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TV teacher: how adults learn through tv viewing

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Introduction

Adult educators have generally been interested in two aspects of the role of film and television fiction. First, there is a growing literature on using these media within conventional pedagogical situations (Thompson, 2007). This includes examining their potential as tools that teachers use to raise awareness of social and political issues and enable students to imagine a range of experiences and possibilities. It also incorporates the development of critical media literacy, whereby students learn to recognize the way ideas are constructed, reflected and reproduced. Guy, for example, perceives the 'corrosive and dehumanizing messages of popular culture' (2007:19) and explores the importance of classroom practices that develop frameworks for critique. Coming, in contrast, from a Jungian perspective, Dirks examines the significance of the emotions in transformative learning and notes how this 'may be fostered through the selective use of fiction, poetry and movies' (2006:23).

This paper addresses the second area of pedagogical interest in film and television; their unmediated educative function. Educators' desire to equip people to engage critically with film and television presupposes their capacity to affect our thinking. Tisdell's work (2007, 2008) discusses both mediated and unmediated learning from fiction. She reports on large scale mixed methods research that demonstrates the potential of fiction as well as the critical documentary to enable people to learn by experiencing alternative narratives, thereby challenging prejudices and assumptions.

Giroux is a well known proponent of the idea that popular culture is educative and argues that films are forms of public pedagogy, with pleasure a significant factor in their pedagogical efficacy. 'They deploy power through the important role they play connecting the production of pleasure and meaning with the mechanisms and practices of powerful teaching machines' (2002:4). Giroux privileges film over television as a pedagogical instrument. He argues that it travels more, offers more space for the play of ideology than a '22 minute sitcom' and requires more attention because it cannot be a backdrop to other activities, such as completing household chores. We think this seriously underestimates the pedagogical power of television.

David Bianculli claims 'It was television, almost as much as rock and roll, that encouraged me to be different and think differently in the late sixties' (2002:4). Syndicated television programmes have international fan bases. Even sitcom characters build over the duration of a series. The long-running television drama, one of which is the focus of our attention, uses extended story arcs, develops complex characters and is a part of its audience's lives for far longer than a film. It offers the opportunity for individuals to engage with characters as they grow and

develop over an extended period. There is also ample evidence of extensive, passionate dialogue between viewers on web-sites dedicated to favourite television programmes, and of creative imaginative work in the form of slash fiction by fans. Whilst television viewing may be interrupted or combined with other activities, this can serve to integrate it more fully with individual lives. Nor is television viewing always this casual. 'My programme' can be claimed as a unique space, where individuals assert their right to personal time. One of our interviewees exemplified this:

when it does come on the kids know I want to watch it, I get really cross, cos somebody else phones, it's always, you know quarter to seven on a Thursday, do they not know Buffy's on! And I get really cross when I'm interrupted and I don't want to share with anybody either. I want to watch it. When I watched those videos, I made sure the kids were in bed, and I just turned the lights down

This paper asks whether it is reasonable to conceive of the future of adult education lying partially with directors and producers of television fiction. This seems to be an important question at a time when institutionally located education for adults is shrinking, certainly in the UK.

Fiction has the potential to initiate transformative learning because it induces intense vicarious experience. This enables us to speed up the learning that might occur through ordinary lived experience; to have many lives and relationships, including some that are rare. In this way fiction can become the 'disorienting dilemma', the 'trigger' for transformation that Mezirow (2000) and others have discussed when considering transformative adult learning.

The television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BTVS)* is a global phenomenon that has attracted an exceptional degree of academic interest. Its own academic journal has been running for nine years. It has generated international conferences and a wide range of academic books (see Hornick's 2010 bibliography). Implicit in books like *Why Buffy Matters* (Wilcox, 2006) and *What would Buffy do?* (Reiss, 2004) is the idea that the series has important things to teach. Popular articles with titles such as 'how to analyse Buffy for personal growth' or 'great truths from Buffy' suggest that many people believe they can learn directly from this text. This paper draws on interviews with eleven adults who watched *BTVS* regularly.

Methodology

Interviews asked general questions about *BtVS* viewing. We felt that asking participants specifically to identify learning might limit or confuse the response. Transcripts were analysed against a framework built from the literature on learning through fiction and popular culture. Data were coded under two categories, 'identification' and 'critical distance'. We discuss the way the first of these categories operates. 'Identification' includes incidents where empathy and identification appear to engender transformative learning.

The category was split into sub-categories, 'resonance' and 'otherness'. There may be strong similarities between the fictional world and that of the reader/viewer. This can be transformative if viewers then reflect upon the way that the fictional

characters engage with and manage these familiar situations. 'Resonance' included accounts from participants in which they:

- Recognised similar experiences, including life events and relationships
- Recognised similar character traits
- Noted resolutions, coping strategies or different perceptions relating to familiar events issues or relationships
- Showed that they understood a situation, relationship or self differently as a result of their viewing

Fiction may also create identification with characters whose lives and circumstances are markedly different from ours. The emotional investment this creates opens us to seeing and understanding the perspectives of those we regard as outsiders.

