

GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS
Making Politicians Take Notice of Media Education
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I feel very honoured to be invited to speak at your conference and I am delighted to have the opportunity to hear about how media education is developing in Italy. I am even more honoured to be described in your conference publicity as a scholar, but I had better make it clear right away that I am not a scholar: I don't teach in a University, I don't do research, and I've hardly written any books. I used to be a secondary school teacher but now, because I work in a government-funded institute where my job is to develop and promote education about the moving image media, it would probably be more accurate to call me a bureaucrat. I like to think that I am a good bureaucrat, because I work to change things, not to help them as they are. Or at least that's what I try to do.

So I'll start by explaining what it is we are trying to change. You should have a fact-sheet with information about media education in England. It's just about England, not the whole of the United Kingdom, because Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are all newly devolved nations within the UK and they either have different education systems already or they are developing new ones. I'll say a bit more about these later on but for now I will concentrate on England. You'll see from your fact-sheet that media education is most firmly established as specialist courses for students of 14 or older, and even at that level it's only provided for a small minority. There is a requirement to study the media in the National Curriculum, but it is a very small requirement and it is not very clear what it actually means. There is hardly any teacher training in media education and it tends to have a low priority - things like traditional literacy, numeracy, and the use of computers have a much higher priority. All pupils have to do a bit of media work as part of the public examination they take at the age of 16. This work is part of the English curriculum. It can consist of looking at advertisements to study the persuasive language they use, or watching film or television versions of novels or plays to think about the differences between print and moving image media (mostly at the level of plot and character, i.e. what's left out, what's different). It might include comparing different versions of the same new story in the press, on TV and on radio, or looking at an example of popular drama such as television soap opera, usually to identify stereotypical characters and situations. This work might take up between 5 + 10 hours in a course that totals about 40 hours.

I don't object very strongly to that sort of media study but if that's all the media education students get, I would argue that it is very narrow, very limited, and very old-fashioned. It's narrow because it only addresses a very small range of contemporary media forms, - advertisements, literary adaptations, news and soap opera. It's limited because it only addresses certain aspects of those media forms, - persuasive language, plot and character, bias, stereotyping. And it's old-fashioned because it's underpinned by a pervasive sense of suspicion and anxiety about the media; a sense that they can never be quite as good, as culturally important, as the English teachers' cultural

professional interest which is novels, plays, and poetry. That's an attitude I think we are starting to out-grow, and it certainly doesn't make much sense to these students themselves.

Add to this the fact that most of this teaching is not supported by training or by good resources, and I hope you will begin to see that there is a lot that could be changed. There are patches of very good work. Especially where individual schools have a long tradition of offering media studies courses for their 14-16 year-olds or their 16-18 year-olds, have built up their competence and their confidence over the years and can think about providing interesting and worth while courses for their 11-14 year-olds as well. But there is also a lot of very mediocre work, and there are hundreds if not thousands of teachers who know that what they are doing is not very satisfactory, and would like to get better training, resources, and above all, guidelines about what they should be doing. And worst of all, there is hardly any media work done in primary schools at all.

I've spent many years of my career producing idealistic solutions to this sort of situation. I've devised classroom resources and projects and training courses, and I've written lots of polemical papers, and so have the other people I work with. Some of this has probably been quite useful to some people for a while, but I don't think it's enough. If media education is important – and presumably you agree with me that it is important or you wouldn't be here - then it's important for all children. But that's a very big ambition and one that I'm pretty sure has not been realised anywhere in the world-yet. To achieve it is not just a matter of getting the theory and the pedagogy right. It's also a matter of getting involved in the politics of education. Politics, as we all know, is a messy business. It tends to value plausibility over truth, compromise over rigour, opportunism over strategy. And the politics of education is even messier, because politicians need quick results and education does not deliver quick results. A week is a long-time in politics, but ten-years is a short time in education - that's how long it takes to produce just one "output", an educated child. So politicians are forever messing about with education, claiming that "this didn't work, so let's try that" - when "this", whatever it was, never had time to prove itself.

