Evaluating Standards in Media Education

Robyn Quin
Barrie McMahon

Abstract: There is now considerable international consensus about the objectives of media studies. The objectives focus on the processes by which audiences can make sense of and critique the media. This paper addresses the outcomes of these initiatives for one group of students In the Western Australian government school system. Information is provided about a testing program of fifteen year old students which investigated the extent to which the students were meeting the media analysis objectives as outlined in the syllabus.

The results provide information about the students' capacity to make sense of the media messages and about the performance of particular demographic groups Including gender, non-English speaking background and Aboriginal students. On the basis of strengths and weaknesses revealed in the testing program, some adjustments to present teaching programs are proposed. These adjustments address the needs of both the general cohort and the particular needs of special groups

Rdsum£: On note, dl'heureactuelle, un important concensus International ausujet des objectifs de l'6tude des medias. Ces objectifssont centres sur les processus par lesquels les spectateurs com prennent et crltlquent les m6dias. Dans cet article, nous nous penchons sur les resultats d'une telle etude chez un groupe d'etudlants du systeme scolalre gouvernemental d'Australie occidentale. Les resultats d'un programme experimental applique a des etudiants d'une quinzaine d'annees, montrent comment les etudiants attelgnent les objectifs d'analyse des medias tel qu'ils sont enonces dans le programme scolalre.

Les resultats montrent egalement comment les etudiants comprennent les messages mediatlques et nous renseignent sur les reactions de groupes demographiques speciflques. Ces groupes etaient dlvises selon le sexe, la langue maternelle (autre que l'anglais) et, si les etudiants etaient d'origine aborigene ou non. Les forces et falblesses de ce programme devaluation determineront les ajustements a apporter aux programmes d'enselgnement proposes. Ces ajustements concerneront les besolns de la majorite et les besolns speciflques de groupes partlculiers.

In many countries, including Britain, Canada and Australia media education has found itself a place in the curriculum and a space on the timetable. This position, within the establishment of subjects, has resulted in demands from educational authorities for formal syllabuses and assessment and course evaluation. This paper outlines a 1991 project conducted in Western Australian schools in response to such demands. The project aimed to assess the level of understanding of the media among fifteen year old students who had studied the formal syllabus as part of their English studies. In addition, the project was designed to indicate those areas of conceptual development which the syllabus was failing to develop satisfactorily. Project leaders hoped that the testing program would help in the development of new and more effective teaching strategies.

Background

The project was part of a system-wide analysis of standards in Western Australian schools. Titled 'Monitoring Standards in Education' the system-wide program was an institutional response to the community's concerns with educational standards in government schools. There was a general belief, fuelled by rising unemployment and opportunistic politicians, that educational standards were falling, particularly in the areas of numeracy and literacy. Public accountability for development of skills in the basics became the popular cry. This community and political concern with standards provided the opportunity for media educators to identify student media analysis skills as fundamental, or basics in their own right.

All government school students study syllabuses which detail a sequence of media analysis skills to be developed in all students.   The Lower Secondary Studies Syllabuses (years 8 to 10) were introduced in 1988 and are compulsory for all government school students, therefore those students taking part in the project discussed below had three years of study in the media analysis skills identified in the English syllabuses. (Some year 10 students also undertake additional programs involving media analysis by electing to do the optional media studies course.)

Three phases of the project are complete: the development of outcome statements of student learning; the development, trial and implementation of the test instruments; and the evaluation of the results across a range of variables. Yet to be undertaken is a review of the syllabus material in the light of the test results.

The Development Phase

For the purpose of the testing program, a continuum of outcome statements describing media analysis skills was developed from the syllabus documents by a team of senior media and English teachers. The continuum covered the years K to 12 of schooling. The ten levels of understanding identified on the continuum are not related to year levels, nor do they cover every aspect of the syllabus. The ten stages indicate key understandings only, and do not offer a comprehensive summary of the syllabus. Although there is no nexus between the grade levels of students and the ten stages of the continuum, year ten students (fifteen year

olds) could be expected to perform at the higher levels of the continuum. The continuum identifies a content strand with the organisers of language and narrative, and a context strand containing the organisers of production/circulation, audiences and values. Ten levels of difficulty are identified for each organiser. The continuum was used to develop the appropriate tests and later as the basis for marking student work.

