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Article

Film Beyond Borders: A Case Study of Inter-Cultural Dialogue and Critical Pedagogy in Malta's Migrant Communities

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Abstract

This paper examines collaborative approaches to harnessing the power of storytelling for change and considers the process of working with students, grassroots organisations, campaigners and activists from migrant communities to make films that have an impact and a legacy and counteract narratives of disinformation. A project was developed at the intersection of film, communities and social justice campaigning to provide a mechanism to connect with global concerns through cross-cultural collaboration. This collaboration facilitates theoretical and methodological innovations that can develop studies of the experience of migration through mutual learning for all collaborators. Notably, in this case study from Malta, the findings demonstrate how inter-cultural collaboration generates space and agency for migrants to discuss their experiences of social conflict and migration on their own terms. The study also indicates that documentary films have potential as a pedagogic tool, and can exert a mutual influence on student development.

Keywords: Malta; displacement; migration; collaboration; filmmaking; university; NGO; social justice campaigning; adaptive grounded theory; inter-cultural learning; critical pedagogy; Freire

1. Introduction

As one of the most southern points in Europe—both Algiers and Tunis are to the north of it latitudinally—the small island of Malta has found itself in a highly strategic position in recent years on the migration route from Tripoli in Libya. With a population of around half a million people, Malta has developed one of the largest per capita proportions of refugees of any European country, and its responses to the growth in refugees has made it subject to significant political and academic scrutiny.

This paper reflects on a collaboration between Spark 15, a uniquely refugee-led NGO in Malta; RAAH, an arts-based fundraising organisation supporting displaced communities based in Malta; and a group of UK academics and students from Sheffield Hallam University. The project was instigated by the founder of RAAH, who approached the university proposing a student field trip and filmmaking collaboration to take place in Malta in 2023. Four UK academics from two disciplines, Film and TV Production, and the Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice were able to secure funding for a study trip that would enable students to learn about key issues facing displaced people and international migration law and to develop filmmaking skills.

The approach to the collaboration was inspired by Freire's ideas of critical pedagogy and the curriculum as praxis (Freire [1970] 2017), informed by Sonya Childress's call for



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just documentary practice (Childress 2021) and guided by Cizek and Uricchio's discourse on the importance of situating first-hand experience at the centre of film practice, where research engagement strategies are informed by local communities who have the greatest stake in their accuracy and impact (Cizek and Uricchio 2022). The paper examines the role of collaborative approaches in harnessing the power of storytelling for change and considers the process of universities working with grassroots organisations, campaigners and activists to make films and deliver research that has social impact and a narrative legacy.

The paper begins with background information about migration to Malta, explores how a cross-cultural planning group was set up and then describes how fifteen students, four academics and a camera technician travelled to Malta and collaborated with the two NGOs to make six short films.

The Findings section presents the outcomes of the projects, including surveys with participants, the film output entitled *Life in Limbo* and two joint screening events held in 2024. Finally, the paper considers how the project informed the creation of *Film Beyond Borders*, a new film unit at Sheffield Hallam University committed to creating social justice films and art about migration that challenges how we interpret the world and call for change. It supports media made by communities themselves and is grounded in principles of respect, inclusion and digital equality. The findings offer invaluable insights for educators and filmmakers, enabling the development of effective and ethically responsible strategies for learning and researching through documentary projects. The study also demonstrates that documentary films have potential as a pedagogic tool, and can exert a mutual influence on student development and the empowerment of migrant groups. While similar studies have employed a filmmaking praxis to create inter-cultural dialogue between marginalised communities and university collaborators (Tan et al. 2023), there has not been this kind of research working with refugee communities in Malta.

2. Background

Many of the recent arrivals in Malta are young men in boats who were destined for mainland Europe but have become caught in the limbo of the asylum system. Although the country's tough action on illegal migration has reduced arrivals by sea from a peak of 3406 in 2017 to just 108 in 2024 (United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) 2025, p. 2), there are many refugees living in Malta awaiting news about their future status. In the first quarter of 2024, refugee status or subsidiary protection was granted to 10% of asylum applications, down from 15% in 2023. This is considerably less than the approximate 50% rate of successful asylum or protection applications made in the early 2000s, one of the highest rates in Europe at that time (Malta introduced its Refugee Act in 2000).

In September 2020, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) noted that Malta had an asylum "system that was struggling to cope, and that relied on a purely 'containment' approach for immigration detention. Conditions of detention and associated regimes for migrants deprived of their liberty appeared to be bordering on inhuman and degrading treatment as a consequence of the institutional neglect" (CPT 2021, p. 7).

Including any appeals process, the average waiting time for a decision on an asylum claim in Malta—either granted or rejected—is around two years. During this time many migrants find work, begin courses of study, establish social networks and even start families, so will often want to seek citizenship as a next step. Maltese processing times for citizenship are notoriously lengthy, with some refugees waiting years for a decision, during which time their work opportunities and freedom of movement are severely restricted.

It is the experiences of these migrants that are at the core of this project, and the films were an opportunity for the collaborators to raise awareness of specific issues and individual stories that they wished to share. The process of researching, developing ideas, encountering diverse perspectives and collaborating on a film has the capacity to shape a new and informed understanding of the world for all involved.