I don't know what agency or alliance in Italy has taken on the role - or might take on the role - of arguing with politicians at the national level about the importance of media education. And I don't know what Mr Berlusconi's attitude is to media education. Does he have one? Whether he has one or not, and whatever it is, I'm sure that to aim a larger and better role for media education in your education system you have to ask yourselves the same kinds of question that we have had to ask ourselves at the *bfi* in our role of trying to lead the lobby for media education. This is a chosen role, not one allocated to us by government. You need to bear in mind that we're small organisation, not rich in funding and not very important politically. We're very small and weak. The advantage of this is that no one pays too much attention to what we are doing; but of course that is also a disadvantage. So we have to be cunning and strategic - we're more like Ho Chi Minh than Napoleon! Our activities have to be driven by questions like these:

- Can we identify minimum requirements for media teaching at each level of education, that could realistically be demanded of all schools?
- What is the best (or least worst) curricular location for media education?
- Are there national priorities for education that can be exploited for the development of media education without compromising its aims?
- Can we simplify the content and aims of media education in ways that make sense to politicians and civil servants?
- How long can we wait?

Minimum requirements

The key word here is “realistically”. If we want to introduce an elaborate and detailed set of requirements for media teaching into all schools, who's going to train the teachers? Who's going to provide the resources? Who's going to evaluate progress? Who's going to pay for it all? Who's going to vote for it? In other words, that's probably an unrealistic aim. We need to consider therefore what's the minimum that could be required - not the minimum in the sense of the simplest or the easiest or the most mechanical and fool proof - but the minimum in the sense of the most salient and understandable starting point that anyone could attempt but at the same time would give thoughtful and creative teachers something to get their teeth into. A colleague of mine in England, Ken Fox at Christ Church College in Canterbury, once argued that if primary school teachers could only do one bit of media education then what they should do is simply give children time to talk about their media experiences. Every week, or even every day, make time for children to tell the class about something they're seen on TV or at the cinema, something they like, or maybe hate, something funny, something frightening - something that matters to them. Allow time to discuss it, for others to ask questions, give opinions. Children's media experiences are important to them, and they should be important to us. The thoughtful and creative teacher who listens to this kind of talk will soon start to think of provocative questions to stir up the discussion. Questions like:

- how did you know he was the bad guy?
- was it meant to be true? How could you tell?
- how come you like that programme and your mum doesn't?
- was that a film or grown-ups or for children? How could you tell?

These questions are not judgmental, they are exploratory. They are encouraging children to reflect upon their experiences, to consider how they have arrived at their interpretations and their judgements. If you don't have much in the way of time or resources for any other media work, this could still be the most valuable use of minimum time.

However, one would hope that it would be possible to gain a little more ground than that. One of the things we have done at the *bfi* is in response to this question is to draw up and publish a model of learning progression. Here is one page from it [overhead projection: page 52 from *Moving Images in the*

Classroom]; you can download the whole thing from our website. This shows you the first of five stages of learning about moving image media (film, video, television) - I'll explain later why we just concentrate on the moving image. The keys to this model are the three inter-related strands or conceptual areas:

- **Language:** how the moving image media use images, sounds, sequencing and duration to communicate stories and ideas;
- **Producers and audiences:** how the moving image media are produced and consumed, and by whom, and why;
- **Messages and values:** how we interpret and judge moving image media, how they affect our feelings and opinions.

These three strands are there because we think they are all essential to a proper understanding of the media. A lot of media education only pays attention to the language - the semiotics - of the media and ignores their economic or ideological dimensions. On the other hand some media education projects are entirely taken up with understanding economic or ideological issues and have no space for personal judgement and interpretation - no place for pleasure, in fact. So it's important to try and find a way of interweaving all three of these strands.

A second thing that's key to this model is the place of practical activity. This is a challenge, but increasingly it is possible through new technology and I'll come back to that again later.

The third important element here is ensuring the breadth of children's media experience. Children are bound to have plenty of experience of popular cultural forms like Disney and Pokemon and that's fine, but they also need to have a broader experience. We have as much responsibility to introduce children to their cultural heritage in moving images as we have to introduce them to their heritage in literature or painting.

This model certainly doesn't provide an answer to the question about the "realistic minimum" to which children might be entitled. In fact it raises more questions, like how broad a range of viewing should children have? and how much time should you actually spend on practical work - in a term, or in a year? and so on. But at least it forms a concrete basis for argument, and that's a start.

