



Bringing It All Back Home

Putting media back into the English Curriculum

Jenny Grahame takes stock of where we are, where we've been, and where we might go with media in English.

Meandering through my archives for this article, I came across a bright orange book called *The English Curriculum – Media: Years 7–9* published in 1991 by the newly launched English and Media Centre. It offered a structured and resourced approach to media education within the then young National Curriculum for English. Revisiting it now, it is both quaintly utopian and refreshingly ambitious. Surprisingly, it can still be found lurking on the shelves of English Departments in schools which have survived the cleansing of specialisms, academy chain take-overs, mergers and name-changes, not to mention government initiatives and interventions. Even more surprisingly, given the astonishing changes in both the media and educational landscapes in the last 27 years, much of its philosophy, pedagogy and conceptual framework are still as relevant, sound, and yet-to-be-achieved as they were back then.

This is not the prelude to a breast-beating eulogy to what we may have lost from English, but an unashamedly partisan call to action for constructive thought about why we lost it, why we now need it more than ever, and how our previous conceptualisations of media study might be adapted to the current state of play.

A reminder of where we've been

English teachers have been teaching about popular media since the 1930s, then nurtured by the value-laden critiques of Leavis and Thompson, for whom cinema and advertising posed moral and cultural threats to young people. It was the role of the English curriculum to defend our youth from the opiates of popular culture,

and this defensive mode can still be detected in the most recent government interventions in our subject. Not until the more liberal 1960s did visionaries such as Michael Marland bring more celebratory and analytic approaches to the study of TV drama scripts, the tabloid press and other cultural forms, and a long tradition of media education through English was born. It's worth remembering that many Media Studies teachers came (as they still do) from an English background – curriculum connections which have become ever more contested and politicised. And yet ...

Readers of a certain age may remember what I now recall fondly as the glory days of the 1990s when despite – or indeed, as a direct response to – the encroachments of KS3 SATs, the emerging Literacy Strategy, and the successive tirades of Tory Education ministers against the 'Chaucer and chips' English curriculum, there was a flurry of media education activity within English departments, and a will to make it work. It was not only inscribed in the Programmes of Study for the National Curriculum, albeit in partial and contested ways, but also mandatory at KS4, with media units required by several of the GCSE examination boards.

If you became an English teacher more recently, however, you probably won't have experienced activities such as the Kif or Froops simulations, holistic immersive experiences embedding textual analysis and production, various persuasive, analytic and factual writing types and unlimited opportunities for talk, contextualised by study of the advertising industry. It's likely also that you

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won't know how many English teachers back in the Millennium dedicated substantial teaching time to analysis of *Big Brother*, *The Simpsons*, the cultural significance of photo-booths, teenmag *Just Seventeen*, or the ethics of war photography. It's worth wondering how many would risk an equivalent content now.

Of course these were just anecdotal fragments of a far bigger and more fully conceptualised picture. During the 80s and 90s the BFI Education Department, Film Education, Thames TV's wonderful *The English Programme*, and many other agencies, spent a great deal of time developing approaches and practices which incorporated media and film across the curriculum. Most notably, BFI provided us with a working framework for what young people needed to understand about the ways *all* texts work – inter-related concepts of language, representation, audience and industry which could, and indeed did for some time, apply to texts and processes across a range of subjects.

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Even more presciently, as far back as 1991 it published Primary and Secondary Curriculum statements, arguing coherently for a whole-school interdisciplinary approach to both the teaching and use of media based around these concepts; a decade later its *Moving Images in the classroom* offered practical guidance with a compendium of fool-proof strategies for interrogating film across the curriculum. And those of us who lived through the mixed blessings of the National Literacy Strategy may remember that in its later stages it actually rolled out a KS3 Media Literacy training package (written by EMC) designed for delivery by local authority advisors, HoDs, and ITE departments.

In 2005, *Media Matters*, a national survey of media education published by QCA (OfQual's predecessor) suggested a broad if somewhat constrained acceptance of the role of media study in English:

Although the national curriculum now expresses the media requirements in terms broadly comparable with the key media concepts, there is considerable variation in how explicitly these concepts are taught within the English Curriculum. Whilst most teachers are confident in teaching about language, audience and purpose, and the construction of meaning, these concepts are often applied in a way that is more relevant to English than to media education ... The value of exploring concepts through the production of media texts is recognised but often limited due to lack of time, resources and technical expertise. [Where these difficulties have been overcome] media production work can be embedded in the national curriculum, leading to a range of effective and creative work.

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So what happened next?

It's not hard to explain why these strategic approaches to media failed to bed down into the heart of English teaching and learning. We have always had to work creatively around the spaces left by the official curriculum. The history of recent education policy, from the loss of local authority control, through the rise of academies, the whittling away of teachers' professional status, the marketing and competitive economy of schools, to the current wave of enforced curriculum reforms, tells part of the story. There's a whole book to be written here about the de-mediatization (if such a word exists) of the English curriculum (and there's a chapter on it, by Steve Connolly, in *The Future of English Teaching WorldWide: Celebrating 50 Years from the Dartmouth Conference* (Andy Goodwyn et al, Routledge, to be published in 2019))

The institutionalisation of Media Studies at GCSE and A Level, and the search for rigorous specialist subject knowledge in the face of public scepticism nudged the subject further away from English Departments, and limited its accessibility to media-friendly teachers. Media educators responded to these challenges pragmatically. Some followed a literacy-based approach, multimodally theorising camera shots, moving image sequences and representations as the equivalent to word, sentence and text-level analysis. Others exploited emerging English trends: spoken language study, a lively part of the agenda until 2014, opened opportunities to explore texting and tweeting, the language of soap opera, interviews, sports commentaries. Short film, then as now, was used as prompts for creative writing, narrative structure and atmosphere. These attempts to find ways of rationalising and justifying the relationship between English and media – the 'stealth' model of media education – are clearly reflected in EMC's publications from the late 90s and 00s. *Doing News* and *Doing Ads*, the *KS3 Media Pack*, the *Doubletake* shorts anthology, *Days Like These*, animation for autobiographical writing.