The Testing Phase

The next step was to develop instruments by which we could assess the level of media analysis skills in students across the state. There were some underlying and unstated aims behind our study. They can be categorized as follows:

Political. In the current climate politicians and parents must be assured that the children are learning something and media studies has traditionally been accused of offering a soft option. It was hoped that the testing program might offer hard data as to the strengths and weaknesses of the media programs in schools. This was not without its dangers, but in the current economic and political climate teachers cannot remain aloof from demands for accountability. As advocates of media education we thought it in our own best interests to contribute to the accountability process and take responsibility for the evaluation of the aims, content and outcomes of the media course.

Educational. It was felt that the project could offer some valuable information for teachers about the strengths and weaknesses of the students, which could be used to develop strategies, building upon the strengths and eradicating the weaknesses. The test instruments were designed to be used in the same manner as doctors use blood tests — as a guide to professional judgement and not as a replacement for it. The instruments were to serve as diagnostic tools that would point to areas in need of remediation.

Two tests were developed by a panel of teachers. They were pre-piloted, piloted and modified before the formal testing program commenced. The Media Language test involved the analysis of three different print advertisements. The second test, Media Narrative, required the analysis of an introductory segment from a television situation comedy. The students were shown a twelve minute extract which was repeated once again after they had read the questions. Both tests covered to some degree the language, narrative, production/circulation, audience and values organisers the emphasis varying in each test. During one week in September 1991, 1425 students, representing just under ten percent of the cohort of fifteen year olds in the state, were tested. Approximately 50% of the students attempted each test, but some students undertook both tests.

As experienced teachers we were well aware of the pitfalls in test design and the impossibility of ensuring true test validity. A further complication arose in the preparation of marking guides because we were trying to place students on a continuum, therefore we had to distinguish between levels of sophistication in the answers. There were no questions which demanded a yes/no, correct/incorrect answer, therefore we had to determine the type of response which would place a student at level six and the response that would place him or her at level nine. The

results of the trial tests were used to distinguish between the levels of responses. At times we were reminded of the piece from Alice in Wonderland

"... how can you possibly award prizes when everyone missed the target?" said Alice.

"Well" said the Queen, "some missed by more than others and we have a fine normal distribution of misses, which means we can forget about the target."

The Evaluation Phase

The tests were marked by a team of trained markers and then subjected to analysis along a number of paradigms using computer-based programs (T-Test, Chi Square Test). The results gave us information about students' strengths and weaknesses, their position on the continuum of outcome statements, and their position in relation to others in the sample. In addition, the results offered information about the differences in performances of males and females; those from English speaking backgrounds compared to those from non-English speaking backgrounds; those of Aboriginal extraction compared with those from non-Aboriginal backgrounds, and heavy consumers of television compared with light users.

Gender   Differences

Female students performed better than males on the tests. There were no test items on which males outperformed females. The gender factor turned out to be the most significant of all the variables. The test items wherein a statistically significant difference between the performance of males and females could be identified were those which covered the following aspects of media analysis:

> understanding of media codes, particularly those related to the symbolic significance of body language, setting, objects, colour, technical conventions (e.g. the symbolic associations with different print styles);
> understanding of the link between codes and the construction of the audience's position (e.g. the effect of voice-over in positioning the audience);
> understanding of the link between the codes and the cultural values that are associated with them. (e.g., the link between stereotypes, the values they portray and the ideological positions they conserve.)

A possible explanation for the gender imbalance in the results might be the literacy factor. Students were required to read questions and provide written answers. Other Monitoring Standards tests have revealed that year ten females have superior literacy skills to year ten males. Although the possibility cannot be completely discounted, the test items which required longer answers were not necessarily those where females outperformed males, nor were the questions that were longer and/or more complex in their requirements necessarily those that produced results with a gender imbalance.

The performance difference may also be a by-product of the test content. The Media Language test used advertisements featuring women in various stereotypical roles. A possible explanation for the superior performance of females is that females found more relevance in the images portrayed and were therefore more ready to critique these representations. But as the superiority of females was illustrated across both tests, the gender specific examples that were used in the Media Language test cannot be a complete explanation of the performance difference.

