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MEDIA LITERACY: A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH

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It cannot be claimed that education for media literacy is firmly anchored in primary schools in any of the four nations that comprise the UK. Curricular requirements are vague, relatively marginal, and confusing; and in England, they are once again being substantially changed by the coalition Government. Despite these unpromising circumstances, there are many examples of excellent practice. However, a merely descriptive account of the situation in England will be misleading. I shall therefore offer a brief analysis of the conflicting and contradictory policies and institutional interests that have affected the development of media literacy education at the primary level, before going on to identify elements of good practice and the contexts in which these have been able to develop. I will show examples of training and teaching strategies, research and development projects and classroom resources.

In the UK we have quite a long tradition of media education, dating from at least as far back as the 1930s.[i] Since the 1970s, the best-known aspect of media education in the UK has been the fact that we have a number of specialist Media Studies courses for 14-18 year olds, leading to qualifications that can help students to gain access to university. However, these courses are all optional, and, although they are taken by over 100,000 candidates annually, this is only about 7% of the age group.

The courses are remarkably demanding: they require an extensive mastery of different critical theories, a wide understanding of the media industries, and some sophisticated practical work. They are academic courses: in other words they are definitely not intended as a route into employment in the media industries: this only happens in even more specialist courses at post-graduate level. And although you can take Film Studies as a separate course, Media Studies has always included the study of film, television, radio, press, magazines and popular music and today includes computer games, websites and social networking.

However, Media Studies is widely derided in the media and regarded with suspicion by middle-class parents wanting to get their kids into prestigious universities, even though it isn't necessarily a barrier to this. This prejudice has been one of the factors that have made it hard to establish a case for making media education available to everyone, starting with much younger children. The idea of media education as an entitlement for every child is an argument that's been developing over the last 20 years and some progress has been made. For example, there are small elements of media education in the mainstream secondary school curricula of all four UK nations, although this is not supported by teacher training or assessment and the quality of work is very uneven.

But parental and media prejudice is not the only reason that it's been difficult to establish media education more widely, let alone to do the more logical thing that you

want to achieve: anchor it in primary schools. When the new Labour Government under Tony Blair came to power in 1997, new policies for film and other media were put in place that made the picture even more confused.

One of the first decisions by the new Government was to invest generously in film. It set up the UK Film Council to fund and promote British film, and this new bureaucracy behaved as bureaucracies always do, creating whole lot of new film organisations around the UK. It also took over the funding of the British Film Institute. The impulse behind all this – to try and improve the cultural status of film in the UK – was admirable, but the execution of the plan was muddled and it was unfortunate that they failed to consult intelligently with those who were already teaching about the media in schools.

The Blair Government approached other media in a different way. In 2003, they set up a new regulator for broadcasting, telephony and the internet, called Ofcom. Amongst other responsibilities allocated to Ofcom was the duty "to work with others to promote media literacy". The idea of creating a statutory responsibility for media literacy, and of giving it to a regulator, emerged from one of those periodic and perhaps particularly Anglo-Saxon moral panics about media influences, particularly on the young, and particularly in respect of sex and violence in the media. Encouraging media literacy was seen by policy-makers as a handy way of keeping the child protection lobby at bay, by saying "it's very difficult to stop children watching this stuff but we can provide them with the critical skills to resist it". From the outset therefore, media literacy in the UK was distorted in three ways: firstly it was perceived as being simply an aspect of child protection, secondly, it was seen as having nothing to do with studying film or the press, as these industries are not regulated by Ofcom; and thirdly, it seemed to have little to do with the UK's long-established traditions of teaching and learning about all the media, which has always been known as "media education", rather than "media literacy".

