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AUTHOR Buckingham, David
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ABSTRACT

What is the value and what are the consequences of students gaining access to "critical" academic discourses about the media? Ideally, the acquisition of an academic discourse should make it possible for students to reflect on their own experience in a systematic and rigorous way. Nevertheless, a critical discourse about the media may sanction a rationalistic approach to popular culture, which fails to engage with children's subcultural experiences and their emotional engagement with the media. It may result in a superficial irony, or indeed a contempt for popular pleasures, which is merely complacent. In Great Britain, the implications of this debate in terms of developing a critical pedagogy in media education remain to be explored. The Vygotskyan perspective may offer a productive alternative to the rather sterile opposition between advocates of progressive and conservative approaches to critical pedagogy. While acknowledging the central importance of children's existing knowledge and the need for active learning, it also stresses the necessity of students acquiring and participating in dominant academic discourses. While it is true that giving children access to privileged discourses is vital, it is equally important that they should learn to interrogate them. The claim that academic discourse is inherently scientific and thus superior to the ideology of popular discourse must be open to question. The concepts and methods of analysis that teachers introduce to students must be seen, not as neutral tools for the acquisition of knowledge, but as themselves ideological. (Fifty-one notes are included; 59 references are attached.) (TRA)

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THE LIMITS OF A DISCOURSE**

**Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the American
Educational Research Association, Chicago, April 1991**

**by David Buckingham
Institute of Education, University of London, UK**

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1. Media education and the dilemmas of critical pedagogy

Discussions of critical pedagogy have often been characterised by a considerable degree of abstract rhetoric. Concepts like 'resistance' and 'reproduction' have been theorised and debated in extremely scholarly terms, yet with little reference to the complex realities of classroom practice. We know a good deal about the general aims of a critical pedagogy, but much less about how these can be achieved.

The development of media education in British schools provides a valuable case study of many of the dilemmas and contradictions of a progressive or critical pedagogy. Throughout its history, media education has been regarded by its advocates as a movement which has sought to bring about radical political changes, both in the consciousness of students and in the education system itself. Some very grand claims have been made about the ability of media teaching to subvert dominant ideologies, to empower the oppressed, and to revolutionise the school curriculum. Yet there remains very little evidence that these claims have been borne out in practice.

In Britain, media education in schools has been very much the poor relation of academic theory [1]. In the 1970s, the establishment of Film Studies (and subsequently Media Studies) as an academic discipline in higher education was the major priority of key institutions in the field. Many advocates of media education appeared to subscribe to a 'top-down' model of educational change - a model which was arguably quite inappropriate to the British system, particularly at that time. In effect, it was assumed that academics would generate knowledge, and would then pass it on to teachers, who in turn would hand it down to students. The 'relations of production' of knowledge implied by this approach were clearly hierarchical, and (as I shall indicate) inevitably entailed an authoritarian pedagogy [2].

Furthermore, the legitimacy of the new subject depended at least to some extent upon its ability to manifest the conventional characteristics of academic scholarship. Academic media theory - like the avant-garde media practice it has often sought to vindicate - has frequently manifested a

fundamental contradiction. While often claiming to be 'on the side of the people', it has frequently displayed a notorious tendency to intellectual obscurantism.

One consequence of this situation is that questions of classroom practice - not merely in schools, but also in higher education itself - have largely been neglected. Paradoxically perhaps, accounts of classroom practice have been conspicuous by their absence from the pages of media education journals. Even today, books about media education tend to take the form of potted summaries of academic research, with 'suggestions for teaching' appended (or not): there is little acknowledgement here of what actually happens when these suggestions are carried out.

For those seeking to promote media education in schools in the late 1970s and early 1980s [3], this privileging of academic theory posed considerable problems. As they recognised, working-class students were unlikely to sit passively absorbing the teacher's expositions of theories of ideology, or spontaneously to prefer the political purity of avant-garde film to the ideological delusions of dominant cinema. In practice, there remained a significant danger of media education being perceived as an attack on students' pleasure or on what they regarded as their 'own' culture.

