



# Reframing Literacy



**‘I found that the children were motivated, engaged and exceedingly attentive right from the beginning. Their descriptive, inferential and predictive skills were extended and they found that they were better at this than they thought because this form of media was familiar to them. The biggest difference in participation and quality of work was from the boys who are not usually enthused by literacy. By the end of the two weeks, the children had extended their vocabulary and were able to write for a variety of purposes and in different styles with greater confidence.’**

Leading literacy teacher, Cambridgeshire

The ‘form of media’ in question is film, and this feedback from a delighted teacher in Peterborough encapsulates the extraordinary success of an ongoing campaign by the BFI. Our aim is to ‘reframe literacy’: to persuade teachers and education policy-makers that film should be an integral part of the literacy curriculum in primary and secondary schools throughout the land. And our reasons for doing so are compelling.

**‘Literacy is not  
just about the  
written word’**

Peterborough city councillor

This announcement in December 2006 signalled Peterborough’s long-term commitment to the idea that watching, studying and analysing a broad range of film in school is integral to successful literacy teaching – not as a special option but as a regular part of literacy or English lessons for all five- to 14-year-olds.

# A strong case for change

We believe that learning about moving image media needs to be seen as a fundamental entitlement for all children. This means looking at literacy in a new way.

Literacy is the repertoire of knowledge, understanding and skills that enables us all to participate in social, cultural and political life. Many now recognise that this repertoire has to include the ability to 'read' and 'write' in media other than print: in moving images and audio, and in the hypertext structures of the digital world.

<sup>1</sup>

The three Cs' approach was conceived by the Media Literacy Task Force, a group of broadcast and cultural organisations committed to the promotion of film and media literacy. For more information and to sign the Charter for Media Literacy, please go to <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/advocacy/charter/>

For many years 'media literacy' has been seen as a different, and often threatening alternative to print literacy. Media skills, it is assumed, are bound to dilute or displace learning about the written word. They are also seen as highly specialised: not only different from other literacy skills, but requiring a completely different pedagogy.

These concerns recede when we examine what print and film have in common instead of focusing on their differences – and concentrate on the simultaneous development of what we call 'the three Cs': the critical, cultural and creative approaches to film and media literacy.<sup>1</sup>

## The critical approach: merging print and film

Both print and film media tell stories, differentiate between fact and fiction, present characters, manage time-scales, and convey a sense of place and context. Both have evolved generic features that enable us to recognise certain kinds of story (romance, for example, or propaganda) and organise our expectations accordingly. In other words, different media share many common textual strategies, and many of the key concepts necessary for the development of literacy are not medium-specific.

Thanks to TV, DVDs and videos, four- and five-year-olds arrive in school with a wider grasp of these key concepts. They have some understanding of narrative, genre, character, setting and time, even if they can't express them very clearly.<sup>2</sup> Long before they learn to read, they can readily answer questions about films like 'can you tell what is going to happen next?' and 'how can you tell?'. These questions develop their ability to infer and predict: essential skills in the reading of any kind of text.

<sup>2</sup>

See Jackie Marsh et al *Digital Beginnings: Young children's use of digital media and new technologies*, University of Sheffield 2005 at <http://www.digitalbeginnings.shef.ac.uk/final-report.html>

## The cultural approach: exploring world film

The strong and positive links between children's understanding of film and TV and their later reading achievement<sup>3</sup> are one reason for integrating film study into literacy teaching. Another is that children ought to experience a broader range of film than they would choose for themselves. Access to films from all over the world empowers children to engage with the widest possible range of people, stories and cultures.

Despite the fact that they arrive in school with the capacity to engage with moving image texts that are much more challenging than the books they are beginning to read, schools don't always recognise the need to introduce children to new cultural experiences through film. As a result, children can be patronised and intellectually under-stimulated by many of the films they encounter at school.

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See Paul W. van den Broek (2001) *The role of television viewing in the development of reading comprehension* at <http://www.ciera.org/library/archive/2001-02/04OCT99-58-MSarchive.html> and Paul W. van den Broek et al (2005) *Assessment of comprehension abilities in young children* in S. Paris and S. Stahl (eds) *New directions in assessment of reading comprehension* (pp 107-130) Mahwah: Erlbaum (in press).

## The creative approach: making film

The third reason for bringing film into the heart of literacy teaching lies in making film. Much excitement and resource goes into creative film work, but often unrelated to critical work or wider viewing. We have found that children who make film after watching and discussing other films greatly expand their knowledge and understanding of what film can do.