There was no opportunity for open debate about what media literacy might mean, so the industries who were regulated by Ofcom got the impression that media literacy was something new and different, and something that they were best placed to undertake. They saw the opportunity for repackaging their own products and services in the guise of media. So an exciting glimpse behind the scenes of a TV production became media literacy, as did the need to upgrade your digital skills so that you could buy a new generation mobile phone, or subscribe to faster broadband. I should emphasise here that none of this was Ofcom's fault: in fact Ofcom did its best to negotiate a difficult position and supported some important media education initiatives. The problem lay in the Government's original decision to give the responsibility for media literacy to a regulator – and for choosing the term "media literacy" in the first place.

To sum up: we now effectively have two policy sectors that relate to media learning:

1. The media literacy sector, which is increasingly being perceived as concerned with digital skills and child protection: in other words, as something that can be safely left to the ICT "experts".
2. The film education sector, which currently puts some £12 million a year into a wide variety of quite different and sometimes conflicting projects,

A number of organisations now support film education in schools, though not exclusively at primary level.

- The British Film Institute

- Film Education, funded mainly by industry distributors and exhibitors, produces free sponsored resources based mainly on new mainstream films, runs a UK-wide week of free film screenings each October, and also offers training for teachers, especially in digital production (www.filmeducation.org). Established since 1985.
- The network of regional independent cinemas includes many with education officers providing screenings, events and courses for a range of learners. (www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/resources/cinemas/default.aspx).
- The independent charity Cineclub provides extended programmes of training and activity for schools and successfully survives without public subsidy (www.cineclub.org.uk).
- First Light Movies receives public subsidy to fund children and youth making films with the help of industry professionals (www.firstlightonline.co.uk/). Established since 2001.
- And between 2008 and 2012 nearly £15 million has been allocated by Government to a scheme for loaning free DVDs to schools (www.filmclub.org). Established since 2008.

[NOTE IN 2013: THIS IS NOW COMPELETLY DIFFERENT AS “Film Nation” HAS TAKEN OVER MOST OF THIS WORK, WITH 4 YEARS OF LOTTERY FUNDING VIA THE BFI]

About £12 million of taxpayers’ money has been allocated annually to film education for the past five years under the aegis of the UK Film Council (UKFC), established in the Blair years and now merged with the British Film Institute. Unfortunately, this money was distributed without any strategic plan for film education per se, and certainly without any real consultation with Ofcom on media literacy. The UKFC did attempt to initiate a strategy in 2008, launching a three-year funding initiative called “Film: 21st Century Literacy” (www.21stcenturyliteracy.org.uk) whose results are published at www.themea.org/pov/volume-3-issue-2/. But this did nothing to rationalise this patchwork of film education organisations. Right now, there’s a Film Policy Review under way which might resolve some of these issues, but it is led by the same people who created the existing melee of bodies competing for schools’ attention, and is unlikely to have the will, let alone the power, to close down or merge any of them. [ACTUALLY IT HAS THOUGH!]

What’s the outcome of all this money being spent on film education in schools? The short and shocking answer is that we don’t know! It is very difficult to measure learning outcomes from any form of cultural education, but it’s characteristic of almost all funding initiatives for cultural education – at least in the UK – that they allocate pitifully small amounts of money to research and evaluation. Film education has developed its own particular characteristics because it has been supported and developed by organisations whose job is to support and develop film culture: often their remit is described as “audience development” rather than “education”. So as long as the claim can be made that large numbers of children and youth have been “exposed” to a film, the actual outcome in educational terms is less important. We call this “provider-led” education: where the interests of the provider come before those of the learner.

I now want to say a bit about the wider educational context. You probably already realise that there are four nations in the UK and each has its own education policy. I’m going to focus today on England, but will just say in passing that the situation is

slightly better in the other three nations, where there has been less interference from central Government.

English schooling has suffered an enormous amount of Government interference over the past 20 years, in the form of constant new legislation, curricular reforms, and structural reorganisation. I could spend all day describing this; suffice to say for now that we now have yet another tranche of changes under way from a right-wing coalition government facing a weak and divided opposition. A programme of new and "rebranded" schools is being fast-tracked: although this doesn't actually stop educators setting up progressive schools dedicated to including all types of child, its ultimate effect will probably be to re-establish the class-divided school system that we had in the 1950s (where the "best" schools can reject the children they don't want) and to leave intact our private school sector, from which most Government ministers tend to come. This is very bad news for the poor and disadvantaged in our society, but it isn't necessarily bad news for media education, because in a heavily marketised context, some schools already see an advantage in promoting themselves as "media colleges" with dazzling websites and TV programmes on local cable.

