Setting an Agenda for Training

Gary Bazalgette

Abstract: The British Film Institute (BFI) has provided a decade of training for teachers In the area of media education. With currlcular changes that would see the incorporation of media education as a requirement In the secondary English curriculum It became obvious to the BFI that face-to-face Inservice programs would no longer suffice. Over 46,000 teachers have little or no preparatory background In media education, That, coupled with decreasing time and financial support for inservice education, indicated the need for a different approach. The BFI, In collaboration with the Open University and the BBC Production Unit, developed a comprehensive distance education Inservice training course In media education for teachers. This paper documents the development of that course.

R6sum6: La British Film Institute (BFI) forme des enselgnants, dans le domalne de l'etudedes medlas, depuisdeja unedecennie. ['integration de l'etude des medias auxprogrammesd'enseignementdel'anglaisaunlveausecondalreaamenelaBFI d prendre conscience que les stages de formation face-d-face ne sufflralent plus. Plus de 46 000 enselgnants n'ont aucune, ou ont peu de preparation en cette matiere. De plus, les contraintes budgetaires et le manque de temps les empechent de pouvoir faire des stages de formation. Il est done necessalre de changer d'approche. La BFI, en collaboration avec l'Open University et la BBC Production Unit, ont done elabore pour les enseignants, un stage de formation integre en etude des medlas, d distance. Get article expose en detail le developpement de ce cours.

"At first I didn't know what questions to ask the children about the photographs.. .Then I went on the British Film Institute Easter School on media education — suddenly it became clear. I could see how all the media could be studied as a site for language learning. Now (July) I can have a discussion about a television programme I haven't seen and discuss points about realism and construction" (Letter from primary teacher, West Sussex).

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You learn a lot from training teachers. Over the past ten years BFI Education has worked with well over a thousand teachers and advisers from all levels of education, in short courses and conferences and in five-day residential schools, the Easter School referred to above. And that number doesn't include the many others that our four education officers have been invited to teach, in workshops and seminars run by other people: advisers, trainers, consortia of schools.

But by 1988 it was already dawning on us that there were vast training needs in media education that we, and other agencies in the field, couldn't possibly meet through face-to-face encounters. New specialist examination courses were being set up at the level of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), taken by sixteen year olds and at the Advanced Level General Certificate of Education (GCE) taken by eighteen year olds, but all too often these were being taught by inexperienced people. More significantly though, in terms of numbers, there were by then campaigns afoot to insert media education into the curricular reforms that were developing in all parts of Britain, on the basis that media education should be the entitlement of every child from the early years of schooling. That argument is logical, and easy enough to make as a piece of rhetoric, but in practice it has daunting implications, given that the government was not planning any financial support for training or resources relating to the new curricula.

As a cultural organisation whose remit is to foster the arts of film and television, the BFI does not have any statutory responsibility to develop media education or to train teachers; it is our own policy decision that doing what we can in the educational field is one way of fulfilling the remit, while other parts of the Institute fulfil it in other ways.

In England and Wales, the government was determined to force through a National Curriculum based on ten traditional subjects: a recipe for overcrowding and conceptual overlaps. In this situation our pragmatic judgement was to argue for media education to have a base in English, since that seemed its best chance of becoming a basic entitlement for eight million school aged children. There are good rhetorical arguments for media education that permeates the whole curriculum, especially at primary level, and there are dangers in attaching a hybrid subject like media education to a traditional area like English, but there seemed to be no practical alternative.

Even so, that meant that in theory there were 46,000 English teachers needing advice and training on media education, and many more generalist primary teachers who would need to integrate media work into their teaching. Although it was a pretty limited aspect of media education that actually ended up in the Statutory Order *, the examples and guidance given made it clear that the curriculum was at least open to broader interpretation and that those teachers who wanted to—and had the ability and confidence to do so—could develop more flexible and imaginative versions.

