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Chapter Three of Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture

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MEDIA LITERACIES

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Advocates of media education have frequently invoked the notion of 'literacy' in attempting to define and justify their work. The use of the term in this context dates back at least to the 1970s, where a range of mostly short-lived 'television literacy' curricula were introduced in the United States (Anderson, 1980). In North America generally, the term 'media literacy' is still often used in preference to 'media education'. The reference to literacy came onto the agenda in the UK in the late 1980s, partly as a result of attempts to integrate media education within the teaching of English (e.g. Bazalgette, 1988; Buckingham, 1993b). More recently, educators whose primary interest is in the teaching of language and literature have come (perhaps belatedly) to recognise the importance of dealing with a wider range of media (e.g. Marsh and Millard, 2000; Watts Pailliotet and Mosenthal, 2000). This more recent emphasis has also led to the emergence of the term 'multiliteracies' (Tyner, 1998; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000).

Such authors typically claim that the 'new' literacies required by the modern media are just as important as the 'old' literacies demanded by print. Of course, communication almost always involves a combination of different modes, visual as well as verbal; but the development of new communications media has decisively undermined the dominance of the printed word – and indeed, is fundamentally reshaping how we use language. Literacy today, it is argued, is inevitably and necessarily multimedia literacy; and to this extent, traditional forms of literacy teaching are no longer adequate.

To some extent, therefore, this use of the term 'media literacy' could be seen as a polemical claim – and in this respect, it has much in common with the fashionable use of the term in contexts such as 'computer literacy', 'economic literacy' and even 'emotional literacy'. It is based on an analogy between the competencies which apply in relatively new or controversial or low-status areas (in this case, media) and those which apply in the established, uncontroversial, high-status area of reading and writing. The analogy is used to bolster claims for the importance – and indeed the respectability – of the new area of study. On the other hand, of course, it may also give hostages to fortune, not least because it implicitly acknowledges the primacy of written language. Because writing is seen as the only 'real' mode of communication, it appears that all the others have to be described as forms of literacy (Kress, 1997).

Defining literacy

The term 'media literacy' refers to the knowledge, skills and competencies that are required in order to use and interpret media. Yet defining media literacy is far from straightforward. To talk about 'literacy' in this context would seem to imply that the media can in some sense be seen to employ forms of language – and that we can study and teach visual and audio-visual 'languages' in a similar way to written language. The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is generally credited with proposing this kind of extension of linguistic methods to the study of other forms of communication – a field that has subsequently been termed semiotics or semiology (that is, the study of signs). Media educators have frequently employed semiotic methods or principles for analysing media texts (see Chapter Five).

Yet for some, the analogy with written language – and hence the term 'media literacy' - is simply too imprecise, if not positively misleading. Some scholars of literacy, for example, caution against this rather loose and metaphorical use of the term, arguing that it blurs necessary distinctions between written language and other modes of communication (e.g. Barton, 1994; Kress, 1997). Meanwhile, some media analysts reject the idea that our understanding of visual communication is based on a mastery of cultural conventions like those that apply in language. On the contrary, they suggest that we understand visual and audio-visual representations using the same skills that we use to interpret the everyday world around us ([Messaris, 1994](#)).

Ultimately, the value of the literacy analogy depends on the level at which we decide to locate it. As Paul Messaris (1994) suggests, the basic conventions of 'film language' do have to be learned; but they are learned comparatively easily and quickly, not least because they mimic familiar processes of perception and comprehension. Interpreting a zoom or a dissolve, for example, is relatively straightforward if one takes account of contextual information (the other shots in the film, or the development of the storyline). In fact, attempts to develop a theory of 'film language' have been fraught with difficulty: it is very hard to find analogies between the 'small elements' of film (shots or camera movements, for example) and the equivalent elements in verbal language (the word or the phoneme), let alone aspects such as tenses or negatives. Several analysts conclude that film does not in fact possess a syntax, which would enable us to distinguish between 'grammatical' and 'ungrammatical' statements (see Buckingham, 1993a).

