

Time For Media Education To Come Out Of The Closet

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Cultural Heritage

Growing up in nineteen eighties and nineties Liverpool, I consumed a *lot* of television. Today, it would probably be deemed as dangerously addictive levels, although at the time my mum considered it to be a safer, more contained alternative to hanging around the council estate where we lived. The physical object of the TV box represented a visual world of escapism, a space where fantasy forfeited reality. In many ways, the TV schedule, dictated my behaviour outside school. I can still associate certain emotional triggers associated with key stages of my youth when I think of specific programmes or download relevant theme tunes!

The Young Doctors signified initial downtime from school, sharing biscuits or toast with my brother Stephen. *LA Law* was aspirational, the idea of a high salaried, high-powered profession seemed seductive in my early teens and *Sons and Daughters* was the original *Home and Away* but with poorly lit sets and without the beach and juice bar. Such relics of my former life are not the focus for my contribution here although they do set the scene regarding my own unique cultural heritage.

The act of 'watching the telly' and religiously following such multifarious texts ranging from *Moonlighting*, *The Equaliser*, *Dempsey and Makepeace*, *Boys from the Blackstuff* and of course, *Prisoner Cell Block H*, ignited my interest in the formation and deconstruction of the 'stories' we have to tell, of performance, language, representation and ultimately the impact on ones' sense of self and perception(s) of others.

Reality Bites

Having provided a backdrop to my cultural heritage, it is important to establish that when I think about media education, there is a persistent and huge tension, even a void, between *possibility* and *reality*. My own experience of Further Education, over the past decade, is one of increasing and incessant struggle because my vision of what media education, indeed what *success should look like* (reference to Natalie Fenton symposium podcast) is remote, even distant from day-to-day reality.

The drive and pressure to recruit increasing numbers of learners; the *marketisation* of media education (see David Buckingham symposium podcast), usually consisting of a staged set up; including two PD170 cameras, tripods, green screen and not forgetting the obligatory boom, is partly to blame for societal misconceptions and learner unpreparedness for the actual content (75% critical theory) as prescribed in the specification.

Students only require 4 GCSE's (grade C in English as a preference, not a requirement) to register onto any Level 3 course. However, actual (based on diagnostic data calculated on entry) literacy levels paint a very different picture for many of us in the FE sector. To reiterate, the canyon between level of learner and his/ her ability to handle the knowledge required (for learners to develop the critical skills on a Level 3 *Extended Diploma in Media Production*, when their identified literacy levels remain at either Level 1 or 2), has simply become wider. Lower literacy levels adversely affect learner ability to critique and *do* texts. Studying media at Level 3 should not be expected to fill the canyons left behind by a seemingly disastrous literacy strategy legacy.

In addition, *Edexcel* have opted for in-house verification of assessment grades as a cheaper alternative to external site visits. This decision can only impact negatively in the long-term regarding quality, standards and sharing good practice across institution and only serve to relegate the pedagogic *possibilities* of our subject.

I Have A Dream...

The *Manifesto for Media Education* (MME) presents a platform that *potentially* signals a transformative moment for our subject. The 'stories' contributed so far signify the beginning of a long awaited and necessary dialogue across institutional and geographical boundaries, as Ruth Zanker rightly reiterates, that will hopefully continue to locate and engage a broader community of practice.

In order for the MME to have *an impact*, generate a deeper, more cohesive understanding of our subject and its *possibilities* (for the benefit of all stakeholders including learners, parents, critics and curriculum planners), it needs to extend its online presence and develop an accessible, user-friendly space where our pedagogic practices, regardless of sector or examination board, can be disseminated and reflected upon. In the same way we ask our learners to begin the process of creating a product, by identifying its users/ market, we as a

community, need to think about the *actual impact* of the pedagogic choices we foster.

As Buckingham states in his contribution, 'we need to cast a more dispassionate eye on what really happens in the classroom, however *awkward* (my italics) or even painful that might be. We need to come up with evidence that media education actually works.'