These changes, however, were happening alongside other educational reforms such as a drastic shift in the provision of in-service training. There were going to be far fewer opportunities for teachers to attend long courses, especially

full-time ones, and the financial base of training was to be shifted to the schools, who would purchase training according to *their* needs. This would aggravate an existing problem: it was very difficult for teachers to obtain any training in media education that went beyond basic introductory sessions. A 1987 report by Her Majesty's Inspectors confirmed that the media teaching actually going on in schools tended to lack any sense of progression in learning — even though, according to a survey done the following year by BFI and the National Foundation for Educational Research, some 30% of schools claimed to be doing some media education. There was a preponderance of isolated topics and projects—the same exercises might be tackled by eight year olds as by fifteen year olds, with little sense at either age of what was being learned or where it might lead.

One answer, we decided, might be to develop a distance learning course that would enable teachers to progress beyond the introductory stage and to see media education as something that could be systematic and continuing. Even though it would only reach relatively few of the potential audience of 46,000 plus, such a course would at least serve as an exemplar for other training providers, and might help to lift media education out of the campaigning and rhetoric stage, into the realm of serious and coherent educational provision.

Accordingly, we entered negotiations with the Open University to develop a package in collaboration with them. This was to be a free-standing package, not linked to any broadcast components and not, at this stage, carrying any certification. We planned a seventy hour course, taught through five components: a book, a video, an audiotape, a set of slides, and a teachers' workbook. A course team of eight people was assembled, and work began in 1990.

In retrospect, it is clear that the entire package was constructed back to front. Driven by production demands, we embarked first on the book and the videotape, without any very clear idea of the pedagogic strategies in which they would be used. It is possible, though, that if we had tried to start from first principles, we would still be arguing about them. We designed the book with an eye to what books already existed in the field, and what we thought any aspiring media teacher ought to know. There is no shortage of books with impressive arguments for media education and bright ideas for ways of doing it. But media education, in different guises such as Film Appreciation and Television Studies, has a long history in Britain and many of its debates are perennial ones. The BFI's first book on the subject, *Talking About the Cinema,* by Kitses and Mercer, was published in 1966, and one of the most influential books in the field was Hall and Whannel's *The Popular Arts,* published by Hutchinson in 1964. We decided that the book had to give a sense of the history, of how the debates about the media's nature, cultural status and effects have trampled to and fro over the same ground, and how, out of those debates, various forms of classroom practice have emerged. An historical dimension would, we felt, give teachers that confidence to engage with these debates on their own terms, rather than imagining that there is an intimidating and established body of knowledge to which they must defer.

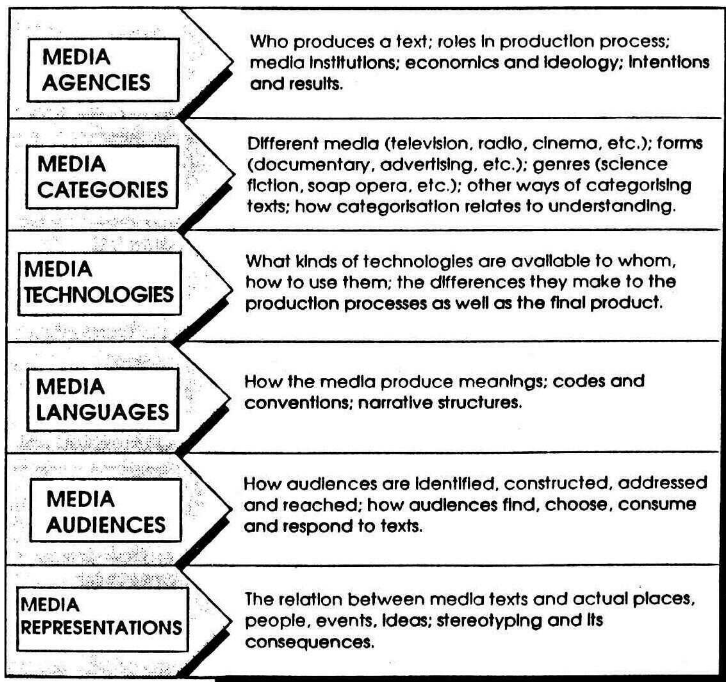
At the same time, the book obviously had to give a sense of the excitement and immediacy of working with children in classrooms. We accordingly commis-

sioned twenty teachers at all levels of education to write short accounts of their own practice: some at micro level; some at the macro level of planning and policy.