If the bias is not in the test items, a further possibility is that there is a bias in the teaching and/or the culture that encourages females to develop more finely tuned media skills than males. There is a body of evidence to indicate that our culture (and concommitantly our education system and media) operate within a masculine discourse. The result is the comparative disadvantage of women, and it could be argued that females have more to gain from recognising their less favourable representation in the media and more to gain by challenging it. In contrast the empowered group, the white middle class males, has less to gain from recognising and critiquing the anomalies in the representations. Is it possible then that the females in the test sample would be more sensitive to the images portrayed and to the values underpinning them than the males — hence the superior performance of females?

If this account of the gender performance difference is valid then a partial solution might be for teachers to place greater emphasis on the analysis skills that are outlined in the values strand of the Media Analysis continuum. The performance of male students may then be improved to a threshold where they do possess the critical skills to analyse their own cultural position. However if the premise is accurate, females will continue to outperform males in this area because of the intrinsic motivation provided by the unfavourable imbalances in cultural representations. A change in focus is probably overdue. A large amount of textual analysis centres around the representation of females in the media. The representation of masculinity receives less attention and criticism. The traditional representation of masculinity is under threat currently from alternative representations, stemming mainly from television. If the emergent representations of males as caring, empathetic men is to contribute in a positive way to forming the social identity of male students then these representations should come under scrutiny. Both male and female students could benefit from a wide-ranging exploration of the media's representation of masculinity.

Language   Differences

Not surprisingly, students from English speaking backgrounds performed better on the tests than those from non-English speaking backgrounds. There was no item with a variation of statistical significance in which non-English speaking background students outperformed English speaking background students. The difference was not as pronounced as the gender difference. Again the discrepancy does not seem to be attributable to the literacy dimension of the test as questions with a high literacy component did not necessarily produce a

statistically significant result. There were two related areas where English speaking background students outperformed those from non-English speaking backgrounds:

>   the ability to identify target audiences
>   the ability to determine audience appeal.

In the case of the target audiences, there was a statistically significant difference in the performances of the two groups when they considered age range of audiences, gender preference for various audiences, class identification for different audiences and the link between target audience and program time slots. Similar problems were experienced by non-English speaking background students when examining the audience appeal of programs.

A possible explanation is that many of these non-English speaking background students read the media texts from outside the dominant reading position. The preferred reading of the text may not be easily accessible to the non-English speaking background students because they are not well placed to identify with the values and attitudes of core groups in society. They may see themselves as peripheral and members of what can be loosely termed The Other by reason of their ethnic backgrounds. If this assumption is correct and teachers are to address the problem it would seem that additional attention needs to be given to the analysis skills identified in the audience strand of the continuum.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance Differences

The tests did not identify sufficient numbers of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students to make definitive judgements about the performance of this group. There were, however, sufficient students in the sample to identify some patterns. There was some correlation between the performance of Aboriginal students and those from non-English speaking backgrounds but there were fewer test items, overall, in which there was a significant statistical discrepancy. The test items which focussed on the mass media codes resulted in a poorer performance from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Given the small sample and the variety of Aboriginal backgrounds within that small sample (some having English speaking backgrounds, some not), it is difficult to predict the types of strategies which may lead to further improvement for this group other than to focus on similar targets as were identified for the non-English speaking background students.

Television Viewing Differences

The correlation between the number of television viewing hours and the performance of students on the tests was statistically significant. Light television users performed better than heavy television users and this trend was more pronounced with males. The results for females were not statistically significant. The two tests yielded different results. The tests that required students to analyse print advertisements did not produce any statistically significant results.

The results from the test requiring analysis of a situation comedy were significant. Heavy users of television, particularly males, performed at a lower level than the light users on the television analysis test.

How can this result be interpreted? Simplistic equations such as "the more they watch, the less they know" may be tempting, but could be misleading. Such assumptions about the influence of television may still have some currency in the popular press, but they have been effectively discredited by research. It would however be legitimate to conclude that simply watching television does not lead to better media analysis skills. They have to be learned. It is a conclusion which should strengthen the claims of media teachers regarding their place in the curriculum.

