

Media matters in general education

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The Liberal and General Studies Project, based at Huddersfield University, aims to recapture the experience of these elements within vocational FHE courses from the 1950s to the 1980s, and to assess what this implies for how general education should be organised now and in future. Any such recommendation would have to address the issue of how communication should be taught and learnt, which in turn is connected to how students might develop a critical approach both to 'reading' and potentially to themselves producing media 'texts'. On pp16-17 we reprint an article written by Roy for a conference of media teachers held in 1991, while in the article on pp12-15, Roy comments from a 2014 perspective on this earlier article and on some criticisms made of it at the time by Colin Waugh in his article 'Media Education and General Education: what is really at stake?' (published in General Educator 15, March-April 1992; for a copy please email post16educator@runbox.com).

At a time when the scope for a critical pedagogy in English schools and colleges seems to have almost disappeared in the face of Govian 'rigour' and when the expansion of film and media studies courses has been arrested and partially reversed, Colin Waugh asked me to look again at an article I wrote in June 1991.

Re-visiting something written twenty-three years earlier is always likely to generate mixed emotions. Predictions and assumptions might have proved embarrassing, and occasionally they might have been prescient. Inevitably, unforeseen changes in ideologies and technologies have completely changed the context for the activities which were the original focus of the article. In 1991 the process which has now brought curriculum development as well as the management of schools and colleges and the regulation of their operation under centralised control had only just begun. So too had the development of digital media technologies which would later completely transform the possibilities of media production activities for students, not just on vocational media courses but in all classrooms. And yet . . . aspects of the argument put forward in 1991 remain relevant.

Before I explore some of those arguments I should explain that in 1991 I was an active participant in the curriculum development of vocational media education courses, working as an examiner/moderator for two awarding bodies. I had helped to develop this form of provision while still a general studies teacher and by 1991 I had virtually completed my move towards full-time film and media education. Today, while still involved with film and media studies informally, I have only a

vestigial role in terms of examining. My interest now in the practices of teaching and learning in the general studies classroom of the 1970s and 1980s is because I believe that the critical pedagogy developed in that period and in those classrooms needs urgently to be re-visited and considered again as a source of ideas for new forms of provision. I have also tried wherever possible to inform my film and media education practice with the same ideas. What I discovered was that in order to maintain the curriculum space opened up in the 1970s for this kind of work we had to accept more and more restrictions on what we could do, especially in terms of how work might be assessed and validated.

Colin wrote a response to my original article (which had been written primarily for media teachers rather than general studies teachers) and I want to use some of his observations as the starting point for my return to the argument. He set out five specific areas of concern which I think might prove useful in opening up a new discussion about general studies/general education and media studies/media education (which I'm going to assume includes film studies and cultural studies).

Vocational education?

In 1991 I hoped to encourage teachers to re-think the term 'vocational', promoting a positive definition of 'vocational education' to mean a richer form of school and college experience, one which would embrace all the exciting teaching and learning possibilities that I had encountered through general studies teaching (and

listed in the 1991 piece under the heading 'the best vocational courses'). I felt then that there were GS teachers who had been able to create such courses in their colleges - and I came across them as a moderator.

Colin argued that, for him, 'vocational' at that time still meant courses for students in employment or leading directly to employment and that what I was describing was essentially 'pre-vocational' education. This new term had appeared in curriculum development following the establishment of the Further Education Unit in 1978 and the publication of its report *A Basis for Choice* (1979) on young people 'staying on' in education but without clear progression pathways. Subsequent curriculum development in pre-vocational education or 'vocational preparation' as it was also termed produced a range of possible qualification structures including CPVE (Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education) in 1985. The original conception of CPVE was a framework within which a programme could be devised for students in their first year of post 16 education, something that could operate at different 'levels' of attainment and which could include academic qualifications alongside core units and vocationally-orientated units associated with broad occupational 'clusters'. The three main awarding bodies BTEC, City & Guilds and RSA were invited to offer validation of this provision and to award certificates. CPVE was intended to be available for the whole ability range of full-time students, but in practice it was only offered to those who were not able to access existing course provision (because they did not have the required entry qualifications). Unable to sustain any growth and effectively sabotaged by the withdrawal of BTEC and RSA, CPVE eventually became a foundation level qualification offered by City & Guilds and known as DVE (Diploma in Vocational Education). As such it became one of the new forms of accredited qualification available to schools in 14-19 education.

CPVE did allow some of the new media sections in colleges to develop course provision. It failed for a variety of reasons, in many cases the same reasons which led to the failure of GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualifications) in the 1990s and the new 'Diploma' in the late 2000s. I want to review these failures under a specific heading.