In primary schools, media literacy education is subject to the same kinds of confusion. But here there are additional factors in the form of a public obsession with literacy levels, and a uniquely onerous regime of testing for numeracy and literacy that distorts some of the teaching, especially in the year before children transfer into secondary school at age 11. On the other hand, primary teachers work with the same class almost all the time, and there is a lot of scope for designing what we now call "learning sequences" (we don't talk about "lessons " any more!) that combine several subjects and enable children to explore a topic over time. In this kind of context it's easier to build in media teaching, than in secondary schools with more rigid subject-based timetables.

CURRICULAR REQUIREMENTS

A factor that has worked both for and against media education in primary schools has been an initiative called the Literacy Strategy, which was set up soon after the Labour Government came to power in 1997. It was extremely prescriptive at first. A Literacy Framework was published which specified exactly what children were to learn in every term of their primary schooling. There was even a Literacy Hour, which had to be provided to children every day, in which activities were prescribed minute by minute.

Given that schools' test results are published in "league tables", supposedly to support parental choice, the authoritarian and reactionary aspects of the Literacy Strategy were able to flourish in many places, and it has indeed had the effect of making a generation of teachers very submissive to central direction and very unused to thinking for themselves. On the other hand, it was necessary to set up a national network of people to manage the Strategy, who were inevitably drawn from experienced educational professionals looking for new career opportunities. Many of these people were keen to try and find ways of making the Strategy more interesting and more relevant to children's lives, and for some of them, media education was an obvious way forward.

So, even though the Strategy has now been closed down and yet another review of the primary curriculum is under way, there is still a patchwork of media education initiatives – of a very particular kind – in primary schools and local authorities across England. I'll explain how this came about.

At the same time as the Strategy was being set up, I became Head of Education at the British Film Institute, having worked already for over 20 years to try and establish film education as an integral part of media education in UK schools. I enjoyed a brief period (1999-2003) of being able to appoint a team of people who could develop what I saw as essential, complementary strands of activity: research, teacher training, publishing and advocacy.

At the beginning of this period, the Literacy Strategy organisers asked me to set up a BFI/Strategy seminar to look at the relationship between print and moving image texts, because even they could see that this was a potentially important issue for learners. At that seminar, two important insights emerged: firstly, that teachers needed most help in understanding the higher-level aspects of literacy: concepts like narrative, character, genre, setting and time. Secondly, that if film were to be used to help develop understanding of these concepts – and we agreed it probably could – then it shouldn't be done through clips but with complete films. So if this work was to be done within the Literacy Hour, it would have to be based on short films, of five minutes or less.

We therefore started to develop classroom resources that consisted of a compilation of non-mainstream short films and notes to help teachers work with those films as texts in their own right: as a valid way of teaching concepts that are central to literacy. We sold the resources to schools, but the take-up needed to be supported and encouraged through training. Teachers are used to the idea of using films as a stimulus or to illustrate aspects of learning; they're much less used to the idea of taking films as the central focus of a lesson. Even those who are quite keen to do this are not sure that they are "allowed" to do it. So we had to work hard to get this idea across, and we reached disappointingly small numbers of schools.

So from 2004 onwards we developed a strategy for reaching wider numbers of teachers and schools. We set up a scheme to train small groups of teachers and local advisers who were nominated by local education authorities to lead the development of moving image media literacy in their schools. Each local authority who wanted to participate had to make a commitment to a two or three year, costed action plan for developing moving image education in their schools, and to pay for their nominated "lead practitioners" to attend intensive three-day residential training in how to work effectively with film in the classroom as a part of literacy teaching.