Debates about the pedagogy of media education in Britain have thus inevitably been somewhat limited, although they have often been extremely polarised [4]. At the risk of caricature, it is possible to identify two contrasting positions here - positions which I would argue are far from unique to media education [5].

The first of these is based on a belief in the inherent radicalism of Media Studies as a body of academic knowledge. Media education is seen as a process of 'demystification', which works in two main ways. Firstly, it involves making previously 'hidden' information available to students. Thus, telling students about the ways in which media institutions operate - for example, about how patterns of ownership and control serve to marginalise or exclude oppositional perspectives - is seen as a means of 'opening their eyes' to the covert operations of capitalism.

Secondly, media education is seen to involve a kind of training in critical analysis, for example using methods derived from structuralism and semiotics. Here too, this is assumed to have an inevitably radical effect. The 'objective' analysis of racist or sexist stereotypes in the media will, it is argued, liberate us from the raise ideologies these representations are seen to support and promote.

Theoretically, this approach relies on a view of the media as extremely powerful agents of the 'dominant ideology', and of audiences as passive victims. It is often accompanied by an almost puritanical distrust of the pleasures afforded by

popular media - the view that, in the words of one advocate of critical pedagogy, the media are 'the major addictive lure to the flesh-pots of our culture' [6].

In terms of educational theory, this approach finds its clearest expression in Harold Entwistle's account of Gramsci [7]. Entwistle rejects as merely patronising the notion that the school curriculum should be based on what is immediately 'relevant' to students. Children from subordinate classes, it is argued, need to be given access to formal academic knowledge if they are to participate in and to change the dominant culture. In Entwistle's terms, this approach represents 'conservative schooling for radical politics'.

By contrast, the second position seeks to validate, even to celebrate, aspects of students' culture which are traditionally excluded from the school curriculum. Thus, it is argued that media education, with its focus on 'popular' rather than 'high' culture, is situated in a very different position in terms of the relation between school culture and the culture of the home or peer group. Primarily by virtue of its content, media education has the potential to challenge traditional notions of what counts as valid knowledge and culture. In the process, it is argued, it makes for much more egalitarian relationships between teachers and students: the students are now the 'experts', while the teacher is no longer the main source of authority.

Advocates of this position have increasingly drawn on a 'reader-oriented' approach to Media Studies. This approach seeks to identify and to celebrate the elements of 'resistance' in the audience's experience of popular media [8]. While this view provides a valuable corrective to the view of media as propagators of 'false consciousness', many critics have argued that it runs the risk of degenerating into superficiality and mere empty populism [9].

In terms of educational theory, this approach tends to draw upon the 'progressivist' tradition of English teaching and of creative arts subjects. The rhetoric is one of 'active learning': open-ended investigation, collaborative group work, discussion and practical production. Far from emphasising 'objectivity' and a received body of academic knowledge, this approach insists on the necessity of students arriving at their own answers, and exploring their own 'subjective' responses.

While both positions would claim to be politically 'progressive', both would seem to overestimate the possibilities of radical change. As I have argued elsewhere [10], the notion of media education as a form of 'demystification' assumes that students will agree that they are 'mystified' and will automatically accept the teacher's attempts to remove the veils of illusion from before their eyes. Yet in practice, working-class students are likely to resist what they regard as the efforts of middle-class

teachers to impose their values and beliefs, however 'ideologically sound' these might claim to be [11]. To assume that ideologies such as racism and sexism are primarily derived from the media, and that they can simply be overthrown by a good dose of analysis is, to say the least, wishful thinking [12].

On the other hand, the 'progressivist' version of media education appears to assume that the power-relations of the classroom can easily be abolished, simply by virtue of changing the content of the curriculum. Again, this would seem to be a highly utopian view, which concrete studies of classroom practice have seriously questioned [13]. As these studies make clear, there is no inherent reason why studying game shows should make for less hierarchical relations between teachers and students than studying the Metaphysical poets.

Furthermore, if the 'demystification' position can easily end up reinforcing existing power-relationships between teachers and students, the 'progressivist' version of media education runs the risk of simply leaving students where they are. In my experience, the study of popular media often produces the response 'so what?' While they may find the activity enjoyable, students often complain that they are not actually 'learning' anything from it. The desire merely to celebrate or validate students' existing knowledge can easily result in a form of institutionalised under-achievement.