Likewise, psychologists' attempts to identify the component skills that make up 'television literacy' have been fraught with difficulty. At least in principle, it should be possible to break down what a competent viewer needs to do in order to 'understand' a piece of television; yet this does not necessarily correspond to the ways in which meanings are actually produced. Particular formal features of television do not carry fixed meanings, which can be objectively defined. A camera zoom, for example, may 'mean' different things at different times; and it may on certain occasions 'mean' the same thing as a tracking shot or a cut to close-up. Such apparently basic elements of media language cannot be said to be processed automatically. However momentarily, viewers have to

make active choices about their meaning (for a fuller discussion, see Buckingham, 1993a: Chapter 2).

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish here between interpretation at this 'micro' level and the 'macro' level of textual meaning. How we interpret a film, for example, does not depend only on how we 'read' particular shots or sequences. It also depends on how the text as a whole is organised and structured, for example via narrative; on how it relates to other texts we may have seen (intertextuality), or genres with which we are familiar; on how the text refers to, and makes claims about, aspects of reality with which we are more or less familiar (representation); and on the expectations we bring to it, for example as a result of the ways in which it has been publicised and distributed. Understanding these different elements might also be seen as forms of 'literacy', in the sense that they involve the production of meaning and pleasure from a range of textual signs.

Thus, the 'literacy' that is generally referred to in the case of 'media literacy' is clearly more than simply a functional literacy – the ability to make sense of a TV programme, for example, or to operate a camera. Literacy is not seen here merely as a kind of cognitive 'tool kit' that enables people to understand and use media. And media education is thus rather more than a kind of training course or proficiency test in media-related skills. For want of a better term, media literacy is a form of critical literacy. It involves analysis, evaluation and critical reflection. It entails the acquisition of a 'meta-language' – that is, a means of describing the forms and structures of different modes of communication; and it involves a broader understanding of the social, economic and institutional contexts of communication, and how these affect people's experiences and practices (Luke, 2000). Media literacy certainly includes the ability to use and interpret media; but it also involves a much broader analytical understanding.

A social theory of literacies

For the advocates of 'multiliteracies' (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000), and for others in this field (Buckingham, 1993a; Spencer, 1986), this emphasis on the plurality of literacies is not just about multiple modes (or media) of communication. It is also to do with the inherently social nature of literacy – and hence with the diverse forms that literacy takes in different cultures, and indeed within the increasingly multicultural societies in which we live. Research on print literacy clearly shows that different social groups define, acquire and use literacy in very different ways; and that the consequences of literacy depend upon the social contexts and social purposes for which it is used (e.g. Heath, 1983; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). It is for this reason that such researchers tend to refer to 'literacy practices' or 'literacy events' rather than merely to 'literacy' per se: in other words, they regard reading and writing as social activities, rather than as manifestations of a set of disembodied cognitive skills.

From this perspective, therefore, literacy cannot be considered separately from the social and institutional structures in which it is situated. This is a social theory, which

effectively dispenses with a singular notion of literacy and replaces it with a notion of plural literacies, that are defined by the meanings they produce and the social interests they serve. It implies that individuals do not create meanings in isolation, but through their involvement in social networks, or 'interpretive communities', which promote and value particular forms of literacy. The study of literacy should thus necessarily address questions about the economic and institutional contexts of communication – for example, how different social groups have different kinds of access to literacy, and how access and distribution are related to broader inequalities within society (Luke, 2000). This approach also implies that acquiring literacy (in whatever form) makes possible particular forms of social action. It enables people to do things, whether in their occupations, in their private lives or in civil society; and the forms it takes depend on what it is that is being done. Social action is inevitably related to the operation of power within society; and so we might say that literacy is about the production of symbolic meanings, which in turn embody and enact particular relationships of power.