Eather more speculative is the question of why this result. Perhaps the key to the poor analyst/heavy viewer correlation are the social circumstances and general attitudes to schooling of the students. Our results gave us no information about such issues as leisure activities available to the sample group, school performance, access to learning resources and many other factors that might be directly relevant to both their viewing habits and their test performance.

What do we do about this result? If the above speculation is correct, we as teachers do not have control over the social variables and cannot change the students' viewing patterns even if this were deemed to be desirable. We can, however, arm the students with improved analysis skills. These results indicate such a need.

The State-wide Profile

The evaluation project has pointed to some serious deficiencies in students' understandings. The major problems identified in the study are lack of an awareness and understanding of the social context and social impact of the media, the lack of an understanding of both ideology and the media's role in maintaining existing power relationships. These weaknesses point to shortcomings in our syllabus and our teaching strategies. We will examine these results in greater detail.

The Social Context

First, the results indicate that students can go through the motions - they are adept at deconstructing a given image. The students are surprisingly good at textual analysis, able to pick an image to pieces but unable to make the conceptual leap between the text and its context. The students' problems with linking their textual analysis with wider issues of representation is, on one level, a question of maturity. Students do not have a world view, a sense of themselves as part of a wider society. Society for them *is* something out there that they will participate in when they leave school.   The first problem identified, then, is the need to furnish students with the skills to apply their analysis skills to a wider social context.

Ideology and Power

The Monitoring Standards results indicated that students generally lacked the ability to discuss the media in terms of its role as a consciousness industry. This is a major problem, as the common requirement in the syllabuses of Australia, Britain and Canada is the demand that students understand the ways in which the media circulate attitudes and values. Not all the syllabuses use these words, some talk about ways of thinking, ways of seeing the world. The bolder use the term ideology. The findings of the study suggest that the central object of media education - the ability to analyse the role of the media in winning the hearts and minds of people - is not being met.

Implications

The syllabus is really about what we want students to be able to do after they have left school. What we teach is determined by a vision of the future. We want students to be competent and critical users of the media - not competent and critical for one school year and long enough to pass the examination, but people who will continue to be competent and critical users of the media long after they have left our care. Therefore the texts we give students to analyse at school are simply vehicles—a means to an end—and that end is the development of critical skills which can be applied to any aspect of the media in the future. The exercises we set students are only useful activities in so far as they give students skills and knowledge they can apply in the future. If at the end of their schooldays the students can talk and write intelligently only about the attitudes and values of the texts they have studied in school but cannot apply their knowledge to other media products, then as teachers we have failed. We need to develop strategies that will encourage students to link what they do in the classroom to the world in which they live.

Possible Strategies

What steps can be taken to rectify the problems and deficiencies identified above? Beginning with the issue of teaching about the social context of the media, how might we go about giving students a wider world view? A preliminary task for the teacher is to demonstrate to students that any media text is polysemous, that is, informed by various pre-existent discourses. It will not be possible to examine all the available discourses on every issue but it is possible to build up over time a schemata of the avenues which might be explored. Case studies developed around various topical media issues could be the means to this end. For example, at the time of writing a pressing issue in our own city is juvenile crime, particularly Aboriginal, juvenile crime. Various representations of this issue are presented by the media and each representation articulates a particular perspective on race, youth and social justice.

A more difficult but exciting approach to widening the students' world view is to use radical texts in the classroom. Texts which cut across the commonly held attitudes, texts which force the viewer to distance themselves from the content, texts which deny easy pleasure and evoke discomfort can be useful in focussing

attention on the ways that values and messages are constructed. Such texts deny accustomed pleasures and so force the viewer into an evaluation of his/her own position vis a vis the text. We have found that most students dislike such texts, but are sympathetic to the political claims they make and are interested in discussing them. On the negative side such texts are hard to come by, often expensive because they are outside the mainstream and, if overused, alienate students because they deny pleasure.

A third possible strategy is to provide students with some key questions which could be applied to current media non-fictional texts. Such questions might include:

> Through whose eyes or perspective do we get the information?
> How is this point of view constructed?
> Whose voices are not heard?
> What other images could have been chosen to support alternative voices?
> If a key piece of information were changed how would the meaning
>   change?
> Who has the power to shape the information we receive?
> Who benefits from the current representations and who loses?