Curricular Location

First of all there is no right answer to this question. Whichever subject on faculty "leads" on media education in a school, there will be gains and losses. But the important point here is that within any school or local authority somebody has to be responsible - has to be the champion - for the organisation and development of media education. If the requirements for media education are just vague and well-intentioned, then nobody is responsible and nothing will happen - or diverse or incoherent initiatives will pop up here and any concern about pupil progression will fly out of the window.

Even if media education becomes a separate subject in the curriculum, it is still going to emerge from one or more existing academic disciplines or school subjects. If it evolves within mother-tongue teaching, as it has in the UK and many other countries, then it will have some of the characteristics of that subject, perhaps more like literature teaching. If it emerges within art teaching, as it has in the Netherlands for example, then it will have different characteristics, probably with a stronger emphasis on creativity and less on critical analysis. Ten years ago at the *bfi* we argued strongly for media education to be part of English, and that it is in fact what happened. We did this because (a) we know that there wasn't a hope in hell of establishing it as a separate subject and (b) because most of the media teaching that already went on was done by English teachers. That argument was successful, up to a point: you can see that result on your fact-sheet. The "down side" of that "success" was that in many schools media education became less important once its marginal status became officially visible in the new curriculum. The imaginative development of content and pedagogy was stifled and media education became just another component in a long list of cultural directives.

As a consequence, we at the *bfi* are making rather a different argument now. We are focusing much more specifically on moving image media rather than "all media" (as I said just now, I'll explain why later). We are saying that critical understanding and creative competence in moving image media is part of what it now means to be literate, and the term we're using for that is "cineliteracy". So in other words we're saying that cineliteracy must underpin the whole curriculum. Within schools, it's essential that one department or member of staff should take responsibility for the development of cineliteracy, but that responsibility has to include making sure that all teachers use moving image media knowledgeably and well, and are contributing to each student's personal development of cineliteracy. To support this argument, we have produced a guide for teachers which suggest ways of using moving image media in nine different subject areas (*Moving Images in the Classroom* bfi 2000), and we're developing classroom resources and training to help teachers do this. At the moment this work is focused on secondary schools, but we will develop it in primary schools as soon as we have a big enough base of primary school teachers to work with - by next year I hope.

National Priorities

If you want to stay pure and preserve your own ideals, don't get into politics! If you want to achieve real change, you can't avoid some involvement in politics. If you're going to get into politics, you need to be absolutely clear about how far you are prepared to go in compromising on your principles. The only way that media education can gain real ground is if it is perceived in some way to fit in with at least some national priorities for education. But you have to be very careful about how these arguments are made.

Current developments in media education in the USA offer us an interesting example. Public health education is a big national priority in the US and there is big money to be made in supporting it. Some media educators have jumped on this bandwagon and are promoting media education as an aspect of public health. This constructs television as a bit like sex or alcohol:

enjoyable, but you have to be careful, take precautions, don't have too much, etc. The argument in favour of this is that you should seize any opportunity you can to further the cause of media education. The argument against, which I would endorse, is two fold: first of all you can't treat cultural constructs like film or television in the same way as sex or alcohol, and secondly, any education that tries to stop people doing something is generally unsuccessful. Education can open doors - it's very bad at closing them!

In contrast - at least I hope so - are two national priorities in the UK that we are trying to work with and which may prove to be fruitful and worthwhile. These are: Literacy, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

The government has a target for literacy which is to raise the standards of reading and writing in every 11-year-old to a certain level by next-year, 2002. For the past four years there has been a very strict regime in primary schools to teach an hour of reading and writing every day and to follow a very tightly prescribed national programme which sets learning outcomes for every term of the six-years of primary school. This all appears to be very tightly tied to the reading and writing of print texts. Now the easy and apparently obvious way to link media education to this programme - which some publishers have done - is to use film or television material to support the Literacy Strategy: simply as a stimulus, for example, or to increase pupils' vocabulary by noting words used in the script or words that appear as writing in the film.

Our approach is, we hope, less simple-minded. Part of the Literacy Strategy requires that children are taught the value and use of critical concepts like narrative, character, setting, story structure, theme and genre to help them understand written stories. We talked to the organisers of the strategy about this. Was there any reason why these concepts shouldn't be taught through film? we asked. No problem at all, they said, in fact we'd welcome it, so long as the kids are shown complete films, not extracts. Obviously this meant using short films, preferably five minutes or less, if the children were going to get the idea of, say, narrative structure in a one-hour lesson. So what we have done is to put together a compilation video tape of short films, specifically for study within the one-hour Literacy lesson. We've been piloting this resource for the last six months with groups of primary schools in four English cities. We're just now in the process of writing detailed notes for teachers, based on this piloting process, and the whole resource will be published in September.