In the case of 'media literacy', therefore, this approach suggests that we cannot regard – or indeed, teach – literacy as a set of cognitive abilities which individuals somehow come to 'possess' once and for all. We would need to begin by acknowledging that the media are an integral part of the texture of children's daily lives, and that they are embedded within their social relationships. We would need to recognise that the competencies that are involved in making sense of the media are socially distributed, and that different social groups have different orientations towards the media, and will use them in diverse ways. In this sense, we should expect that children will have different 'media literacies' – or different modalities of literacy – that are required by the different social situations they encounter, and that will in turn have different social functions and consequences. And we should acknowledge that individuals have 'histories' of media experiences that may be activated in particular ways in particular social contexts, or by particular 'literacy events'.

At this point, let us step back from this rather abstract discussion and consider what 'media literacy' might actually mean in practice. How might we define media literacy in such a way that we could actually teach it? Is it possible to specify the constituent parts of media literacy, and to identify how young people might be expected to acquire them? In the following section, I consider one practical attempt to address these questions.

Mapping media literacies

There have been various attempts to define the components of 'media literacy', and to prescribe how these might be taught to children at different ages (see, for example, Bazalgette, 1989; Brown, 1991; Tyner, 1998; Worsnop, 1996). The British Film Institute's model of 'cineliteracy', first proposed in the Report Making Movies Matter (Film Education Working Group, 1999), is one recent example. The BFI's model refers specifically to moving images, although most of the aspects identified can also apply to other media, including print; and there is no compelling logic for considering moving images in isolation.

The BFI model breaks down the field into three 'conceptual areas': 'the language of moving images', 'producers and audiences' and 'messages and values'. (These areas are effectively the same as those I will be describing in detail in the following chapter; although I will be separating 'producers and audiences' into two distinct categories.) The document seeks to provide a model of 'learning progression' that will inform teaching about the moving image at different ages and stages of children's school careers. In addition to defining the 'experiences and activities' students should be able to engage in at each stage, it also defines the 'outcomes' that are to be expected, and the 'key words' that suggest 'the areas and types of knowledge that each stage might involve'.

Figure 3.1 provides an example of the outcomes that are specified in one of the three areas, 'messages and values'. According to the text, this area is broadly concerned with questions about the 'effects' of the media on 'ideas, values and beliefs'; and it focuses particularly on the relationship between moving image texts and reality. (This area corresponds to that of 'representation', discussed in detail in Chapter Four.) It is important to note that this model is defined in terms of stages, rather than ages; although it is no coincidence that the UK National Curriculum is also currently divided into five 'key stages', which are defined by age. (Thus, Key Stage 1 is ages 5-7; Key Stage 2, ages 7-11; Key Stage 3, ages 11-14; Key Stage 4, ages 14-16; and Key Stage 5, ages 16-18.)

FIGURE 3.1

'CINELITERACY': MESSAGES AND VALUES

At Stage 1, learners should be able to:

- *Identify and talk about different levels of 'realism', e.g. naturalistic drama vs. cartoon animation.*
- *Refer to elements of film language when explaining personal responses and preferences (e.g. shot, cut, zoom, close-up, focus).*
- *Identify devices such as flashback, dream sequences, exaggeration; and discuss why they are needed and how they are conveyed.*

At Stage 2, learners should be able to:

- *Identify ways in which film, video and television can show things that have not 'really' happened, such as violence or magic.*
- *Explore reasons for and against censorship, age classification and the broadcasting 'watershed'.*

At Stage 3, learners should be able to:

- *Explain how social groups, events and ideas are represented in film, video and television, using terms such as 'stereotype', 'authentic' and 'representation'.*
- *Explain and justify aesthetic judgements and personal responses.*
- *Argue for alternative ways of representing a group, event, or idea.*

At Stage 4, learners should be able to:

- *Discuss and evaluate film, video and television texts with strong social or ideological messages, using terms such as 'propaganda' and 'ideology'.*

At Stage 5, learners should be able to:

- *Discuss and evaluate ideological messages in mainstream film, video and television texts, using terms such as 'hegemony' and 'diegesis'.*
- *Describe and account for different levels of realism in film, video and television texts.*
- *Explain relationships between aesthetic style and social/political meaning.*

Source: slightly adapted from Moving Images in the Classroom, British Film Institute, 2000: pp. 52-56.

