

Media education: or why I learnt to stop teaching and start smuggling instead

“Pedagogical experience demonstrates that instruction in concepts is impossible. It is pedagogically fruitless...” (Vygotsky, in Daniels, 2001)

As a newly appointed English teacher in 1991 I was eager to find openings in the curricular that would explore and expand upon current student awareness of and experience in critical media techniques.

UK.

The first real smuggling opportunity came from a most unexpected quarter: the Conservative government’s return to ‘basics’ was grounded on the newly developed SATs testing regime. The National Curriculum for English pivoted on the pre-disclosed exam document that rolled out the usual list of canonical suspects. Shakespeare appeared in the form of Jacques’ speech from *As You Like It*. While my teaching colleagues both in the school and across the nation (Jenny Grahame will recall) bewailed the loss of volition in what to teach, I was happy to share my misgivings with the Year 9 students. What was interesting, I mused, was that the document didn’t say *how* we were to teach said texts (there was a Browning poem as well, I believe!).

My smuggling opportunity appeared as we were diligently reading through the dismembered text (Year 9 students didn’t have to read or know the actual play itself). What kept the students productively and critically busy for the next 3 weeks was the idea that they - first as individuals then in teams - were to write and present their own 20th century version of the ‘speech’. Open preliminary discussion set the stage of subsequent practical work: “Does it have to be a man?” asked one female student. “No”, I answered, “and she doesn’t have to be white either” Once the communal AHA! moment was grasped the class walls were soon covered with written and visual examples (drawings, cartoons) of career arcs that often ironically subverted the socially assumed media representations of ‘success’ that the 13 years olds had already been used to. The project explored therein issues of gender, age, sex and class as these impinged upon assumed character arcs from birth to death. Registers that ranged from mockery to knowing social commentary exposed levels of informed self reflexive critique that neither I nor the then Secretary of State Chris Patten could have anticipated. Furthermore, I am convinced that the task even enhanced the student’s success at that year’s exam AND may have set the scene for further interest in both Shakespeare and drama in general.

Despite its questionable instrumental intent, then, the Back to Basics initiative of the then Conservative government provided that rare leakage opportunity that Media Educationalists are born to grasp, critically explore, intellectually develop, and, dare I say, ruthlessly exploit with their students.

That early teaching experience confirmed for me that one shouldn't look for the ideal teaching programme that will in of itself allow for ideal learning outcomes of the kind that the best in Media Education is expected to deliver.

Berlin, Germany.

Other examples of the kind elaborated upon here emerged later in, for example, the Free University of Berlin where I taught U.S film at the John F. Kennedy Institute of North American Studies. One aspect of being a foreigner is, of course, that we see the obvious almost too clearly. It dawned on me, for example, that aspects of actual educational theory seemed only to be explicitly covered in those courses that were specifically aimed at grooming educationalists. It seemed odd that the educational process itself wasn't an intrinsic part of *all* courses. Students can spend twenty years 'in' education and not actually enquire about it (other than in terms of how to beat an examination or draft an essay). Education - in all its ideological assumptions and ramifications seemed, despite Bourdieu, the usual given, not something to do with *this* course. It was from those ruminations (I dare not call them insights) that I drew up a semester course on how mainstream film represents - either explicitly (*Dead Poets Society*) or implicitly (*American History*) - the intrapersonal process of teaching and learning. The BA course provided American Studies students from geography, history, psychology, for example, inroads into the development of educational practice and theory as it emerged from the beginning of the 20th century in the United States (ie, from Dewey, Thorndike to Bandura). Cognitive and social theories of pedagogy informed the subject of the films chosen (*The Blackboard Jungle* was a good one here). It also provided those new to the actual analysis of film with a critical handle with which to further their interests in narrative and character development - on how films/screenwriters/directors themselves make similar pedagogic assumptions and assertions concerning their own notional audiences. (Once the point is made of course, one could appreciate how virtually all mainstream film and TV narratives feature characters that in one way or another must perforce learn new modes of thinking and