3. Stakeholders

Spark 15 is a uniquely refugee-led NGO in Malta that supports people seeking sanctuary to integrate into Maltese society through free English and digital literacy classes, as well as sport and arts events. The organisation places importance on this support coming from its community members with lived experience of displacement who have first-hand insights and knowledge of the migration journey, arrival, transition and integration (Spark 15 2022).

RAAH (Reality about Humanity) delivers a range of arts-focused educational, social and fundraising activities to displaced communities in Malta and the UK. One of the organisation's key aims is to support the residents of Hal Far refugee camp in Malta to access study opportunities, employment and legal aid. RAAH is funded by corporate partnerships and has a longstanding connection to Sheffield Hallam University through university alumni who work with RAAH (n.d.).

Sheffield Hallam is a University of Sanctuary situated in the original City of Sanctuary (n.d.) for refugees and asylum seekers and welcomes sanctuary seekers, fostering a culture of welcome and inclusion for all (Sheffield Hallam University n.d.-a).

4. The Planning Group

A project planning group was set up that consisted of a diverse range of ethnicities, nationalities and backgrounds. It included six NGO leaders from refugee-led Spark 15 (four from the Black African diaspora and two white Europeans from Malta), two members of RAAH (British South Asian and British mixed heritage), a lecturer from the University of Malta (white European) with a special interest in forced migration and four UK academics from Sheffield Hallam University (three white Europeans and one Black African). Regular weekly meetings were held by video conference from late April in 2023 in order to discuss project aims and approach, film ideas, schedules, and logistics of travel and accommodation.

During these meetings, the planning group established some key principles that informed the collaboration. Of importance for the NGOs was to create counter-stories to mainstream narratives of media disinformation (perceiving migrants as victims or a threat) both in terms of the film output and the students' learning about migration. As identified by de Haas (2024) four narratives dominate public debates (mass migration, migration threat, migration victims and migration celebration) and there is a real need to provide "alternative narratives which connect with the real lived experiences and decisions of migrants as well as the real concerns and questions many people have about migration." The NGOs wished to create a series of films that told the stories of "inspiring changemakers" from Spark 15, and to place them at the centre the issues faced by Malta's migrant communities, such as the experience of being indefinitely "in limbo" while waiting for Maltese citizenship. They wished for the films to tell authentic stories of lived experiences from their own perspectives. It quickly emerged that Spark 15 President Dursa Mama would be the subject for a headlining film about the NGO, having arrived in Malta himself as a refugee aged just 17. As the project progressed, a further four Spark 15 members decided to take part in the films.

The planning group's shared ambition was that the films would be used by Spark 15, RAAH and Sheffield Hallam University for shared social justice campaigning through

screening events that would raise awareness of issues facing migrants, create discussion and also promote the work of Spark 15. These goals aligned with Cizek and Uricchio's ideas of placing people with first-hand experience at the centre of a practice rather than that of the artistic vision or agenda of the filmmaker (Cizek and Uricchio 2022) and Childress's call for documentary practice to situate community benefit as paramount in the production process (Childress 2017). Documentary as a medium has been rooted in cultural, racial, gender and class-based colonialism (Martinez 2016) in which the documentary "subjects" have their stories told by a filmmaker in a problematic power relationship (Richards 2024).

Thus, to create change and highlight authentic lived perspectives, the planning group took steps to adopt an innovative methodological approach situated at the intersection of social science, film, migrant communities, and social justice campaigning. Through a schedule of social activities, shared meals, meetings, sightseeing and film planning the group would get to know each other. Spark members would have the opportunity to highlight the issues they wished to raise in the films and participate in film planning (e.g., scenes and locations), including being in control of and contributing to the final film edits. The planning group placed an emphasis on the films emerging from a "process" and making media with people rather than for or about them, and aimed to create a space where relationships could be built, where learning and skills could be exchanged, and where trust could grow, and that this process could be transformative for all involved. During the time spent fostering relationships, Spark 15 members could have space and time to share their migration stories and highlight the issues they wished to raise in the films and contribute to film planning (e.g., scenes and locations). They would also be in control of and contributing to the final film edits.

A key motivation for the founder of RAAH in instigating the project was for all the participants to grow as "global citizens" and for the collaboration to break down any barriers, assumptions or misconceptions they might have about each other. The project sought to create a "third space" that allows for the re-siting of boundaries and new identities, challenging ideas of the "stranger" or "other" in traditional narratives of immigration (Hall 1990). The films could "speak nearby" instead of "speaking about," thereby advocating a technique of storytelling that avoids objectifying the subject and allows the migrant experience to be voiced without reducing it to a set of pre-defined narratives (Balsom 2018). The stories and engagement strategy would be led by Spark 15 and used as a powerful form of advocacy and resistance to challenge power structures, and to build solidarity.

5. Project Narrative

To make the films, fifteen students were selected from Law and Criminology, Film and TV Production, Journalism, PR, Digital Media Marketing and Digital Media Production. The group travelled to Malta in August 2023 along with four academic staff and a camera technician. The student cohort included 15 Sheffield Hallam students (13 white British and 2 Black Nigerians) from a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds and mixed genders.

The students were tasked with creating a series of films with and for Spark 15 as the client and commissioner. These would be screened in both the UK and Malta with the purpose of both raising awareness of key issues facing migrants in Malta as well as reflecting wider common experiences of people seeking sanctuary (such as having to cross war-torn Libya and the Mediterranean to reach Europe). Two day-long workshops were held for the students in the weeks immediately prior to the trip for the purpose of researching migration to Malta and developing their camera and audio recording skills for the trip. The students formed themselves into groups, bringing a range of skills, e.g., the

Law and Journalism students focused on researching international and legal contexts and the Film students brought knowledge of camera and sound.

