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All Things Bold and Beautiful: Researching Adult Learning through Soaps

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Abstract: *This paper proposes that, globally, informal lifelong learning outside of education institutions is often neglected, and that cultures of learning must recognize and value a wide range of informal learning. In popular culture, soap operas have both intentionally and unintentionally been sites for learning, and their significance need to be more thoroughly researched. But this challenges conventional methodologies. Innovative approaches are needed, including the use of chat forums on the worldwide web, through the internet.*

Popular Culture as Cultures of Learning

In Britain, the Labour Government was elected on a manifesto slogan of 'education, education, education'. Since coming into power in May 1997, there has been a substantial amount of political rhetoric around lifelong learning, with a limited amount of redistribution of resources towards it. As yet, there is very little evidence of a significant let alone radical shift in terms of practice. A National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (NAGCELL) was set up soon after the Labour Party took control, under the leadership of Professor Bob Fryer, the former principal of Northern College, a residential adult education college in South Yorkshire. In its first report, *Learning for the Twenty-first Century*¹, there were a number of radical ideas, built around the identification of the need to build cultures of learning. If Britain was to become a learning society, then there had to be a revolution in attitudes toward valuing learning. Many employers as well as other kinds of communities who could benefit from lifelong learning, it was argued, currently exclude themselves, or are excluded, from the 'pleasures and achievements'² of lifelong learning. Nothing short of a revolution would challenge this exclusion. This report had a clear but constrained influence on government policy, as represented in *The Learning Age*³ in February 1999. This was initially intended to be a statement of government policy on lifelong learning, but was urgently downgraded to a policy consultation document as the implications became apparent.

As the Government began to implement some of the more feasible and conservative aspects of *The Learning Age*, the National Advisory Group was reconvened in order to look at a narrow range of issues relating to policy implementation. The second report, *Creating Learning Cultures*⁴, however, took a broader perspective on how to build the Learning Age. Moreover, this was set in the context of the risk society - changing cultures and cultural change. Among the ten characteristics of the risk society⁵ identified by the Advisory Group are 'the increasing variety and pluralism of popular culture' and 'the growing importance of communications and information technology to many aspects of our lives'⁶. The main concern is for those who are excluded from lifelong learning. Whilst the assumptions and values behind this viewpoint need to be challenged, that is not the purpose of this paper. Rather, it will pick up issues relating to the recognition that learning could take place through popular culture:

...policy-makers and providers need to devise strategies and policies which go with the grain of its (the contemporary world) of its positive and popular features so that people can make imaginative use of them. This includes learning from and working closely with those organizations and individual who already know how to achieve success – through imaginative outreach, the engaging use of new information and communication technologies, and through creativity in the fields of popular culture, music, sport, communications and entertainment.⁷

If this is recognizing the potential of popular culture and the world of entertainment to promote life-long learning, and to argue for parity alongside structured and accredited education programs, then this is a major revolution in attitudes among policy-makers. However, this potential does need to be researched and not merely taken as axiomatic, or it will not be able to justify its validity alongside national learning targets and qualification outcomes.

The use of popular culture in creating learning cultures therefore needs a more thorough examination.

Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and Learning

This paper focuses on a rather narrow range of both popular culture – soap operas – and ICT. And the media – television – is hardly new technology, although the digital revolution is transforming its capacity in conjunction with cable and satellite. The use of television in educational broadcasting has been around for a very long time, and is relatively well researched. According to Fieldhouse, 'it is arguable that broadcasting has been the major adult education agency of the twentieth century'⁸. Where the literature goes beyond the techniques of using television as a 'window on the world' in the classroom, or a major teaching strategy in distance education, into a more cultural analysis of the uses of television, it has largely been researched with children, and in particular concentrating on the effects of violence in the media⁹. Its application to adult learning is somewhat limited, and largely negative. For example, in terms of learning for citizenship or political democracy, the interests of the dominant class are assumed to be served by the media: television supposedly engages people in non-critical, passive entertainment as an alternative to adult education classes which will develop their political awareness and critical thinking skills¹⁰. This paper is proposing the view that far from being about passive non-learning, television viewing can have tremendous potential for stimulating critical commentary and raising awareness of a wide range of issues, not least through popular cultural programs including soaps.

