

# **The Urban Myth of Media Education in England**

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## **1. Introduction**

The motivation for this research has arisen from discussions conducted informally between colleagues involved in teaching level 2 and 3 vocational TV and film based media courses at a further education college in the SW of England. An initial impetus came from members of staff with high level industry experience, in one case as a freelance producer for the BBC. The central question concerned the relevance of the TV and film media curriculum in preparing students to work in the industry. Those from industry felt that vocational media courses were not regarded by media employers as a suitable preparation to work in media. Discussions then included vocational students who confirmed that the courses did not meet their expectations, nor seem to focus on their ambitions.

While these discussions took place, another aspect of the changing media landscape arose as a possible curriculum development opportunity. The advent of local TV, currently under consideration by the UK government, may offer a real vocational context for students on media courses. As noted later, some commentators (Dyke, 2011; Harris, 2009) have suggested that one of the key aspects needed for local TV to succeed is the involvement of students in its production.

This paper will critically examine the place of media (TV and film) in the education curriculum, drawing on personal experience, tutor comment and student feedback. It will also consider how local TV might affect the development of this curriculum.

## **2. Aims and Objectives**

The aim is to question the current design of the TV and film based media curriculum, in particular the vocational curriculum, drawing on the views of tutors, students and industry practitioners. In doing this we hope to shed light

on the reasoning behind existing curriculum specifications and to question if these are appropriate, valid and relevant.

Our objective is to produce an impetus towards reconstructing a media moving image curriculum, based on tutors and learners perceptions, contextualised by the possible future of local and Internet Protocol (IP) based television.

### **3. Context and Literature review.**

In considering this paper many threads have been explored: The development of media education and its industrial context, the nature of learning and its purpose and the issue of curriculum design. In addition the method of study was largely informed by the work of Michael Fielding (2005) on Joint Practice Development. These perspectives are considered in turn below.

#### **3.1. Brief overview of the origins of post 16 media education provision.**

Post 16 media education began around the 1980s and was influenced by the publication of two books: 'Teaching the Media' by Len Masterman (1985) and 'The Media Studies Book' by David Lusted (1991). At the time there were few media graduates, so many of those who were drawn into teaching the subject came from other disciplines. I came from business and economics, many of my colleagues came from English, communications, sociology, cultural studies and occasionally, film studies. Some of us had industry experience.

Masterman's book combined media production with media theory: Critical theory. This set up an interesting pedagogical challenge for teachers, some of whom had little idea of how media products were actually produced. They had to learn technologies and strategies for teaching about production, and also teach techniques for critical analysis. Only a few mastered the production process, using sub industry equipment (domestic market

camcorders and edit systems), while many more found it was easier to develop critical analysis, especially if they came from communications studies and English. Media studies largely became the study of the media from the standpoint of a range of disciplines – psychology, communication, English literature, for example. The tools of analysis applied to these disciplines were applied to media.

At the same time, Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) arrived in post 14 education (Yeoman, 2002). This provided funding for the purchase of media equipment, made available to groups of students who were not 'studying the media', but simply wanted to make a film. Media was used as a motivational device to draw them into developing communication skills, teamwork, project collaborations and to explore issues such as multiculturalism in the UK. By the mid 1990s, media education appeared to be founded on the inclusion of three main strands:

- a. Teaching media as a profession (vocational).
- b. Teaching media as critical theory (academic), to enable political and cultural understanding of possible media manipulation.
- c. Teaching media to motivate learners to learn something else. (recreational/ motivational/ broadening/ enrichment).

The way these strands intertwined can be seen from a brief look at the qualifications. On an early version of Media Studies GCSE virtually the whole of the assessment was based on practical work. A good video was accepted as evidence of planning and creative development. Students who found they had not obtained at least a grade C in their GCSEs suddenly could gain a grade C without a focus on their ability to write and justify what they were doing. There was some media theory in this course, but not much. Eventually more written content was added, until success rates fell back to 'normal' levels. The course was highly motivational for those who had not succeeded earlier at school.