While there are some 'functional' elements at Stage 1 here, this is very clearly a model of 'critical' literacy, in the terms identified above. This is characteristic, not just of the area of 'messages and values', but of the approach as a whole. While this critical element is perhaps less apparent in the area of 'language', it is quite strongly emphasised in that of 'producers and audiences'. Thus, under 'language', learners are expected to cover the different elements of film language, the interaction of image and sound, narrative structure, the role of technology and the evolution of 'film style'. Under 'producers and audiences', they develop an understanding of the production, economic organisation, marketing and distribution of moving image texts, and of the ways in which audiences respond to them. These are all key areas of media education, which will be considered in detail in Chapter Four.

Models of this kind are almost certainly necessary, but they also raise several problems, both in detail and in principle. The BFI document does not refer to any research in this area – indeed, it describes the model as 'hypothetical', and suggests that research has yet to be undertaken. However, there is in fact a substantial body of research on these issues, within a range of academic disciplines. In order to illustrate some of the difficulties raised by this kind of 'mapping' of media literacy, the following sections of the chapter discuss

the broad outlines of this research and the different ways in which it can be interpreted. My focus here is on one particular aspect of the field, and on one medium – namely, on how children understand the relationship between television and the real world. This discussion therefore provides a case study of some of the broader issues at stake in attempting to define media literacy. We begin with a 'classical' developmental account.

Beyond the magic window

For babies, television must appear as simply a random selection of shapes, colours and sounds. However, as they develop the ability to identify three-dimensional shapes, and come to understand the functions of language, children begin to develop hypotheses about the relationship between television and the real world. To begin with, television may be perceived as a kind of 'magic window', or alternatively as a magic box in which tiny people are living. Yet by the time they are about two, children seem to have understood that television is a medium that represents events which are taking place (or have taken place) elsewhere. Through the experience of video, they also come to understand that television can be recorded and replayed, and that it is not necessarily 'live'.

From the age of two, children are also developing an understanding of the 'language' of television. They learn that it follows rules or conventions which are different from those of real life (Messaris, 1994). Thus, they learn that a zoom in to close-up does not mean that an object has got bigger, and that a cutaway to another object does not mean that the first object has disappeared (Salomon, 1979). They learn to 'fill the gaps' which have been left in editing, for example when a character leaves a room and is next seen walking down the street (Smith et al., 1985). They learn to recognise the beginnings and endings of programmes, and to perceive the differences between programmes and advertisements (Jaglom and Gardner, 1981).

Between the ages of three and five, the distinction between television and real life gradually becomes more flexible. While very young children appear to believe that all television is real, slightly older children may express precisely the opposite view; yet by around the age of five, children generally give more considered responses, suggesting that television is sometimes real, sometimes not (Messaris, 1986). Between about five and seven, they also begin to distinguish between different kinds of programmes according to how realistic they are perceived to be. For example, they are likely to distinguish between cartoons, puppet animation and live action, and may well find events portrayed in live action drama or news much more frightening than similar events shown in cartoons (Chandler, 1997; Dorr, 1983; Hawkins, 1977). These relationships are often worked through in their television-related play, where children are actively experimenting with the differences between 'real life' and 'just pretend'.

By middle childhood (age 8-9), children are becoming more aware of the possible motivations of television producers – and indeed often quite cynical about them. For

example, they will discuss how the narrative of a soap opera is organised in an attempt to keep us watching, or how advertisements attempt to persuade us to buy (Buckingham, 1993a). They are also keenly interested in how programmes are produced, and (by the age of ten or eleven) are offering increasingly 'critical' judgments about the quality of the acting or the realism of the décor (Davies, 1997; Dorr, 1983; Hodge and Tripp, 1986). In both respects, they are much more likely to regard television as an artefact, and much less likely to see it as simply a 'slice of life'.

