

THE CRITICAL MASS: AUDIENCE AS A CRITICAL COMPONENT IN DECONSTRUCTION OF TEXTS

The topic for my presentation came largely out of experiences I've had in the classroom where students 'haven't got it' or have missed the point when attempting to analyse media texts. The first thing to reflect on is : why is my explanation, my pre-teaching, my process causing them not to get it? The 'missing the point' is evidenced by a lack of awareness of the original function of a text – determining it's construction and possible audience response to it. I had many students writing responses, trying to cram in as many key terms as possible, struggling with the cognitive overload of Diegetic and Non-diegetic, but only one or two referenced the fact that *because* they were watching a public information film, the audience would be tuned into a likely set of devices, construction would consist of a likely set of codes and challenges to convention would impact on audiences.

This is a 'text blindness' – an inability to recognise something that is familiar and known because of the way it has been presented. The way I had been presenting texts was through media language in the first instance – teaching wonderful bits of codes, key language that the students could acquire and feel like proper, academic sixth formers. This is a typical starting point for almost every Media course out there. But, it wasn't allowing students to perform at the best of their ability, worst still, it was causing them to doubt the stuff they did know – the highly sophisticated (though not articulated), implicit knowledge they have of media texts, having had a lifetime of exposure to moving image and print.

In reading acquisition, fluency comes from three key elements – activation of Schema (an existing knowledge of the world, a stable foundation of a degree of predictability), Chunking and Automaticity (an ability to block groups of words in a text to move swiftly through the text). Fluency is prevented when individual elements are decoded in isolation. When the brain attempts to add each bit together to construct meaning, it has to keep going back to the beginning of the sentence as the demand on working memory is too much, leading to overload.

To prevent this overload, Schema is highly important. Many emerging readers, read globally – that is, guess or overlook unknown words, but they are still able to pick up the absolute essence of what they are reading to make sense of it. This is because of their solid Schema.

So, if we are to turn our emerging readers of the media into fluent critical thinkers, we should ask them to consider whole texts before beginning the process of deconstruction – the whole being greater than the sum of it's parts.

Media texts are a means of communication, a portal between two worlds – the world of the text producer and the audience. Each moment of communication can have an infinite number of possibilities, variations resulting from institutional values, resources, limitations, tools used etc. We cannot teach students every slot machine combination that may occur. We can though, begin by activating students awareness of their expectations when engaging with media texts, familiar and unfamiliar, to enable them to decode on a less literal, more analytical level.

Central now to my delivery of media texts is the starting point of *what would an audience expect from this text? What's the (communication) purpose of this text? What codes might appear in a text like this? How could audiences be challenged or the communication be subverted?*

This places more emphasis on the impact of text producer choices (the why and the effect) rather than struggling to move forward from the what ('....umm... because it just is...?')

Finally, how could exam boards support students? If we want the best out of our students, so that they can achieve and excel, it could be argued that the parameters need to be much more clearly defined in Media Studies specifications. What those parameters are is part of the much wider discussion and debate facing Media & Film at the moment.

Any feedback is always welcome. I would love to hear from media teachers and share what has worked in their classrooms.

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