My account of these two positions has been brief, and thus inevitably oversimplified. In practice, most British advocates of media education in schools have sought a negotiated position between them - although in many cases, this has led to a considerable degree of incoherence and contradiction [14]. On the level of classroom practice, and in syllabuses and teaching materials, there are often tensions between the insistence on an 'objective' body of academic knowledge and the need to adopt more open-ended teaching strategies. We are often careful to assert that 'there are no right answers', while clearly believing that there are [15].

Ultimately, the problem with both approaches outlined here is their failure to develop an adequate theory of learning. Either learning is something that 'just happens' through a process of osmosis, or it is something which follows inevitably as a result of teaching. If it is to be effective, a critical pedagogy will require a more complex understanding of the relationship between students' existing 'commonsense' knowledge and the more formal academic knowledge made available in schools.

2. New definitions - and further dilemmas

Despite the increasing constraints on educational innovation, media education in Britain has undergone a considerable expansion over the past decade. While it has consolidated its position in the upper years of secondary schooling, via the increasing popularity of the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examination, and now with the advent of A-levels, it has also moved into areas of the curriculum hitherto largely untouched. There have been major new initiatives in media education at primary and lower secondary levels [16], and in the range of vocational and pre-vocational courses being offered both in schools and further education colleges [17]. Perhaps most significantly, the National Curriculum for English contains a substantial component of media education, which provides an important basis for future developments [18].

Nevertheless, this expansion has had ambiguous implications in terms of the debates described above. Media education is no longer a 'vanguard' movement, or the preserve of a small band of committed enthusiasts. For better or worse, it is now much closer to the educational mainstream. As a result, it has inevitably become much more eclectic and less clearly focused: different definitions of media education - some of them undoubtedly far from 'critical' or 'progressive' - often appear to co-exist in a state of uneasy harmony.

While any expansion of the subject is broadly to be welcomed, there is a significant risk that the distinct identity of media education will be lost, and the fundamental critical challenge which it poses simply dissipated. For some media educators, the process has involved too many unacceptable compromises [19]. Yet on the other hand, there are those who would argue that the encounter with other subjects and the expansion into new curriculum spaces raises questions and possibilities which media educators have neglected for far too long.

For example, in British primary schools, the 'progressivist' ethos is much stronger than in secondary schools: primary education, it is often argued, 'starts with the child' rather than with a body of knowledge. The development of media education at primary level has thus inevitably raised fundamental questions about children's existing knowledge of the media, and about how they learn, which secondary media teachers have often neglected. It is through a critical engagement with this progressivist tradition that some of the most interesting current work in media education is being developed [20].

Similarly, the burgeoning growth of vocational and pre-vocational education - which has arisen largely as a response to increasing youth unemployment - has had contradictory consequences for media educators. While there is undoubtedly a danger that media courses at this level will be reduced to a

form of training in technical skills, there has in fact been considerable scope for critical media education in courses such as TVEI (the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative). Indeed, some advocates of media education regard vocational media education as a valuable opportunity to train 'critical practitioners', and thereby to make changes in the media industries which critical theory has singularly failed to achieve [21].

Furthermore, the emphasis on practical work in these courses may encourage a more fundamental - and undoubtedly necessary - reconsideration of the relationship between 'theory' and 'practice' in media education more broadly. In this respect, media education may contribute to a more general questioning of the division between the mental and the manual, and between academic and vocational elements of the curriculum, which is increasingly emerging in the wake of the 'new vocationalism'.

Likewise, the developing relationship with English can be seen to contribute to a broader questioning of both subjects which many would regard as long overdue. While most media teachers in British schools are trained as English teachers, and while most English teachers will cover aspects of the media in their teaching, there are many essential theoretical and pedagogic differences between the two areas. Media education poses a fundamental challenge to the elitist and asocial theory of culture on which a great deal of English teaching is based. It questions many of the basic principles - the notion of 'literature', or the ideology of 'personal response' - which are taken for granted by English teachers, and offers an approach to studying the social production of meaning which is potentially much more rigorous and systematic.

