BEING LITERATE: FUNCTIONAL SKILL OR CULTURAL PARTICIPATION?
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I am very honoured to have been given the opportunity to speak to you and very grateful to the University for inviting me to Osaka. I do hope I can be helpful to your thinking and teaching here, but I am very conscious that it is not easy to establish dialogue across linguistic and cultural boundaries. We may discover some interesting misunderstandings today, but we can always learn from misunderstandings, once they have been revealed!

I am going to talk about what I think it means to be literate in the 21st century, but unlike most of you, I am not speaking from an academic perspective. I work in the British Film Institute which is a cultural institution funded by the UK Government, so I am a sort of cultural bureaucrat (though I was a teacher once). When I argue, as I shall, for a new concept of literacy that includes non-print media, my preoccupation tends to be not so much with establishing the theoretical case for such a concept, but in considering the implications of such a concept for public policy, for investment in training and resources. I spend most of my life merely trying to persuade policy-makers and funders to take this concept seriously – which has to include trying to understand why they don't take it seriously – and finding arguments that might shift their prejudices.

Whether or not I have been successful in this mission is something we can come back to in more detail, in the discussion this afternoon. To summarise for now: we do have some very small and marginal requirements for studying the media in our National Curriculum in England, which are tacked on to the subject content specifications for English, and there are a few more which are part of Citizenship. What I have learned over the past fifteen years is that little additional requirements like this, which really don't affect the central concerns of a subject, really have hardly any impact at all on what teachers do. They allow a few enthusiasts to develop some nice ideas, but the majority of teachers don't have either the knowledge or the confidence to see the potential of these requirements.

So my first important point for you today is that, for media literacy to have the impact many of us think it should, it's probably futile to argue for it simply as a little addition to the school curriculum. When I say this I'm not referring to the possibility of specialist media courses that might be offered to older students as part of the examination system. We do have such courses in the UK and they are quite successful – although they are only taken by quite a small minority of students. What I'm talking about today is the place, or potential place, for media literacy within the mandatory school curriculum for all children up to the age of

about 14. In that context, making the case for media literacy as an extra part of the curriculum that needs to be added on somehow, is unlikely to be very successful. What we need to do is to look at the concept of literacy itself. We need to recognise that, in the kind of culture we inhabit now, we need to think again about what it should mean to be literate.

In Japan, I am illiterate. Almost all the writing I see: in airports and stations, shops and restaurants, advertising and newspapers, is completely incomprehensible to me. If I try to memorise the Kanji characters for a word I know, such as "Osaka", I find it incredibly difficult to recognise them again. This is a different experience for me than being in a Western European country where, even if I don't speak the language, it is easy for me to recognise essential words like the names of places and important things like toilets or ticket offices. So being here has given me some idea of what it's like to be completely unable to read or write. That's an interesting experience for me and one that reminds me how important reading and writing are in any culture, and why they have dominated the concept of literacy for so long.

But let's consider what I would need to learn if I were to try and become as literate in this country as you are. Clearly, not being able to read and write would only be part of my problems! My most obvious difficulty is that I don't know Japanese. I might be able to learn some basic Japanese from books and tapes, which would probably get me to the level of rather literal "decoding" from English into Japanese and back again. I don't think you'd regard that as being literate enough to get a job here or to participate in social life. To do that, I'd need to learn an enormous amount more, about the whole culture in which your language is embedded. I couldn't get that from textbooks. I'd have to learn it from people, from literature and art and history. But consider for a moment please, how literate you think I'd become if I didn't also read your newspapers, watch your TV, listen to your radio, play your computer games and see your films? If you got the job of being my Japanese literacy teacher, would you want to leave those media out of my lessons?

If, as I suspect, you'd want to include them, what would be your reasons? Would it be simply that they would help me to acquire reading, writing and speaking skills? Or would it also be that they would help me to understand your culture more fully, to appreciate nuance and subtext, to understand jokes and avoid social gaffes, to recognise other people's interests? In fact it would probably be for both reasons, because once you get beyond the basic skills of decoding the language, it's impossible to disentangle the skills that make you a good communicator from those that enable you to take on any of the roles that you might want to take on as a grown-up member of society, such as employee, citizen, consumer, parent, spouse or friend. Literacy, surely, has to be seen as the repertoire of skills that enables a person to play all those roles: and it's a repertoire drawn from a wide range of cultural experiences, not just from written language.

That's looking at literacy from the point of view of our individual life experiences as adults. I think that's a good place to start with any consideration of what should and should not be taught in schools. But of course when we do start to think about the school curriculum and how it should be taught and managed, the issues tend to look rather different.