Between middle childhood and early adolescence (between nine and twelve), children are also increasingly bringing more general social understandings to bear in their judgment of television, noting what is absent as well as questioning what is present (Hawkins, 1977). They may compare their own experience of family life, for example, with the representations provided on television, judging them to be less realistic as a result. Yet they may also acknowledge that in many cases, and for many reasons, television may not seek to be realistic in the first place, and that the need for plausibility has to be balanced against the need to amuse or entertain. Similarly, while a particular scene may be perceived as unrealistic on an empirical level – for example, in genres like science fiction or melodrama – it may also be seen to express an 'emotional realism' which children may recognise and find moving (Buckingham, 1996a).

Finally, from the age of about eleven or twelve upwards, children may begin to speculate about the ideological impact of television, and the potential effects of 'positive' or 'negative' images of particular groups on audiences, even hypothetical ones. They begin to become aware of the process of 'stereotyping', both in real life and in the media. They may also come to perceive the differences between different styles of 'realism', and develop an aesthetic appreciation of the various ways in which the illusion of reality is created by television (Buckingham, 1996a).

Reality problems

To some degree, this account describes an inherently educational process. Explicitly or implicitly, television as a medium teaches the competencies that are required to make sense of it, just as books teach children how to read, and what reading means (Meek, 1988). A good deal of children's television, for example, is concerned to 'demystify' the medium, by demonstrating how programmes are produced, and by playing with the distinctions between television and real life – even if its attempts to do this are sometimes contradictory. Furthermore, parents and peers are also informally teaching children as they watch television together. By confirming or questioning the accuracy of television representations, explaining and supplementing what is shown, and offering advice about whether television should be taken as a model of real-life behaviour, they are helping children to develop a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationships between the medium and the real world (Alexander et al., 1984; Messaris and Sarrett, 1981).

Nevertheless, there are several problems that might be raised with such an account, and with psychological research of this kind more broadly. The sequence identified here can easily be mapped on to a Piagetian model of cognitive development (see Dorr, 1986); and as such, it runs the risk of being reduced to a mechanical sequence of 'ages and stages'. Critics of psychological research also suggest that it tends to adopt a rationalistic notion of child development as a steady progression towards adult maturity and rationality. In the case of work on children and the media, this developmentalist approach inevitably privileges certain kinds of judgments (particularly rational, 'critical' judgments) at the expense of others. Thus, a distanced critique of the implausibility of television is taken as a sign of 'maturity'; and in the process, any expression of pleasure or enjoyment may come to appear positively naïve.

Perhaps more significantly, this kind of account runs the risk of neglecting the social dimensions of children's engagements with television. Rather than seeing judgments about the reality of television simply as cognitive phenomena, my research suggests that they can also serve a variety of interpersonal functions (Buckingham, 1993a). In the context of group discussion, condemning programmes as 'unrealistic' provides a powerful means of defining one's own tastes, and thus of claiming a particular social identity. For example, girls' frequent complaints about the 'unrealistic' storylines or events in action-adventure cartoons often reflect a desire to distance themselves from what are seen as boys' 'childish' tastes, and thereby to proclaim their own (gendered) maturity. On the other hand, boys' rejection of the 'unrealistic' muscle-bound men in a programme like Baywatch may reflect anxieties about the fragility of their own masculine identity. Boys' rejection of melodrama or girls' rejection of violent action movies can thus be seen as rather more than the mechanical application of fixed judgments of taste: on the contrary, they represent an active claim to a particular social position - a claim which is sometimes tentative and uncertain, and in many cases open to challenge by others.