In order to move beyond the critique of the hegemonic power of television, it is important to en-

gage with the thesis. In particular, the work of Raymond Williams is important, for he not only provided critical insights into television as a cultural phenomenon, but was himself an experienced adult educator, and brought these interests together¹¹. As early as 1961, he was denying that 'telly-glued masses' exist¹², and that a deeper understanding of working class popular culture was needed. That analysis came through, in part, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: it was 'the place to be'¹³. As Julie Fenton has put it:

Acknowledging the faltering of the purely political imperative, the CCCS work to uncover and celebrate those counter-hegemonic practices within working-class culture which resist the influence of dominant culture.¹⁴

Part of the CCCS analysis was to look at the genre of soap operas as cultural studies. As the literature indicates, the analysis of soap operas is multi-dimensional. There are debates about genre – what are the defining characteristics of a soap opera that set it aside from any other television program? Whilst this is problematic, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss fully. According to Allen, the defining of a program as a soap is by no means clear-cut – it depends on target audience, interpretive communities, and transnational and transcultural factors¹⁵. Second, there is the relationship between soaps and everyday life – do they accurately reflect society, or are they unrealistic or distorted fictions? Third, how useful is the notion of social capital in explaining the popularity of soap operas¹⁶? Transnational factors play a part in this – how realistic is an American soap viewed in Romania? Then there are questions about the characterization and actors whose professional and private lives can be heavily influenced by regular appearances in television soaps. This analysis is focusing on soaps as popular culture through which informal or incidental learning may occur.

Soap Operas: What Can They Teach Us?

During the writing of the final stages of this paper, a British national radio station broadcast a live phone-in discussion about the realism of soap operas. One caller expressed his view:

*It seems to me that today most young people get their education about HIV, eating disorders and marital relationships from soap operas. That's sad.*¹⁷

This assertion needs researching. If indeed it were true, then soap operas, consistently the most popular programs on British television carry a significant responsibility, equivalent to schools and colleges. A content analysis of British soaps over a period of time shows (1) that educational issues are intentionally raised in only a minority of episodes of a very few soaps; (2) there is considerable evidence of values and attitudes being promoted and sustained through soaps towards a number of social and political issues and problems, including health, welfare, employment and learning itself. Sometimes soaps are praised for raising delicate issues such as sexual abuse and rape, eating disorders, infidelities, and drug abuse; at other times, they are criticized for being too serious and failing to entertain because the issues being dealt with are so sensitive. The issue of whether this is a *sad* state of affairs may be a reflection of one's position on social capital. Whilst soaps, and television in general may be seen as devices through which an individual's social capital is reduced with declining participation in civic associations, there is evidence of increasing informal networks around soaps. Through the worldwide web, there are enhanced and global opportunities to engage in discussion about soap operas. The number of chat forums that focus on specific soaps or on soaps in general are vast, and the level of participation is high with thousands of messages and contributions to the chat added everyday.

Because of space restrictions this paper is concentrating on an example of intentional learning: the use of television soaps to 'normalize' the problem of illiteracy, to convey the notion that this is a common problem faced by many people, and that with the commitment of the individual and the support of education and training bodies, progress can be made. Dymock¹⁸ argues that television has contributed to the extent of illiteracy as a problem, because of the ease in which it can disseminate information, including verbal information, meaning that people no longer need to read or write – technology can communicate on their behalf. It is somewhat paradoxical,

therefore, that the Australian government increased funding to develop a national television teaching series aimed at adults who had literacy difficulties. This was the experience elsewhere too. Literacy through television is part of education broadcasting¹⁹. In this context, Draine and Wilde-meersch conclude that “the most important learning today encompass both television and radio airwaves”²⁰. Television is more than a vehicle for developing literacy. From a liberatory perspective, television has its own literacy that needs to be critically decoded and interpreted²¹. It is a significant part of culture.