We were pretty pleased with this project. It didn't cost us anything apart from our own salaries, but we worked with 61 local authorities (42% of the total) who produced action plans, participated in training and collectively invested some £800,000 in this work; we trained 150 local leaders, sold over £500,000 worth of resources to schools, and we estimated that it has reached at least a million children so far. It's been influential in getting more references to film and media in curriculum documents, and it's generated an interest in finding more non-mainstream films to show to children. Perhaps most importantly, though, it has continued to generate fresh research and thinking in the primary education sector, which is what is most likely to lead to change in the longer term.

I think this has been the most significant media education initiative in UK primary schools, and you can read more about it at www.21stcenturyliteracy.org.uk/docs/Reframing_Literacy.pdf. But how much influence has it really had? Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is still a default position on film education that most teachers adopt, which goes something like this:

> The kids love films and they know a lot about them. So showing films can be a great way of motivating them to learn. We use film to stimulate their ideas for writing and it is amazingly effective. After seeing a film the kids talk and write more, use a wider vocabulary and structure their stories better.

Where schools have a strong interest in, and confidence with, digital technologies, an alternative paragraph may be used, as follows:

> The kids love computers and they know a lot about them. So getting them to use film production software/games production software is a great way of motivating them to learn. They make films (or construct games) to consolidate their learning and it is amazingly effective. After doing this the kids talk and write more, use a wider vocabulary and structure their stories better.

Each of these positions is driven by policy priorities imposed on teachers by Government. The first is driven by teachers desperate to meet their targets for improving writing (especially boys' writing) and the second is driven by teachers keen to demonstrate their effectiveness as ICT coordinators.

But it is interesting to unpack these statements. First of all they simply refer to "film" in the same way that they might refer to "rain" or "electricity": as though it were just undifferentiated stuff that happens to be available. Secondly, note the phrase "use film". Film isn't to be taught or studied or analysed or made: it's *used*, like Kleenex (and perhaps can then be thrown away). In both statements film fails to achieve the status of something worth teaching about; its status is merely utilitarian; it's a means to other, more important, ends.

Note also that teachers are constantly "amazed" by what children can achieve when film is involved in the lesson. I would say that this is consistently the most predictable reaction when teachers begin to incorporate film (or other media) into their lessons. But even though they are teachers, very few then start to think about the questions that should logically follow:

- If children respond strongly to film, why is this?
- What do they already know about film that enables them to work with it so confidently?
- If they are already "good at" film, do I have a responsibility to take their film learning further?

Most primary teachers don't do this – at least in England – because the habit of thinking and planning in a learner-centred way has been discredited and abandoned. In their one-year, school-based initial teacher training courses which have little time for background theory, they have acquired only a limited knowledge of child development, and they fall back easily on "common sense" ideas about the media: that they are bad for children and that therefore the teacher's job must be to defend their pupils from media influences.