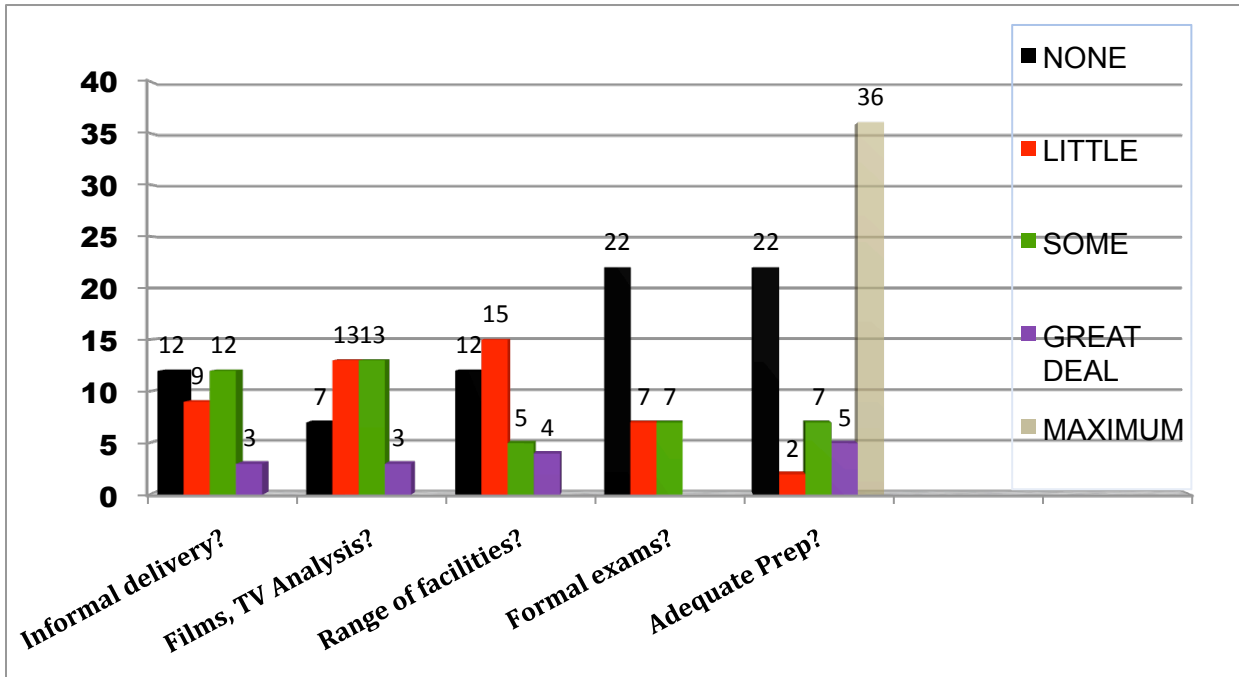
doing in order to chart their way through Act 2. The one who does best - or who is mentored best! - survives as the winning hero).

