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Creative, Cultural and Critical:
Media Literacy Theory in the Primary Classroom

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Abstract

Media literacy education projects and initiatives have tended to focus on teenagers and to be informed either by social or moral concerns or by a body of theory which has evolved primarily in the academy. Three recent research initiatives to which we have all contributed – *Reframing Literacy (RL)*, *Persistence of Vision (POV)*, and *Developing Media Literacy: towards a model of learning progression (DML)* – prompt consideration of a different approach.[1]

All three projects indicate that young children (from age three or four onwards) are already engaging with the kinds of powerful questions that generate the central theories of media literacy; for example representation, audience, institutions, narrative and media language. Our research also indicates that children's pre-school engagements with non-print texts such as films and TV programmes provide them with a rich repertoire of experience for literacy learning in the form of recognising textual features that contribute to meaning making, and skills such as inference and prediction. Where this early learning is recognised and built on by teachers, children's overall attainment is substantially enhanced.

We present evidence from all three research projects, exploring how children's existing understandings can be made explicit and how their learning can be extended through further critical analysis and creative production. Furthermore, we propose that by valuing children's understandings of film and by offering opportunities for using diverse, powerful modes of expression, the hierarchies of classroom achievement can be productively upturned. We discuss some of the implications for pedagogy in the primary school and signal the need for radical change in educational policy.

Key Words: media literacy, literacy, film, animation, primary school, critical, cultural, creative.

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1. Identifying and drawing on children's prior knowledge

Harry was in year two in a primary school in the south east of England. He was popular with his peers and seemed happy to come to school. But he did not often contribute to whole class talk, regularly keeping his head down and eyes focused on the floor. His teacher described him as a reluctant writer and he commented (at the grand old age of six) that he did not like writing. Then one day, Harry sat up and paid attention. The opening sequence of the popular film *Monsters Inc* was screened and the whole class participated in a film analysis process, leading to film production. For Harry, this experience resulted in some unexpectedly creative, playful and multimodal responses, which persuaded the teacher to review her perception of Harry and his writing.

This incident from DML is what commonly occurs when teachers embark on critical analysis of films with children. They are taken aback, firstly, by the enthusiasm and eloquence with which children are able to discuss and analyse film texts; and secondly, by subsequent revelations of hitherto untapped abilities, not only in creative work with film but also in writing and reading. Recent research illuminates this by recognising the importance of children's engagements with popular culture (Marsh, 2005 pp 28-50) to their developing literacy and identity practices. Children's multimodal textual experiences clearly contribute to their repertoires for understanding of narrative (Robinson, 1997; Parry, 2010) and enable them to develop specific and distinctive reading skills (Kress, 2000). The term multimodality has highlighted the need to acknowledge that texts take distinct forms, are differently constructed and require different sorts of readings skills. It is therefore important not to lump "media" "popular culture" "digital" or "multimodal" texts together and indeed only by looking at different forms in particular and in close up can we begin to understand the different sorts of skills involved in engaging with them.

The three projects we are drawing on here focused specifically on a moving-image medium, film, and make the case for closer attention to its specific features. Given that children start to engage with and enjoy moving-image media (TV and film) in their second year of life, then they must also gain not only a repertoire of ideas about texts in general, but also some understanding of the distinctive codes and conventions of these media, often in contexts with little or no adult mediation. A number of implications follow:

- By not valuing or fostering children's moving-image knowledge, schools are neglecting an important aspect of early literacy learning (Marsh, 2006 p 160-173).
- If children have learned to understand complex moving-image texts by the age of five, their entitlement to take that learning further must be considered carefully.
- If schools fail to acknowledge that for some children their ability to read, make and imagine moving-image texts far exceeds their ability to engage with print texts (Parry, 2010, pp 89-100) then they are "squandering [these children's] existing capital" (Bearne, 2004 p 102).

2. The challenges for teachers

All three of the research projects we have been involved in indicate the need to properly value and understand children's existing repertoires of understanding of texts as assets (Mackey, 2002). This has further, substantial implications for curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training and education policy.

During RL, it became clear that for some of the teachers the challenges of working with film, together with their experience of prescriptive curricular content (linked to high-stakes testing and school league tables) made it difficult for them to address these questions. In the initial project activity – watching and discussing the short film *Baboon on the Moon*[2] – they relied on what they assumed would be a necessary process of getting children to spot "technological" features of film, such as close-ups. Follow-up activities reverted to the safer ground of writing and drawing, using film "techniques" as an aid to conventional literacy work: it was hard for them to figure out how to take the film work further. In discussion a key proposition emerged: that they should try to listen to the children's own responses to film more, and use their ideas and concerns as the basis for further teaching and learning. "Listening to the children" sounds simple, but it involves an informed awareness of the kinds of conceptual issues that children may be struggling with – an awareness that tends to be blocked by a prescriptive curriculum based solely on children's acquisition of print literacy.