Let me show you one of the film we're using.

VIDEO: "EL CAMINANTE" (5 minutes)

One of the things we suggest teachers do with that film is to concentrate on the setting: what are we actually shown of the village, the gorge, things in the village, and how do we piece it together in our heads? Another approach is to think about time: how long does the whole story last and how is it compressed into 5 minutes? Although print and moving images manage the exposition of setting and the compression of time in different ways, there are commonalities at a deeper level. Each type of text has to operate an economy of narration,

and to establish patterns of recognition and expectation within which this can happen.

The teachers' responses to this material at the pilot stage have been phenomenal. They are convinced that the experience of carrying out critical analysis on film has a profound effect on children's writing. They write more, they use more elaborate sentence structures and more descriptive words. But the teachers are also arguing very eloquently for the value of the film-viewing in its own right. Like us, they are very keen to broaden the range of media that the children encounter. Some of the material on the tape is much more challenging than this - but it's at primary level that children are more ready to accept experimental or different work, especially if it's in small doses! So we are really quite hopeful that this resource will fulfil some of the aims we outlined in our learning progression model: to encounter a wider range of media and to understand better how moving images make meaning.

It's a slower and more complex task for us to work with the Government's ICT initiatives, because very few schools yet have the software, the memory capacity and the technical skills to use the moving image capabilities of their computers. And much of the rhetoric that surrounds ICT is terribly old-fashioned. It's driven by notions of "information provision" as though that somehow is supposed to be the same thing as education. The idea that we learn best through dialogue, through negotiation, through reflecting back our learning and making it our own - all that seems to be big news to the corporate hucksters of the ICT universe! But there are signs that this phase is passing. Policy-makers are beginning to realise that ICT in its own right is no more interesting than pencils: it's what you do with it that matters. The shortcomings of simple - but politically appealing - input-output models of education inevitably appear after a while, and ideas like creativity and interactive learning come back into fashion. In this climate, the importance of cheap software like iMovie2, which makes it easy for children to edit and manipulate moving images and sound, begins to be recognised.

Think about how important this is. I'm not talking about exceptional events like children making movies. That may be fun, but it's not going to happen in every classroom in the land. I'm talking about children working with moving images as a daily activity, as commonplace as using a word processing or spreadsheet program.

Imagine this. Two children are learning about the development of the franchise as part of the History curriculum for 13-year-olds. They have access to 10 minutes of authentic newsreel and documentary footage from the 1910s about the activities of the suffragettes. Using this and anything else they get from the library or the Internet, they have two hours to construct a one-minute moving image "essay" using extracts from the film footage and their own voice over. The result is a videotape that they can show to the rest of the class or perhaps install on the school's website. Think about the skills that these two children are developing in the course of that task. They are assessing the value of different kinds of historical evidence - including film documentary and news; they are using editorial and communications skills in putting it all

together, and they are using their "cineliteracy" to make it "flow" as a comprehensible and interesting film. They are engaging in detailed analysis of film from a completely different period and thinking about the ethics of how they make use of it.

We know that children of this age can do this kind of work because we have 22 teachers for whom we have negotiated Government Scholarships to do research on children's use of this kind of software. And the task I've just described is exactly one that we will be offering to groups of pupils this autumn, as a way of opening up the eyes of both teachers and policy-makers to the real potential of ICT. We call it "putting the 'c' back into 'ICT'" - because it often seems to be forgotten that "communications" is part of ICT.

I don't think that working with either of these initiatives had compromised what we are trying to do: in fact they've given us opportunities to enhance and develop it. Perhaps most importantly, though, they are enabling us to produce evidence about teaching and learning in media education. When you can produce evidence linked to national priorities, policy-makers are inclined to listen.

Simplifying the Message

But what are we trying to do? Most politicians have an attention span of about two-minutes, and they usually aren't education specialists. If you can convey the core of the argument for media education in less than two minutes, then you may gain enough time to explain it properly. But if you can't offer a succinct and memorable message, you have less chance of being listened to.