There is undoubtedly a considerable pleasure in this kind of critical talk: mocking the 'unrealistic' nature of television, speculating about 'how it's done', and playing with the relationship between television and reality would seem to be important aspects of most viewers' everyday interaction with the medium. Yet this kind of talk clearly does rely to some extent on disavowing one's own pleasure - or indeed displeasure - at the moment of viewing. Drawing attention to the special effects in horror movies, or laughing at the over-acting in soap operas, seems to offer a sense of power and control over experiences that might have been frightening or moving at the time, and thus provides a pleasurable sense of security (Buckingham, 1996a).

However, it is important to stress that this kind of critical talk also serves particular functions in the context of dialogue with others. The context of research itself is clearly crucial here. Any adult asking children questions about television - particularly in a school context, as has generally been the case in my research - is likely to invite these critical responses. Most children know that many adults disapprove of them watching 'too much' television, and they are familiar with at least some of the arguments about its negative effects upon them. In some instances, these arguments are addressed directly, although children are generally keen to exempt themselves from such charges: while their

younger siblings might copy what they watch, such accusations certainly do not apply to them. Just as adults appear to displace the 'effects' of television onto children - thereby implying that they themselves are not at risk - so children tend to suggest that these arguments only apply to those much younger than themselves.

In a sense, judgments about the 'unreality' of television could be seen to serve a similar function, albeit in a more indirect way. They enable the speaker to present him- or herself as a sophisticated viewer, who is able to 'see through' the illusions television provides. In effect, they represent a claim for social status - and, particularly in this context, a claim to be 'adult'. While these claims may be at least partly directed towards the interviewer and towards other children in the group, they often seem to rely on distinguishing the speaker from an invisible 'other' - from those viewers who are immature or stupid enough to believe that what they watch is real.

Significantly, there are often clear distinctions here in terms of social class. Broadly speaking, the middle-class children in my research have been more likely to perceive the interview context in 'educational' terms, and to frame their responses accordingly. By contrast, many of the working-class children have tended to use the invitation to talk about television as an opportunity to stake out their own tastes and to celebrate their own pleasures for the benefit of the peer group. While the middle-class children direct much of their talk towards the interviewer, and tend to defer to the interviewer's power, this is much less true of the working-class children, for whom the interviewer occasionally appears to be little more than an irrelevance. Thus, judgments about the reality of television are much more of a preoccupation for middle-class children. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, their judgments appear more complex and sophisticated than those of the majority of their working-class counterparts. Yet these arguments should not be seen to support any simplistic conclusions about the levels of 'media literacy' in different social classes. Rather, it would seem that these critical discourses serve particular social functions for these children, which are at least partly to do with defining their own class position. They provide a powerful means whereby middle-class children can demonstrate their own critical authority, and thereby distinguish themselves from those invisible 'others' - the 'mass' audience - who are, by implication, more at risk of suffering the harmful effects of television. Some further implications of this use of 'critical' discourse will be considered in more detail in Chapter Seven.

The limits of assessment

This detour into research about children and television illustrates several broader issues that are directly relevant to media education. On one level, it suggests that a social-scientific concept such as 'representation' is not some kind of alien academic imposition on students. On the contrary, it shows how children's understanding of this issue derives (at least initially) from their everyday attempts to make sense of the medium, which begin in early childhood. However, it also suggests that judgments about representation or realism are frequently very complex. Children use a range of different types of

knowledge in making such judgments, which include their developing knowledge about the processes of media production, their knowledge of the 'language' of media, and their knowledge of the real world. As this implies, judgments of reality are almost bound to be a focus of tension and debate. Some people (such as teachers in classrooms) may assume the power to impose particular definitions or versions of reality; and, as Hodge and Tripp (1986) suggest, 'reality' is often seen here as a matter of what children ought to think, rather than how things are. As such, these definitions are very likely to be resisted. This should at least caution us against the difficulties of attempting to enlighten children about the 'inaccuracies' and 'distortions' of the media – an approach which still informs many media education curricula (Bragg, 2001).