Students also took part in a training workshop in preparation for working with film subjects with traumatic experiences that might potentially be recounted on camera, as well as covering key legal and ethical considerations. The students were briefed about how to approach working with contributors who may have experienced trauma and Spark 15 and RAAH leaders would make decisions through discussions with the community about who would be involved in the films. Students were instructed to ask sensitive, broad and open-ended questions, which would allow contributors to share their stories with dignity and control. Students were also briefed on what migrant journeys might entail and experiences they might have faced. Collaboration and power-sharing were prioritised through shared creative input, with Spark contributors reviewing rough and fine cuts to ensure they felt accurately represented and recognising their right to retract sensitive material before the final release.

The first few days in Malta were largely taken up with orientation and networking activities so that UK academics and students could get to know representatives from the NGOs and some of the wider refugee community on the island with whom they would be collaborating. On the first night, the students listened to presentations from Spark 15 and RAAH about their work in Malta, which was followed by a pizza social on the beach, where film ideas were further developed and discussed.

The schedule of activities organised by the NGOs further included cooking for each other, trips to Hal Far refugee camp hosted by Spark 15 specialist guest speakers Dr Maria Pisani (Lecturer in Forced Migration and Youth, and Critical Intersectionalities at the University of Malta) and renowned human rights activist Yana Mintoff Bland, as well as educational visits to other local refugee support groups. Key social activities included a football game, swimming, a quiz, beach barbecues and a shared day trip to the island of Gozo.

6. Theory and Method

The research team utilised an inductive adaptive grounded theory methodological approach, which encourages the researchers and their collaborators to be deeply immersed and involved in the process of data collection and analysis (Charmaz 2014). The cross-cultural collaborative methodology was designed to ensure an iterative process of sharing ideas and reviewing and analysing content between students, NGOs, and research participants. The underpinning hypothesis of the research is that these immersive and inter-cultural experiences should offer transformational benefits to learners from diverse backgrounds, which are captured in the data collection and analysis that is presented in the next section. The research design invokes complementarity theory, which encourages analysis of combinations of social, cultural and organisational factors (Brynjolfsson and Milgrom 2012) to understand experiences, change and decision-making in specific contexts.

The process of sampling and data collection was driven by Spark 15 and its migrant membership who wished to tell their stories of migration.

Methods of data collection include the film outputs, data collected from participants, and the impact of their experience upon their career trajectory. The perspectives of NGO leaders and community participants were captured during the documentary-making process in field notes and interview recording, as well as post-production reflective interviews and focus groups. The data analysis process was delivered alongside the production of the films to ensure collaboration was part of the visual storytelling on film as well as the generation and understanding of the data. Consent was provided by all participants during

the filmmaking process to further agreements about the survey data, which remained an ongoing process with regular meetings between stakeholders.

Working with NGOs and making films about displacement offers a learning experience for all. The data analysis process sought to provide narrative measurements through analysis of field notes, the film outputs, qualitative interviews and focus groups through ongoing researcher-collaborator interaction (Charmaz 2014). Through this process, correlations were established between aspects of the documentary filmmaking programme and the potential impact upon all of those involved as stakeholders, which is presented in the next section.

The project was inspired by Freire and Giroux's ideas of critical pedagogy, in which the curriculum and learning are viewed as praxis, i.e., reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire [1970] 2017; Freire [1973] 2021, Giroux 2011). The cornerstone of Freire's pedagogy is learning through "conscientização" or consciousness raising, which can be summarised as "the process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their own capacities to recreate them" (Darder et al. 2009, p. 14).

As Henry Giroux maintains, Freirean-inspired critical pedagogy is specifically targeted at moving society towards a future based on justice and equality.

"Unlike dominant modes of teaching, critical pedagogy insists that one of the fundamental tasks of the educators is to make sure that the future points to a more socially just world". (Giroux 2011, p. 158)

In working on the documentary films as a collective group with a shared purpose, the project embraced Mbembe's ideas of a "classroom without walls", in which teachers themselves are decentralised and other forms of knowledge take precedence (Mbembe 2015). The NGOs became co-learners, contributing to a shared project that created "new forms of assemblies that become points of convergence of and platforms for the redistribution of different kinds of knowledges" (Mbembe 2015). Documentary impact projects bring together theories and methods to assess the social impact of storytelling using social science research methodology such as interviews, focus groups and content analysis (Chattoo and Das 2014; Napoli 2014; Doc Society 2026). This project-based learning enables collaborators to gain knowledge in deeper, more lasting ways that make learning feel meaningful (Students as Change Agents 2021; Jaafar et al. 2020; Hotdocs n.d.; Schwartz 2001). The theory of change (Anderson 2005; Weiss 1995) for this project is that experiential and inter-cultural learning enhances academic potential and performance, engages learning from within and beyond universities, and develops individuals.

Through collaboration with Spark 15, the project facilitated a semi-structured dialogue between (predominantly) white, Western students from the UK and migrant communities in Malta that started online, developed through documentary research and hearing personal testimony, and flourished through the development of sustainable international and intercultural social networks. As envisaged by Freire ([1970] 2017) and Childress (2017), this methodology challenges oppressive structures and focuses on the construction of socially just norms through documentary filmmaking and reflection on the development process. The documentary films have the potential to develop awareness of the migration experience, but the core value of the project lies within the experiences of collaboration, creation, and critical inter-cultural dialogue, as demonstrated in the following Findings section.