Media A level (Cambridge Board) began with a fairly demanding practical element, slowly reduced over the years to bring it into line with other academic subjects. The arrival of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) in 1992 and later, the Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications at levels 2 and 3, was supposed to provide an outlet for those who wanted a vocational route into the media.

The GNVQ, now defunct, demanded a huge amount of writing and research and very little actual production. This was partly driven by the need to make it available to schools that did not have the kind of equipment available in FE colleges. To make GNVQ 'equivalent to A levels', academic units were included. To succeed on a GNVQ you also needed to understand the A level. However, to succeed at A level you did not need to understand the GNVQ. The GNVQ was therefore seen as valid in terms of its link to the A level.

The BTEC National (now extension diploma) also claimed to be equivalent to A level. It also has a compulsory academic unit that covers much of the A level curriculum.

The development of foundation degrees, based in FE colleges, was based partly on perceptions from the Dearing Review (1997) and supported by The Leitch Report (2006), that HE (and FE) needed a more vocational focus. These courses were largely written by FE tutors with support from industry and academic advisers. For the first time in their teaching careers, FE lecturers could specify the content of the curriculum. Drawing on their industrial experiences they moved towards vocationally relevant content. From this initiative some of the questions in this paper have arisen. What is happening in media education at levels 2 and 3? How relevant is it? Should it be different and could it support what happens on the industry focussed foundation degree programmes?

### **3.2. The Media Curriculum and Industrial Contexts.**

Hart et al (1998) suggested that internationally much of the media studies curriculum is fragmented. This can in part be attributed to the focus of teachers on delivering what they know about, rather than a cohesive and agreed approach. The broad subject base of new media teachers may have contributed to this. Hence, for those without industrial experience there was a tendency to teach, for example, literary critical approaches. These did not always sit well with the realities of how the industry works.

As Masterman points out in his foreword to Hart's book: 'Teaching about advertising is still universally teaching against advertising rather than an attempt to develop understanding of how it works.' (Masterman in Hart Ed, 1998, p.viii). In other words, critical analysis of the advert is more important than knowing the forces that brought it into being.

Masterman goes on to make the point that media teachers had assumed that the media can be understood by engagement with critical analysis applied to media texts. 'Media education has been based on a premise of the most astonishing naivety that the primary function of media has been the production of information or entertainment.' (Masterman in Hart Ed, 1998, p. X). He notes that understanding marketing strategies built on viewing the audience as the product that is sold is important in understanding how the media works. Moran and Malbon (2006) further supported this view by noting how TV formats have become part of the media business, essentially selling programme structures that have proved successful in attracting mass audiences.

The debate about what constitutes media studies can become infused with complications. Because so many disciplines are used to analyse aspects of media it can become difficult for students, especially vocational students, to grasp what they are supposed to be studying. For example, Julian McDougall advises in his book for media teachers:

To tackle audience work with confidence you need to support students in their understanding of demographics, dominant readings and other

possibilities, cultivation, moral panic, myth, reception theory and reader-response, research methods and theories of popular culture (McDougal, 2006, p161)

This is quite a list. Even so, it does not seem to include Masterman's view of the marketing approach to audiences.

Media industries are notoriously difficult to gain entry to, unless you know someone who can either get you in or guide you in. As Atila Mustafa makes clear, there is still an industry view that the media requires particular strategies to gain entry: 'Media employers preferred experience against qualifications but not many could suggest how to acquire it.' (Mustfa, 2002, p.5).

In 2000, Chris Woodhead, then Chief Inspector for Schools, hit the headlines with these comments about media courses:

"If you embark on a degree course and finish it and then you find yourself unemployed, is that enhancing your life? I don't think so." Among media employers, he said, there was "profound scepticism as to whether these courses teach students the skills and understanding they want." (BBCnews.co.uk, March 2000)

Not everyone agreed with Woodhead but his comments did reflect a general industry view that media courses were not training students to work in the media.