This model of a two-part anthology, part historical review and part contemporary experience, remained our working base as we turned to other components of the package. But as they grew, we realised that we needed more hi the book. More original writing was commissioned: guides to the different traditions of thought coming from cultural studies and sociology; studies of pedagogy and learning. One question still remained: what linked the debates of the 1960s and 1970s to the practice of the late 1980s and 1990s? What did we think teachers ought to be thinking and doing? What the book needed was a pivot, a point which made sense of how we had anthologised both past and present.

By now we were refining our ideas about the conceptual basis of the package as a whole. We had agreed to take as our framework the six-part "Key Aspect" structure of broad headings which was first outlined in our 1989 book Primary *Media Education: A Curriculum Statement*[2]. Developed by a group of primary teachers and advisers, this framework attempted to link and adapt a number of the key concepts currently taught to students of fourteen years of age and older, to the group's own perceptions of children's initial understandings about, and interests in, the media.

Figure 1.
Chart of Key Aspects



Many media education curricula are based on a series of axioms. For example, Ontario's resource guide, *Media Literacy,* has eight Key Concepts, each of which asserts a precept: "media contain ideological and value messages," or "form and content are closely related in the media."[3] But there is not a clear link between these precepts and the multiplicity of classroom activities or "coping strategies" offered in the pages that follow. Are the precepts teaching goals, or first principles? It is hard to tell, and it is even harder to tell how one would plan or evaluate children's learning (as opposed to classroom activities) in relation to them. It ought to be possible to devise a curriculum framework that encompasses both goals and first principles, and is capable of being mapped on to the progression of children's learning, without developing a mechanistic one-thing-after-another syllabus.

A paper by Eke (1986), one of the Primary Media Education working group, criticised "the tendency to break down media issues/theory into smaller "logical' components" after which "it is difficult to avoid the temptation to sequence the fragments logically in terms of difficulty.. .and to teach on this basis" [4]. The group's own investigations into children's talk about the media expanded this idea. Very young children were clearly making judgements and hypotheses that could be linked, conceptually, to key issues of media theory, "Blue Peter's more realer than Bugs Bunny"[5] is a modality judgement, focusing on the reality status of texts, but drawing on generic knowledge and a skilled reading of audiovisual techniques and conventions. "They never let the baddies win" not only summarises generic conventions but also contains the term "they" which is capable of development towards an understanding of media institutions, economic determinants, ways of addressing audiences and circulating texts. Any conversation with children about media has these theoretical connotations. In the end, it is not crucial exactly which working concepts are chosen for a curricular base. But any curriculum map of media education, whatever conceptual ground it covers, ought to be capable of interpretation in both horizontal and vertical dimensions, like a geographical contour map. It ought to delineate the range of concepts, but at the same time we have to be able to read the different levels at which each concept can be thought about and discussed, from the most basic principles or generalisations, to the most complex and sophisticated interpretation. In brief, it has to be both accessible and challenging. A list of axioms runs the risk of being neither.

That said, it must also be recognised that we learn from our teaching. Consequently, any curriculum framework should be provisional. Our Key Aspect framework is, perforce, a recurrent thread in the package, a tool for measuring progress, generating questions, and planning activities. To support it, a substantial chapter outlining the Key Aspect framework was added to the book.