'Otherness' included accounts from participants in which they:

- Experienced from the perspective of someone whose position or perspective (racial, social, personal, moral or political) was different from theirs
- Experienced situations that were outside their normal life experiences
- Reflected on unconscious/ hidden aspects of themselves/ their circumstances
- Identified challenges to their perceptions of outsiders

There was cross-over between categories. An individual might identify strongly with a character, but not with the situation they were in, which would trigger a learning experience as they imagined coping in that context. A quotation from one participant illustrates this. She refers to a critically acclaimed episode about the death of Buffy's mother:

I used to watch Buffy with a friend who lived nearby, we're both mad addicts (laughs) really, and it used to really affect us, and we'd talk about it for a while, and spent, after watching that particular episode we were both thinking 'Oh God, wouldn't it be awful', you know, if something happened to one of our parents, wouldn't that be awful, and we'd been *discussing* it, and what would you do.

These friends used the programme to explore a situation they had not experienced, but expected they would have to endure. The television is used as the basis for an imaginative act, helping them to prepare for one of life's difficult passages. They are dealing with a situation that resonates for them (they have parents and fear their death) but are still unfamiliar (they have not yet encountered loss).

Two illustrations

The following two examples show how the category 'identification' works with respect to resonance and otherness. *BtVS* deals with moral complexities and ambiguities (Loftis, 2009). Characters that appear initially to be good behave in morally disturbing ways or turn and embrace evil. This engendered significant reflection in participants, as they struggled to reconcile their social and moral perspectives with their affiliation to characters who behaved in ways that either contravened participants' moral codes or dichotomous thinking.

Spike, a central character, is a vampire with a long violent history, who is first rendered harmless by technology, then by his feelings for Buffy. One man's reflections on his feelings about Spike show how he sees Spike as profoundly 'other', yet finds he identifies with aspects of his behaviour; he admires and identifies with Buffy, but is disturbed by her relationship with Spike.

... Spike and his relationship with Buffy, because initially I couldn't get that relationship in my head. When Buffy came back from being dead I understand that the character was messed up, but the fact that she slept with Spike, Spike being a mass murderer, Ok he had the chip in his head, but him being a mass murderer and basically an out-and-out bastard, (...) I just thought 'No, she couldn't do, she wouldn't do that surely?' Even, no matter how desperate or messed up she was, not with the person, not with that kind of person. But then, erm...once the...I still never really had been able to get over that little hurdle in my head, but obviously it's happened and I didn't want to dismiss it, I obviously kept watching things to see where it would all go, and a spin-off from that event happening that I had such a hard time coping with in my own head, erm...that particularly interested me was (...) he then decided to erm...well, I was going to say decided to try to be a better man, or to be more of a man that she wanted(...) er the fact that he was trying to do that and the lengths he went to got my attention for two reasons. One being that obviously, if you're in a situation and you've seen somebody, you meet somebody and you think 'Oh, they're gorgeous and I'd like to be with them' (...) you think 'Right, I've got to get their attention, I've got to try and get into their little circle of friends or chat her up (...) and just the fact I've been there before (...) and tried to do things or portray myself in a certain way that I think may have got me into her little personal circle. And the lengths Spike went to to do that, quite metaphorical, which I think...so you get a soul, interested me. And the other reason it interested me, (...) is that it really, you know it wasn't a selfless thing. You know, I sat there thinking he's not so much doing this for her benefit as for his, or is he? So you can read it both ways. So I can associate with that. (...)

(More discussion of Spike's evil acts)

I still always think that person at some point was there ripping the throats out of babies, so I can never quite embrace him one hundred percent in my head. I love the character, he makes me laugh out loud, you know I think Marsters the actor who plays him is brilliant, but always at the back of my head would be that 'You, you did terrible things.'

The viewer struggles with a range of moral complexities. The language indicates the mental effort that goes into watching the programme. 'I had such a hard time coping with it my own head'. I think we can see a stage in transformation here. His existing meaning perspectives have been challenged by the fact that these characters get together and he finds it difficult to cope with this. He cannot just dismiss it because of his engagement with the series and Buffy herself 'no she wouldn't do that, surely', but he hasn't got to the point at which it is resolved and a new perspective has taken its place. The latter part of the extract shows him struggling with his own beliefs about human nature and whether character is fixed or not. He identifies with Spike

presenting himself well to someone to whom he is attracted, but is struck by the metaphor of acquiring a new soul to do so. He can't decide on a fundamental moral issue – whether reformation is a selfless or selfish act. In effect he is engaging with a profound philosophical dilemma concerning the nature of goodness. Can goodness or unselfishness ever genuinely be so, if embracing these makes us feel better?

