

Media Literacy Education in Primary Years: Carrying on Regardless

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Abstract

This think-piece shares emerging ideas about media education, which the authors permit themselves to explore despite the current 'strangulation' of media studies in England. By 'carrying on regardless' we refer to an aspiration we have to continue to develop our pedagogical and theoretical approaches to media education, rather than having to expend energy always defending the subject and reformulating it to suit the discourses of populist politics. As such we reflect back on the Developing Media Literacy research project and consider our interpretations of the data in the light of recent thinking about cognition, constructivism and curriculum (more Cs!) in learning and pedagogy. We suggest that there is still important work to be done in terms of developing pedagogy which enables complex concepts to be understood, operationalized and questioned by children. We do so with the assumption implicit (as it is in most other subjects) that this work is important for the individual, the community and society (and that we do not need to spend our word count reinventing that particular wheel).

Key Words: Media literacy, pedagogy, constructivism, cognition, curriculum concepts

Introduction

Six years ago, in 2012, a major media literacy project that both authors were involved in (in different capacities) came to an end. Some of the data from this project has been written about (Buckingham, 2014; Burn et al., 2010; Parry, 2014, 2016 ; Powell, 2014) but there was also a lot of data which did not make the final cut. At CEMP's Media Education Summit in Rome in 2016¹, where we were both presenting, we took the opportunity to discuss this data in the light of emerging issues which we were worrying about; issues that have come to be seen as 'the strangulation of media studies.'² Since that time we have created shared opportunities to reflect on the research and what it still might have to tell us about the kind of media literacy learning that had gone on, or was likely to be still going on, in classrooms. While a significant amount of time had elapsed, we found the

data from the primary schools in particular, provided valuable documentation of attempts to teach media studies concepts to young children. We propose that in the “cold climate” in which media literacy education finds itself in England and Northern Ireland today this data has a significant contribution to make. To put it another way, the development of media literacy education and media studies as a subject has hit numerous policy and curriculum road-blocks which are hampering progress. The data we have returned to, speaks to a different context perhaps; an imagined context in which the roadblocks have been overcome and we are looking optimistically, reflectively and critically at the epistemological development of the subject and planning further pedagogical innovation. In the title we frame this as ‘carrying on regardless’ and by this we mean that our energy cannot only be spent on critiquing the way the subject has been subjugated by the current government. We must imagine a future and not be forced into reactionary and defensive positions. In order to look forward we look outwards, rather than backwards and we look at what we perceive to be examples of teaching which signal some opportunities for innovation.

Our discussions have focused largely on the data documenting the teaching of media literacy with young children (6 and 7 year olds). However, as we were discussing the data from the original project and thinking about what it said about pedagogy and practice now, it soon became clear that many other questions were being raised by it which applied to media education work

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done with learners at all levels. This article is then, a brief account of the research project, but also an account of the kind of challenges that are posed when reflecting on the data in 2018. Over and above the issue of the policy and curriculum road-blocks, we would group these challenges into three main areas; 1) Pedagogical Challenges; 2) The Problems of Constructivism and the “cognitive turn”; 3) The Conceptual Framework and Social Realist views of Curriculum. An article of this length cannot explore these challenges in

huge depth (and we are planning a longer paper) but we offer a brief analysis in order to elicit debate with colleagues about the data and how it speaks to different contexts— aspiring perhaps also to develop further international solidarity and collective action in relation to the further progression of our subject.

The Project Data

The wider media literacy project from which the original data we looked at, was conceived of as a study of learning progression. In effect, what could be said about progression in media literacy over a sustained period of time—in this case, two years? The project involved teaching four groups of children and young people of different ages four units of work, connected to the conceptual framework of Media Language, Audience, Representation and Institution. Across the two year period, all the learning and production work that these four age groups (6-7 year olds, 9-10 year olds, 12-13 year olds and 15-16 year olds) produced was collected and scrutinised. This data included production work, classroom activities, classroom teaching and interviews with both teachers and pupils. In our first fresh look at the data we decided to focus on the youngest group’s work on the concept of audience. This was primarily because we thought that both as a concept and as an age group, audience and 6-7 year olds sense of it is not something that has been extensively explored in the existing literature but also because in this particular classroom the teacher had tried to build on previous teaching of the other concepts and treated this final activity as an opportunity to make links across each of the previous units.

The Audience unit of work, the last one to be tackled in the project included a brainstorming activity that we hoped would promote the kind of reflexive thinking about the assumptions often made about the relationship between media and audiences. We provided a set of one-sentence statements about audiences that children were encouraged to debate, for example: *Social networking sites like Facebook stop young people making friends, going out and socialising.*

The aim here was to highlight and to question the assumptions on which the statements were based; and to begin to consider what kinds of evidence we might need if we wanted to explore them further, or gather information about them. The second and third activities

used simulation techniques to address the targeting of audiences, and then to give students some experience of audience research. The first was essentially a ‘warm up’ activity, in which students were asked to devise, research and ‘pitch’ a new cartoon to replace *The Simpsons*, with different types of appeal to different members of the family. The second was significantly more elaborate: students were asked to devise a cross-media health campaign designed to prevent the spread of a virulent new form of influenza. Here again, they were asked to research the media preferences, needs and perspectives of a range of different audience groups, and to assess the potential impact of their proposals on their behaviour—in this case including young children and their mothers, and elderly people.