The sixty minute video component was made by the BBC Production Unit at the Open University, which introduced the practices and procedures of a third institution to the BFI-OU collaboration already in place. Television production schedules are inexorable, and the video had to be made in the autumn of 1990 whether we were ready for it or not. Pragmatically, we knew there were several tasks the video had to perform. It had to offer audiovisual texts for analysis, and

there was no time for a leisurely review of cinema and broadcasting to find the perfect exemplar. One well-used tactic was chosen: beginning the entire course raw, as it were, by showing the opening of a feature film and asking people to identify their own responses, their own questions, their own predictions - on these we would build the conceptual framework of the course. The first few minutes of *Celia* were chosen: an Australian film by Ann Turner which interestingly mixes fantasy and politics, and which has a child protagonist.

Adopting this tactic for a distance learning project created its own problems. Face to face, it is possible to draw out people's comments and show how they link to the conceptual framework. To the comment "*I* think it's a horror film" one can respond "how do you know?", and then draw out the student's own knowledge of category, identifying that as a worthwhile basis for further questions and investigation. But in designing print and video for an unknown audience, there is no guarantee of responses unless they are anticipated, and thereby pre-empted. There is no simple solution to this dilemma. We supplied a lot of workbook notes - far more than originally planned — but it also seemed important to demonstrate the conceptual framework in action on the video. Choosing a romantic, soft-sell Italian television commercial for pasta, a voice-over was written to take viewers through a slowed and paused version of the commercial, to show how each Key Aspect could be brought to bear on the text and illuminate it in a different way. In the workbook, a set of notes was provided that challenged the voice-over, asking readers to think again about what was said and to consider how far they felt it was justified. The video then provides another text - a BBC programme trailer - for the package users to analyse on their own, using questions and notes from the workbook.

In devising this part of the package we were on familiar ground. We had all done exercises with teachers in the analysis of texts, using this conceptual approach. Providing slides and audiotape, we could also enable students of the package to undertake standard exercises in image analysis and in making a photo-story with a sound track. All this was based on the sound principle of starting where the students are: showing them that they already have knowledge, understanding and skills that they can use and develop.

A typical procedure in many training courses is to move from this sort of work straight into classroom activity, either leaving the trainee to work out how the activity is supposed to link to the conceptual signposts already set up, or on the basis of pure assertion: "this activity will teach children to..." or "*by* doing this, pupils will learn that..."

We were not happy with this approach. We felt we had to start with our students' own levels of understanding, hence we should be encouraging them to do the same. But how could we demonstrate the significance of their students' knowledge and understanding? We could not literally do this, but what we could do was to provide both video and audiotape of children's activities and talk, and demand an analysis of both, in terms of what kinds of knowledge and understanding were demonstrated, and what kinds of learning seemed to be going on. Working with small groups of children aged six, ten, and twelve, we taped

discussions of two items already included in the package - a documentary style photograph and the pasta commercial. We selected teachers of three different age groups (seven, thirteen, and sixteen year olds), and filmed them at work in their classrooms with their students.

Here we came up against the peculiar difficulties of media education training. If one is teaching people to analyse the way texts are constructed and to interrogate their conventions, one cannot just show classroom practice! In piloting sections of the package our nice films of busy children were shredded by our newly critical students. Questions on the audiotape were pilloried. The answer, and it is inevitably a partial one, was to demand that the package users focus specifically on the problem of representing classroom practice through the media. Any medium — print, audio, video, photography — involves choices: of words, of framing, of editing from several hours down to a few minutes. In confronting these choices through both analytical and practical tasks, our students involve themselves in media issues and educational issues at the same time.

