

Editorial: Media Education in the Time of Coronavirus

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Enforced isolation tends to make one reflective, as does (I have discovered) writing a scheme of work for an international A level in Media Studies. Realising that I hadn't actually taught Media Studies A level for over ten years I found myself trawling old books, new books, websites, recordings and images for inspiration, guidance and to jog my memory. One inscription in a copy of Len Masterman's *Teaching the Media* (first published in 1985 – mine is the later Routledge edition) reminded me that it has been almost 30 years since I first stepped into a classroom to teach Media Studies. Indulge me then, while I reflect on what media education meant to me in the 90s, why I think it has always been not just amenable to research, but inherently a continuing research project, and how the articles in this issue of the journal embody that spirit of enquiry and reflection.



I have written before about my debt to Masterman (Readman 2013) and, if anything, my admiration for *Teaching the Media* increases with time – not only does the book outline a rigorous conceptual approach to media education, but it embraces the necessity of a critical stance in relation to education itself. In short, it is fundamentally a methodological book – media education is, more than anything, an epistemological orientation in Masterman's hands: a mode of questioning and a refusal to take anything for granted. This mode of questioning is the product of a particular design, and it is the design which provides it with both disciplinary specificity and fluidity. He describes it as “a coherent discipline in its own right, with its own characteristic concepts,

practices and modes of enquiry” yet also argues that it “should not be confined to the province of media teachers” and that it should “*inform the teaching of all subjects*” (241). This progressive approach to media education as something ‘lifelong’, ‘holistic’ and ‘ecological’ struggled to survive, however, as, gradually, the disciplinary boundaries were drawn, and the exigencies of assessment produced an orthodoxy of production activities, auteurist responses, and theoretical

name-dropping. The challenge, I think, was later picked up by Bennett et al. with their argument for the need to move beyond 'the media' and examine, instead, the dynamics of the mediascape. They criticise Masterman's advocacy of 'alternative' media production (it was the 80s, after all) for being "unwittingly conservative" (Bennett et al. 2011: 124), but the spirit of the project he began is developed in theoretically rich and exciting ways in their book.

And it is this notion of a 'project' that seems pertinent. One of the great attractions of media education in the 90s was that it felt like the Wild West – frontiers didn't exist yet, territories were up for grabs, and claims could be staked. There weren't textbooks and schemes of work readily available, so resources had to be produced as well as teaching strategies developed around them. There were books and BFI publications about film and TV, of course (there was a particularly good one on *Teaching TV Sitcom*, 1985) but, apart from *Teaching the Media* I can only remember *The Media Studies Book* (1991) with chapters by, for example, David Buckingham, Gill Branston and Jenny Grahame. The approach was, as with Masterman, a conceptual one; the chapters focused on, for example, 'Language', 'Narrative', 'Audience' and 'Institution'. The nature of the 'subject' (before it became formalised as a subject) was a negotiation. I knew what it *wasn't* at least; it wasn't Communication Studies, with its emphasis on face to face communication, its functional models of 'sender' and 'receiver' and its apparently unproblematic interpretations of non-verbal communication. Media Studies, conversely, questioned everything and was critical, playful and 'porous'.

This 'thing' then, called Media Studies was in a continual state of formation, reflection and observation - it was, I guess, like an action research project. It was also a heuristic project – we would try things out, evaluate the outcomes, try again. I used to begin my weeks by handing out to students a 'media quotation' for discussion. These slips of paper had been artfully produced on the department's sole Macintosh Classic, loosely modelled on Graham Rawle's 'Lost Consonants' series in *The Guardian* (<http://www.grahamrawle.com/lost-consonants.html>). Like 'Lost Consonants' they featured 'cut out and collect' dashed outlines, each one numbered (also signifying collectability) and bore a quotation from, for example, Christian Metz, Roland Barthes, or Pierre Bourdieu. My own addition was an ironically enlisted advertising slogan along the bottom: "Media Quotations: they're soft, strong and very long" (from Andrex toilet tissue), for example. I relished the collision of high and low, the cerebral and corporeal (*The Modern Review*, with its sell-line "Low culture for highbrows" was regular reading at the time). The medium/form elicited some laughs (perhaps mostly mine) which took the edge off the explicit injunction to analyse, interpret and learn and (yes, if I'm honest) to acquire the cultural capital of theory. The hours I spent sourcing an appropriate quotation and constructing these provocations and challenges astounds me now, but I believed in the project, I believed in the explanatory force of theory, and I believed in the importance of debate. My 'media quotations'

practice was both flippant and deadly serious. It reflected the implicit understanding that, as Murdock and Golding argue a quarter of a century later, (the debate has continued this long!):

media studies is not a discipline in the conventional sense, occupying a designated academic territory with fixed boundaries. It is a space of encounter and debate. Its concerns overlap with the cognate areas of cultural and information studies and draw on traditions of inquiry and debate from across the entire range of the social and human sciences. (Murdock and Golding 2015: 41-42)

I wouldn't have characterised my work as a 'research project' back then, although, with hindsight, there are some indications in the audio diaries I recorded at the time, in which I think aloud about how, for example, I might use *Sean's Show* (Channel 4 1992-1993) to teach about realism. The audio diaries were, themselves, an ironic and self-conscious engagement with the temporal affordances of the media – I mention Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* in the very first one. It wasn't until I began my doctoral work and my supervisor Jenny Moon encouraged me to write reflectively, that I realised I had been doing this in some form all along.

It is hard now to think what isn't mediated, particularly at a time of global lockdown when every meeting takes place online and other people's children, animals and kitchens become part of the texture of public conversations. The articles in this issue of MERJ predate the Coronavirus pandemic, but all are attuned, nevertheless, to the mediated nature of everyday life and education, and all are committed to projects of critical enquiry.

Robyn Ilten-Gee, for example, links narrative moral agency with critical pedagogy and podcasting, showing how the medium facilitates the construction of empathetic subject positions. Through this she argues that the literal inclusion of different voices in a recorded narrative work creates opportunities to manage conflict and foster resilience. Similarly, Mark Subryan and Lada Trifonova Price reveal how students of journalism can become reflective and reflexive agents of knowledge production when presented with specific epistemological challenges – they argue for the need for journalism education to go beyond practicalities and to embrace the complexities of research skills in order to develop a critical mindset.

Géraldine Wuyckens shows how students of all ages can be stimulated to engage critically with digital technologies and interactions through a 'design fiction' process which involves imaginative projection and critique. Richard Wallis, Christa van Raalte and Stefania Allegrini reach some fascinating insights into the nature of media education through an analysis of the reflections of graduates, two decades after their course. The ethnographic media work of Abhishek Chatterjee, Heitor Alvelos and Jorge Brandão Pereira involves students in a project of curation and preservation; the 'anti-amnesia' of their title is powerfully evocative of the

temporal possibilities of media production, which is used here in a pedagogic project to “rescue materials, documents, testimonies, and historical facts that may otherwise be lost or forgotten”.

Finally, Theresa Redmond, Evelien Schilder and Jennifer Luetkemeyer perform a kind of ‘flipping’ of conventional pedagogy by assessing the qualities of *questions* that students ask, rather than answers. Their use of media literacy to foster critical enquiry is absolutely congruent with the aims of Masterman back in 1985 and recognises the ‘entangled’ nature of literacies.

In a time of (mediated) crisis the value of such resources and abilities is clear.

References

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