And then came the Gove curriculum: a framework so devoid of reference to the media-saturated real world of students' experience that even the most committed media educators have found it hard to subvert.

Digital developments and red herrings

Gove's interventions are an extraordinarily contrary response to the seismic changes in the media themselves since the late 1990s. Rather than confronting the impact of digitisation on education as a whole, and in particular on the entire landscape of English teaching, he chose simply to ignore it. This is not unlike Jeremy Hunt's recent proposal to 'protect' children from the dangers of Facebook by restricting access to it.

So we now have an abundance of digital tools for literacy – word clouds, number-crunching, highlighting and search apps, authoring tools, annotation and editing software, etc. – unlimited support for forensic textual analysis as required for the English GCSE specs. And yet the value of such 'reading' tools to interrogate media has been at best rendered invisible, at worst actively discouraged by the formal English Curriculum. At the same time, long-held and proven ideas about the significance to 21st century literacy of 'writing' in media have been undermined at a time when it is easier than ever for students and for schools to experiment with it. Opportunities for practical media production have exponentially declined, both in English and, even more alarmingly, within the Media Studies specifications at GCSE and A Level (of which you can read more elsewhere in this issue).

Over the last two decades there has been shamefully little evidence-based research into the synergy between print and media literacy, and the role of communicating/writing in media, even in prestigious US institutions and digital ideas-factories. In part this may be due to the functional, skills-based hijacking of issues by digital literacy enthusiasts who have used technology as 'transparent' teaching tools or techniques, while 'in the process, fundamental questions about how technologies mediate and represent the world, about how they create meaning, and about how they are produced, are inevitably marginalised (Buckingham 2008).'

We're far from the idealistic orange-book-thinking of the 90s when it seemed possible that media concepts and practices might actually make an informed impact on the structure and content of English.

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A long and living history

We know from the very many examples of good practice passing through NATE and EMC that English teachers still have the will and the commitment to incorporate media texts into their classrooms. For over 30 years media teachers have thrashed out ways of making sense of an infinitely expanding media landscape. We've developed a set of concepts – referenced but only partially explained here – that can at least partially inform and structure some of the English and media skills students will need in negotiating adult life. We've accumulated a wide repertoire of manageable and engaging classroom strategies and applied them both to the most conventional of literary texts and to the newer challenges of contemporary cultural production. And we have a wide range of resources, perhaps dated over time, certainly requiring updating and adaptation, but which can provide models for future-proofing our practice.

It may seem that we have entered a particularly bleak period in which curriculum constraints and narrow forms of accountability have hijacked subject English. But in a spirit of optimism, let's reflect on what has happened in the past, and remember that it's not over till it's over. Eventually the curriculum pendulum will swing back and reinvent/revive/re-embrace a model of English which is again diverse, critical and engaging. Bring back that orange book. Let's not forget what we've had – but make it fit for the 21st Century.

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The Future of Teaching about the Media in English: time for positive change?

Andy Goodwyn and **Steve Connolly** ask teachers to let them know what they are doing with media in English classrooms in the run-up to a special 'Media in English' conference in November.

Over the last few years teaching about media texts has been 'disappeared' from English. It does not appear in the National Curriculum and does not feature in the relatively new GCSE specifications. At the same time, there has been a major battle to ensure that both GCSE and A Level Media Studies specifications will be approved and studied in schools. While these specifications may in many ways not appear to be wholly satisfactory, this 'battle' at least has been won.

Whatever the situation with the English National Curriculum, we know that there is still good work related to media in English classrooms. We know that Media Studies has survived, we know that the National Curriculum is no longer the strait jacket it was and – most importantly – we know that schools should be teaching all young people about the media – but we do not have any systematic evidence of where it is happening.

To address these issues, the BERA (British Educational Research Association) English in Education SIG (Special Interest Group) is proposing a day event in November 2018 which will explore the current status of Media texts within English, and seeks teachers from all phases who are currently doing work with Media texts in English and literacy lessons to come forward and share this practice.

The conference will bring together educators, whether teachers or academic researchers, to reflect on the past but more importantly to look ahead to ensuring that media work is once more important in English and that teachers can develop the

necessary expertise to become specialist teachers. Major organisations will be present who have a stake in the future of this key area of education. The day will feature key note talks by Andrew Burn and others, research papers from leading academics, and teacher presenting their own practice through papers and workshops.

The mission statement of the SIG states that English 'has a very strong focus on texts of all kinds, especially literary texts, but usually including 'viewing' in a broad sense, sometimes called Media Education --- and these areas shade into digital literacy and uses of technology.' This will therefore be the first of a number of Media in English events hosted by the BERA English in Education SIG, which will include regional events in Spring 2019 to follow up the initial conference.

The English in Education SIG encourages teachers and academics to share their good practice in using Media texts within the English curriculum by telling us about them via the hashtag #mediainenglish or by emailing steve.connolly@beds.ac.uk. All accounts and ideas are welcome and we would like to make the best of these a key feature of the event in November.

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