‘Using moving images in the classroom has made the end of Key Stage 3 fun and exciting. I chose to look at *The Man with the Beautiful Eyes*, using the poem and film. This enabled me to create a Transition Scheme of Work. From this I hoped to forge a link between poetry in year 9 and poetry in GCSE, focusing on critical analysis of both film and print based text. This was incredibly successful. In fact it had the pupils on the edge of their seats wanting more. A very refreshing way to tackle the end of what is always a hard year for the pupils. They did not realise how easy the Assessment Objectives could be at Key Stage 4.’



# A great track record

The BFI campaign to reframe literacy began in 1999, when John Stannard, then head of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), asked us to help his team explore the role that film might play in their emerging strategy – and address their concerns about the teaching of whole texts and the structures that go with them.

## Short films are best

We all realised that 90-minute feature films are too long to be viewed and discussed in ordinary classroom sessions, and that using short clips would defeat the object of the exercise, which is to understand how complete narrative structures work, or how characters develop over the course of a whole story. So the NLS asked us to focus on short films.

Good short films are more like poems than novels: intense, densely textured, often open to many levels of interpretation. They have limited appeal in the commercial marketplace and are funded from diverse sources, so to make them easy to sell to different countries, they often contain little or no dialogue. As a result they offer intensely 'filmic' experiences, using images and movement, sequence and duration, sound and music to tell their stories. As most are also unfamiliar to children, they have a great capacity to surprise, delight, stimulate, and provoke.

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The BFI 'shorts family': *Starting Stories 1 and 2*, *Story Shorts 1 and 2*, *Screening Shorts*, *Moving Shorts*, *Real Shorts*.

## Films that inspire

Following the NLS seminar, we embarked on the development of a series of classroom resources, using short films rich enough to reward repeated viewing and close analysis. A huge amount of research, previewing and discussion with teachers resulted in the selection of 52 films of the highest quality from all over the world.<sup>4</sup> Many are animations and many have no dialogue. Some are non-fiction. Most were not originally made for children; diverse in style, content and sources, they offer stimulating viewing experiences.

The response has been extraordinary. Teachers keep telling us that sessions engender excitement, fascination, increased concentration and motivation, and frequent demands to see the films over and over again.

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Sample teaching materials can be found at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/teaching/primary>

## Spreading the word

Our first resource, *Story Shorts*, was a compilation video with a substantial teachers' book. Those who used it were enormously enthusiastic. The NLS bought copies for every local authority in England, and had their regional consultants and advisers trained in our approaches. Both Scottish Screen and the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission set up new initiatives based on our campaign resources.

Even so, by the end of 2004 it was clear that the campaign was not reaching anywhere near the numbers we wanted. So in England, we adopted a new approach: training a nationwide cohort of Lead Practitioners – nominated and financed by local authorities – who would design and disseminate curricula, resources and training.

## A complete resource

We know that many teachers are intimidated by the idea of analysing films in the classroom: they associate it with Media Studies and assume that technical jargon must be used. To counter this, we evolved a user-friendly way of exploring the key concepts, even with very young children. Effective techniques were developed in collaboration with teachers and pupils in 35 schools, and then refined in seminars with literacy advisers and consultants.<sup>5</sup>



top left:  
*Baboon on the Moon*  
UK 2002  
Christopher Duriez  
courtesy of Britshorts

bottom left:  
*The Lucky Dip*  
UK 2001  
Emily Skinner  
courtesy of Slinky Pictures Ltd

right:  
*Between Us*  
UK 2004  
Charlotte Bruus-Christensen,  
Stefan Monk  
courtesy of the National Film  
and Television School

*Little Wolf*  
UK 1992  
An Vrombaut  
courtesy of An Vrombaut



*Hidden (Gömd)*  
Sweden 2002  
Hanna Heilborn, David Aronowitsch  
and Mats Johansson  
courtesy of Story AB



top left:  
*Nits*  
UK 2003  
Harry Wootliff  
courtesy of Dazzle Films



bottom left:  
*Rescued by Rover*  
UK 1905  
Lewin Fitzhamon, CM Hepworth  
courtesy of the BFI



right:  
*Otherwise (Anders Artig)*  
Germany 2002  
Christina Schindler  
courtesy of Christina Schindler,  
Trickfilms

Flatlife  
Belgium 2004  
Jonas Geirnaert  
courtesy of La Big Family asbl



Birthday Boy  
Australia 2004  
Sejong Park  
courtesy of the Australian Film  
Television and Radio School



‘We had our initial launch event and were delighted that the majority of our schools were represented...what has really amazed us though, is the way the project has taken on a life of its own. Despite our plans to impact on the classrooms in autumn 2006, we were inundated with reports of moving image adventures happening across Slough in July. Neither of us has ever known any project to have such an immediate impact. What has been particularly pleasing is that this positive response has come from pupils across all Key Stages.’