The data available for this unit included a large amount of video recording of the teaching that went on for this age group on one site in the project (there were four sites altogether) and the subsequent learning activities that the children engaged in. We originally intended that reflecting again on this data would allow us to think about the issues surrounding the teaching of a concept such as audience to young children in particular, but as we progressed in our analysis, it became very apparent to us that wider questions were being raised by what we were looking at. With both the benefit of hindsight and one eye on the educational policy environment both here in the UK and globally, we started to think that there was a need to consider these wider questions and challenges and ask them of both ourselves and our fellow media educators.

1) Pedagogical Challenges

When watching the video from our chosen part of the project, we were struck by how much was going on, pedagogically in this class of seven year olds, and how little analysis or theorisation of this activity has gone on, particularly in terms of children of this age. One of us had observed, even in his own research (Connolly, 2013) that there was little attempt to theorise media literacy pedagogy in terms of what it is that the media literacy teacher does or should do. Since this time, there have been some developments, most notably Julian McDougall’s notion of the “pedagogy of the inexpert” (Andrews & McDougall, 2012)—wherein the teacher brokers a sort of knowledge exchange with their student based on the students’ experiences

of culture and technology, resulting in learning occurring through an “assemblage-event”. This seems to be a perfectly acceptable way of thinking about pedagogy for older students who have had certain kinds of experience and perspectives on culture and the media, but we had some doubts about whether it was an appropriate model for very young children. In the project data we looked at, there was a great deal of quite subtle teacher guidance; this undoubtedly did involve a conversation—something that is essential to McDougall’s

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model—but it was, perhaps paradoxically, both highly structured and highly agile. Consider this comment made by the teacher as part of a discussion about media audiences which had begun to focus on questions about the suitability of a particular media text for a particular audience, thereby touching on film classification. The discussion had been in process for some time and the children had been drawing on their knowledge of science and experiments to think about how they might investigate media audiences when one child suggests:

Year 3 child: Say if you bought a drink—you’d look at the back and see what ingredients there is.

Teacher: Ah so you are comparing media to a drink. A scientific way of doing it—so you’d see how much fat and sugar was in it to see it was bad for you. Films are more difficult to do that with because they don’t come with a label saying what’s inside them and we don’t know exactly how much violence or swearing.

What struck us about this exchange is the way that the teacher engages in what we term “conceptual oscillation”. The pedagogical skill here, involves taking

what a child suggests and summarising it to the group in the light of deeper conceptual knowledge and experience, whilst also raising questions using concrete examples the children can engage with. So here the teacher adopts a position in relation to the concept and the child's own suggestion but not a closed one and not one that he maintains throughout the unit. Over time he moves from one child, one perspective, one understanding of the concept to the next but he

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inhabits each in the moment through the use of examples. He recognises the different understandings of audience the children have and brings his own knowledge of the concept into dialogue with it and this enables him to create a space in which multiple meanings can be accepted and explored. This seems to us to be something a little different to a pedagogy of the inexpert, and so, something that needs theorising in a different way. It also seems to us to be a stark contrast to some of the more exam-focused lessons we saw where meaning was much more tightly defined and determined by experts including teachers, web resources and text books .

2) The Problem of Constructivism and the “Cognitive Turn”

The role of the teacher in the classroom exchanges we witnessed in the video data led us from the pedagogy itself to the philosophical and epistemological positions which underpinned it. In this particular situation the teacher definitely did some things which we as observers, considered “expert”, skilfully leading pupils from their own experiences to deeper conceptual understanding. Such considerations pushed us back towards the idea that constructivism is essential for media education. Knowledge was being actively constructed all the time; some of this construction was the students using the teacher's expertise and applying it to new learning situations (as in the class discussion)

, while in other situations the students used their existing experiences to test out the teacher expertise (in the simulation task for example). This observation may seem obvious, but it is, we believe important to emphasise the constructivist nature of media literacy because more broadly in education, we perceive what Connolly (forthcoming 2018) has termed “the cognitive turn”—in essence the desire to create accounts of learning which focus on the role of mind, memory and perception. In England and Northern Ireland's compulsory education system there has been a return to an emphasis on knowledge-based curricula and in this policy and curriculum context knowledge is seen as a set of finite, learnable and predictable facts.