Dealing with these problems got us to the stage of identifying and producing the content of nearly all the components, but in terms of the package's pedagogy we had only gotten through stage one. Most guides to media education stop there: you have the conceptual picture, you have tried out a few useful activities - go out there and do it! We wanted to do more. We wanted to return to, and open up, some of the intractable critical debates that shook media education in the 1970s and have tended to be swept under the carpet in the rush to make media education a respectable curriculum subject for the 1990s. What ever happened to ideology? What happened to pleasure? And going back further still, what happened to value judgements and aesthetics? These are by no means closed subjects from an unfashionable decade. We devised a three-session unit of the package that met these debates head on, revisiting such texts as the MacCabe-McArthur debate on realism[6] and Judith Williamson's "How Does Girl Number Twenty Understand Ideology?" [7], but asking students to engage with them in terms of their own motivations, practice and goals here and now.

Prompted by the Inspectorate's critiques, we also wanted to tackle progression in learning. The major difficulty here was that there is practically no evidence to use: virtually no one gets a chance to teach media systematically to the same children over several years. This unit therefore became very hypothetical, as we asked students to revisit the tapes of children's talk and work at various age levels, and to think about the differences. The problem is that one cannot extrapolate progression in learning from developmental evidence.

Speaking of a 1940s documentary photograph, the 6-year-olds say "this picture's something real." What do they mean by this, and how does one find out? Twelve year olds looking at the same photograph say "it does look a bit false^yeah/ it doesn't look realistic." Are both groups recognising the documentary intention of the image? Are the older students able to focus on what the younger ones have missed, or are they reading it differently? And what difference would it make to those six year olds' understanding if they had the opportunity to take different

Figure 2.
Bert Hardy Photograph

photos of a subject and to explore their own judgements about what they think is real and what they think is not real? We cannot answer these questions yet, but we can at least alert teachers to their complexity and importance.

Finally, it seemed crucial that the package's users should not just learn about media education as a set of teaching and learning concerns, but that they should be able to place those concerns in a strategic context. Where would they locate media teaching? How does it relate to their own curricular requirements? How would they promote it in their own institution or their own region? Again, the debates anthologised in the book feed in at this point, as we ask the teachers studying the package to plan a term's work, and to prepare a presentation on media education for an audience of colleagues or parents.

Not everyone using the package is going to take it on as a full seventy hour course[8]. It is constructed in sixteen sessions, some of two hours and some of four, organised into five units. There is also a substantial amount of reading between sessions. We have assumed that it is at least as likely that trainers will adapt and select from the package according to their own time constraints and needs, and we indicate some ways of doing this. Nevertheless, our intention all along has been to set a new agenda for training. Any educational training that fails to link theory to practice, that offers teaching based on predetermined activities rather than on children's learning, will not really meet teachers' needs, however accessible it may seem at first sight.

In the final analysis we do not want to train teachers to think that they know it all - or even that they could know it all. The final session of the package is open-ended, inviting teachers to define and undertake their own classroom research, taking the work of the package on into their own practice and into as yet unanswered - or even unformulated - questions, of which there are many.

Notes

1. The Statutory Orders are the documents describing the legal requirements for the teaching of each subject in the National Curriculum.
2. Bazalgette, C. (Ed.) (1989). *Primary media education: A curriculum statement.* London: British Film Institute.
3. Ontario Ministry of Education. (1989). *Media literacy resource guide.* Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, pp. 8-10.
4. Eke, R. (1986). Media Education Issues. In *BFI National Working Party for primary media education,* Working Papers Two. London: British Film Institute.
5. Blue Peter is a long-running magazine program for children aged six to twelve, shown daily on BBC television.
6. See Colin McArthur, Days of Hope. In Scra>n, V. 17 (1) 1976, and Colin MacCabe Principles of Realism and Pleasure. In *Screen,* V. 17 (3) 1976.
7. Williamson, J. How Does Girl Number Twenty Understand Ideology? In *Screen Education,* No. 40, Winter, 1981-82.
8. *Media education: An introduction* (1982) Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Photo Credit - Bert Hardy (1949). Liverpool, England

AUTHOR

Gary Bazalgette is Deputy Head of Education, British Film Institute, 21 Stephen St., London, England W1P1PL.