7. Findings

The data in this section is drawn from focus group interviews with three leaders of Spark 15, the founder of RAAH, and six students from Sheffield Hallam University,

combined with an analysis of the film outputs and two joint screening events that took place in 2024: one at the Migration Matters Festival, Britain's largest creative arts festival about sanctuary during Refugee Week at The Showroom Cinema, and the other at Sheffield Hallam University. The adaptive grounded theory collaborative approach (Charmaz 2014) generates an iterative approach to data collection that empowers participants to be active contributors to the research design and analysis and to encourage reflection on the process of documentary-making and the ethics of cross-cultural practice. This finding was evidenced in the coding of the data that identified the following themes. At the forefront of all the data was the value of collaboration as a mechanism for "just" filmmaking, but alongside this, more subtle themes relating to engaging with stakeholders, the value of the filmmaking process, and the ownership of storytelling emerged.

7.1. *Life in Limbo: A Series of Films*

(1) Changemakers

Dursa Mama, the president and one of the founders of refugee-led NGO Spark 15, which provides support, community and training for refugees in Malta, shares his experiences of being displaced from Ethiopia, setting up Spark 15, and creating a community through shared events such as BBQs, football, English classes and how he strives to achieve the organisation's long-term goal to grow and expand to support migrants. (14 min).

(2) Ahmed's Story

Ahmed Albarjo shares his experiences of being in a "legal limbo" in Malta after becoming displaced and fleeing from Sudan. Like many asylum seekers, he does not know how long he will have to wait for citizenship and equal rights; this could take many years, and until then he is unable to move on with his life. Ahmed discusses his hopes to have the opportunity to fully realise his potential. (8 min).

(3) Freedom of a Butterfly

Kemilla Arabe shares her story of her journey as a child travelling through Libya and across the Mediterranean and finding belonging, love and friendship through a chance meeting with a family in Malta. (16 min).

(4) Greater Tomorrow

A contributor anonymously shares her inspiring story of survival, hope and empowerment after enduring harrowing experiences at the hands of traffickers and undertaking a perilous journey from sub-Saharan Africa through the desert and across the Mediterranean. (14 min).

(5) The El Hiblu Three

This film tells the story of three West African teenagers who, in 2019, boarded a crowded boat, fleeing Libya together with 108 other people. After their boat started deflating, they were rescued by a private cargo ship, the El Hiblu. The ship's captain then tried to return them to Libya, contravening international law. As the only English speakers, the teenagers acted as translators on behalf of the passengers. Once in Malta, the teenagers were charged with terrorist activities in a gross miscarriage-of-justice case.

(6) Blue Door

This film shows the work of Blue Door, a charity that provides free literacy, language and life skills classes for migrants (this is a film with another Maltese NGO connected to Spark 15 and RAAH).

7.2. Working Within a Framework of Collaboration and Just Documentary Practice

Spark 15 wanted the films to tell the migrants' stories, inspire others and raise awareness about the importance of equal rights and opportunities for other migrants in Malta. It was particularly important for them to convey shared lived experiences of displacement and authentic perspectives from the migrant community in Malta.

Dursa (Spark 15): The reason I share my experience is just not only my healing, but I want to use my voice to empower others and also to encourage. And also my voice will be reached, especially by the policymakers, the other stakeholders. We want to live as a human being as well. We want to be treated as we're supposed to be treated. Also, it's a lived experience. I want to encourage other people to show them experience. Just being silent is not something. I think we used our voice to be ourselves and also to tell our story to the world.

I just want to express how much the platform, the student and all of us, we are like so feel safe. And the communication, the adaptability, I think it's really wonderful.

Ahmed (Spark 15): I really feel like I participate in something, I like it. And I show the idea of my challenge and my life in Malta. I feel that finally find somebody to listen to me. You know, that's what I think. . . To find true story from the people who are suffering themselves is a really good point.

RAAH provided a more nuanced viewpoint that incorporated both positive and negative perspectives on the collaboration.

Jas (RAAH): All the conversations I had with the students were always so positive, you know, like there was never any negative, like people being sceptical or anything like that, which is what the media portrays. . . They want to learn and they want to hear what's going on with all these people who have had to go through hard journeys.

One thing that I think we really wanted to try and nail and I think we didn't fully nail was the how to make it that people are building friendships rather than it being like a professional [film shoot].

And then. Maybe a more selective process with what students get to go. Because I think a couple of the students just saw it as like a holiday.

The responses from Spark 15 and RAAH support the group's approach to co-creation, which sought to place those with lived experience at the heart of the filmmaking process, whilst also recognising differences in stakeholder motivation. Feeling empowered through project collaboration is consonant with recognising the importance of decolonising and democratising the documentary process, for filmmakers to be in direct conversation with justice movements, and for filmmakers to interrogate biases to provide an authentic representation of communities (Solanas and Getino 1970; Childress 2020; Childress and Driver 2022; Cizek and Uricchio 2022).