Zygmunt Bauman (2005: 1097) provides a practical cure to Buckingham's seemingly ruthless yet honest diagnosis, however it comes with a warning, as he asserts:

Disclosure is the beginning – not the end – of the war against human misery.

Practice

In 2009, whilst undertaking the MA in Creative and Media Education (MACME) at Bournemouth University, I attempted to disseminate and make transparent my own learning for the benefit of others. As a product, it is flawed, however its message remains relevant. It evidences or *discloses* my attempts to disseminate the learning that occurred that day. The additional creation of an accessible, audiovisual resource enables our pedagogic experiences to live outside of *Moodle* or *Blackboard*.

The idea of a shared dialogue is not new. Historically, the contextualization of culture has always been part of media education but the dissemination of what we do across institution has *not*.

The research methods employed, adapt and make explicit techniques used in *Creative Explorations*, by David Gauntlett in his chapter (2007: 128-157) entitled, 'Building Identities In Metaphors'. Due to cost of *Lego* bricks, I developed 'Serious *Play-Doh*' instead, as a cheaper alternative - pedagogic research doesn't have to be expensive. I simply created a space for colleagues to reflect on their own pedagogic behaviour(s). In the spirit of making transparent the *awkward* and as an example of autoethnography in action, you can access 'The Death of the Teacher' exhibition video here:

<http://creativechameleon.weebly.com/exhibition.html>

In a time of fierce competition, student-as-consumer and pedagogic accountability, our subject is in the midst of a somewhat vulnerable yet highly reflexive period of educational history.

As I see it, a MME should not seek to standardize or unify media education in a set of coherent and agreed principles but make visible, critique and account for what we do. We need to document the development of our understanding on a localized level for future generations of media educators, to enable them to locate and make reference to a database containing our subject heritage.

Refraining from dissemination whatever the rationale (institutional USP, fear of disclosure, protecting intellectual copyright) only presents us with an array of missed learning opportunities. Our knowledge base will continue to splinter off, as the walls separating our silos of understanding thicken.

Ironically then, media education finds itself in a unique position. In a time of severe cuts to staff development budgets, we need to apply our learning here, we need to merge theory and practice and make our rhetoric *live*.

What It Means To Be Human

Unlike our fixed, biological fingerprint, our unique cultural heritage is determined by our ability to identify, distinguish, unpack, reconstruct and ultimately re-present the self. In an individualized world, our cultural heritage is intrinsically mobile and inherently at odds between ones' online (reconstructed) and offline (inner) self. For instance, *Facebook*, *You Tube* and *Twitter* are platforms associated with the reconstructed self; places where we consciously redefine, present and publish self-selected elements of 'the self'.

In part, I am in agreement with McDougall (reference to his manifesto contribution) who observes that our learners are 'apprentices in theorising their culture' and that learning about 'the media' is ultimately a defunct entity. However, we need to be cautious about referring to pedagogic learning spaces as belonging to 'the inexpert'.

As a community, we need to move beyond the defensive and avoid terminology that might confuse and hinder the *possibilities* of this crucial moment. On the contrary, I would argue that media education needs new forms of research on what it means to be human; it is about making connections between the online and offline self as we attempt to become 'experts' of the (holistic) self and perception(s) of others. For instance, questioning the ways in which texts re-construct and re-present themselves, validity, reliability, provocation, dealing with

uncertainty, managing conflict, and ultimately, it is about learner preparedness to function with confidence in our society.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 1086) aptly refer to the current state of play as, 'para-ethnography' where the classroom is our field of inquiry, and our learners, 'treated as experts, as collaborators and partners in research'.

Finally, if our subject has the courage to come out of the closet, we might just be able to access, what Bauman (2005: 1089) describes as, 'human possibilities previously hidden'.

In Summary

Point 1: Actual disclosure of our pedagogic practices will be essential if we are to develop a community built on academic rigor and accountability.

Point 2: Engage and exhibit exploratory research projects on what it means to be human, based on:

- a) Offline (inner) and online (reconstructed) sense of self.
- b) Individual and community (tangible and virtual).

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