On the other hand, progressive English teaching has developed a more effective and imaginative pedagogy, from which media education - with its frequent reliance on closed 'exercises' and mechanistic approaches to analysis - has a great deal to learn. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere [22], bringing together English and media education should be more than a matter of simply combining media education theory with English pedagogy: on the contrary, it will require a thorough rethinking of the aims and methods of both subjects.

While these developments may ultimately prove to be extremely productive, there is nevertheless a risk that they may fatally destabilise media education, or blunt its critical edge. Now more than ever before, it seems necessary to insist that media education is more than simply a training in technical 'skills', or just another element of English alongside poetry or creative writing.

In this context, the definition of an explicit conceptual framework for media education is crucially important. The development of Media Studies GCSE and the publication of curriculum statements for media education in recent years [23] would appear to mark a growing consensus - and indeed a new

confidence - about the nature of the subject field. While there are minor differences between syllabus documents, there is widespread agreement on the 'key concepts' with which media education is concerned. All the syllabuses refer to the four main areas of 'media language' (or 'codes and conventions'), 'representation', 'institution' (or 'agency') and 'audience'.

This definition of media education in terms of concepts - rather than, for example, 'facts' or 'skills' - clearly has significant advantages. It does not specify a given content, thereby enabling the curriculum to remain contemporary and responsive to students' interests and enthusiasms. It makes it possible to compare and contrast different media, and to recognise the connections between them. And it renders the theoretical basis of the subject explicit, both for teachers and students.

At the same time, there are potential dangers here. There is a risk of teaching concepts in isolation from each other, and thus making it difficult for students to recognise the connections between them. Concepts cannot be meaningfully taught without reference to 'facts': any understanding of the structure and operation of media institutions, for example, will be superficial if it is not informed by a certain amount of factual knowledge. Furthermore, it is possible to reduce a set of concepts to a series of abstract definitions - in effect, to a body of 'content' - which can be transmitted and then tested.

Ultimately, the emphasis on conceptual learning raises some quite fundamental epistemological problems. How do we identify what children know? What do we take as evidence of conceptual understanding? How does conceptual learning happen, and how can we make it happen?

These questions have been addressed by the two research projects I intend to discuss in the following sections of this paper. Neither claims to be offering easy answers: on the contrary, both projects raise much more difficult questions about the value of the notion of 'conceptual understanding' itself. Nevertheless, as I shall indicate, there may be considerable potential here for moving beyond the rather unproductive opposition between 'conservative' and 'progressive' approaches to critical pedagogy.

3. Language and learning

One recent GCSE examination paper in Media Studies required students to provide a definition of the term 'representation' - although apparently only one candidate was awarded the full three marks [24]. This is, certainly, one kind of evidence of conceptual understanding - although it is one which most teachers would probably regard as pretty inadequate. While it certainly serves as a useful measure of

students' ability to regurgitate what teachers have fed them, the ability to use an academic discourse in itself clearly tells us very little about 'understanding'.

In a recent paper [25], I have employed some ideas from Vygotsky and Bruner in an attempt to outline a more productive approach to the question of conceptual learning in media education. Vygotsky [26] makes an important distinction between what he calls 'spontaneous' and 'scientific' concepts. Spontaneous concepts are those developed through the child's own mental efforts, while scientific concepts are decisively influenced by adults, and arise from the process of teaching. Scientific concepts - which include social scientific concepts - are distinct from spontaneous concepts in two major respects. Firstly, they are characterised by a degree of distance from immediate experience: they involve an ability to generalise in systematic ways. Secondly, they involve self-reflection, or what Bruner terms 'metacognition' - that is, attention not merely to the object to which the concept refers, but also to the thought process itself.

To a certain extent, we might consider children's existing understanding of the media as a body of spontaneous concepts. While these concepts will become more systematic and generalised as they mature, media education might be seen to provide a body of scientific concepts which will enable them to think, and to use language (including 'media language'), in a much more conscious and deliberate way. The aim of media education, then, is not merely to enable children to 'read' - or make sense of - media texts, or to enable them to 'write' their own. It must also enable them to reflect systematically on the processes of reading and writing themselves, to understand and to analyse their own experience as readers and writers.