The headlining film *Changemakers in the Life in Limbo* series, which tells Dursa Mama's story, offers a unique and deep understanding of the lived experiences of migrants and conveys Spark 15's journey and mission to be part of a community collaboration that engages with Malta's policymakers to support the thousands who arrive by sea each year, and the few who are granted refugee status or subsidiary protection by Malta. The film also explores a recurring theme throughout the series and key message from Spark 15, which is that migrants can remain in "limbo" indefinitely without gaining citizenship rights for many years.

7.3. The Process of Just Filmmaking

The collaborative approach that was embedded into the project also provided a mechanism for facilitating a migrant-led approach to the filmmaking that was supported by the student filmmakers. All the survey participants emphasised the importance of relationships in the filmmaking process: spending time together, getting to know each other and forming friendships with the Spark 15 community. Putting people with first-hand experience at the centre of a practice places greater emphasis on process over outcome (Cizek and Uricchio 2022). Of key importance were shared activities such as cooking for each other and simply “hanging out” together, which led to new friendships and enjoyment of the project.

Nag (Spark 15): *The networking thing is really good because we have not only worked together but also we created a family vibe that we will hope that in future we will do more and more.*

Having people coming all the way and living and interacting with you, having day to day conversations and be part as one community which not only make you open up and say your story but also give you that sense of belonging and you will start like thinking of okay, my story is worth to be said to people, that they will make the best out of it, and to show it to the other people of the world.

Cal (MA Filmmaking): *[Socialising] made me realize how just wonderful people are in general . . . despite everything that they’ve gone through, they were still there, like, giving their time and their resources . . . to cook for us and let us experience the kind of sort of traditional foods and all those things. That was very enlightening and a lovely experience. And, how friendly they were, I don’t think I’ve ever experienced anything like that, like—ever [emphasis added].*

It was beautiful. It was really nice to sit and share that, share story, share experiences.

Callum (BA Film and TV Production): *We were so welcomed in as well, like with open arms. Like, it was really, really nice. . . We made a good team . . . we just kind of made a community.*

Developing a network also fostered knowledge and a deep appreciation of each other’s cultures and backgrounds.

Sodiq (Digital Media Management): *I was able to appreciate the diversity between us. I mean, different people, different perspective, different experiences, which was great. Yeah, everything was just emotional.*

Cal (MA Filmmaking): *I’m a landlocked white boy that doesn’t have a diverse friendship group who doesn’t experience any of this stuff and hasn’t and doesn’t have friends or haven’t got, you know, I don’t have friends with lived experience . . . I have a more diverse group friendship group now because of this trip.*

Some of the students reflected on the limitations of the duration, that 14 days was not long enough and that they would like to have spent more time with Spark 15 in the build-up to the trip on planning. This was a fair observation, as in the film and TV industry producing a documentary can require months of planning and execution; this was a scaled-down version made within university budgets and timescales.

Spark 15 also reflected on how a longer amount of time together would have been beneficial, and they were keen for the collaboration to continue and to build a long-lasting legacy.

Nag (Spark 15):

We should make more impact of trying to use this as a starting point where we can put and challenge stakeholder and decision makers to try to put migration and life of people

who are affected by the refugees and migrant community into perspective and try to bring it as something that we should talk about it more.

7.4. Harnessing the Power of Storytelling

The Spark 15 members reflected on the importance of sharing unfiltered accounts that conveyed the injustice they felt about having survived harrowing journeys to arrive in Europe only to face inequality and the personal consequences of being detained and living undocumented for lengthy periods of time.

For example, Ahmed's Story explores the impact of being "in limbo" and how he and others survived a harrowing journey from Sudan to arrive in Malta and face societal barriers, inequality and differential treatment by the Maltese government. The film highlights the plight of many young people seeking asylum who are themselves "in limbo" in Malta, detained and undocumented for long periods of time, sometimes indefinitely. Young people and teenagers in detention are often referred to as "ghosts in the system," facing significant tolls on their mental wellbeing and life opportunities in an apartheid-like system with limited rights or access to justice.

Ahmed (Spark 15): Many people don't know about us when we come to Europe. We seek for peace, we seek for a better life. And then when we came here, we face detention, we face prisons, we face a lot of challenge in life. . . Sometimes we feel like that we are human, we are the same. . . There's a lot of differentiate between refugees and normal citizens in a European country.

For me it is a really good opportunity and good chance for other people to see my story and to know the truth.

One of the most moving and compelling films in the series, the film Greater Tomorrow, is a testament to the strength of community cohesion created during the project. The contributor approached the students asking if she could record her testimony anonymously after socialising with them and seeing some of the other films take shape. She expressed a desire to share details of her journey from Nigeria because she wanted to inspire single mothers to be strong and resilient in difficult circumstances. Her film gives insight into a gendered experience of forced migration and includes harrowing testimony about her journey to Libya, where she faced harsh conditions at the hands of human traffickers. The film serves as a hugely powerful motivator for the need for safe routes and passage for migrants.

Carving out communal spaces for deep listening, fostering dialogue and building connections was key not only in developing friendships, but also in contributing to the nature and content of the film projects themselves. The film output as a whole reflects key themes identified by the NGO Spark 15 during the planning stages as important, including migrant rights under international law and how these are implemented by individual governments; detention conditions; how rights are addressed by border control forces and within detention facilities; the trauma caused by human traffickers in Libya prior to crossing the Mediterranean; the contexts in which people undertake perilous journeys to find sanctuary; domestic policies that create legal barriers to employment; the personal and emotional impact of displacement; and the importance for displaced people of access to justice, healthcare and state protection from human trafficking, slave labour and abuse such as forced sex work.

