

Curating Media Literacy: A Porous Expertise

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This article summarises and reflects upon my contribution to the Media Literacy Research Symposium at Fairfield University in March.

Firstly, I need to thank the hosts for the invitation and for making me and my daughter, with whom I was travelling, so welcome. Making the trip has reaped rich benefits, with a number of the researchers I met there planning to present at our own Media Education Summit in Prague, this November. So far confirmed are Paul Milhailidis convening a plenary panel on collaborative international research with Belinha and Rob Williams participating; Renee Hobbs giving a keynote and a number of other practitioners from Fairfield giving papers. We'll be following up Paul's panel and inviting people over to an event in London, to launch a new special interest group with the United Kingdom Literacy Association. This summer I am booked to participate in media literacy academies at Salzburg and Beirut. And we hope we can work on a combined issue of our Media Education Research Journal and the Journal of Media Literacy Education in the next year. Most of this is happening because of connections made in Fairfield and if it all joins up, we'll be working together in the near future as an international research consortium. I think these are what we call 'disproportionate outcomes' and shows how, despite my general affinity with online solutions to geographical boundaries, sometimes getting on a plane is the best way.

So – what did I contribute in return for all of those rewards?

I started out with an input to an opening panel discussion on the need for media literacy education. Having written the opening chapter for Belinha and Paul's collection (De Abreu and Milhailidis, 2014), I knew this was a community of practice with a shared objective to a large extent but I wanted to make the point from the (perhaps jaded) UK perspective that experience shows a very broad and far reaching remit for media literacy as a panacea for the ills of, well to be frank, global capitalism is pretty untenable for educators to achieve. So we have to work on accepting we have a broad shared vision but then narrowing in on an achievable set of first steps – rather like we'd advise a thesis student to 'focus in' rather than try to cover everything.

I followed this up in my presentation where I proposed an 'untangling' of three threads to media literacy – critical reading, creative production and civic action. In Belinha and Paul's collection, I mapped the following connected and overlapping discourses of media literacy:

- Social *Hagood, Kist, Lee.*
- Post-Protectionist *Andersen, Reilly, Lundgren, Bindig & Castonguay, Shwarz.*
- Citizenship *Jolls et al, Mihailidis, Melki, Leaning, Agosto & Magee, Bogel, Fry, Pernisco, Gordon & Schirra, Gallagher, Livingstone & Wang.*
- Creative *Dezuanni & Woods, Jensen.*
- Subject Media *McDougall, Duanic, De Abreu, Considine & Considine, Silverblatt et al.*

It should be that way, in such a rich collection. But for the 'project'? Playing devil's advocate, couldn't a student produce highly creative but profoundly uncritical, neoliberally hegemonic, media material. Or might another student learn to read the media so critically that they want nothing to do with it and feel no compulsion to create? And would we expect a History student to take civic action? I observed this problem more recently at the Unesco summit, where I worked on their draft MIL declaration (2014) which spans safe use of the internet, coding and (no exaggeration) world peace.

De Abreu & Mihailidis cite Rheingold (2011) for the immense responsibility for media literacy education to foster:

- Criticality
 - Participation
 - Engagement
 - Vibrancy
 - Inclusion
 - Tolerance
- and even mindfulness*

Again, no bad thing, but let's compare this to other disciplines that operate in 'in the centre' and then consider how we do this from the (extreme) margins?

So, the danger is that we re-render the project always incomplete (to paraphrase Habermas). Whilst I agree with David Buckingham's response to my chapter of the book, where he celebrates this permanent flux and the 'thousand flowers blooming', it's harder to convince policy makers about that. I'm seeing, with my most cynical lens attached, a Habermasian *nonsense experiment, generating our own aporias*, at an impasse of our own making, even a Rushkoffian *Big Blank?* The way out has to be a *pedagogic* shift

The other intervention I wanted to make in my paper was to do with pedagogy, the 'void' in too much media literacy work. I think the international community has privileged the nouns (what should students learn) with the pedagogic verbs (how should learning work). Put simply, we've failed to match up the blurring of media / audience boundaries with those of teacher expert / student apprentice. So I was proposing a more 'porous' conception of expertise for media literacy, with the metaphor of curation offered for thinking about how this might work. So, drawing on the work I have done recently with John Potter, (2014), Ben Andrews (2013) and Susan Orr (2014), I offered some examples, from research, to explore the potential for curation to offer a productive metaphor for the convergence of digital media learning across and between home / lifeworld and formal educational / systemworld spaces – or between the public and private spheres. I drew conclusions from a few of my projects to argue that the acceptance of transmedia literacy practices as a cite for rich educational work – in media education and related areas – can only succeed if matched by a convergence of a more *porous* educator-student expertise. See this statement from David Buckingham back in 1990:

Questions about subjectivity, about students' sense of their own identity, are inextricable from the ways in which they read and use media... We need to provide opportunities for students to explore their emotional investments in the media in their own terms, rather than attempting to replace these by rigorous 'rational' analysis (1990: 224).