From this perspective, reflection and self-evaluation would appear to be crucial aspects of learning in media education. It is through reflection that students will be able to make their implicit 'spontaneous' knowledge about the media explicit, and then - with the aid of the teacher and of peers - to reformulate it in terms of broader 'scientific' concepts. Vygotsky argues against the 'direct teaching' of concepts - which he suggests will result in 'nothing but empty verbalism, a parrotlike repetition of words by the child'. Nevertheless, he does argue that children need to be introduced to the terminology of scientific concepts - in effect, to the academic discourse of the subject - and that they will only gradually take this on and come to use it as their own.

Bruner's notions of 'scaffolding' and 'handover' are both attempts to describe the way in which teachers can enable students to connect spontaneous and scientific concepts [27]. For both writers, dialogue with teachers (along with more competent peers) plays a crucial role here. Children do not 'discover' scientific concepts, but are aided in doing so by

the systematic interventions of teachers. While Vygotsky certainly emphasises the importance of 'active learning', he also stresses the importance of teachers enabling children to take on, and participate in, the dominant culture. In this respect, his approach could be seen to transcend the limitations of both 'conservative' and 'progressive' positions.

Nevertheless, there are several unresolved issues here. In particular, there is the question of the relationship between conceptual learning and discourse. From a Vygotskian perspective, the relationship between language and thought is dialectical. Acquiring or using a particular discourse - for example, the academic discourse of Media Studies - is seen to serve particular cognitive functions. Thus, as I have indicated, Vygotsky argues that learning the language of scientific concepts enables one to think more systematically and self-reflexively: it serves as a tool which aids understanding.

For example, children will inevitably be making judgments about the modality of media texts - that is, the extent to which they can be seen as 'realistic' - from a very early age [28]. These judgments may well depend upon a variety of criteria, at least some of which may prove contradictory. The aim of media education would be to encourage children to make these criteria explicit, and enable them to acquire a discourse in which to analyse them - for example, by considering debates about representation, stereotyping, 'positive images' and so on. The end result of this process would not be a fixed 'position' on the question of representation (although unfortunately it often is!) but an understanding of the social and cultural debates which are at stake, and an ability to intervene in them, both through criticism and through practice [29].

However, recent work in discourse analysis [30] has taken a more sceptical view of language, which cautions against the notion that language merely 'reflects' cognitive processes such as attitudes or beliefs. From this perspective, acquiring or using a particular discourse has pre-eminently social functions: it serves to define the 'self' in relation to others, and is crucially determined by the social and interpersonal context in which it occurs.

In the context of the classroom, what children and teachers say will thus inevitably depend upon the power-relationships which obtain between them - although it will also serve to define and redefine those relationships. For example, as I have argued elsewhere [31], students may respond to the propagandist approach of some radical teachers in one of two ways. Either they will choose to play the game, in which case they may learn to reproduce the 'correct' right-on responses without necessarily investigating or questioning their own position [32]. Or they will refuse to do so, in which case they will say things they may or may not believe, simply in

order to annoy the teacher and thereby amuse themselves. A good deal of anti-racist and anti-sexist teaching has foundered on precisely this problem: for the majority of working-class students, it represents simply another attempt by middle-class teachers to impose their attitudes and beliefs, often backed up by the disciplinary apparatus of the school [33].

Similarly, using the specialist terminology of academic discourse can serve as a means of demonstrating one's willingness to play the teacher's game, but it does not necessarily count as evidence of 'understanding'. The decision to adopt a 'critical' discourse about 'the media' - rather than simply talking about the good bits in the video you saw last night, for example - needs to be regarded as a social act, and not merely as evidence of cognitive processes.

From this perspective, we would need to be much more cautious about the role of language in learning. We would need to question the view of language as a neutral tool for understanding, and the notion of academic discourse as purely 'scientific'. All discourse - including academic discourse - would need to be judged in terms of its social functions and effects, rather than merely in terms of its role in cognitive processes.