In two leading national soap operas in Britain, literacy has been dealt with as part of the narrative of the soap. Most recently, the writers of *Coronation Street*, set in a working class community in urban Manchester in the north of England, have revealed that Tyrone, a 17-year old tear-away from a lone-parent family, could not read, which he is embarrassed and angry about, but is persuaded to discreetly undertake reading lessons from a local resident, a retired teacher. In *Brookside*, set in a small neighborhood in Liverpool, also in the north of England, where the working classes and middle class live side by side (and where class conflict often features as a theme), the literacy theme is less part of the narrative than part of a national campaign. The executive producer of *Brookside*, and the chairman of the company that makes the series, Phil Redmond, had been approached by a leading international novelist, Ken Follett (whose partner, Barbara is an elected member of the Labour Government) to get involved in a new literacy campaign in early 1998, the National Year of Reading in Britain. Redmond had already been castigated in the late 1970s when his children's TV program about a school, *Grange Hill*, told a story about a 12-year old boy who could not read. Redmond was told at the time that no child could enter secondary education without having been taught to read. We now know better. Redmond believes that literacy is vital, and was happy to pick the theme up again in *Brookside*, a series that attracts around six million viewers (*Coronation Street*, along with *EastEnders* based in London, are the two most popular soaps in Britain, with around 15 million viewers each).

It was appropriate because the soap is renowned for dealing with a wide range of issues. Redmond had already worked with the government's Department of Health and the Home Office to raise awareness of anti-drugs campaigns through the program. Redmond, recently made honorary professor of media studies, at the John Moores University in Liverpool, is at pains to insist, however, they do not just take the government line, but do their own research and develop their own storylines. Thus the story of Niamh Musgrove, a woman who had been successful in her job for many years until the company decided to become computerized. We then discover that all this time she had not been able to read due to disruptions to her schooling, and yet had developed successful strategies for overcoming this disadvantage. Now it was out in the open. She could no longer manage her unit, as her charges could no longer respect her. Her family was embarrassed, as they had been unaware of this (even though she had four children, two of whom were adults). After a little struggle coming to terms with recognizing her 'problem' she is also persuaded to do something about it, and goes along to the local further education to undertake a literacy campaign. We are shown how welcoming and caring the college is. From this point the story becomes less significant in the series, but it is evident that she quickly acquires literacy skills.

This raises two issues about realism. Some argue that the situation was unrealistic, because she could not have hidden her disadvantage for as long as she did; nor could she acquire the skills as quickly as she did. Second, as the story came to light, the program ended with an advertisement, using the characters from the soap to promote a new literacy campaign, 'Brookie Basics'. As many as 800 centers across Britain, most of whom are quality kitemarked by the Basic Skills Agency, agreed to use the campaign and the materials the *Brookside* company produced in conjunction with the City of Liverpool Further Education College. A national telephone hotline would put callers in touch with their local literacy center. However, on a global scale, and compared with many Australian and American soaps, including *The Bold and the Beautiful*, British soaps are generally characterized by their attempt to reflect real issues and contexts²².

Researching Learning through Television

Unfortunately, to date it has not proved possible to get any research data on the success of the literacy campaign through *Brookside*. We are told that there was a 'substantial response' to the program, but no data has been published on take up and success. This raises issues to do with the basis of research for learning through watching soaps. Whilst a statistical analysis might be useful, there is also a qualitative dimension to this. Given the global nature of soaps, it is feasible to carry out a series of qualitative studies using the vast networks of soap opera viewers that exist through internet chat forums. As well as being evidence of social capital, these can be a potentially rich source of research data, although the use of the net and chat forums do pose some genuine concerns in terms of both reliability and validity. There is evidence to suggest that some of those who engage in discussions on the net not only wish to remain anonymous, but intentionally misrepresent themselves. This has two effects. The first is that we cannot collect demographic data very easily. Whilst we have a vast amount of views and opinions expressed, it is not easy to associate them with even basic independent variables such as gender, ethnicity, nor age. So, if wished to know whether women more than men learned through soaps, we might be able to get some indication from the web, but names used are not always a good indicator of gender, not only because of cultural differences, but because of pseudonyms chosen. Second, if there is a possibility that if chat participants are prepared to misrepresent their identity, then they may also misrepresent or exaggerate their views. On the other hand, there is a vast amount of data that can be examined and critically analyzed, and placed in the context of what is already known about those who watch soaps²³.

Notes

¹ National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (The Fryer Report) (1997), *Learning for the Twenty-first Century*. London: Department for Education and Employment.

² National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (The Second Fryer Report)

(1999), *Creating Learning Cultures: Next Steps in Achieving the Learning Age*. London: Department for Education and Employment, 1999.