I'd like to start by going right to the other end of the spectrum, as it were, and ask you to think about what kinds of cultural experiences children bring with them when they first come into school. A very large part of these experiences have probably involved engagement with the media –especially the moving image media of film, television and video.

Children in media-saturated cultures like ours watch an enormous amount of moving image media. Televisions are on in many homes for much of the day, and it's common practice for parents to use television or video as a child-minder. But children's engagement with the moving image is often quite active. They quickly identify favourite films and programmes. They use visual search on a video recorder to view and re-view segments of videos that they like, over and over again. They can do this by the time they are two and a half. So by the time they get to school, at the age of five or six, most children will have been studying moving image media for at least three years.

Is it really legitimate to use the word "studying" for that kind of activity? The conventional view – held by educators, child psychologists, and the like, is that time spent watching television and video is time more or less wasted. They say it makes children less sociable, more obese, predisposed towards violence and sexual stereotyping, less able to concentrate, lacking in linguistic skills – a whole string of bad effects. They would certainly say that if children come to school after watching TV for three years then that must be a problem that teachers have to overcome.

Well, I simply do not want to go into those arguments at all. That is not my concern today. I will say in passing that I think many of the negative criticisms of children's media consumption are exaggerated, and driven more by the need to avoid investing in proper child care and safe public spaces, than they are in rigorous research, but that is the only comment I want to make. What I do want to argue is that if children have spent all that time with TV then they must have learned something, because little children do not waste time. Children of two, three, four years old are learning machines: that's what they do. They learn. They may not learn what we want them to learn, but everything they encounter or do contributes to their learning: they learn more at that age than they ever will at any other stage of their lives. None of us has the learning capacity of a two-year-old. So rather than dismiss all that TV watching as useless, let's consider what they may have learned from it.

A group of researchers based at the University of Minnesota[i] in the USA are investigating aspects of early literacy in young children. They make a distinction between two kinds of skill: the skills of decoding written language, and the skills of comprehension. They point out that in the past, more research has been done on decoding skills than on comprehension skills. The commonly held view is that children must first acquire basic language skills (phonological awareness, vocabulary, character recognition and so on); then they develop the skills of decoding the written language: that is, translating the written code into meaningful language units. It is generally believed that they develop the capacity to comprehend a text on the basis of having acquired these decoding skills. The Minnesota researchers challenge this view. They argue that children develop comprehension skills from a very early age, at the same time as, or maybe before, they acquire decoding skills.

Let's make sure we're clear about what "comprehension" means. If I give you these two sentences:

The professor gave a lecture to the students.
He didn't notice that several of them had fallen asleep.

I'm sure you can very easily make connexions between those two statements. You have probably assumed that "he" in the second sentence refers to the professor and that "them" refers to the students. You have probably also inferred a causal relationship between the two sentences: the students fell asleep because the professor's lecture was boring. The fact that the professor didn't notice may also have suggested something to you about his character. None of these links between the two sentences is explicit, but as skilled readers you can easily identify them. This ability to infer connexions between different parts of a text is what comprehension is all about. It's what enables you to see the text as a coherent whole, and to make judgments about its relation to the real world. It's completely different from the skill of being able to decode the words on the screen, and of course it's derived in part from your wider cultural knowledge.

The Minnesota researchers carried out an interesting experiment based on this distinction between decoding and comprehension. Their aim was to try and find reliable ways of predicting the later reading achievement of six-year-olds starting school. They gave two tests to a group of six-year-olds: one to identify their levels of basic "pre-reading" language skills, and one to identify their levels of comprehension of a TV programme – an episode of *Rugrats*. To test their comprehension of TV they focused particularly on cause and effect – finding out whether the children could identify the reasons for a character behaving in a certain way, for example. They then tracked this group for two years and tested their levels of reading attainment when they got to eight years old. What they found was that high levels of TV comprehension at age six correlated very closely with high reading attainment at age eight. They were a better indicator of future reading attainment than mastery of basic language skills. In other words if

you are a "good TV viewer" when you are six you are more likely to be a good reader when you are eight. They also found that the correlation continued: the good eight-year-old readers continued to be good at understanding TV narratives. What they were good at, in fact, was comprehension.

This research therefore suggests is that comprehension can be thought of as largely a generic skill, which is vital to understanding any kind of text. It involves learning about devices such as narrative structure, character functions, symbolic conventions, genre: devices that you don't need to learn just from print media. Comprehension skills like these can be developed very early, through engagement with moving image media, and extended later to print. And if comprehension skills go on being fostered, children's competence in understanding all kinds of text is likely to increase.