A turning-point came with an account at the mid-project team meeting by some Early Years/Foundation Stage (EYFS) teachers about how their children's independent decisions about play topics were allowed to lead activity after the viewing and discussion of the film. This was a decisive influence on the Year 1 and Year 2 teachers' decision to try a different pedagogic approach with another film and to feel comfortable with the 'risks' of open questioning and of following the leads indicated by the children's responses.

These teachers then did manage to develop an open questioning technique, coupled with open follow-up questions (eg 'why?' and 'can you tell me more?') that encouraged reflection and re-viewing, and resulted in more 'in depth' analysis covering several different directions of textual enquiry. They found this liberating and transformative. Because it revealed for them how articulate and confident the children could be when discussing film, they were led to revise their assumptions about the concepts that children might be "ready for" at particular ages.

3. Leadership and Communities of Practice

How might educational practice evolve to meet such challenges? One of the participant local authority advisers in POV set up an online video sharing space which came to be a central focus for the dissemination of practice. More than forty short films were uploaded to the Vimeo channel[3], which was chosen for its ease of use, higher level privacy settings and the fact that schools were less likely to have imposed the same restrictions on it as on YouTube (which is frequently blocked for teachers and children alike). Teachers in all the Devon POV project schools uploaded work and it became a network for exchanging ideas and opinions about starting points for both poetry and animation. In terms of observable existing theoretical frameworks, some of the characteristics of Etienne Wenger's (1998) "communities of practice" were in evidence, most notably the ways in which the tripartite notions of "mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire" were represented in the exchanges in the comment spaces.[4]

Excitement about the uses of new social media technologies to support creative approaches to learning has burgeoned in recent years (see Ito et al, 2007 and Jenkins et al, 2006). Some critics have seen in these approaches a tendency to exaggerate the potential of the medium and to become cheerleaders for the ICT in Education industry (see Buckingham, 2007) Despite accepting those those caveats, it was nevertheless possible also to see in the Vimeo channel some nascent characteristics of the "affinity spaces" described by Gee, particularly the idea that knowledge and practice become "tacit" when people are engaged in "guided participation" in their uses of the space.[5] In this we were able to see the critical importance of the role of the co-ordinator for English in the local authority: in other words, the key factor here was the way the technology was exploited by a highly creative and dedicated leader, not the mere existence of the technology itself.

4. Continuity and coherence

All three research projects were conceived in opposition to the widespread practice of relegating film work in schools to the status of special projects and "one-off" learning experiences, and of focusing either on film analysis or on

filmmaking, rather than integrating the two. In addition, both POV and RL included the proviso that children should also have opportunities to see and discuss non-mainstream films that would present unexpected stylistic features and narrative structures.

These principles derive from what has been termed the "3C" model of media learning [6], but the three projects also insisted that the "Critical, Cultural and Creative" dimensions of the model should be closely integrated, and that learning experiences should be recursive and progressive. POV uncovered the benefits of recursive experience with animation production, revisiting and extending practical experience on three occasions through the period of a year, rather than experiencing such work as a one-off project. Investigating and reflecting on these experiences, researchers found that children's recursive opportunities for animation production provided them with a rich repertoire of experience for engaging with creative writing. They learned how to recognise textual features, imagery and repetition in different forms of poetry which contributed to meaning making, alongside developing skills such as inference and prediction.

Some of the teachers in POV were initially concerned that they would not only have to teach animation, which they perceived as both new and difficult, but that they would also have to teach poetry, which they already found difficult. But by the close of the project, one teacher of six year olds was wondering how she would be able to teach poetry without using animation in the future. Perhaps one of the reasons for the success of the work at a textual level was the time-based and imagistic nature of the written form and the crafted, miniature form of the animated films that the children saw: for example non-mainstream films such as those included in the British Film Institute's "shorts" compilations (see British Film Institute, 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2007) which inspired some unusual stylistic choices in children's own filmmaking.[7]

It became clear in many schools that the features of poetry which were being explored, such as rhythm, metre, tone and imagery, found corollaries in the time-based texts of animation where such understanding, particularly of timing, is critical to the successful construction of the form. Children were encouraged to plan for movements through time, calculating the numbers of frames needed to create convincing movements. In post production in one school, children were observed working painstakingly and with great concentration adding the voiceovers for previously animated poems. Matching line length to image, movement and scene was by no means straightforward. Many of the films used no words, however, and one animator provided schools with "poetic sounds" to stimulate production ideas.[8] The recursive nature of the project allowed learning to be carried forward from one project to the next, at least once skilled and evaluative

questioning of the children had taken place, asking them to suggest ways in which they could improve on their animations next time.

In schools in England which still adhere to the teaching of reading and writing texts in the form devised by the National Literacy Strategy,[9] many children experience literacy "lessons" as a series of building blocks, that is, as discrete, disconnected segments of knowledge about language to be applied in practical activities which are either endlessly deferred or disconnected from other subjects in the curriculum or events in the classroom. Thus, many children become expert planners of work without ever undertaking any actual sustained, creative engagement with writing which explores and develops the concepts with which they are operating. "Creative writing" for extended periods of time is no longer the norm in primary schools. Where it does occur, so much writing is for the purpose of short term rehearsal of atomised skills of production, using "powerful verbs" when writing a "persuasive letter" for example.