7.5. Critical Pedagogy and Shared Storytelling

A key finding from the survey from the Sheffield Hallam student survey was that shared storytelling, spending time together and hearing first-hand insights from Spark 15 were catalysts for transformational learning about forced displacement and migration.

These experiences created “implicit” memories (Maughan 2011), that is, unconscious feelings and values that themselves form a kind of knowledge that can be stronger and more impactful than knowledge gained through formal classroom teaching (Ashton and Stone 2021).

Jayne (BA Film and TV Production): *We listened to different people’s stories and went to Hal Far [refugee camp]. It was so eye opening to hear the situations and how awful it is. But then to hear people’s stories and about Spark’s work, the idea of community, the help, the education and what people got from Spark. . . It was just life changing. And it’s something that we will probably carry with us forever.*

Kaitlyn (BA Film and TV Production) *It was awful sitting in [Ahmed’s] living room and him telling the awful stories of losing all of his friends on boats when he came over. It was just shocking and heartbreaking to hear. He spoke about it calmly as well. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what he’s been through.*

Sodiq (MA Digital Media Management): *[The project] is a very big lesson for me. . . it teaches me a better way of having empathy and understanding of what people have been through. And understanding how I’m supposed to treat them, how I’m supposed to see them.*

The experiences described by the students and their motivations to create change align closely with Freire’s ideas on how a deepening awareness or “conscientização” can inspire students to engage in and drive critical dialogue on world issues.

Developing knowledge that is embedded in personal stories and shared experience, and working within a holistic environment, proved to be a powerful way for students to undertake meaningful learning and gain knowledge in deeper, more lasting ways. Furthermore, we found that empathy created by storytelling can be great fuel for action alongside coordinated, organised and strategic actions in documentary impact campaigns (Hotdocs n.d.).

Mikey (BA Film and TV Production): *It has felt important to open ourselves up to things that we don’t have to deal with . . . that making a film about it will raise awareness and hopefully create some sort of effect . . . like making a film that people would actually think about and have to critically try and understand.*

The students recognised that collaborating on the project with the community enabled them to create deeper and more authentic films.

Callum (BA Film and TV Production): *I feel like [forming friendships] benefited the documentaries . . . because they got them more comfortable talking to us and . . . it was just like nice to get to know them behind the camera, away from the camera, and learn more about their story and who they are. Like, you know, they’re not just their story.*

Another key finding relating to the Sheffield Hallam students is how they described meeting Spark 15 and hearing their stories made them question their assumptions and mainstream narratives about migration.

Kaitlyn (BA Film and TV Production): *The media doesn’t show you these sides of the story, just all these people coming on boats. . . but there’s actually people behind that and horrific tragic stories and you won’t see that unless you actually speak to these people in person. . . to find out the truth behind it all.*

Cal (MA Filmmaking): *Being with people like Dursa and him explaining his story, it was very real. And it made me realize that it doesn’t matter how it’s reported [on mainstream media] . . . there’s people behind that. And I think it’s just helped me,*

like, develop a lot more sympathy, empathy ... about the whole situation... it was very emotional.

Brookfield (2012) emphasises the importance of students—and their teachers—developing the capacity to challenge their own assumptions and make informed choices about their actions. The project even led to one student reflecting on his own values and being confident to challenge some of his own family members on their support for the 2024 UK far-right, anti-immigration riots.

Cal (MA Filmmaking): *I've actually kind of removed myself from some of my family, because after all these riots and stuff that happened, I discovered that a lot of my family aren't very pleasant. . . I could get quite heated about it. But, you know—it has changed me. And it's made me stand up for people more actively rather than just having these ideas and beliefs. . . It's not a choice you know. A lot of these people do have no other choice. If they want to survive, they have to do this.*

Furthermore, it was evident that the student filmmakers placed great importance in accurately representing Spark 15 members as an “inspirational” and “pioneering” group of young people with lived experience of displacement who were forging new and successful lives in Malta. This suggests that in the films they made they were concerned not just with creating empathy, but also with disrupting media narratives and familiar media archetypes such as “refugee-as-victim” or “refugee-as-threat” (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; de Haas 2024), and importantly, they recognised and celebrated the achievements of Spark 15 members as young “changemakers” who are forging new and successful lives in Malta.

Mikey (BA Film and TV Production): *I think it changes your view of what you should be doing with your privilege. For me it was the realisation that there's something you can do. And it was important that a lot of the learning was how to do it correctly. You know, what's the right way to help people and raise awareness in a way that helps them as well. You know, that's not taking advantage of personal trauma. . . I feel like since then anything that comes up, you know, you feel compelled, like you've got to try and help out if you can.*

Kaitlyn (BA Film and TV Production): *People that work for Spark 15 are so inspiring. Their main goal is to create that community, create that safe space. . . make that change and make that impact. Their stories were life changing and if we'd not gone on that trip I don't think there's be any other opportunity where I'd really be able to hear anything like that.*

Notably, one of the MA students from Nigeria found the experience to be deeply emotional and transformative. He discussed being particularly shocked by Kemilia's story in making “Freedom of a Butterfly” with her because she was from a nearby region to his home in Africa. He compared and contrasted his own life experiences thoughtfully with Kemilia's.

