



## NTFS 20th Anniversary - Q&A with Dr Pratap Rughani

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Dr Pratap Rughani ruminates on his career progression, marrying documentary-production with curriculum development and the impact of the NTFS

**Tell us about how you initially came to make documentary films and how this journey shaped your current teaching context?**

Aged 19, I taught (briefly) on a Vietnamese refugee camp in Hong Kong during the summer break from my literature degree. I was

reading Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* and James Baldwin then. It anchored three things:

- 1) **Education is an essential road to new chances**
- 2) **The importance of empowering marginalised people to speak in their own terms**
- 3) **The responsibility of media to expose abuses of power, often revealed by listening at the margins of exclusion**

**I couldn't get the Hong Kong press to publish what I was seeing/hearing, so I wrote about it for the University paper on my return to London, where I grew up. This shaped my creative work, including my photography and the kind of plays I was directing and it got me interested in factual storytelling.**

As a postgraduate, I was a reporter on *The Independent* newspaper, then joined BBC TV as a Production

Trainee. Television back then barely reflected the pluralism of British life but I am grateful for receptive colleagues who encouraged me.

I became a Script Editor, finding and commissioning new and diverse writers for BBC Drama. I found my *métier* in documentary film and made over thirty-five films for national and international broadcast at Channel 4; BBC; US Networks, the British Council and cinema/festival exhibition. I developed intercultural narratives, conceiving documentary as an arena in which people of radically different perspectives are juxtaposed to develop dialogue in the broader culture.

Sometimes this was in the aftermath of conflict, informed by research and filming e.g. in the Sierra Leone civil war, Rwanda and especially my Channel 4 work with Desmond Tutu and the Truth Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Often there were gaps of comprehension to navigate between majority communities and their 'others' in Aboriginal Australia, British Islam, Native America or the UK nations. Intercultural communication and intersectionality is the constant in this work, and the joys of developing dialogue through meeting difference.

At the same time I sometimes felt frustrated that the speed of production left little room for reflection. In 1991 I was approached by Goldsmiths College to devise a new course unit on 'writing for

media' and through the following years I continued to develop university teaching and learning whilst moving in and out of production.

**How do you interweave your film practice with teaching, learning and curriculum development? What are the particular challenges to Teaching and Learning in Documentary Studies?**

For me, thinking/theory and practice/making are wings of the same dove. The creative process integrates them and can help keep the maker honest by returning to a zone of 'becoming', through co-creation and collaborative pedagogies. I know this most viscerally through documentary film making but it could equally be understood through writing, painting, design or other practices across many disciplines, including some sciences. Typically, the work involves haptic or 'embodied knowledge'.

The main challenge is to configure teaching and learning spaces to shape a curriculum rooted in the dynamics of creative processes in each discipline and its histories or theoretical frames. Thinking informs the practice and vice versa, especially when we guide students' work into the world. Great ideas and sometimes complex and conceptual thinking make sense and are contested in the world through this artwork. It comes alive in the public sphere, through a pattern of audience response in a circuit that can mature into a connection and build community.

**How has your work as a documentary film maker impacted on your approach to excellence in learning and teaching?**

When realising its potential, documentary-making involves 'deep listening' and the best work configures that kind of space for audiences too. That means storytelling that can meet other ways of seeing, living and being in the world. It implies a willingness to be influenced and persuaded in the light of better knowledge.

That could be a definition of education too. In that sense, I feel incredibly privileged to be continually exploring perspectives beyond my preferred views and limitations. Each student - like each film - can open a new continent. The work that we make through our learning and teaching connections with students and colleagues (underpinned by collaborative methodologies) enables something new to be born - if I can attend well enough to the specific design of the environment to best enable the development of another's learning.

**How did this work in these areas lead to your decision to apply for NTF?**

I hadn't heard of NTFs but applied because colleagues I respect – Shân Wareing; Terry Finnigan and Sally Brown - wanted to support me or my College. I know from encouraging others to apply that

some applicants feel reticent about seeing themselves as an NTF and are wary of making any claim about 'excellence' in our work.

**I know many teachers more than worthy of this recognition who don't go near the word 'excellence'. Sometimes it takes others to see and name 'excellence'.**

It is a valuable journey to understand what is more deeply meant by this language. It fired me to do some research on how to support colleagues who feel held back by this language. The award is valuable in as much as it creates opportunities to clarify a vision for teaching and learning, often becoming visible in the 'rear-view mirror' or by reflecting on our work; for me it's about cultivating the conditions for wisdom and compassion in education.