Many vocational media course tutors explain why networking and work experience is so important. It is not simply the case that a good qualification will get you noticed. At the same time, those who do wish to work in the media need to understand that, certainly in production and performance, total dedication is expected. That means late nights, weekend working and some uncomfortable environments. Creative students need to understand that for the most part they will be creating programmes to attract advertisers and

mass audiences, and in many cases, being commissioned and employed on this basis. These perceptions are not always emphasised on media courses.

A further context for this study is the possible advent of local TV (Dyke, 2011; Harris, 2009). On vocational courses media students are faced with a huge mountain to climb. Trying to emulate what they see on national TV can be an impossible task. Local TV however will only work if the standards applied are based within an achievable framework, as Greg Dyke, former director general of the BBC suggested in his recent lecture at York University:

... people are willing to accept reduced quality if the content is more local. It could be argued that regional news has never been as good as national news in term of quality because less money is spent on it, but this has not impacted on ratings. The same would apply to local versus regional. (Dyke, 2009, p.7)

Dyke also recognises that students on courses could help to deliver local TV and that for some this could be a way into employment: 'At Universities like this up and down the country literally thousands of students are learning how to make television... Local television will also bring many other jobs for young people...' (Dyke, 2011, p.7).

The range of potential provision is vast, as Steve Harris from the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) makes clear: 'ofcom ...has provided for up to 81 local digital TV services – at larger locations there may be scope for two and even three services' (Harris, 2009, p.2)

This represents a huge opportunity for education providers across the UK to design their courses around the needs of this new venture.

### **3.3. Learning and its purpose.**

Frank Coffield suggests that as teachers one of our firm aims should be to 'do the minimum harm' (Coffield, 2010, p.6). We therefore need to think carefully about the messages we give our media students, especially those who have ambitions to work in the industry. This is not easily resolved as critically based media education tries to produce students who are aware of media manipulation, and vocational media education might train people in how to successfully manipulate others. The industry may prefer those who have the skill to manipulate an audience, rather than those who have the ability to critically understand how the audience is being manipulated. While both approaches may not be mutually exclusive, the emphasis in the media education curriculum is perhaps more easily placed on the latter.

Questioning the purpose of learning has become less important in recent years, replaced by a focus on techniques that bring about good results. It's not what you learn; it's how effectively you do it. To some extent this reflects a postmodernist view, where the greatest value is placed on the process of discourse which brings about change. By implication this means learning to learn, embracing what Rorty calls 'edifying philosophy' (Rorty, 1979, p.70).

Sennett (2008) purposes that the actions of a craftsman, in trying to perfect the craft, are of themselves the carrier of meaning and purpose. He places this form of learning centre stage. Trial and error and developing higher skills from reflecting on the process of work are seen as powerful motivators for lifelong learning and understanding of life's purpose. '...the craft of making physical things provides insight into the techniques of experience that can shape our dealings with others.' (Sennett, 2008, p.289).

For the media curriculum there is some resonance here. Many vocational media students may wish to take a craftsman approach to their curriculum, but are confronted with systems that have at their root the perception of developing the tools to learn, or the tools of critical analysis. These tools tend to be academically constructed, linked to deeper levels of analytical thinking. Hence media is used to deliver learning techniques and critical skills, but

perhaps, as Sennett suggests, in a void, away from the practical skills of creating media products.

### **3.4. Curriculum Design.**

Curriculum design is complex. On one level it can be driven by philosophical views of education, linked to the community in which it takes place, expressed, for example, in the work of John Dewey (1916). It can also focus on technical investigations of effectiveness in learning methods (Skinner, 1953), and more latterly through empirical investigations based on evidence based practice (Hattie, 2009). Coffield (2008) offers two metaphors for learning (acquisition and participation) the choice of which would greatly affect the way a curriculum is designed and delivered. Dylan Wiliam's work on Assessment for Learning (Wiliam, 2009) suggests that space is needed in the curriculum for students to learn from assessments – not simply to receive summative judgements. To make this a central part of curriculum delivery requires a shift in curriculum design. As is noted later in this paper, the vocational media curriculum is awash with summative assessment, leaving little space for Wiliam's approach. The need to standardise and compare, meet political and assessment targets, link outcomes to progress; all these inform the design of the curriculum. Theorists offer critiques of how different forms of curriculum can be viewed (Kelly, 2009; Scott, 2008; Heathcote et al, 1982; Golby et al, 1975). These perspectives make clear how complex curriculum design is, as it attempts to meet a range of requirements, not all related to effective forms of learning. A key point made by Frank Coffield (2008) about FE colleges and the whole of the FE curriculum relates to the time allocated to consideration of teaching and learning. Having analysed three key documents from The Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the body that managed funding for the FE sector until it was disbanded in 2010, he concludes that there were 86 identifiable targets but that:

...In all three documents, which run to 167 pages altogether, there is one deafening silence: there is no discussion of T & L (Teaching and Learning). Indeed, it barely rates a mention...(Coffield, 2008, p.48)

Teaching and learning is of itself a complex process, in which there is no general agreement about methods. If this is not a focus, then it is quite possible that other aspects of curriculum (standardisation, assessment, funding and resourcing for example) will take precedence. The very purpose of the curriculum, in this case the vocational media curriculum, can be lost in a sea of other priorities.

#### **4. Methodology.**

The work of Michael Fielding et al (2005) helped to inform the design of the methodology. Fielding and colleagues suggest that effective CPD takes place when teams co-operate and discuss issues, rather than through an expert - dissemination model. In addition, Frank Coffield (2008) asks why the tutors' voice has not been heard in FE colleges where the emphasis on recent years has been on top down government driven initiatives and the learner voice. Further support for the method adopted here appeared in Diana Laurillard's inaugural lecture when she concludes that we should 'Give pedagogy back to the teachers'. (Laurillard, 2008, p.34).

Using a report and respond approach, a group of media tutors were invited to discussion forums, which were filmed. The main points raised were then circulated in a draft paper to the group to ascertain further comment and to ensure the points were a true representation of the views expressed. This exercise was repeated and points added. In addition, further informal discussions took place and were included in the findings.

A group of 6 tutors offered views based on their role as lecturers and as former industry practitioners.

A small group of four students from the level 3 BTEC moving image course agreed to form a focus group and offered feedback on their view of the course and how it met their career aims.

## 5. Findings.

The tutors all agreed that the current vocational media curriculum at levels 2 and 3 was flawed. Those with recent industry experience were very clear about how inappropriate the qualifications were. One commented:

*'when I came into education I thought it would be to teach students what I had learnt as a freelance producer with the BBC. It certainly wasn't that.'* (Leslie)

This was supported by another's view,

*'I think there has to be something more realistic about what it's actually like to work in the industry. It could be that they make decisions now when they are between 16 and 18 that it's not what they want - rather than live in the illusion about what working in the industry is like.'* (Jane)

And:

*'There's a massive gap between professional and what the students do.'* (Brigid)

*'the creative opportunities are really in problem solving. There are not that many real design jobs. Most of it is nuts and bolts and meeting customer needs.'* (Brian)

Another comment related to how students are recruited on to media courses:

*'In media (courses) it is assumed that anyone can do it. This is not true of other subjects. To do art you need to draw.'* (Alan)

From further discussion outside the filmed interviews the question of the assessment process arose. The assessment regime on the level 3 course is

effectively a tick box exercise. There are 18 units with at least 4 assessed outcomes each, making a total of 72 outcomes for work to be measured against. There are three grade levels giving a total of 216 possible grade outcomes. With a typical group of 20 students this amounts to 4160 summative grading decisions the teacher has to make.

Another younger member of staff commented:

*‘Many students do not join the course to write reams of research into histories and endless evaluations documents– they want to learn how to use cameras, create products and become media practitioners.’*  
(James)

This view was echoed by the student focus group:

*‘There is too much writing and not enough practical work.’*

The students all felt the course should be more focussed on work for real audiences and clients. One group, who had just completed their first client brief (mid way through the second year) noted that the client had not wanted any of their creative ideas. They all realised that this was a new experience. They had to produce what the client wanted, not what they wanted. They all felt this should have happened many more times on the course. They were all explicit about their ambitions to work in the media as producers, editors and directors.