Indeed, there is a significant danger that an academic discourse - however 'radical' - will seek to replace, rather than build upon, the popular discourses through which children already make sense of their experience of the media. The 'subjective' responses of students may simply be invalidated, in favour of the 'objective' analytical approach of the teacher [34]. By defining the students' discourses as merely 'ideological' - and therefore lacking in legitimate status - the 'scientific' discourse of the teacher may come to serve as the only guarantee of critical authority.

4. Talk, text and context: the social functions of a critical discourse

This relationship between discourse and social context has emerged as one major focus of my current research on the development of 'television literacy' [35]. The research is based on the analysis of small-group discussions about television, held with children aged between seven and twelve.

The study draws on approaches to audience research developed within 'British cultural studies' [36], although it seeks to extend that tradition through a much closer and more self-reflexive approach to the role of language. What emerges very clearly from the research is that children's talk about television crucially depends upon the context in which it occurs, and the ways in which they perceive that context. In talking about television - in selecting what to talk about and

how - children are actively defining themselves in relation to others, both in terms of age and in terms of social factors such as class, 'race' and gender. Yet this process of self-definition is characterised by a considerable degree of diversity and flexibility.

One issue which is particularly relevant to my argument in this paper concerns the role of a 'critical' discourse about television. Given the dominant view of children as passive victims of the media, it seems important to acknowledge the fact that children often display considerable critical sophistication in their discussion of television. The children in our sample show little evidence of confusion about the relationship between television and reality, and a high degree of scepticism about supposedly 'powerful' influences such as advertising. Children of all ages appear to be quite adept at 'sending up' television and mocking it for its artificiality: they will complain about bad acting, continuity mistakes and inept storylines, even in programmes they clearly enjoy a great deal.

Nevertheless, the use of a critical discourse can be seen to serve specific social functions. Children are very aware that adults - and particularly middle-class adults like teachers - often disapprove of them watching television, and believe it has a harmful influence upon them. The fact that they are being interviewed by an adult in an educational setting is likely to cue more critical responses than might otherwise have been the case [37].

One characteristic strategy here is to attempt to displace the 'effects' of television onto 'other people'. Just as adults frequently displace their concerns onto children, so children will often claim that it is those much younger than themselves who are most at risk - while they themselves, by implication, are more 'adult' and thus much less vulnerable [38]. In this context, therefore, the children clearly have a good deal to be gained from presenting themselves as selective, critical viewers, who are able to see through the deceptions and limitations of the medium.

The extent to which children will adopt a critical discourse therefore depends upon how they are choosing to define themselves, both in relation to each other and to the interviewer. Thus, boys will often seek to deflate what they perceive as 'girls' programmes' such as soap operas, while girls will do the same in the case of 'boys' programmes' such as action-adventure cartoons. Here, the use of a critical discourse - for example, condemning the programmes as 'predictable' or 'unrealistic' - clearly derives from the need to claim or to project a particular gendered identity.

On the other hand, children may often fail or simply refuse to play the interviewer's game. Proclaiming an exaggerated enthusiasm for gory horror movies, for example, can serve as a useful way of subverting the interviewer's power in the

situation. In choosing to swap anecdotes about favourite programmes or to act out what happened, the children often move away from the 'educational' agenda, engaging in behaviour which would not be sanctioned in the classroom, and leaving the interviewer way behind.

Furthermore, there are notable differences here in terms of social class. Broadly speaking, the middle-class children in our sample are more likely to adopt this kind of critical discourse about television, particularly in more open-ended discussion. They appear to be more concerned with questions of modality and representation, and to know more about how television programmes are produced. They are more likely to engage in general discussions and debates about television - rather than, for example, simply talking about the 'good bits', or about specific programmes. Their judgments appear to be more self-reflexive and systematic, closer to the discourse of 'scientific concepts'.

However, in attempting to explain this difference, it is important to avoid a deterministic account of the role of social class. Here too, we need to account for the different ways in which children perceive the context of discussion. There is certainly evidence that at least in the early stages of the research, the younger middle-class children were much more likely to perceive and indeed actively construct the interview situation in 'educational' terms. By contrast, many of the working-class children took the opportunity to do something rather different: they seemed to perceive the situation much less formally, and were much less deferent towards the interviewer.