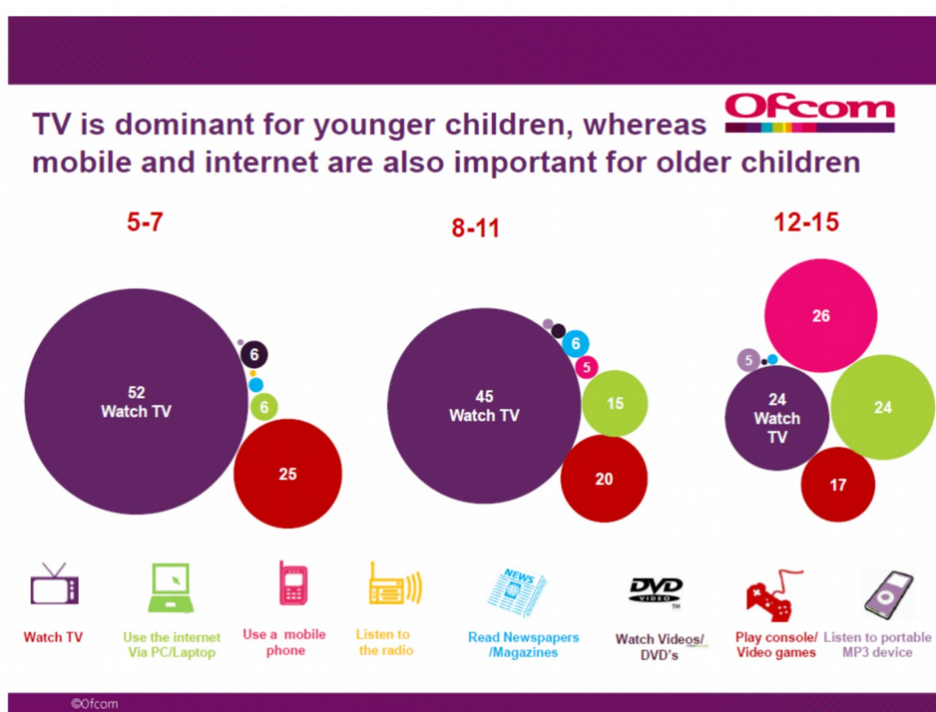
WHY THE EMPHASIS ON FILM?

I believe that if we can stop thinking about media literacy in terms of media technologies and media institutions, and instead start thinking about media literacy in terms of what learners already know, and want to learn, then we can start to frame and define it rather differently. This is where I want to move on to talking about some

of the research and development that around media literacy at the primary level that has gone on in the UK, which is starting to shift our ideas about, for example, what children are "ready for" at different ages; what is appropriate for children to see and discuss, and what children are capable of making.

As I'm sure you know, most current research that's relevant to media literacy tends to be on what I'm going to call the 21st century media of games, social networking and creative software, rather than in the 20th century media of film, TV and radio. I'm sure you're aware of the work of Americans such as Henry Jenkins (www.henryjenkins.org) and James Paul Gee (www.jamespaulgee.com); in the UK some of the noted researchers are Stephen Heppell (www.heppell.net), Jackie Marsh at the University of Sheffield who led an important study on children's experiences with digital media from birth to age 6 (www.digitalbeginnings.shef.ac.uk) and the team at Futurelab (www.futurelab.org.uk). Someone else I really rate, but who – as an ordinary classroom teacher – is not nearly so well-known, is Tim Brook (www.digitalglue.org). But I do feel that the work on 21st century media, not surprisingly, is still at the stage of grappling with rapidly changing realities and with the development of theory. It can tell us to be adventurous in the classroom, but it can't yet tell us what it means to be literate in 21st century media.

This is hardly surprising, given that we have still not established what it means to be literate in the 20th century media of film, radio and TV. But we are a little further down that road. This is where I want to argue for a unity of purpose in teaching about the media, rather than for dividing them up into older and newer forms. A useful reality check here is the "audit" that Ofcom regularly carries out into what it calls "the media literacy" of children and of adults. The skills and awareness these audits look for are pretty basic, so I think we should beware of thinking that they can really tell us how media literate the UK population is, but they do give us a useful set of indicators over time. This chart tells us how children of different ages responded in 2010 to the question "what media technology would you miss most if it was taken away?"



http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/media-lit11/childrens.pdf

This year their data show that, when asked what media technology they would miss most if it was taken away, 52% of the 5-7 age group identified television as their favourite, with computer/console games coming a long way behind at 25% and other media practically nowhere. Public excitement and moral panics about digital technologies tend to overlook the continued and specific importance of the moving image (ie TV and films) in children's formative years. It's a safe bet that if Ofcom's study looked at pre-schoolers, we'd see an even bigger preference for TV – and for DVDs, which Ofcom doesn't ask about, since it doesn't regulate them!

