

## Media Literacy for All?

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If media literacy is as important as everyone says it is, then it is too important to be left to the media. The only way we are going to get a media literate population in the UK is by making sure that everyone is taught media literacy in school.

The idea of education for media literacy as a general entitlement in schools is not, and will not be, met by specialist courses for the 14-19 sector. Media Studies at GCSE, Media Studies, Film Studies and Moving Image Arts at A Level or Scottish Highers, are all optional courses for older students and taken by less than 6% of the age group.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that a larger number of candidates will take the forthcoming Creative and Media Diploma, but it still won't be for everyone. It is the 5-14 age group which follows national curricular requirements. These differ somewhat between the UK's four nations (with the new curriculum in Northern Ireland promising the most extensive media literacy provision); in England there are small and marginal requirements for media literacy only within English at secondary level.

It doesn't make much sense for media education to start at age 11 when one considers the level of access that even very young children have to TV, video, DVD and internet, and the extent to which they enjoy playing and replaying their favourite scenes and visiting their favourite websites. Why should early years settings ignore such a significant part of children's pre-school experience?

Of course one reason is the fear that paying attention to media will stop children learning to read and write. But in fact, research in the US shows that children with high levels of video and audio comprehension skills actually go on to become better readers,<sup>2</sup> not worse as is generally supposed. An important part of what you need to be a good reader and communicator is a grasp of what literacy teachers call "text level concepts": things like narrative formats, genre, characters, modality<sup>3</sup> and so on, which help you to infer meanings and predict what comes next. These concepts aren't developed through print media alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Candidate numbers and results can be found at [www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/teachlearn/stats](http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/teachlearn/stats). The actual specifications from the different Boards can be seen at [www.wjec.co.uk](http://www.wjec.co.uk); [www.ocr.org.uk](http://www.ocr.org.uk); [www.aqa.org.uk](http://www.aqa.org.uk); [www.ccea.org.uk](http://www.ccea.org.uk).

<sup>2</sup> For Paul van den Broek and colleagues' important work at the University of Minnesota, see <http://www.ciera.org/library/archive/2001-02/04OCT99-58-MSarchive.html>

<sup>3</sup> "Modality" refers to the level of realism apparently intended by a text: for example Bugs Bunny films are low modality; TV news is high modality.

At the bfi, we have used this insight as the basis for a series of resources for teaching moving image media literacy within the context of the Literacy Hour: each comprises a compilation of complete short films (*not* clips) with detailed teaching guidance.<sup>4</sup> Currently there is one resource for each age phase or Key Stage up to age 14; more are planned during 2005-06. They have been used UK-wide, with particularly strong support in England given the interest of the National Strategies<sup>5</sup> and a large number of local authorities. We are currently engaged in training “lead practitioners” for local authorities, 44 of whom have already committed nearly £750,000 for two- and three-year programmes to roll out this kind of moving image media literacy teaching to hundreds of schools. Over 6000 resources have been sold and we reckon to be reaching over a million children. Colleagues in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are using the same resources to develop similar schemes.

Why has this initiative been so successful? First of all, it hasn’t created a problem for educators by confronting them with what seems to be a totally new area. Instead, it’s offered them a better way to tackle literacy by seeing it as something that engages with children’s whole media experience, not just the print bit. Secondly, it’s been effective because we haven’t just dished out free resources: schools buy them because they want them, and they also buy into a strategically planned training programme.

The initiative is bottom-up as well as top-down: driven as much by teacher and learner enthusiasm as by advisory and local authority endorsement. But perhaps most important of all, the short films in the packs, sourced from Britain and around the world, provide stunning cultural experiences which are challenging and enriching for children and teachers alike.

Despite the enormous take-up of this work, the National Curriculum in England still does not recognise the potentially immense significance of media literacy, let alone establishing it as a basic entitlement for all children. There is in fact a real danger that education policy-makers will continue to resist the idea of media literacy, because they are getting mixed messages as to what it’s about. If they perceive it as something extra to be fitted into the curriculum, if they keep getting different definitions of media literacy, if they see it as merely a version of information technology, and if they see it as special pleading by the media industries to compensate for the failures of regulation, or as a promotion of media products to learners, then they are likely to be unsympathetic.

But if policy-makers can be enabled to see media literacy as a distinctive set of knowledge, skills and understanding that are worthwhile in their own right, and as a way of enhancing and extending the curriculum rather than just adding more content, then they are likely to be sympathetic. They need robust evidence to

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<sup>4</sup> Go to <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/teaching/primary.html> for more detail on these resources.

<sup>5</sup> A national network of regional directors and local advisers set up to support teachers and raise standards in schools.

convince them that this kind of work will raise standards, which is why the Charter for Media Literacy includes 'provider clauses' that stress the importance of research and the dissemination of best practice.

The likeliest way of convincing policy-makers is to develop, as the bfi has done, an 'acquisition model' of education for media literacy: one that stresses desirable gains for learners rather than negative attitudes or protectionism. In the Charter this is summed up as three essential, interlocking strands of learning:

- Cultural – broadening experience of different kinds of media forms and content;
- Critical – developing critical skills in analysing and assessing media;
- Creative – developing creative skills in using media for expression, communication and participation in public debate.

These "three Cs" offer a positive, integrated framework that makes sense to educators and to learners. It also recognises what education is like: a slow, iterative process, not a quick fix. These features can be a challenge to media producers, who are used to speedier results. So as well as convincing policy-makers, we have to look at how we bridge the gap of suspicion and mistrust that exists between two very different cultures: education and the media. It may be that the Charter can help to provide this, by setting out a common set of goals, which we can all endorse. A better mutual understanding between these two sectors will be vital if we really want to achieve media literacy for all.

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More extended versions of these arguments can be found at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/advocacy/> and at <http://www.qca.org.uk/11466.html>.