South Africa

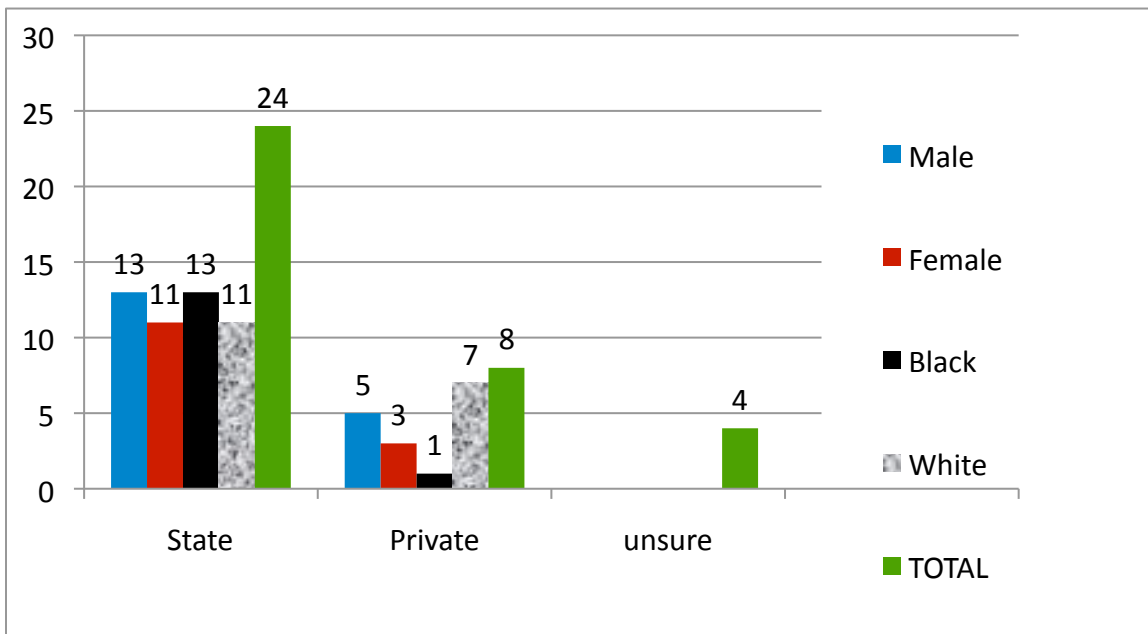
I am mindful of these early and recent experiences in my present role as Lecturer in Theory in what used to be the Pretoria Film School here in South Africa - and where theory (as such) is not even referred to in those elaborate Study Guides that have been in place for several years. Year 3 students, for example, are expected to explore the 'Cinema of the Mavericks' while post-graduates are heavily involved (for a whole year) on the 'Cinema of the Independents'. There is no mention of 'Auteur Theory' in courses that are grounded in the obvious. One virtue, as you might gather, is the enormous wiggle room for maneuver that this absence allows for. Hence the B-tech/BA students - not so comfortable with essays - will be expected in a future assignment from me to undertake a 5 minute video production covering what they will consider to be a significant plot-point in the life of a key theorist (Levi-Strauss in the jungle? Walter Benjamin in Port Bou? Lacan meets Sylvia Bataille?). The production crew will thereby become an effective Research Group that will (it is hoped) engage them by gentle osmosis in the actual theories of their chosen Subjects - not the easiest of tasks for students 'naturally' focused almost exclusively on the assumed coming glories that the Red Carpet will have to offer.

Reference to current teaching practice in Africa provides now a short opportunity for insights that may be of interest to colleagues. As mentioned, I am currently at what is in effect South Africa's most well-established film institution of its kind in Higher Education. From its inception in 1971 to 2004 it was, for both students and teaching staff, an all White institution. After 17 years of democratic rule we have now appointed our first black AND female full time lecturer.

I have of late (February 2011) taken the liberty to undertake an adhoc questionnaire intended to enquire about the (assumed) pre-university media education experience of our current 1st Year students. We should note that, however crude, the figures represents those students who have achieved sufficient matric exam successes to qualify for university entrance to what is, in effect, South Africa's national film school (up to 300 interviews take place for 40 places each year and they are sharp and very eager cohort). The results - hopefully self explanatory - are as follows.



A demographic breakdown of the 24 students in terms of originating schools is as follows.



What might assist in reading the results is the fact that

- the ONLY formal test in media literacy in South Africa is buried deep in the English metric examination paper.
- When students mentioned 'facilities' these were in the form of technologies made available primarily for drama productions (lights)
- There is a notable increase of film analysis in non-state schools where TV and video feedback facilities are more often available
- That the high proportion of students who feel unprepared for the Film curriculum (22 out of 36) might explain the regular and significant drop out rate - that impacts mostly on the Black students - as the course unfurls.

If this snapshot insight is anything to go by, there is clearly much to forward here in South Africa when it comes to the future of Media Education. Three factors call for immediate attention: 1. the perceived role and lowly status of the educationalist in South Africa's severely corporatized and consumer-led society; 2. the impoverished training of said educationalists in aspects of critical methodology. 3. the need for a richer, knowing curriculum that will more fully embrace and encourage such methodologies if and when they are to emerge.

In the light of inevitable changes soon to impact South Africa (and if the lingering legacies of Apartheid are to be fully replaced) the society and its variegated communities will urgently require a newly configured generation of teachers and students who can champion the kind of critical methodologies that the best of Media Education - from Canada, Australia and the UK - has always promoted and, with some satisfaction, often smuggled through.

What troubles me is from where - if not in the case of current film students - these teachers are to come from? Hence, future questionnaires will elaborate on the pivotal question, "...are you expecting to be a teacher in this highly specialized field? If not do you know a smuggler who is?"

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