I think that research offers us a fascinating insight, which has powerful implications for how we approach early literacy. But I also think there is a problem with it. I don't agree that children's comprehension skills are somehow being "naturally" nurtured by TV-watching. That implies that TV is immediately comprehensible to very young children, but clearly it isn't. Let's consider two-year-olds.

Two to two-and-a-half is the age at which many children start independently choosing to watch TV and have the motor skills to switch it on and insert their tapes or DVDs. But at that age a great deal of what they see is almost incomprehensible! They can't follow much of a story. They can't understand most of the language. Almost all the cultural references are beyond them. And yet they will watch it, probably intermittently, and they will very quickly identify favourites. With access to video they will re-view their favourites with a level of persistence that goes way beyond what any adult could manage. I'm sure many of you have seen this happening. What's going on when they do this?

Let's look at a bit of the kind of thing a two-year-old might enjoy. I've watched a two-year-old watch this so I know this can be a favourite. As you watch it, try to imagine what a two-year-old might make of it.

MONSTERS INC extract (2 minutes maximum)

I suggest that a young child watching this will begin to learn that sequences of images and combinations of images and sounds can be purposeful, and even predictable. For example, we take it for granted that a big image of a green one-eyed monster's face following on from a small image of a green one-eyed monster walking along is showing us the same monster, closer up. Very young children don't see this at first: they think it's a different, bigger monster. When they do realise it's the same character, shown differently, they have started to learn the rules of a system. Why are we shown a close up of a face? It doesn't mimic human perception: we don't look at something several feet away and then

suddenly see it right in front of our noses. A close up is used because the filmmakers want to draw our attention to what that character is saying, or to a character's reaction to something that's just happened or just been said. A close up is a filmic convention used for dramatic emphasis. It was not used in the early years of cinema: it evolved as the language of cinema evolved. Its use is not arbitrary: it is governed by rules.

It is true that moving image media do make use of instinctive human behaviour in relation to the visual in such conventions as eye line matching, following movement, etc (Messaris 1994)[ii]. For example, when we see a character look off-screen, we expect the next shot to show us what that character is looking at. There are many other conventions in cinematic language that relate closely to instinctive human behaviour, and which seem natural because we are so used to them. They help to sustain the illusion of reality, which is one of the things we all like about moving image media. But what is shown to us on a cinema screen cannot be described as instinctive or natural: it is constructed. Think about an obvious and simple shot such as a camera movement following a character crossing a room. This doesn't happen by accident. It is there on purpose: because a director has decided it should be there. It's required perhaps because the audience needs to see the context of the action, or needs to be shown exactly how long it takes this character to cross the room, or because that actor is talking or reacting during that movement.

Furthermore, moving image media are multi-modal. They tend to get labelled as "visual media", but this overlooks the important functions of aural modes such as voice, music and sound design.[iii] You only have to try watching TV with the sound turned down, or listening to a sound track without the visuals, to realise how important sound is as a component of meaning in moving image media.

Finally, we need to remember that these media are also time-based. Like music and dance, a film or television programme has a fixed duration. It uses rhythm and pace to contribute to meaning. The relationship between "screen time" and "real time" can be deliberately varied: it can be the same, or it can be slower. By cutting to and fro between the speeding train and the heroine tied to the track, screen time is stretched to increase suspense. By cutting straight from a proposal scene to a wedding day, many days or weeks are elided, but the narrative logic is clear. These conventions may seem "natural", but they are not. We have all learned to understand them.

So it's important to recognise and accept that moving image media have developed codes and conventions which, like linguistic grammars, are rule-bound and which we have to decode in order to understand the medium. In moving image media, there are distinctive and medium-specific codes and conventions through which time is managed in narratives, characters are presented, generic categories are signalled, analogies expressed, mood and atmosphere are

indicated, and different modalities in the relationship between text and reality are established.

What I want to argue here is that children are acquiring skills in reading these codes at the same time, if not before, they acquire comprehension skills. For example: I once took a group of children to see the film *Oliver!* The youngest of the group couldn't really follow the plot, but at one point when the music swelled to a climax and the camera pulled out in a long crane shot, they asked, "Is this the end?" It wasn't: it was just a big song and dance number. My young companions' comprehension skills weren't good enough for them to recognise that it couldn't be the end because a lot of narrative strands hadn't been resolved. But their decoding skills were good enough for them to identify the conventions that usually do signal the end of a film.