In Media Studies the focus on sociological concepts such as institutions and representation and the emphasis on criticality means we tend to see knowledge as constructed, contested and contingent. Indeed in this classroom, there was little doubt in our minds that the vast amount of knowledge was being socially constructed. However, we also saw an important role for a pedagogic context in which conceptual understanding could move from being tentative or, in Vygotskian terms, ‘intuitive’ to being ‘scientific’ or learned. Not as a means of closing things down and especially not for the purposes of assessment but much more for the purposes of operationalising concepts, acting on them as part of research and creative activity. So in this case the children used the idea of a target audience to think about how they might communicate an important health message effectively. We suggest this is compatible with the teacher's oscillation between this understanding of audience and another and also connects with Connolly's metaphor of the “dialectic of familiarity” (2013, 2014) . Here the children inhabit a particular conceptual understanding through creative production activity. However, we argue that there may be a stronger place for a more cognitive variety of constructivism in which things like memory and perception are used and developed by both teacher and pupils through certain kinds of classroom interaction. One of us has already suggested for example, (Connolly, forthcoming 2018) that memory has some role to play in learning a production process such as video editing. While we are not wholly acceptant of some cognitive accounts of teaching and learning and their application to media education, we

find ourselves in the middle of a global education discourse (Willingham 2017; Sweller 2016; Wiliam 2017) which asks teachers to think about the role of the brain in what they are teaching and what is being learnt. Media educators must have some response to this, even if it is just to reassert our commitment to media literacy as a socially constructivist activity. Undertaking further analysis using Vygotskian accounts of conceptual learning, as proposed by David Buckingham (2003) and Parry (2014) may be important for us as a community to ensure we are responsive in our pedagogy to new understanding of learning.

3) The Conceptual Framework and Social Realist Views of Curriculum

Stuart Poyntz (2015) has given a very good recent account of why we need a conceptual framework, and we would broadly agree with his defence of its strengths in the face of new models of media education. Poyntz identifies five issues or challenges which are important to consider when thinking about the significance of a key concept model, which can broadly summarised as 1) A return to traditional views of education; 2) A paucity of teacher education in the field of media education; 3) A focus on what Poyntz calls “performative” vocabularies, best characterised by the connection of education to the acquisition of “competencies”; 4) The challenge of connectivity and how a key concept model deals with this ; and 5) The vexed relationship of a key concept model to a wider, global media and information literacy agenda.

Putting aside for one moment, that in many jurisdictions, including England and NI, that point 1) on the above list has almost already entirely done away with point 3), these challenges are still present. Indeed for us, one of our most salient observations when looking back at the data from this project was how point 1) has meant that we would probably not be able to facilitate this sort of project now, in 2018 , only a few short years away from its completion. Theoretically, this return to traditional modes of education, in which there are “hard borders” between school subjects, and very specifically defined sorts of knowledge which occupy them, is suggested by a group of sociologists of education (Moore,

2000; Maton, 2010) who define themselves as social realists. This group of thinkers see interdisciplinarity as a weakness (Moore, 2000), and canons of texts as essential for defining what is important to know or even worth knowing (Maton; 2010). Many academics in media education and broader media literacy have seen the strength of the field as being constituted by its interdisciplinarity and its rejection of cultural hierarchies. For us as researchers, the data in this project reminded us of two things; firstly, that working with young children does require the kind of metalanguage conferred by a key conceptual framework. The teacher we observed working with these 6-7 year olds used it regularly to reinforce learning;

- You’ve definitely got a narrative structure because something is going wrong and it gets fixed at the end”
- “What we’ve got in the class today are two different audiences—and although you might watch the same things, you might also watch different things and you might also have different opinions on things.”

We suggest that this data demonstrates the teacher’s use of critical vocabularies as a fundamental aspect of children’s conceptual learning (Connolly, 2013) and that being taught this vocabulary is an important stage in media learning. However, it is clearly not the sole arbiter of developing media literacy, so secondly, we suggest that, in in the key concept model , there comes a point at which the dynamic between pupil and teacher clearly changes. This might be characterised by McDougall’s “pedagogy of the inexpert” or again, by Connolly’s “dialectic of familiarity” (2013; 2014) , but it clearly does not fit the social realist account of

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learning, and as such needs to be restated to emphasise the strengths of a key concept model which does not rely upon tightly defined canons, vocabularies and subject knowledge.

Much of what we have been thinking about has been about the nature of knowledge and its social construction. In the spirit of this endeavour we would welcome responses from colleagues which will help us think about the issues we have raised in a broader, internationally informed way. In the meantime, we will be carrying on regardless in our reengagement with the data from this class and with our thinking and asking questions about pedagogic practice in our field, the continued value of a conceptual framework and our responses to the cognitive turn in education. ✱

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FOOTNOTES

¹ <https://www.cemp.ac.uk/summit/2016/>

² <https://davidbuckingham.net/2017/07/16/the-strangulation-of-media-studies/>