**How did you feel when you found out you won the award?**

**What did the recognition mean to you?**

I felt embarrassed initially and still see it as recognition of the learning and teaching culture that I grow in, rather than a personal achievement. Alongside NTFs mentioned, I feel grateful to many, many people who helped me, especially Dr Gargi Rughani and

Professor Alan Sinfield (who died in 2002 and 2017 respectively) and whose close attention and interest helped give the gift of (self) confidence to respond to the world as it strikes me in both its beauty and the inequalities that disfigure it.

**What have been your main achievements since you won the award? How did your NTF Award contribute to these achievements?**

Outer achievements include my students' success plus my own research, industry and teaching awards e.g. for work in embedding ethics in pedagogy and curricula, and for my film *Justine*, in partnership with disability arts group, Project Artworks.

But real 'achievements' are inner rather than outer. On a good day, I am strongly focused on the kind of attention that helps people learn and grow into our deeper intelligence and values: to co-create a culture that's more fully human or humane; to develop education that of its nature serves social justice. I sometimes sense that my "ego" is less and less involved in this.

**The best response to the great good fortune I've enjoyed in the gift of education is to help give these gifts to others. I've been very**

**fortunate in the encouragement and opportunities that mentors and colleagues in broadcasting and universities offered.**

**Please could you tell us about your current work at UAL and your work on developing inclusive curricula and inter-cultural communication?**

How long have you got? Inclusivity is simple to say. But how to enable the deeper meeting needed when people and histories long separated or polarised are co-joined? I write curricula that embrace disciplinary excellence that reflects a truer face of diverse talent (e.g. LCC's MA in Documentary Film). Pluralism means improving the quality of what we do and developing the skills that support better inter-cultural exchange. I'm committed to integrating practice-based teaching and research through pedagogic innovation rooted in teaching and research ethics.

**What was the impact of your time as Vice-Chair for the Committee of the Association of National Teaching Fellows?**

I was honoured to be elected Vice-Chair for the Committee of the Association of National Teaching Fellows, and to serve alongside the great Sally Brown (and therefore Phil Race too). My role was



with a leadership role to 'scope national developments' for NTF response that included co-writing the NTFs' TEF response and as an interest group, lobby for TEF to represent teaching values in the new metrics, focusing on dialogue with Peers with university expertise in the House of Lords. Several Peers responded. This meant communicating with several hundred NTFs across the network to incorporate feedback and moderate debate at several NTF conferences. The best bit was being part of an outstanding team of NTFs whose generosity of spirit has always been exemplary.

**How do you think the sector has changed – good or bad – in the years since you won an NTF award?**

The marketisation of higher education (without an electoral mandate) means that we must be more focused on education's responsibility to help students from all backgrounds, if we are not to further perpetuate disadvantage. The way we emerge from Covid is critical here.

**What role do you see National Teaching Fellows/The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme having in addressing the challenges faced by the sector?**

I am writing this in week eight of lockdown. Many of us are (re)discovering the affordances of online tools and new ways of

teaching. Configured correctly, we could be on the cusp of a quantum leap in education, towards something more democratic. NTFs are already helping model the pedagogies that enable this.

Diversity is about excellence. NTF selection is conceived in terms of excellence. Are we an excellent group? Is excellence reflected in how we conduct ourselves; how we teach, learn and employ others? Is true excellence possible without diversity of perspectives and thought? I'm rarely in environments where staff are anywhere near reflecting the diversity of students who fund our institutions.

If diversity is a metric of our progress what can we say of UK universities where there are currently 25 black women professors out of 16,000+ professors? How can NTFs effectively challenge this (and other kinds) of deficit and act on the [EHRC's wake-up call to universities?](#)

### **What are your hopes for the next 20 years of the NTFS?**

I hope that we will do even better in nurturing and recognising talent that is not just in our own image and that we will deepen the ability to 'hold' difference. I'm currently writing new course materials to develop deeper listening and thus nurture more diverse narratives. Ideally this will mean better dialogue that can attend to competing versions of history and experience to embrace the bigger story of

multi-culture. I hope this will help broaden education in a richer teaching and learning landscape.



**Share your #NTFSis20 story with us on Twitter and join the [Advance HE Connect](#) group especially for National Teaching Fellows.**

*Dr Pratāp Rughani is Associate Dean of Research & Professor of Documentary Practices, London College of Communication, University of the Arts London and Director at Lotus Films. He interleaves film practice with writing, teaching and learning, with a particular focus on curriculum development that integrates teaching, research and practice. His research interests unpack documentary film practice; the relationship of ethics to aesthetics and the value of 'not knowing' as a spur to creative thought.*

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/ntfs-20th-anniversary-qa-dr-pratap-rughani>