So I think the Minnesota researchers may have missed something out when they tested children only for their TV comprehension skills. Those six-year-olds must actually have had an impressive repertoire of TV decoding skills as well. This doesn't undermine the researchers' findings – in fact it adds to their force. We need to acknowledge that children come into school having learned not only how to follow cause and effect in film and TV narratives but also a huge and complex system of moving image codes and conventions. We need to accept that this learning is important; but we also need to be very clear about why it's important. The tempting argument to make is simply that film, television and video are useful stepping-stones to the acquisition of traditional literacy. It's clearly true that if teachers take account of children's early audio-visual experiences – respect them; encourage children to talk about them – then that will help the children to become competent readers and writers.

It's a tempting argument – but its value is very limited, because it just takes us back to the traditional idea of literacy as nothing more than a competence in reading and writing, a competence that is separate from, and more valuable than, other kinds of comprehension skills. This kind of hierarchical distinction is unhelpful and destructive. We need to think of literacy as a repertoire of related skills, some of which are generic and some of which are specific to particular media, but all of which are of value.

But what might this mean for teaching and learning? Let's look at a film at this point to help us think this through. The film I want to show you is part of a teaching resource, one of three that we have produced for use by literacy teachers. Between them they cover the whole age range from three to 14, and each resource is based on short films that weren't originally made for educational use or indeed for children. This film is part of the resource for lower secondary schools, so we intend it to be seen and studied by 11-14 year olds.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER
By Michael Dudok de Wit

8 minutes (from BFI *Screening Stories* resource)

I hope you agree that it would be hard to think of that film only in terms of its usefulness to the teaching of literacy. Most people find it extremely powerful and very moving: it demands thought and reflection. It's not an obscure or challenging film, but its meaning is not completely obvious either. It uses this very simple structure of repeated visits to the shore; the story setting remains the sea-dyke and the changes in the weather so that we only glimpse moments from these lives, which are going on elsewhere. Even the truth status of what we see is not certain: does the father really row away or is that a metaphor? Is the entire last sequence – or maybe event the whole film – in the daughter's imagination? These key elements are left open – and yet the film's emotional power is very clear.

What would teachers expect to do with that film? In the UK, the instinctive response of English teachers would be to ask pupils to write about it, using the film's emotional impact as a stimulus. So suggested topics might be, tell the daughter's story from her own point of view, or imagine that you are one of the people who sees her returning so often to the shore. Those would be quite nice tasks and probably some very good imaginative writing would result. But the film then is just used as a starting-point: its own story-telling strategies aren't examined.

One of the things we suggest that teachers might do is to ask pupils to think about how this story is told. For instance, just think about how you might begin the story, using words. How would you write the opening sentence of "Father and Daughter"? Perhaps you'd just like to think about that for a moment.

Here are some examples from other people who've tried the same task.

He knew he was going to have to say goodbye – perhaps for ever.
Every weekend we used to ride out to the shore where the boat was moored.
The only sound they can hear is the call of the curlew.
One day, Daddy went away.

Each of those writers has had to make choices: tense (present, past, past continuous), point of view, and what the first piece of information is going to be. In contrast, a film can instantaneously offer many levels of information. Let's just look at that opening again.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER
OPENING 2 MINUTES

We have several different camera positions in relation to the people and the bicycle wheel, we have the birds and the landscape, and we have the music. We never see the people's faces close-up, and there is no dialogue, so two of the

conventional ways in which film usually conveys emotion are not provided. Instead, we have the actions, and just that sudden repeated embrace, seen at a distance in the landscape. There is also of course the style of the drawing and the type of animation used, and the very limited range of colour. All of these are choices by the filmmaker, and they are all just as meaningful as the writer's choice of words.

By being asked to look so closely at these few moments of the story opening, and to think about how two different media handle it, pupils do have a chance to think more deeply about how story telling works. They may come to understand that all story telling involves many choices, and that those choices matter. And on the way, they will, inevitably, come to see that film is a unique and distinctive medium. Film has its own ways of telling stories that cannot simply be replicated in words. And maybe this will encourage them to watch other films, and also television, more attentively.

So I guess I should admit that when we produced this resource we were sort of sneaking something in under the wire. Teachers buy *Screening Stories* because they are required to teach literacy and they're keen to find new approaches to something they find a bit daunting. But what we hope is that when they see a film as powerful and rich as this one, they can't ignore its intrinsic value. They may start off using it to teach concepts like narrative and metaphor but they will, we hope, realise that they are generic concepts and it is equally valuable to teach them directly through film. Certainly many teachers who have used these resources do come back to us and say, "Please find us more wonderful films like these" because they can see that this is a way of providing their pupils with important and memorable cultural experiences.