Nearly a quarter of a century on, and firmly into the 'digital age', these questions remain - and the need for appropriate pedagogic strategies is – I suggested, largely unresolved. Indeed, the proliferation of media learning and exchange outside of the classroom, enabled at least partly by the internet and social media, obliges us to return to the same (unanswered) questions about reflexive, critical articulations of mediated 'pleasure' in media education that Buckingham posed for the analogue age, long before MIL.

I ran through several examples during the session but I'll offer two here. For the first project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, (Berger and McDougall, 2013), students worked collaboratively with teachers to learn

gameplay, analyse the game as a text and co-create study materials. Echoing Ranciere (2009), whose ideas about 'indisciplined' pedagogy resonate with both our 'porous' understanding of expertise and the curation metaphor, the 'ignorant schoolmaster' was here working with the gamer-student on an academic deconstruction of a (digitally transformed)'book' they – the 'expert' teacher are unlikely to read (or even be able to). Curating, the emphasis was on resisting any notion that this game is untypical but rather to understand it as presenting the (always-already) 'in between' nature of textual reception and exchange. Put simply, curation allows for mediation to be moving, as events – exhibited always artificially, contained only for the duration of the display. By undermining – through parody – the idea that a game is either 'like a novel' or not, working with text-events in a 'flattened hierarchy' the critical educational questions posed by curation shift from 'what does the text mean?' to *what is reading, what is play, what are the rules for the game of reading and how can we add to the flow of the event?*

The second project of interest here involved 13-14 year old Citizenship students making documentary films to explore ideas about local, national and European identity. This was more about 'making' but the pedagogic shift was to require the films to be ethnographic so the students could reflect on the power of the edit, with a clear brief to provide 'thick description' of community viewpoints about Europe. In working ethnographically, students making the documentary films were at the same time the 'subjects' (agents) and 'objects' (the data) of the learning and the research. Data was captured in three forms – the documentary films produced by students, uploaded to the project's website and screened at two international film festivals; individual interviews with teachers and group interviews with participating students. The research questions related to the potential of this pedagogic intervention for reflexive learning in Citizenship (the UK curricular manifestation of 'civics') to successfully work in the "*interplay between contexts for action, relationships within and across contexts, and the dispositions that young people bring to such contexts and relationships*" (Biesta, Lawy and Kelly, 2009: 5). The extent to which students would be comfortable with this approach – compared to their 'instinctive' familiarity with both conventional media and its profoundly non-ethnographic modes of representation and conventional learning with equally profound hierarchies of expertise and transmission – was the focus of interviews with students and teachers during and after the intervention. In the responses, teachers shared positive experiences in terms of 'engagement' and beyond this, two further levels of practice were identified. Firstly, students thinking (for themselves) about identity issues in ways that seemed to have arisen experientially – or dialogically, in terms of 'going out' to find their own contexts for learning – out of the school into the community, another 'membrane' to permeate. Secondly, the teachers instinctively translated their observations into a discourse of 'skills' – of participation and action. The potential for using 'easy' media to more formally 'map' this kind of work an ethnographic mode of curation would, we suggest, move teachers in all subject contexts, embracing their 'inexpertise', to the more genuinely constructivist pedagogy most practitioners would endorse. Embracing this challenge, I argued, can move us away from the unwitting hegemony represented by Zizek's 'postmodern father' (2013) which I offered as a metaphor for our intrusion into students' mediated lifeworlds on our own terms.

I concluded by suggesting that these findings provide compelling evidence that lived experience, media and the act of curation can be brought together by new pedagogical models that move away from 'fixed' boundaries between home and education, learning and play, types of text, media and people and most importantly, expert and learner. The difference is that these new ways of seeing media literacy are harder to develop in the more constraining institutional framing of UK Media Studies than in the potentially more 'free range' contexts international media literacy researchers operate. This is stunningly ironic, but that's another story.

Julian's presentation from the Fairfield symposium is available at:

<http://www.slideshare.net/silvertwin/fairfield-pres-j-mc-d>

The Media Education Summit, Prague, November 2014:

<http://www.cemp.ac.uk/summit/2014/>

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