Currency in the Qualifications Market

CPVE was just one of many curriculum innovations in the 1980s, all of them in different ways acting as responses to changes in the UK's industrial structure and employment market (and more broadly the 'failure' of secondary education in attainment levels as measured by international comparisons). From the early 1980s government policies (pursued by both Tory

and Labour) had these consistent features:

- a move towards centralised control by Whitehall departments of both education and training
- the establishment of a succession of quangos charged with developing new provision, regulating, funding etc. of post compulsory education and training (with repercussions for schools)
- the gradual marginalisation of Local Education Authorities
- autonomy for colleges and schools in terms of budgets
- policies to increase post-16 school and college attendance
- encouragement for parents and young people to see themselves as 'customers' of education providers
- quasi-privatisation of education and training provision with new entrants from the private sector, especially in training but also as sponsors of schools.

Together these different policies created a confusing and contradictory set of 'market conditions' such that central policy initiatives sometimes foundered because the 'customers' began to use their power in the market. The rapid growth of media studies in schools and colleges (i.e. rather than vocational media qualifications) was fuelled by students selecting what they thought was attractive and school and college managements responding to demand at a time when other areas of provision were declining.

That A-levels in particular were more in demand than vocational courses is partly explained by the concept of 'currency' or the 'exchange value' of the certificate any qualification produces. Despite tinkering with the A-level concept (i.e. modular structures, etc.), A-levels are still recognisable as qualifications that have been on offer for 60 years. Their status is widely recognised by parents, government ministers and higher education (which initially devised them) and they have become a 'gold standard'. The fact that they are not appropriate for many of the students who take them does not affect their value in the market. Thus, each of the initiatives by central government to introduce new types of qualification have been doomed to failure since 'currency' value can't be invented from scratch - even though with the Diploma government attempted to 'buy' a position in the market by showering selected schools and colleges with investment funds if they undertook to recruit students for diploma programmes. If A-levels are the gold standard, long established vocational qualifications also have exchange value. The introduction of GNVQs in the 1990s was supposed to lead to the eventual withdrawal of BTEC National Diplomas, which as the successors to ONDs (Ordinary National Diplomas) also have a long pedigree. The NDs are still there and GNVQ was buried partly because colleges refused to give up BTEC ND provision and

because BTEC itself was not prepared to withdraw them.

After taking part in 15 years of attempts to introduce 'general vocational qualifications' (i.e. qualifications for young people sitting between existing academic and job-specific vocational qualifications), I remain convinced that unless A-levels themselves are replaced, it will be impossible for a new qualification structure to generate sufficient exchange value to become sustainable. Equally, that sustainability would also require acceptance from the users/providers of existing vocational awards to embrace more general qualifications. Colin's criticisms of my 'utopian' ideas about vocational education were largely concerned with recognising the different positions within these debates about the importance of 'academic', 'vocational' etc. as concepts and ideologies - and the implications for institutions in opting for one or the other. His analysis remains valid but it shouldn't stop us looking for potentially unifying solutions.

Academic 'rigour', critical thinking and 'really useful knowledge'

Another of the reasons for the failure of centralised curriculum development has been the imposition of schemes of assessment and specifications of learning objectives both for the new qualifications and eventually across all qualifications and processes of validation. Here isn't the place to review the history of 'competence-based' assessment which arrived alongside behavioural objectives and the eventual establishment of the NCVQ (National Council for Vocational Qualifications). Competence-based assessment had certain advantages, including the introduction of the concept of allowing students to demonstrate what they could do (i.e. rather than what they couldn't do via examination). It also had problems, one of which was that it was easy to characterise as 'not rigorous'. The current obsession with testing and targets appears to be all about statistical comparisons rather than a useful 'assessment' of what students have achieved. It's rigorous but ultimately pointless.

The assessment of 'skills, knowledge and understanding' in vocational media education offers a useful case study of how things might be different. (Even if current proposals for GCSE/A Level remove many aspects of assessment of Media Studies such as coursework which have been shared across media education.) 'Skills, knowledge and understanding' is a long-established concept to represent the range of assessment objectives in vocational courses. Only 'knowledge' is easily tested via the kinds of rigorous examination demanded by Gove et al.

The most difficult assessment task for most media students and, their teachers, is to demonstrate how

they have used the skills they have developed and the knowledge acquired in producing a specific media text and what understanding they have gained by observing how audiences have engaged with the text. To do this students need to be able to reflect on their own learning, recognise the processes they have gone through and analyse how audiences have responded. This no easy task - but it is made much more difficult if the assessment itself depends on the student's written 'evaluation'. What tends to be assessed ('marked', 'graded') in this case is the written work rather than participation in the process of production. I'm reminded of being presented (as a moderator/verifier) with, for example, a photographic exhibition in which the highest grade had gone to the student whose written evaluation was considered the best and that some students who had produced the most interesting and most creative images had been marked down because of poor evaluations. I'm not suggesting here that written work isn't important or that media producers don't need to be able to articulate clearly what they are attempting to do. My point is that the assessment instrument should fit the task. I did manage to find assessment centres where students recorded their evaluations as audio or video recordings. These seem to me more appropriate - although the task for the assessor is perhaps more onerous. There is currently a new movement in HE film studies to encourage film scholars and their students to create video essays (editing clips from films and adding text and voiceover/music to create analysis; see 'Audiovisualcy' at <http://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy>).