If you've encountered other accounts of media literacy, especially from North America, you'll know that the approach I've just described is unusual. Most of the writers who have made the case for media literacy in the Anglophone countries tend to address only the mainstream media that children already watch, and place a strong emphasis on critical and analytical skills. For many writers, the implicit or even explicit starting point is that the media are problematic: they promote stereotypes and biased views; they provide unsuitable content such as sexual and violent material; they are like an addictive drug that children can't stop watching. And even those writers who do have quite a positive approach to the media do not make the case for including the kind of material I've just shown you.

I think this is a problem, and it may be part of the reason that media educators in most countries have found it difficult to get media literacy programmes into national curricula. When we use the term "literacy" in relation to written media, the implication is that written media are of value, and that being literate comprises a set of skills that are desirable because they will enable you to access that value. But when many media educators use the term "literacy" in relation to media, they don't invoke the same sense of value. They argue that the

media are significant and powerful, but not that they are of cultural value like literature or drama. They imply that what a media literate person can do is defend themselves against the media. This is confusing, as well as unnecessary!

Just because the media can be misused, and may provide objectionable content, does not mean that our primary response to them as educators should be a negative one. In fact, as I hope I have demonstrated to you already, the media are a vital part of our culture and are capable of providing unique and powerful experiences. They are also clearly vital to our political processes and commercial systems. So surely then the right starting-point for the development of media literacy must be to offer powerful experiences like *Father and Daughter*. Whatever comes later, learners ought to begin with high expectations of what the media can achieve. This also makes sense to educators. No worthwhile educational enterprise can be founded on a negative attitude.

That may be that starting-point, but of course, a great deal does have to come later. I have concentrated in this presentation on the idea that we need to see literacy differently, as comprising a continuum of skills relating to many different media, and as relating to our total cultural experience, not just part of it. The logical extension of that argument must obviously mean that learning for literacy has to include many aspects of the media, not just beautiful art films. So I'd like to conclude by indicating two other major aspects of this "wider literacy" that would be essential parts of any learners' experience.

Just as we expect children to learn to read newspapers as well as poetry, literacy learning has to address non-fictional media forms: information and persuasion. Every citizen ought to be able to interrogate and analyse news, documentary and advertising. They should be able to use techniques of decoding and comprehension to figure out what's true and what isn't, but also to look at larger patterns of who's represented how and who's not represented at all. They need to understand systems of ownership, so that they can think about who's speaking on whose behalf, and in whose interests, and why. But at the same time learners need to have opportunities to think about what better representations might look like, and to experiment with producing their own media representations. Creative activity with media is thus an absolutely vital part of literacy, and it doesn't necessarily have to be time-consuming and expensive. The best place to start learning the creative side of moving image media is not with the camera but with the computer. Trying out simple but creative exercises like adding a different sound track to a short piece of existing film, or trying out three or four shots in a different order, is the quickest and most effective way of realizing what kinds of choices you need to make when you are filming. It's also, of course, a very effective way of developing your critical skills. This is where the decoding skills I described when we looked at *Monsters Inc* earlier on, become vitally important. It's a liberating and thrilling experience to realise how much control you can have over the meaning of moving images by manipulating tiny elements of a scene. So creative work with moving image media doesn't have to be a huge

unmanageable task in the classroom: it can involve frequent and quite informal opportunities for experimentation and the development of skills. In other words, it could be a normal part of education, not a very occasional extra.

As a final summary, I'll leave you with a very simple formula. What I've talked about this morning are three strands of literacy learning, which we can apply to all forms of communication, including the media. They are:

CULTURE = experiencing the full range of cultural forms
CRITICISM = developing critical skills in analysis and evaluation
CREATIVITY = developing creative skills of expression and communication

In English, these words all start with "C" so we can call them the "three Cs". I've focused more on the cultural strand today, and have emphasised moving image media more than other media forms. This doesn't mean that the cultural strand is more important than the other two, or that moving image media are more important than, say, audio or Internet. All the media, and all three of these learning strands, inform and enhance each other. It's limiting and less effective if they are taught separately or sequentially. Of course how that can be managed in the classroom, or inserted into curricula, is quite another matter, and we'll have to leave that for another day! Let's just remember that the proper starting-point for educational policy and planning has to be the learner, not the teachers or the school administrator. So what I've tried to concentrate on today has been what it could mean, for learners, to become truly literate.

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[i] See for example "Role of Early Narrative Understanding in Predicting Future Reading Comprehension" by Kathleen E. Kremer, Julia S. Lynch, Panayiota Kendeou, Jason Butler and Paul van den Broek, University of Minnesota, and Elizabeth Pugzles Lorch, University of Kentucky, paper presented at AERA Conference 2002, and available at www.ciera.org.

[ii] Paul Messaris (1994), *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind and Reality*, Westview Press.

[iii] Andrew Burn (2003) *English in Education* vol 37 no 3.