The second problem we identified was the inability of students to deal with issues of ideology and power in the media. Issues of power and ideology have traditionally been skirted around in the media classroom, often for reasons of self-preservation, but it has become clear to us that perhaps they need to be tackled head on.

One approach to the issue of ideology, or values, is to use old, dated texts. Students are more readily able to distinguish the values inherent in old texts than current ones because they are often at odds with their own view of the world. The recognition will often be evident in their laughter. Laughter is their response to the discomfort they feel when faced with values they do not share. The laughter can be used as a way into the text (what was it about the extract that made you laugh?) From that point it is possible to move into questions of reading. What knowledge did you have access to that made you respond in that way? How has the class/gender/race/ age orientation in the text affected your reading? The denaturalising effect of the dated texts offers a way into the discussion of the construction of values and attitudes.

Another strategy is to lead students to an understanding of the relationship between an image and an ideological position by identifying both the connotations and the implied oppositions in the text. In the evaluation we found that students were experts at spotting the symbol but found it much harder to relate the choice of symbols to an ideological position. Images are selected for the associations they evoke. An accessible example is from the closing minutes of Nicaragua: No Pasaran. If students identify those images which are used to represent the Nicaraguans and compare them to those used to represent the United States of America they will begin to see a pattern emerging. The oppositions constructed

and favoured within the text suggest to the audience particular ideas, proposi-
tions and arguments about the film's position. The images are selected for their
power to activate the attitudes and values of the viewer.

Consistent across the strategies suggested is the implication of the need to
focus directly on the issue of social context and it seems to be an area not
prioritised in the syllabuses. Common to syllabuses in Canada, Australia and
Britain is a strong emphasis on textual anaylsis at the expense of contextual
analysis. This could be because most texts have been written by people from a
literature background; it might be that experience has indicated that this is the
most effective path. Whatever the reason it does not matter as long as the goals
are being met. However unless the issues of representation, power and pleasure
and the articulations of these in current media texts are dealt with directly there
is the danger that student skills and knowledge will be limited to classroom
application. How often are students asked to analyse the constructed oppositions
in the previous night's news broadcast?

In conclusion the question of aims in media education will be addressed
briefly. The aims of media education need to be clearer to students and parents.
Expectations of students need to be clearly and openly stated; teachers must
identify and use techniques to establish whether students are learning; student
progress must be made visible to the wider community. This is not to say that we
must embark on a campaign of mass testing. On the contrary, time wasting,
educationally suspect testing can be avoided if clear statements of expected
outcomes are provided for students. We need to cut through the rubric of the
syllabuses and state directly what it is we expect students to be able to do. With
some refinement we are hoping that the continuum will provide a user friendly
guide for teachers. They can use it to ask themselves what their own students can
do at any point in time and where they should be aiming for next. It should provide
a model for determining where we are heading with the students.

We are now entering the next stage of media education. The syllabuses are
in place, teachers are being trained for the task, the subject has a place on the
educational agenda, but it is not the time for complacency. The central purpose
of media education must be kept in mind if the courses are not to become navel-
gazing exercises. We need to continue the search for new and more effective
teaching strategies; we need to actively question our progress and determine our
path for the future. Refinement is needed.

ENDNOTES

1) Monitoring Standards in Education is an evaluation of the numeracy and
   literacy skills of students in years three (eight year olds); seven (twelve year
   olds) and ten (fifiteen year olds) in Western Australian state government
   schools. It is conducted by the Ministry of Education and involves testing

    sample groups of students across the state. The testing in media studies was conducted as part of the testing of literacy skills.

2)   The Monitoring Standards program as it currently operates calls for testing on a sample basis only. The tests can be used to develop profiles of students' skills and knowledge but cannot be used to compare students or teachers. This factor was important in convincing teachers to participate.

3) Palmer, P. (1986). *The lively audience: A study of children around the TV set.* Sydney: Alien and Unwin.

AUTHORS

Robyn Quin is Head, School of Language, Literature and Media Studies at Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley Campus, 2 Bradford St., Mount Lawley, Western Australia 6050.

Barrie McMahon is Director of Curriculum, Ministry of Education, Perth, West Australia.