For some of the older middle-class children, however, the discussions seemed to be perceived primarily as an opportunity for a self-conscious display of their own 'good taste' and critical acumen. There was often a considerable degree of competition here, as children vied to deliver the wittiest put-down of the most awful game shows, or to perform the most damning imitation of bad acting in the soaps. The more criticisms you could offer, the more intelligent and sophisticated you would appear.

Nevertheless, in some of these discussions, the critical discourse often seemed actively to exclude other kinds of talk. While mocking the limitations of television is often a pleasurable activity, it tends to prevent any more sustained discussion of the pleasures of viewing itself. Obviously being able to mock television in sufficient detail depends upon a familiarity with it - yet in many cases, these children would only admit to watching programmes 'to see how stupid they are'. Even programmes that were obviously enjoyed were discussed in extremely distanced, ironical terms.

While this critical discourse was not explicitly phrased in class terms, there is clearly a thin line between contempt for popular television and contempt for its audience. To commit

yourself to liking anything - with the exception of documentaries, which were the only programmes to merit any more serious discussion here - would be to run the risk of aligning yourself with the mass audience, those 'other people' who are stupid enough to watch it and believe it.

These motivations are, I would argue, not unknown in academic work on the media. A good deal of critical work in this field is informed by a kind of genteel distaste for the brashness and vulgarity of popular culture. Here too, the force of one's criticisms can serve as a guarantee of the correctness of the writer's ideological credentials. Yet the class basis of this condemnation of popular culture often goes unacknowledged. The traditional Left view of popular culture as a means of inducing 'false consciousness' in the supine masses has much in common with the Leavisite contempt for popular culture, and the elitist social values that accompany it. As James Donald [39] has argued, there is a sense in which academic Media Studies is often perceived as 'simply an initiation into the new elect of justified sinners, the culturally undoped'.

As I have argued elsewhere, there is a danger here of merely seeking to validate rationalistic norms of 'critical viewing' [40]. A great deal of work on television literacy appears to be based on a notion of the ideal viewer as one who is never persuaded or fooled, who 'sees through' the illusions television provides - in effect, the viewer who is impervious to influence. Yet what is clearly missing from the experience of our 'critical viewer' is the dimension of aesthetic pleasure and of emotional engagement with television. The 'critical viewer' remains unmoved, and can only recognise pleasure as a form of deception, a disguise under which the medium performs its nasty ideological work. From this perspective, pleasure is something we have to 'own up to': it is dangerous and must be intellectualised away [41]. The class basis of this approach, and the broader notions of 'taste' that accompany it, is self-evident [42].

The research I have briefly described here seeks to construct a rather different notion of television literacy, which rejects this normative approach. In common with recent research on print literacy, the emphasis here is on the plurality of literacies, and their social contexts and functions. Literacy is regarded here, not as a set of cognitive 'skills' which live in individual's heads, but as a set of social practices. From this perspective, children's 'cognitive understandings' of television cannot be separated from the social contexts in which they are situated, or from their affective investments in the medium.

5. Demonstrating 'understanding'

This issue of the relationship between discourse and conceptual understanding has also emerged as a central theme in recent classroom research in media education. The question of what one takes as evidence of conceptual understanding is brought into sharp focus when it comes to evaluation, particularly of students' practical media productions.

The relationship between 'theoretical' and 'practical' work in media education has long been regarded as problematic [43]. Advocates of the 'demystification' approach have, to some extent justifiably, been critical of the use of practical work as a form of 'self-expression' [44], and of the view of media education as simply a form of training in technical skills [45]. Yet this has led them to argue that practical work should be strictly subordinated to theory: from this perspective, practical work is often reduced to an exercise in 'deconstruction', a means of illustrating pre-determined theoretical analyses.

While this approach may be preferable to half-baked notions of 'creativity', it clearly neglects much of the educational potential of practical work. For many students, practical media production is the most enjoyable and motivating aspect of media education. It requires students to collaborate, to take responsibility for their own work, and it can provide them with a considerable degree of peer-group status [46]. These qualities are rare enough in schools, and it would be short-sighted merely to abandon them.