Jeanette Wenman, Manager of Primary Literacy,  
Slough Local Authority  
Zoe Livingstone, Secondary English Consultant,  
Slough Local Authority



# A big impact

## **On local authorities**

Between February 2005 and February 2007, 61 local authorities participated in the Lead Practitioner training. At each workshop we introduced new short films and received a huge range of learning programmes and creative ideas in return. The Lead Practitioners returned home fired with enthusiasm for training others, for creating and circulating schemes of work, and for integrating film with other new approaches to literacy.

The total financial commitment by local authorities currently stands at over £800,000. And the money they have spent over the past two years on BFI resources stands at about £400,000, reaching 5000 schools, and well over two million children.<sup>6</sup>

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Barnet, Bedfordshire, Berkshire,  
Birmingham, Bournemouth, Bracknell  
Forest, Brent, Brighton and Hove,  
Cheshire, Cornwall, Croydon,  
Derbyshire, Devon, Doncaster,  
Dudley, Ealing, East Yorkshire, Enfield,  
Gloucester, Hampshire, Hounslow,  
Kirklees, Lambeth, Lancashire, Leeds,  
Leicester City, Leicestershire,  
Lincolnshire, Liverpool, Merton,  
Milton Keynes, Newcastle Upon Tyne,  
Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Norwich,  
Nottingham City, Peterborough, Poole,  
Reading, Redbridge, Rotherham,  
Sandwell, Slough, Solihull, South  
Gloucestershire, Southampton,  
Southend, Southwark, St. Helens,  
Staffordshire, Suffolk, Surrey, Swindon,  
Thurrock, Torbay, Walthamstow,  
Wandsworth, Wiltshire, Windsor and  
Maidenhead, Wolverhampton,  
Worcestershire

## On the national curriculum

There has also been high-level political impact on the curriculum in England. Since September 2007 all primary schools in England have been following a revised framework for teaching literacy, which now includes the requirement for children to develop their ability to read 'in print and on screen.' To support the new framework, the Primary National Strategy now includes sample schemes of work featuring short films from the BFI resource and adopting our approach to teaching practice.

## On teacher training

Universities running teacher training courses have enthusiastically embraced our resource and approach, among them De Montfort University, Liverpool Hope, Roehampton Institute, London University Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes University, University of East London, Sheffield University, Sunderland University and Bath Spa University. In addition, Teachers TV has produced two sets of programmes demonstrating our approach.<sup>7</sup>

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Teachers TV films featuring BFI short films can be found at [www.teachers.tv](http://www.teachers.tv)  
Search for Reading Films KS1 and  
Reading Films KS2.

**‘The BFI should seek funding from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) for an extension of this scheme. Given its early successes, despite limited funding, it is clear that the properly-funded extension of the scheme would have a significant impact on moving image education from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3 in England.’**

Dr Jackie Marsh, University of Sheffield  
Dr Eve Bearne, United Kingdom Literacy Association

These are the promising findings of an independent evaluation of the Reframing Literacy initiative (the final report, entitled *Moving Literacy On*, will soon be available at [www.ukla.org](http://www.ukla.org)). And this call is made at a time when public concern about how we care for and educate our children is intense and widespread.



# The time is now

## **Burning questions**

According to the Primary Review, the national curriculum is 'monolithic and inflexible...attending too little to creativity and the generic skills of communication and problem solving'. It asks, 'what should the primary curriculum look like? In what, precisely and all rhetoric apart, do curriculum breadth and balance reside? What is a rounded primary education?'

In her latest Annual Report, the Chief Inspector of Schools notes that 'the gap between the outcomes for those with advantages in life and those with the least is not reducing quickly enough.'

## Clear answers

At the heart of the Reframing Literacy initiative lies the conviction that, if children get the chance to experience a literacy curriculum that respects and extends their knowledge of moving image media, they are likely to do better in school. It seems at least possible that if schools fail to address the full range of children's cultural experience, literacy standards will continue to disappoint.