In the second extract we see how AS identifies strongly with Buffy when Buffy is behaving in a way that AS thinks is quite 'other' – alien to everything she (AS) believes in, or believes she herself embodies:

To my surprise, I was quite, when I used to watch Buffy 5, I've always wanted to be able to fight like that, maybe there's a dark side to me I don't know about, and that quite surprised me because I'm not aggressive, I'm not a fighter, never, never fought, never wanted to hurt anybody in that way, wouldn't want to. (...) There's maybe a side of me I don't know, I don't know about, you might not want to!

(The interview moves on to discuss other aspects of the show, and includes an account of AS witnessing some real violence and her own response – then moves back to Buffy's violence)

Yeah, it's a release, you know when she's kicking, I always think, it always reminds me of that beating and the man kicking that boy's head in and it's awful, cos I'm not aggressive at all. (...) I think we're all capable of something that is different to how we normally perceive ourselves, and that was quite an eye opener for me. It was almost like an out of body experience, thinking you know, this is not actually me, I'm a gentle catholic girl, you know! (She talks more about how angry and violent she feels about some situations)

But I was speaking really from, you know, almost salivating, if anyone hurts my girls, then, if I hear of anyone attacking them or hurting them in any kind of way, there's a demon comes out in me and I know its there and I think, I think its there in everybody. Just press the right buttons, and that's sad, its awful that really, isn't it, to admit to that.

AS seems to operate within a meaning perspective that rejects violence and only enables her to view herself positively if she believes, as she repeatedly asserts in the interview, that she is not violent. Yet the sheer pleasure she experiences seeing Buffy hurt people makes her reflect on her own character, analysing its contradictions and starting to find ways to accommodate a different sense of herself, one that is prepared to include violent feelings and defensive aggression. She talks about thinking she is actually another person when she enjoys Buffy's aggression, 'this is not actually me'. A phrase like 'gentle catholic girl' suggests that her sense of herself has been constructed through her social and religious background; her TV viewing is challenging this. Her ability to identify with a small girl facing apparently stronger opponents and defeating them brings to the fore her own deep-rooted anger and frustration.

It is interesting that AS uses the metaphorical framework of the series itself when she talks about having a 'demon' in her that does these things. One important

feature of fiction that there is not time to explore fully here is its capacity to produce concrete manifestations of unconscious or semi-conscious desires and anxieties. Dirkx examines how developing an awareness of these and their significance can lead to profound transformations, arguing that:

when we take seriously the responsibility of developing a more conscious relationship with the unconscious dimensions of our being, we enter into a profoundly transformative, life-changing process (2006:19).

The horror genre is predicated on translating unconscious fears into physical threats and critics have examined this working in *BtVS* (e.g. Wilcox, 2001; Chandler, 2003). AS's recognition of the 'demon' within her is illustrative of a significant feature of learning through identification. Viewers start to identify with characters who are outsiders, living lives that are very different from their own. In the case of *BtVS*, this could be seen through identification with the demons and vampires themselves, especially Spike and his suffering, but interviewees also mention identifying with other characters whose behaviour seems socially or morally transgressive.

Conclusion

The interviews indicated that viewers were engaged in a process of transformative learning as a result of their engagement with *BtVS*. It prompted critical reflection that challenged their sense of themselves and their beliefs about complex moral issues. Pleasure and emotional engagement were central to this process. The writers and directors were indeed pedagogues, presenting characters that grew and changed and facing viewers with complex moral dilemmas (Loftis, 2009). They created situations that challenged commonly held assumptions and drew on powerful symbolism to confront viewers with a range of unconscious or semi-conscious fears and desires.

These findings do not challenge the value of structured educational approaches to the media. It is possible to read fictions in ways that reinforce hegemony and confirm established ways of thinking. Watching TV might therefore be anathema to transformative learning. Teachers can select and combine fictional encounters most likely to create learning for particular groups and individuals and offer activities to promote critical engagement and dialogue (Alexandrin, 2008; Earle, 2000; Guy, 2007; Guenther and Dees, 2000; Tisdell, 2007, 2008). This may require a degree of risk and courage, as Smith (2000) demonstrates in her description of using popular cultural texts to challenge the intersection of racism and patriarchy. Teachers can work with groups to expose members to new ways of reading and deconstructing popular fictions.

Scope and funding for such work is limited, however, leaving transformative learning through fiction increasingly in the hands of creative individuals and teams: writers, directors, producers and others. Viewing looks likely to continue to be an important site of learning. As Redmon Wright concludes in her analysis of the impact of the television series the Avengers on women's sense of themselves and the possibilities open to them, 'As adult educators, we must pay attention to the powerful influence of the popular.' (2007:70).

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