Teachers on the whole reported that POV was successful in driving up writing standards. We came to see that this was because of the creative connections which could be made between curriculum areas and knowledge domains. Writing had a purpose and was holistically connected to a curriculum experience. It makes sense to children to work in this way as many have pointed out: firstly for reasons of fashioning and maintaining creative flow (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) and secondly because situated learning and the development of literacy skills go hand in hand (see Gee, 2004). In textual terms, at both functional and formal level, the poetry supported the animation and vice versa. In one of the project schools, a teacher reflected on the ways in which working in a complementary way in the different modes of text and visual production supported the children's overall literacy development in ways envisaged by writers and academics in the field (see for example Bearne, 2009 pp 156-187).

Another important benefit of the recursive pattern of POV was that the inevitable initial problems with technology receded over time. At the second and third stages, both teachers and children were focusing more on the production of meaning and less on the technical issues. In RL, a different solution was presented to some of the teachers: the free download Photo Story software as an easy and child-friendly way into making many of the choices that filmmakers face, such as duration, transitions, camera movements, framing and sound. Selecting from still images and music provided by their teacher, a group of Year 1 children were able to create a scary "mood piece" in a very short time with little teacher intervention,[10] thus achieving a quick start that allowed for further creative attempts later on.

5. Conclusions

All three projects identified skills, knowledge and understanding that seem to be significantly enhanced when analytical and creative work with film is integrated with other learning. Age-and-stage curricular models were thrown into question when it became clear that in film education, children of any age from 3 onwards were at least to some extent able to:

a. engage with, understand and respond to narrative and non-narrative texts;
b. make deductions, inferences and interpretations; respond to characterisation (i.e. read facial expression, dress, gesture and posture in moving images and understand character as expressed in dialogue); make judgements about the modality (reality status) of texts;
c. compare the structures and effects of different kinds of text, the different elements that make up a text and the authorial and editorial decisions that contribute to structure;
d. understand how elements of composition and stylistic devices combine in contributing to meaning, for example mise-en-scene, framing, sequence, duration, transitions, sound; and also shape and timing in animation;
e. discuss authorial intent, for example in decisions about framing and point of view in communicating with the audience;
f. identify and discuss genre features;
g. relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts;
h. articulate a personal response and comment reflectively and critically on the text.[11]

While the examples we give here all relate to film, it should be noted that these are all aspects of learning that are relevant to understanding and making any kind of text. But this cannot merely be an argument for using critical and creative work with film as a way of improving traditional literacy. It ought to lead us towards a reconsideration of what constitutes literacy in the 21st century.

Notes

[1] Funded by the UK Film Council, Creativity, Culture and Education and by Devon, Norfolk and Worcestershire local authorities, "Persistence of Vision" (POV) was a one-year (2009-10) Media Education Association project in 18 rural primary schools in England. Its aim was to gather a base of evidence about the ways in which particular critical, cultural and creative teaching approaches can enhance learning and increase progression in relation to children's engagements with poetry and animation. See Bazalgette, C. (2010) "Persistence of Vision: Views of Work in Progress" at www.themea.org/2010/08/22/persistence-of-vision-views-of-work-in-progress/

"Developing Media Literacy: Towards a Model of Learning Progression" (DML) was a large-scale three-year (2009-11)research study of the practice of media education in schools in the UK which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. See www.childrenyouthandmedia.org/cscym/index.php/research/67-research-projects-current/121-developing-media-lite

"Reframing Literacy" (RL) was a seven-month pilot project (2007-8) funded by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and involving researchers from the universities of Sheffield and Nottingham, the British Film Institute and the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. It aimed to clarifying some of the issues that would have to be addressed in embedding moving image education in the progression frameworks for literacy. See Bazalgette, C. and Bearne, E. (2010). *Beyond Words: Developing Children's Understanding of Multimodal Texts*. Leicester: UKLA; and via www.ukla.org/publications/view/beyond_words_developing_childrens_understanding_of_multimodal_texts/

[2] Duriez, C. *Baboon on the Moon,* UK 2002. 6-minute model-animation short film, published in *Story Shorts*. London: British Film Institute 2004.

[3] See http://vimeo.com/channels/100818.

[4] Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice - Learning, Meaning & Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp 72-74.

[5] Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. New York: Routledge, p 98.

[6] see Clause 3 of the Charter for Media Literacy, at www.euromedialiteracy.eu/charter.php.

[7] See *A Robot's Life* at http://vimeo.com/11163899

[8] See *The Cutting Dot* at http://vimeo.com/12388832

[9] DFES (1998). *National Literacy Strategy*. London: HMSO.

[10] See *The Scary Night* at www.readingfilm.co.uk; password 978189.

[11] Adapted from the framework given in the Introduction to Bazalgette, C. and Bearne, E. (2010). *Beyond Words: Developing Children's Understanding of Multimodal Texts*. Leicester: UKLA, p 4.

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