One tutor with much production experience at the BBC commented that students would never be able to achieve what the BBC might want. They could approach these skills but the truth was that if you wanted to work for the BBC, then they would train you when you joined. This training view was also supported by another tutor who had worked in local radio. He commented that he was given a schedule task and that it took him three weeks to become good at it – simply by refining his learning by repeating the experience each day. Clearly, this might not suit an educational environment. However, it did

raise the question of just what technical and practical skills should (or could) be achieved at this level.

The following summarises the main points made by the discussion groups:

- a. Vocational media education needs to focus on production that is realistic for those that wish to develop those skills. It should be valid in itself, not dependent on knowing the academic curriculum. (the students valued some critical understanding, though not as much as the curriculum demanded).
- b. Assessment should be simplified and include more practical work, linked to real tasks for clients. (some assessment should be as would happen in the industry).
- c. Students need to know where the curriculum will lead and the realities of working in the media for clients or broadcasters.
- d. If the course is mainly motivational, or linked to developing other skills, this needs to be made clear to the students.
- e. Students should not be encouraged to study media simply because there is no other available choice.
- f. Forms of media production should be assessed in their own right, not always based on what a student might write about them.
- g. Courses need to be flexible so that special interests can be developed within the structure –for example pop video production. Students requested a second year that allowed for three major production projects, focussed on real work, rather than continuing with more short and diverse modules.

- h. Realistic local media constructions – for example, community based local TV, need to support and inform the vocational courses.
- i. Tutors, learners and industry views of the curriculum should be used in the design of that curriculum.

Two short video outlining the key messages are available at :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-f7rndNFD8>

and

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJLWdPb5Ehc>

## **6. Discussion.**

There is clearly a mismatch between what students perceive vocational media and TV courses will provide, what teachers wish to do and what is actually possible to deliver. The tension between the “inoculation” theory of critical media education, the development of skills to access higher forms of learning, and the realities of working in the industry do not sit happily together. It is worth considering why this situation continues, and the waste of ambition and potential talent that this could be perpetrating. Would this be acceptable if we were training in other vocations, such as engineering or plumbing for example? From the evidence presented, for some media students, we may not be assisting them in the right way to achieve their ambitions.

Vocational education initiatives seem to come thick and fast from Government. Often they are general in nature and are designed to solve long term economic problems. Education tends to lag behind industry. An opportunity comes along, and some time later we include it in our educational planning – a process that can take years. The opportunity to become part of the development of local TV at its outset, to create structures within education that support this, would be an innovative move. Education could contribute to

the commercial outcome, to the benefit of students, audiences and the companies that might become involved in Local TV.

Such a move might also help students to learn in new ways that are more akin to developing life skills. As Richard Sennett suggests, the talent to improve and the ability to work well in teams helps us to become good citizens.

Any move in this direction would be most likely to succeed if the tutors who teach on the courses are involved in the curriculum design and dissemination to colleagues. Certainly in terms of the study conducted here the contribution of colleagues was invaluable. They are all now very enthusiastic about developing a new approach. It would be a mistake to simply design another course and roll it out across the UK. The same perceptions that underlie local TV – that it should be designed for the locality and will therefore be different and appropriate in different areas, needs to inform any curriculum design. As Michael Feliding's study reveals, professional development is more likely to succeed if it involves those who deliver the courses, and less likely to have an impact if we follow a top down cascade model of development.

As noted above, curriculum design is complex, driven by philosophies, political expediencies, funding issues and effective methods of teaching and learning (though, according to Frank Coffied's research, not perhaps a key area for the LSC). Add to this the need to standardise assessment across levels and subjects and any attempt to redesign a curriculum becomes a daunting task. Nonetheless, the views of those who took part in this study are clear.

The evidence suggests that there may be both a need and an opportunity to consider another approach to the design of the vocational media curriculum. A key question is then how can we address this potential, but still meets all that education demands inherent in curriculum design?

Note: the names of participants have been changed.

Word count 4219.

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