³ Department for Education and Employment, *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain*. London: Department for Education and Employment, 1999

⁴ National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (1999) op. cit.

⁵ As proposed by U. Beck (1992) *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage and developed by A. Giddens (1998) 'Risk society: the context of British politics' in J. Franklin (ed) (1998) *The Politics of Risk Society*. London: Institute of Public Policy Research.

⁶ National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (1999) op. cit. p. 7

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ R. Fieldhouse (1995) 'Historical perspectives on future developments and diversity in British adult education' in Ian Bryant (ed), *Vision, Intervention - Celebrating Adult Education: Papers from the 25th Annual Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults, Winchester 1995*, University of Southampton/SCUTREA, 1995; p. 81

⁹ See, for example, G. Dunn (1977) *The Box in the Corner: Television and the Under Fives*. London: Macmillan; M. J. A. Hare (1983) (ed) *Learning from Television: Psychological and Educational Research*. London: Academic Press

¹⁰ Benn states that for a whole section of the population, but especially younger adults, 'social capital' is reduced by not being involved in civic associations. 'The main culprit is television ... television privatises social time'. R. Benn (1997), 'Participation in adult education: breaking boundaries or deepening inequalities' in P. Armstrong, N. Miller and M. Zukas (eds), *Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries: International Research in the Education of Adults. Proceedings of the 27th Annual Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults, July 1997*, University of London/SCUTREA; pp. 31-34.

Brookfield cites the example of the Phil Donahue Show which encourages the audience to 'explore

and consider critically interpretations of the world different to those they normally held. The Donahue show can be viewed as a metaphor for many adult education programs.' S. Brookfield (1997) 'Adult education as political detoxification' in Armstrong, Miller and Zukas (eds) (1997) op. cit. pp. 122-128.

¹¹ A. O'Connor (1989) *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings*. London: Routledge.

¹² R. Williams (1961), *The Long Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. p. 361

¹³ J. McGuigan (1999) 'Whither cultural studies?' In N. Aldred and M. Ryle (eds), *Teaching Culture: The Long Revolution and Cultural Studies*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education; p. 81

¹⁴ J. Fenton (1997) 'Desiring a discipline: negotiating the post-modern divide' in P. Armstrong, N. Miller and M. Zukas (eds) op. cit. p. 153

¹⁵ R.C. Allen (1991) 'Bursting bubbles: soap opera, audiences and the limits of genre' in E. Seiter et al. (eds) (1991) *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*. London: Routledge.

¹⁶ In drawing on Robert Putnam's work on social capital, Juliet Merrifield observes that there is intrusion into people's private spaces by government and global commodity culture, and suggests that 'television soap operas ... have more reality than their neighbourhoods for many people'. J. Merrifield (1997) 'Finding our lodestone again: democracy, the civil society and adult education' in P. Armstrong, N. Miller and M. Zukas (eds) (1997) op. cit. p. 322

¹⁷ BBC Radio Five Live with Nicky Campbell, 8 February 2000

¹⁸ D.R. Dymock (1995) 'Vision, provision and television; an Australian perspective on 25 years of adult literacy development' in Ian Bryant (ed) (1995) op. cit. pp. 51-56

¹⁹ However, I would argue that the broadcast element goes beyond what Jenny Stevens, referring to the 1970s BBC TV's series *Your Move*, described as 'a motivator and stimulant', important as that may be. Cited in H. A. Jones (1977) 'The NIAE literacy research: a case study in methods' *Papers from the 7th SCUTREA Annual Conference, University of Hull, July 1977*; p. 66

²⁰ N. Druine and D. Wildemeersch (1997) 'From deschooling to reschooling adult literacy in Flanders: limitations to the mainstream model of adult basic education' in P. Armstrong, N. Miller and M. Zukas (eds) (1997) op. cit. p. 135

²¹ See D. Buckingham (1993), *Children talking television: the making of television literacy*. London: Falmer Press.

²² However, they do not always succeed. British soaps, for example, have a significantly higher death rate than the population as a whole. One is estimated to have seven times the current death rate.

²³ For example, E. Seiter et al. (1991) 'Don't treat us like we're stupid and naïve': toward an ethnography of soap opera viewers'. In E. Seiter et al. (eds) (1991) op. cit. Ch. 12.