In the face of this evidence, it's hard to make the case for confining media literacy education to 21st century media. Children's very earliest media experiences are with moving-image media. They are likely to be sat in front of TV from around 3 months old. If we can detach ourselves from judgments about whether or not this is a good thing, we ought to be able to perceive the remarkable fact that, even if children are hardly ever shown stories in books, they still learn to follow them in films and TV by their third year of life – and this learning is largely unmediated by adults! In contrast, their computer-based learning is likely to come a little later and to be, at least at first, mediated by an adult or older sibling. Doubtless the computer-learning is important, but the complex rhetorical system of the moving image underpins not only films and TV but also much of the content that they encounter on websites and in games.

This rhetorical system is often summed up as "sound and images", but it's a lot more complicated than that. The image mode can include sub-modes such as framing, movement, mise-en-scène, lighting, colour, graphics and animation style. The sound track can be composed of voice, music, sound effects and silence, each of which can be broken down again into a multiplicity of modes, as can the sub-modes of "performance" such as expression, movement, speech, song, appearance and costume. All these sub-modes are in themselves immensely complex and important. But a vitally important mode is almost always overlooked: time, which includes duration, rhythm, sequence and transitions. Time in films and TV is different from the time required to read a book or scan through a website, which is under our control. Time in moving-image media is an essential part of the repertoire of creative choices available to the filmmaker, in the same way that it is essential to composers of music: changing the duration of a shot or a transition, or altering the sequence of shots, affects meaning just as much as changing the tempo of a piece of music or changing a crochet to a minim.

This is why I argue that the study of moving-image media is central to media literacy. Recent research indicates that children's abilities to achieve the following "literacy tasks" may be developed from their film and TV viewing at least alongside, if not before, they learn them from books:

- Making inferences from clues in the text
- Making narrative predictions
- Considering authorial intent
- Identifying character type
- Recognising a genre
- Recognising a specific point of view
- Understanding compressed or extended time-frames

This research also shows that children in Years 1 and 2 (ages 5 and 6) can

- consider how a sound track relates to visuals;

- position a camera and frame an object or scene/analyse how this has been done;
- decide to use a close-up/consider why a close-up has been used;
- choose music to convey a specific mood/try out different kinds of music with the same images;
- add sound effects to convey a sense of place and time;
- decide exactly where to cut a visual or audio track;
- compose, or analyse, an audio and/or visual montage to tell a story or express a state of mind.

Unfortunately, only a relatively small amount of UK research has focused on this: the “Reframing Literacy” study (see Marsh, *Moving Literacy On*; Bazalgette and Bearne, *Beyond Words*), the “Persistence of Vision” project (http://themea.org/pov/volume-3-issue-2/persistence-of-vision/) and the current study on media literacy and learning progression by David Buckingham, Andrew Burn and their team at the Institute of Education, London: “Developing Media Literacy: towards a Model of Learning Progression” (www.ioe.ac.uk/research/4689.html).

However, the predominant theme in academic research relating to media education is “multimodal theory”. I believe that this is putting media education development on to the wrong track and is not proving very helpful to classroom practitioners. Despite its claim to be based in “social semiotics”, this work fails to take account of 20th century semioticians such as Barthes and Metz, for whom film was absolutely central, and focuses instead on the layout of modern illustrated books and web pages. More damagingly, the educational writers who follow this school have taken things a step further and have lumped together all texts other than those in which written words predominate into the one category of “multimodal texts”.

A busy industry is growing up in English primary schools based on telling teachers how to teach about multimodal texts, but at the sharp end of classroom practice it is hard to see how this is helping teachers get any nearer to an understanding of the many non-print texts in children’s lives and the specific ways in which they differ from one another in their meaning-making strategies. A film is not at all like a website and a website is not at all like a computer game. In my view there can be only one reason for trying to group them all under the same heading: it is a way of avoiding the public outcry that would probably follow if it were to become known that primary school children were learning about “the media”. “We’re studying multimodal texts” sounds pretty impressive even if it doesn’t mean much.

[i] For an account of this earlier history see Terry Bolas (2009) *Screen education: from film appreciation to media studies*. Bristol: Intellect Books.