The key point here, however, is that children's judgments about the reality of what they watch on television cannot be seen as a purely cognitive or intellectual process, or as a merely individual one. On the contrary, it is through making 'critical' judgments of this kind that children seek to define their social identities, both in relation to their peers and in relation to adults. Likewise, assertions about the 'effects' of the media – whether explicit or implicit – inevitably reflect broader claims about one's own position. What we believe to be 'real' also depends to a large extent on what we want to be real, and hence on the pleasures that particular representations may offer us. Debating these kinds of issues in the classroom is undoubtedly a central aspect of media education; but for the reasons I have implied, it is also likely to be fraught with difficulty. The classroom is not a neutral space of dispassionate scientific enquiry, in which objective 'truth' can be easily established. On the contrary, it is a social arena in which students and teachers engage in an ongoing struggle over the right to define meaning and identity.

This account therefore illustrates the importance of what I have termed a social theory of media literacy. It suggests that making sense of the media is not simply a matter of what goes on inside children's heads: it is an interpersonal phenomenon, in which social interests and identities are unavoidably at stake. In this sense, a model like the British Film Institute's map of 'cineliteracy' is inevitably very reductive. It encourages us to assess 'outcomes' against normative statements of particular stages – defined, at least partly, through students' ability to employ particular 'key words' (from 'zoom' through 'stereotype' to 'hegemony'). It does not particularly help us to know how we might intervene in order to move particular students onwards in their understanding; nor does it acknowledge the social dynamics of learning in the classroom. Ultimately, it is not so much a model of 'learning progression' as a model of assessment.

In the following three chapters, I will be considering the different components of media literacy in more detail, and describing a range of relevant teaching strategies. In Part Three of the book, however, I will revisit some of these more awkward questions about learning, in the light of classroom-based research. Without denying the potential value of a developmental model, I will be arguing that we need a more dynamic - and more social - understanding of learning, that goes beyond the mechanical specification of 'ages and stages'. In concluding this chapter, however, I would like to summarise what I see as the most significant emphases and benefits of this focus on 'literacy'.

Why literacy?

As I have suggested, the notion of 'media literacy' is far from unproblematic. Yet it firmly situates the study of media within a broader analysis of communication; and in doing so, it implicitly questions the continuing dominance of print culture within education. As I shall indicate in more detail in Chapter Six, media education directly challenges many of the assumptions and practices that characterise the teaching of language and literature in schools. It represents a call for a more inclusive and relevant – but also more coherent and rigorous – approach to teaching about culture and communication.

In particular, the social theory of literacy outlined here implicitly challenges the textual emphasis of much literature teaching – and indeed, a good deal of media education as well (Morgan, 1998b). Media literacy necessarily entails a systematic understanding of the formal strategies and conventions of communication – and as such, media education is bound to entail close textual analysis. Yet texts are only part of the picture. As Roger Silverstone (1999) argues, media literacy obviously entails 'a capacity to decipher, appreciate, criticise and compose'; but it also requires a broader understanding of the social, economic and historical contexts in which texts are produced, distributed and used by audiences. This broader, multi-faceted approach is certainly apparent in the model of assessment outlined above; and it is reflected both in the conceptual framework of media education outlined in Chapter Four and in the range of teaching strategies described in Chapter Five.

At the same time, the emphasis on literacy reminds us of an element that is often neglected in media education. For literacy clearly involves both reading and writing; and as such, media literacy must necessarily entail both the interpretation and the production of media. As I shall indicate in more detail in Part Three of this book, media teaching has historically been dominated by 'critical analysis' – and indeed, by a relatively narrow form of textual analysis, which is primarily designed to expose the 'hidden ideologies' of media texts. By contrast, media production has been regarded with considerable unease and suspicion. Even where teachers have given students opportunities to engage in their own creative production – making their own videotapes or magazines or photographs, for example – they have often failed to integrate the two elements. The model of 'media learning' I will be outlining in Chapter Nine attempts to provide a more dynamic, reflexive approach, which combines critical analysis and creative production. In this sense, I would argue that it represents a more comprehensive form of media literacy than has been promoted in the past.

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