Sodiq (MA Digital Media Management): *She is African, I'm African. But, we are having a very different course to be where we are. I was having good access to education, I was having good access to being with my family. You know, I was safe where I'm living. It has taught me to have a very good human connection, to be connected to other people, you know, in terms of what they've been through. It might happen to anyone.*

These reflections from the Sheffield Hallam students strongly suggest a “transcendence of self” where empathy and connections were made through the project, and a learning driven by a desire to contribute to the community rather than by personal gain. Key attributes for foundational learning to occur (Mezirow and Taylor 2011) include individual

experience, critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation and authentic relationships—all described as key experiences by students on the project.

The UK students identified their learning as being specific to the unique conditions of this collaboration and outside regular teaching, aligning with Mbembe's ideas of a classroom without walls (Mbembe 2015).

Kaitlyn (BA Film and TV Production): *I think it's something you can't teach in a classroom, like, how to interact with people, how to tell a story in a sensitive way where you're not taking advantage of someone's situation and you're actually listening to them and their story.*

7.6. Life in Limbo: Two Joint Screening Events in 2024

Spark 15 were unable to attend any events in the UK in person due to visa restrictions for migrants in Malta. However, at each event there was a live link up to Malta for the event with contributions and a Q&A from the NGO remotely.

The screenings took place at Sheffield Hallam University (attended by over 200 people) and Migration Matters Festival, Britain's largest creative arts festival about sanctuary during Refugee Week at The Showroom Cinema (attended by over 50 people). The screenings further illustrated Freire and Giroux's theories of critical pedagogy and how it can move participants towards justice and equality. At the Sheffield Hallam University screening, the CEO of RAAH gave an in-person talk focusing on the importance of enabling safe passage and better conditions for people seeking sanctuary; and in a live linkup Spark 15 gave an overview of their uniquely refugee-led approach as an NGO, taking part in the films and the longer-term goals of the collaboration. University students gave short introductions to the films, and further guest speakers included representatives from Sheffield's City of Sanctuary and the HKC Refugee Clinic, who spoke about the importance of facilitating the safe reuniting of families separated by conflict and displacement and enabling migrants to be able to support themselves and contribute to the UK economy. The Migration Matters screening also featured a live link up with Spark 15 and audience discussion about the project, which also included the UK academics, RAAH members and students.

The NGOs from Spark 15 and RAAH described the events as being empowering, and there was discussion of how the film output could be used further to raise awareness and discussion.

Nag (Spark 15): *We were like, oh my gosh, you know, our story is being there so many people interested to listen and also encouraged us also to not only trying to understand, but we are also trying to do something similar in Malta because the outcome is great.*

Jas (RAAH): *When I was at the screening in Sheffield, it was so awesome, like it was so encouraging. And like, you can just see the buzz . . . From the RAAH team, like, we were really encouraged and felt very empowered by that screening. So, yeah, I think that was a great success. Thank you.*

Nag (Spark 15): *We should try to maximize this opportunity having the students and also you guys coming all from the Sheffield and show the interest and film. We shouldn't just leave it here.*

. . . it will serve for more of raising awareness and try to bring more of a local community together and open the discussion. I think showing the film it will be much easier . . . to tell some people about what we're doing . . . the picture worth thousand words.

Screening in different places will bring us also more people, especially young student or people with interest to come forward to Spark and say, listen, we need to do something. How can we help?

The Sheffield Hallam students also reflected positively on the event.

Jayne (BA Film and TV Production): *All the festivals and places we've shared these films is really important. I think that advocates for... making people aware of things and spreading that awareness.*

Callum: *It's great because they [Spark 15] get more eyes on them, more exposure, hopefully resulting in more donations and more help—and, and they also get like a product to show people... maybe it'll help people who have gone through those difficult journeys and difficult times, just by watching them because, because it's so powerful what you can do with a film.*

Students have continued to campaign and cite the influence of the project on their work experiences. For example, one of the Journalism students wrote a powerful report for the Times of Malta about the work of Spark 15, outlining suffering experienced by asylum seekers as a result of lengthy processing times; a Law student has undertaken voluntary work at City of Sanctuary in Sheffield; and two Film and TV Production graduates continue to collaborate with RAAH on independent film projects. Continuing to be active afterwards indicates how “[T]he emancipatory curriculum constitutes mutual relationship between self-reflection and action” (Verster et al. 2018, p. 2829).

A key outcome for Spark 15 is how the project inspired them to further share their stories and link up with other universities who might want to learn about migration, and develop further creative projects, particularly potentially with the University of Malta.

Nag (Spark 15): *Students came all the way from Sheffield and they show interest working with migrant community and refugees, that they face these things, and interact with them on the ground... we were very grateful to have such project collaboration with you.*

We hope that this is not just a project that finish and that's it. We need to be part of something big. We need to make big films and movies about it.

I believe that change start from even from small, but also try to go inside the community and the decision maker and stakeholders and the media is very important and very big powerful that we should use it to try to maximize and try to give spark platform.

8. Project Legacy and Conclusions

Spark 15 and RAAH continue to use the films in Malta to promote their work and create discussion. Notably, in 2025, two of the films were screened at TAMA's “Connecting the Dots”¹ VIP event in Malta, which gathered key stakeholders, activists, community leaders, the Malta Police Force and the University of Malta.

