work on their respective projects at University of Texas at Dallas (left) and the University of Hawaii at Manoa (right).

ABSTRACT

A team of educators with extensive industry experience discuss their best practices for teaching industry standard approaches to animation production at the university level. The panel discussion will compare different curricula to determine what is working, what can be improved, and how to implement ideas for future student success.

KEYWORDS

animation, education, pipeline, production, workforce training

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1 OVERVIEW

Whether you're on the education or industry side of animation, you know this to be true: entry level animation professionals stepping out of the academic world hold incredible talent and skill but lack the experience and knowledge of working on a greater creative collaboration.

How do we fix this?

How do we give students experience in problem solving, workflow creation, and collaboration that will help them transform from talented individuals to powerhouse professionals? How can we set students up for success upon graduation as they enter the workforce?

In short, what are the best practices for teaching industry standard approaches to animation production at the university level?

As it is a cross-section of industry and education, Siggraph is the perfect place to pose these questions and more. We have assembled a team of educators with a vast wealth of industry experience, including Dreamworks Animation, Rhythm and Hues, Sony Animation, and Disney Studios, who are now working in a variety of universities, both public and private, and animation programs across the country. Their goal is to discuss how different curricula and school programs teach animation process and pipeline to determine what is working, what can be improved, and how to implement ideas for future student success. In what promises to be a lively discussion, we hope to engage our intended audience of educators, students, industry hiring managers, and industry recruiters on what we can do within our curricula to help our students become successful professionals.

Computer animation programs at universities continue to grow with the popularity of animated entertainment, games, and new and emerging technologies like Virtual and Augmented Reality. Like any other degree, the goal of the animation curriculum is to teach not only the critical thought but also the skills needed to be employable upon graduation, and to use the medium of animation to be better artists and storytellers. There are different approaches on how to teach animation effectively, including lecture based and interactive teaching methods, but often what's missing is a defined workflow that students can use as they plan. Understanding how animation studios operate their overall animation production pipeline as well as workflows for specific tasks, such as character animation, is a useful and proven model that can be applied to teaching.

2 STRUCTURE

The panel will begin with introductions and brief explanations of the various types of schools and programs our panelists come from. We do not want to assume that all attendees are familiar with the current state of animation education, so we will take the time to explain the structure of our programs, as well as what is working and what's not. We will provide visuals, such as the behind the scenes videos found on UT Dallas' Animation Lab website, <https://atec-animgames.com/stargazer-process>, to ensure the audience can understand the student experience.

3 SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND TOPICS

We intend to structure this discussion with the following topics. Here is a sample list of questions per topic:

Creating a Structure: PLANNING AND PIPELINE

- How much infrastructure does your school provide with regards to pipeline?
- Many programs bring a group of students together to create short films over the course of one or two semesters. How is this structured in your school?
- What are specific techniques and workflows that have improved the curriculum that are based on studio and professional practices?

Working with a Team: COLLABORATION

- One member of the panel specifically teaches a project management within animation course called "Project Management for Arts, Technology and Emerging Communication." How has this inclusion contributed to the students' abilities to manage their time, delegate tasks, and work as a team?
- How are the other panelists' programs tackling production management and producing animation in their curricula?
- What tools or methods do you encourage your students to use to improve communication between crew members?
- Do you implement a form of hierarchy or roles within your classes or projects?

Student Career Paths: PREPARING FOR POST COLLEGE

- We all live and teach in areas that are not animation industry hubs. How are students prepped and advised for professional work?
- When should students pursue a graduate degree? What should that graduate program look like?

The Future: WHAT CHANGES DO WE NEED?

- What other ideas do you have that you want to implement in your program?
- How can we apply this work to more non-traditional animation methods?
- Does your program offer structured collaboration opportunities for students interested in AR, VR, or interactive media?

4 PANELISTS

Brittany Biggs is an animation filmmaker and Assistant Professor of Animation with the Academy for Creative Media at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. Her feature film credits include DreamWorks' 'Trolls,' 'Kung Fu Panda 3,' 'Kung Fu Panda 2,' and 'Turbo.' Her short animated film 'A Tall Tale' was screened internationally in film festivals, including Annecy International Animation Film Festival, and it won Best Animated Short in the 2011 Los Angeles Women's International Film Festival.

Scott Raymond is currently the Associate Professor of Animation at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN. There he has created a brand new BFA concentration in Animation + Visual Effects. Previously Scott spent 8 years at DreamWorks Animation, first as a crowds artist and then as an animator. He has worked in feature and TV animation, live-action visual effects, gaming, AR, webseries, theme parks and commercials - the latter winning several National ADDY awards for animation.

Phillip Hall enjoys nearly 20 years of professional character animation and teaching experience. He served CBN as Animation Director on Superbook and has worked as Senior Animator on Happy Feet Two. His other animation credits include Hotel Transylvania, Yogi Bear 3D, Alvin and the Chipmunks: the Squeakquel, Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs, Red Dead Redemption and Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2. Phillip has taught various character animation courses at The Art Institute of California – San Diego, Huntington University, The Art Institute of Virginia Beach and The University of Texas at Dallas. Currently, Phillip teaches animation at Regent University.

Kara Oropallo educates future animation professionals as a Senior Lecturer at the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas. Her research focuses primarily on creative management and the art (and joy!) of managing artists. She conducts yearly workshops and training programs with numerous animation studios, including DreamWorks, Skydance, Paramount, Reel FX, and Mikros. Kara's previous industry experience includes more than 12 years at DreamWorks Animation, where she worked in production on films like The Croods and Rise of the Guardians, as well as studio management on films like The Boss Baby and Trolls.

Diana Reichenbach is an award-winning multimedia artist specializing in immersive and architectural media. Her work has been exhibited at the Virgin Airways clubhouse at LAX, Light City Baltimore, Burning Man Festival, Bonnaroo, RiverRun Film Festival, Punta Y Raya, Anima Mundi, Animafest Zagreb, and the Ottawa International Animation Festival. In 2019, she was awarded 'Best Artistic Dome Short Film' at the Downtown Los Angeles Film Festival, and the 'Best Full-dome Short Film' at the Fulldome Festival in Jena, Germany. In addition to current independent and professional

projects, she is a Professor of Animation at Savannah College of Art and Design.