Most arguments for media education are too broad, too abstract and too grandiose to make much headway with hard-nosed policy-makers. To start with, it's never clear enough what is meant by "media". Even with the qualification "mass media" it's still not clear. Does it include cinema? Popular music? Computer games? Some would say yes, some no. Are news and advertising both media in their own right or are they cross-media forms? Again, definitions differ. And when we came to the aims of media education, the message is even fuzzier. Are we trying to stop children watching too much TV, or celebrating popular culture? Are we teaching European semiotics or North American communications theory? Is it all about learning to make videos, or about critical analysis? And if it's all of those, how do you explain that in two-minutes?

We struggled with this problem at the *bfi* for many years until suddenly a solution was placed in our hands. The new Government in 1997, grateful to its media industry supporters, asked us to produce a report explaining how the UK could develop more "cineliterate" audiences for its film industry. Learning aside the fact that most British films aren't worth being cineliterate for, this gave us a clear and useful message. The moving image media form a distinctive group sharing a common language and a history of over a century. They are the media most shared and enjoyed by audiences, but at the same time they are the media with which teachers feel least confident.

Surely then there is an argument for giving our advocacy a tighter focus? It's impossible to mobilise the whole multifarious media education movement to achieve a meaningful intervention at primary or middle-school level, but it is possible to mobilise a significant and relatively coherent part of it - the moving image. Here's how we have argued this in one of our publications:

"As the communications environment continues to change, there is much debate about the nature and range of the basic skills people will need to participate in the society of the future. There is little doubt that print literacy will remain a key competence, but there is also little doubt that other kinds of competence will grow in importance. The ability to analyse moving images, to talk about how they work, and to imagine their creative potential, drawing upon a wide film and television viewing experience as well as on practical skills, could be termed 'cineliteracy'. Like competence in print, number or ICT, cineliteracy will increasingly underpin the whole curriculum".

I think you'll find that took less than a minute to read. The title of our report to Government got it down to two seconds: "Movies Matter". And it worked. We haven't changed the world yet, but we are being listened to. We have a message that policy-makers can understand, so they're willing to listen to more of it. They're willing to stop and look at the evidence. They're willing to help us identify the schools, and the funding, to develop our work.

How long Can We Wait?

There's a great line, scripted by William Goldman, in one of my favourite films, Rob Reiner's The Princess Bride. Cary Elwes is climbing the 1000-metre high Cliffs of Madness on a fraying rope and as he nears the top he sees Mandy Patinkin with a sword waiting to kill him. He looks up and says calmly "This is not as easy as it looks". Don't for one moment think that it has been easy, simple or quick to get to where we are today in media education in Britain or even that what we have now is to be envied or emulated. I've been in this business for 30-years and there have been many surges of optimism in that time. The time-horizon for the work we're doing now is, I reckon, five to ten years. And that's looking on the bright side. As for comparisons between the UK and Italy, I couldn't presume to make them, even though I do know Italy a little bit and have family living here. Countries differ in their media ecologies, their education systems, and their political colours, as well as in their culture and language.

The only thing I can guess at from our experience so far is the UK is that to achieve a step-change you need two things: alliances and a catalyst. I can give you an example of this from another UK nation, Northern Ireland. There's a very interesting situation now in Northern Ireland, as you can probably imagine. There's a desperate desire for peace - which may yet be disappointed - but there is also enormous optimism and vision for the future. The school curriculum is being completely and radically reviewed under the new Northern Ireland Assembly. So it has been potentially a great moment for media education to take a big step forward - and yet this wasn't happening. The reason was that each of the interested parties - the teachers' groups, the universities, the film festivals, the workshop providers - was perceived by all

the others as needing to defend its new comer, of putting its own interests first. So it was impossible for any one agency to take a lead. Because we at the *bfi* came in from outside, and had less "baggage", were able to go in and talk directly to the education minister, Martin McGuinness. We pitched him the one-minute argument, and asked "will you support a working group to bring all these agencies together and work out a strategic, costed plan for the development of moving image education in Northern Ireland?" He said yes. So we were able to draw in all the agencies involved and the government departments, with the message "this is the best chance you're ever going to get to move things forward". And of course they all agreed. We were the catalyst, they are the alliance. Will it work? I don't know yet.