The Reframing Literacy experience also informs the current debate on public service programming for children. In a recent paper entitled *The future of children's television programming*, Ofcom reports that 'a clear majority of parents regard public service programming for children as very important, [but] less than half think it is being delivered satisfactorily, especially in reflecting a range of cultures and opinions from around the UK'.<sup>8</sup>

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The report summary can be found at <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/summary>

In light of this criticism, we must look at children's literacy within the wider context of children's culture. The time has come to think about how schools can help make children's media experiences as rich and varied as we have long insisted their literary and artistic experiences should be.

‘Teachers have seen how, starting with film, all children regardless of their ability, have been able to discuss narrative in a sophisticated manner. Pupils are now more fully engaged in a relevant and motivating curriculum. The use of film has allowed children to learn using a medium within which they feel comfortable and able to take risks. This allows for higher order thinking to take place which is then transferable into both reading and writing, as well as giving them the tools they need to understand the media rich world around them.’

Nicola Highfield, English and EAL Consultant  
(Secondary) Sandwell Local Authority  
Ruth Leask, Primary Strategy Consultant  
(Literacy) Sandwell Local Authority

To be  
continued

The BFI continues to use its national networks and contacts to build awareness of its short film resources and the availability of its team of freelance trainers. Lead Practitioners across the country are forming an online community supported by a BFI-funded website, which will host resources, activities and debate around film and literacy.<sup>9</sup>



Our partner, Film Education, offers training for Lead Practitioners through its CP3 programme. Several Regional Screen Agencies in England are supporting schools by building Lead Practitioner networks of their own. And short films are a growing dimension of both cinema-based education programmes and of the UK's five children's film festivals.

Through extended school services, another partner, Film Club, enables children to access cultural cinema. Placing an emphasis on the 'three Cs', First Light Movies supports film production by young people throughout the UK, and its website, Film Street, provides yet another gateway to cultural cinema.

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For more information on the Lead Practitioners online community, please see [www.mediaed.org.uk](http://www.mediaed.org.uk) and [www.mediaedassociation.org.uk](http://www.mediaedassociation.org.uk)

Beyond literacy, we are developing short film resources to support the modern foreign languages curriculum; if films help literacy, they ought to help language!

In June 2008, the BFI, its partners and the UK Film Council will launch a nationwide Strategy for Film Education in which Reframing Literacy will play a key part. And on 13 and 14 November we will host a national conference at BFI Southbank in London.

# Action

To realise the full potential of the Reframing Literacy initiative to transform children's learning, we must work together to:

- Gather comprehensive evidence of the impact of this work on children's literacy throughout the country
- Gather, share and publicise good and 'next' practice with film in the literacy curriculum
- Conduct research into how children's learning progresses when they engage in literacy through film, especially in the Foundation stages and across the KS2/3 transition
- Conduct research into integrated creative, cultural and critical learning through film i.e. the 'three Cs'
- Develop short film-based literacy programmes to support Initial Teacher Training in Higher Education Institutions

If you have support, resources or evidence to offer, or would like support or resources from us, please write to Mark Reid, Head of Education, BFI, 21 Stephen Street, London W1T 1LN, or email [mark.reid@bfi.org.uk](mailto:mark.reid@bfi.org.uk)



[www.bfi.org.uk/education](http://www.bfi.org.uk/education)  
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[www.discoveryfilmfestival.org.uk](http://www.discoveryfilmfestival.org.uk)  
[www.filmclub.org](http://www.filmclub.org)  
[www.filmeducation.org](http://www.filmeducation.org)  
[www.filmstreet.co.uk](http://www.filmstreet.co.uk)  
[www.firstlightmovies.com](http://www.firstlightmovies.com)  
[www.barbican.org.uk/lcff](http://www.barbican.org.uk/lcff)  
[www.mediaedassociation.org.uk](http://www.mediaedassociation.org.uk)  
[www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk)  
[www.showcomotionconference.com](http://www.showcomotionconference.com)  
[www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk](http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk)  
[www.ukla.org](http://www.ukla.org)

More literacy and film resources can be found at  
[www.mediaed.org.uk](http://www.mediaed.org.uk)

Regional Screen Agencies:

[www.filmlondon.org.uk](http://www.filmlondon.org.uk)  
[www.em-media.org.uk](http://www.em-media.org.uk)  
[www.northwestvision.co.uk](http://www.northwestvision.co.uk)  
[www.northernmedia.org](http://www.northernmedia.org)  
[www.screeneast.co.uk](http://www.screeneast.co.uk)  
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