Informed by the findings of this research a film unit, *Film Beyond Borders*² has been set up to continue the collaboration between Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and RAAH. Film Beyond Borders is specifically for people seeking sanctuary and is designed to enable them to develop filmmaking and visual arts skills in Sheffield. It provides training workshops, mentoring, peer support from students and collaboration opportunities in the form of a summer school week followed by bespoke support to develop longer-term projects. UK collaborators on the films include City of Sanctuary, SOS Sudan, One World Choir, U-Mix and [Sheffield Hallam University](#) (n.d.-b). There is a focus on the process of collaboration with other participants as well as student and staff mentors from the university.

This study demonstrates how educators and universities can collaborate with communities and develop shared and ethically responsible impact projects as a collective, and how this output can create positive change for both students and community groups.

Importantly, through working collaboratively and placing people with first-hand experience at the centre of the filmmaking process (Cizek and Uricchio 2022; Childress

2017), we were able to collectively explore and develop an approach that was in direct conversation with justice movements—in this case, Spark 15, which is uniquely refugee led and supportive of migrant rights. The resulting film output counteracted narratives of disinformation both for audiences and university students, who described transformative learning experiences and how their knowledge of issues facing those seeking sanctuary has developed. The NGO members felt empowered through collaborating on films about their important work, sharing stories of the inspiring “changemakers” within their community and raising awareness of key issues faced.

Throughout this article, we have sought to highlight the relevance of critical pedagogy as of key importance in the learning process, explore how co-creating a documentary impact project with a grassroots community can both promote the work of NGOs and enhance students’ understanding of migration and the impact international law and border control has on individuals, and how to approach documentary production in an ethical and responsible way. We have also analysed how this kind of experiential learning can enable participants to develop professionally in their field (in this case, filmmaking and law).

The study highlights several important considerations that were integral to the success of the project as a collaboration and that point to areas for curricular design in identifying how a university documentary production can work in a just, collaborative and supportive way with local communities.

A shared multi-stakeholder planning group is important in identifying a strategy and purpose that benefits all involved.

- Placing importance on the “process,” forming relationships, dialogue and deep listening enables academic staff, students and a community to work together to effectively make powerful and authentic films that are grounded in principles of justice and inclusion.
- Making films for change can empower community members and provide platforms for discussion.
- Making authentic films requires them to be informed by lived experiences and perspectives through collaboration.
- Sharing stories enables all project participants to learn about each other in a powerful way that fosters empathy and connections.
- Through producing films and collaborating with community, students can change and develop their outlook about migration and people seeking sanctuary.
- A film project can provide community members with materials and a platform for promotion at conferences, festivals and awareness-raising events that counter narratives of disinformation.

We recognise some limitations to these findings in that this was a small group of students who self-selected to undertake the project, thus limiting the variation in student experiences captured, and the approach is yet to be conducted within regular curricular teaching. Another limitation highlighted by students and community members was the short duration of the production period of 14 days; a longer period would have allowed more time to film stories or events unfolding and further collaborate with the community. Living closer would have enabled Spark 15 members to attend the edit phase in person; however, rough cuts were regularly sent back and forth until the contributors had made their final decisions on the shape of the films.

Nevertheless, this study provides a case illustrating how educators could facilitate a collaborative learning environment and work with community groups on shared output, and create a curriculum that could be implemented to promote intercultural understanding and knowledge within and beyond the classroom.

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Notes

- ¹ Film Beyond Borders aims to create and screen social justice films and art about migration that challenge how we interpret the world, and that call for change. The unit is designed to make media driven from within communities and is grounded in principles of respect, inclusion and digital equality. The resulting summer school films have been distributed at the grassroots community level, film festivals and human rights events such as Migration Matters and Aesthetica Film Festival. The films tell inspirational stories and explore themes of belonging, displacement, migration and human rights, and the need for safe, legal routes to find safety in Europe. Two key films include Hafiz's Story, which charts Hafiz Trjok's incredible journey from war-torn Sudan to finding new beginnings in Sheffield; and One World Choir, a film featuring powerful spoken word poetry, song and stories of strength found through a community choir. The films have been screened not only at festivals, but also community events such as at U-Mix which promotes inclusion through sport; Learn for Life, which provides education, training, and support to local residents, refugees, and asylum seekers; and at an art, music and poetry event alongside the feature film *Sudan, Remember Us* at the Showroom Cinema (<https://www.instagram.com/p/DPn-cufiLuo/>, accessed on 6 September 2025). These events featured panel discussion with the filmmakers to explore key themes such as war, migration, resilience and protest.
- ² TAMA's *Connecting the Dots* (<https://tama.ngo/events>, accessed on 6 September 2025) (TAMA n.d.) event was billed as shedding light on the real-life experiences of women who travelled through Libya to Malta and confronting sexual and gender-based violence in the context of migration. Kemilia Arabe also contributed to an article for a Malta web-site (Tortell 2025) sharing her powerful personal story. Freedom of a Butterfly tells her story of tof forging a new life in Malta and how a chance encounter with a family led to finding friendship, love and support with a family in Malta. The story centres on Kemilia's connection with Adam, the young son, who draws a butterfly symbol for her representing freedom, and the family's deep appreciation of the joy and lessons she brings to their lives. The story is heartwarming and inspiring, showing the power and connection new relationships bring and Kemilia's indomitable spirit. As an observational film with interviews, it is one of the most powerful films drawing attention to the importance of support for young people finding themselves alone in a new country.

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