One of the reasons why this mode of assessment is less possible in the current climate is because of the requirement that all evaluations must be personal rather than collective. This is a feature of the determination to measure achievement and to grade rather than to actually assess learning. Most forms of media production are collective and the social and groupwork skills necessary to be part of a production team are an essential part of learning assessment instruments that focus on the individual aren't really appropriate. One of the issues about trying to assess the group's work is that poor students in a group might 'drag down' stronger ones or vice versa, strong students cover up for the weak. One of the best approaches I have seen aggregated a variety of assessment instruments including tutor observation, group assessments of other groups and peer assessment - students commenting (anonymously) on the other members of their groups. My impression was that the students concerned took this seriously.

As well as using appropriate instruments, assessment should also be an integral part of the culture of the school or college and potentially the local community. As far as possible, vocational media tasks should be 'real' in the sense that they engage with

issues, events etc. that have a real purpose. For example, a typical set A-level Media assignment might require students to make a trailer for a new film - action and horror have been popular choices. This has the advantage that all students produce something similar and that it is easily defined and by definition short - it allows grading and comparisons across cohorts of students as an examined coursework requirement. But it is a completely artificial exercise as a trailer for a film that won't be made. Consider instead a requirement to make a short film about an aspect of school or college life - something which will have a real audience, that will require students to negotiate interviews and permissions and that could address real issues. I would argue that the latter is akin to general studies practice. Part of what will be assessed is 'really useful knowledge' that students can use in all aspects of their lives.

In this discussion of assessment, some of the conflict between the more radical ideas associated with vocational media work and the straitjacket of centralised assessment regulations is because media education, like general studies, is not a subject defined by a body of knowledge (though something like that has been codified for media studies) but is instead a set of practices drawing on many existing subject disciplines and contrasting practices and methodologies. In the discussion above, for instance the ethos of the art college and the practices of design education have much to offer in the assessment of photography practice. Vocational media education is aimed at developing the capacity of students to communicate effectively both in employment and their social lives and the social usefulness of what they learn is not easily quantifiable or measurable. Sometimes its success is evident in the improvement of student work in other single subjects because of the transferable skills acquired through media education. When media was part of National Curriculum English in the 1990s and when Media Studies was taken alongside English GCSEs until fairly recently, research reveals that attainment in English increased (*English and Media Centre 2005: 21*). Contrary to claims that HE media studies/production courses are a soft option that doesn't attract employers, research on graduate recruitment reveals that media graduates are amongst the most successful in entering employment - partly because their transferable skills are prized by employers in many industries (see Curran 2013).

Industry, trade unions and the labour movement

Colin picked me up in the 1991 paper for suggesting that industry's recognition of the need for a multi-skilled

workforce was new or necessarily progressive. In a sense I've repeated aspects of that statement with my claims about media graduates above. I understand Colin's point but the media industries themselves have quite complex histories in terms of industrial relations. The newspaper industry for instance saw the print unions defeated in the 1980s over the introduction of digital technologies which have also changed the working opportunities for journalists. The film and television industries have a rather different history with no formal training structure (almost unique in major British industries in the early 1990s) until the introduction of NVQs and the creation of Skillset (now 'Creative Skillset', the Sector Skills Council for all the creative industries). Initially Skillset was wary of existing media education and training but later its involvement in the ill-fated Diploma under the last Labour government saw some suggestions for student activities that would have been welcomed in a general studies context - not 'rigorous' enough for government but interesting in terms of really useful skills, knowledge and understanding. The major media corporations are always going to be unlikely partners for vocational media education or general studies, but there are agencies in the sector that have strong traditions of unionism and socially-engaged creative work.

What happens next?

Colin's invitation to write this piece has prompted me to think about how much media education and the critical pedagogy of general studies still has in common. Studying the media and developing skills, knowledge and understanding to use media technologies and techniques effectively has always been a central part of general studies. As digital technologies make individual and collective production more possible - but also increase the penetration of media corporations into more social and work-related spaces - it's essential that media teachers and those in general education wanting to revive the critical pedagogy begin to develop working relationships. So, as William Holden demands at the end of *The Wild Bunch*, 'Let's go!'.

References

- Curran, James (2013) 'Mickey Mouse Squeaks Back: Defending Media Studies' on <http://www.meccsa.org.uk/news/mickey-mouse-squeaks-back-defending-media-studies/>
 English and Media Centre (2005) *Media Matters: a review of media studies in schools and colleges*, London: EMC