While the importance of practical work in media education has increasingly been acknowledged - it forms at least half of most GCSE syllabuses, for example - there remain significant problems in terms of how it is evaluated, not merely by teachers but also by students themselves. Most media syllabuses require a written 'log' or diary to accompany practical projects, yet there is often very little guidance as to the form this should take.

The log appears to serve two main functions. On an instrumental level, it provides a way for examiners to account for the individual contributions of students to what are usually collective projects. More broadly, it should offer students an opportunity to reflect on the experience of practical work - for example, to think about why certain choices were made and the effects these may have had. The written log is intended to encourage students to evaluate their own work, and thereby to draw connections between the 'practical' and 'theoretical' aspects of the course. While conceptual understandings may only be implicit in the practical projects themselves, they should be much more explicit in the written log.

In her account of a practical simulation exercise on the theme of media institutions, Jenny Grahame considers some of the

problems with this approach [47]. Obviously, the emphasis on a written log discriminates against students who have problems with writing - yet these may be precisely the students who have contributed most effectively to the success of the practical work itself. Yet even for the more 'able' students in this study, the written evaluation seemed to prove inhibiting and unrewarding. Many of the insights and understandings - and in particular those relating to the social, interpersonal aspects of the process - which Grahame observed in the course of her students' practical work were simply lost when it came to writing.

Grahame contrasts this approach to evaluation with a more open-ended follow-up activity, and with informal classroom discussion: here, students were able to set their own agenda, and to draw on their own experience both as producers and as audiences. As she argues, the insistence on written evaluation may derive from a kind of insecurity about what students might be learning from practical work:

However open-ended the project, we seem to need strategies which bring academic knowledge back to us in a safe and acceptable form. But by insisting that students must locate their individual accounts within a pre-determined 'objective' framework, we may be putting several important learning outcomes at risk. It may be that only by allowing students to write freely and subjectively about their own personal perceptions of the production process can we begin to reconcile our notions of appropriate learning with what they perceive as important to them. (p. 121)

These concerns were also raised in our study of a classroom project about television advertising, undertaken with year 7 students [48]. In this case, we designed a series of lessons in which the critical analysis of advertisements was intended to lead into a practical simulation, in which students would produce their own. The analytical work was notable for the degree of cynicism which the students displayed towards advertising - although here too, it was the middle-class students who were much more adept at employing the discourses of the 'wise consumer'.

Again, one of the major problems here was in attempting to evaluate the students' practical productions. Most of the advertisements they produced appeared to parody dominant conventions, suggesting that they had a very sophisticated understanding of the 'language' of advertising. Nevertheless, it was difficult to know how far to take this material seriously: the use of a simulation seemed to provide a safe space in which potentially difficult issues such as sexuality could be dealt with in an ironical, and thus relatively harmless way.

Yet here too, the students made little explicit connection between the 'theoretical' and 'practical' elements of the

course: their own response to the practical work focused entirely on the social and interpersonal aspects of the process, and effectively ignored the conceptual aims of the project. Of course, it could well have been unrealistic to expect children of this age to offer an elaborate rationale for their work. On the other hand, it could simply have been that we were attempting to teach them things they already knew, and were simply so obvious that they didn't need to be stated.

In my current research [49], similar questions have arisen in considering the differences between students' work in English and in Media Studies. This research has involved the in-depth study of two year 10 classes in a largely working-class London secondary school. Here too, the question of evaluation (by both teachers and students) brings many of the broader issues into focus.

In contrast to the emphasis on conceptual learning in media education, the aims of English teaching are often defined in terms of the mastery of practices - reading, writing, speaking and listening. Evaluation in English appears to be primarily comparative, and to a large extent intuitive: GCSE syllabuses, for example, require teachers to distinguish between 'vivid' and merely 'effective' pieces of writing, yet the theoretical principles on which these distinctions are based are rarely made explicit [50]. By contrast, evaluation in Media Studies appears to be much more straightforward: one is assessing students' understanding of the 'key concepts', primarily on the basis of their grasp of the academic discourse of the subject.

However, in practice, the evaluation of students' work in Media Studies - and particularly their practical productions - is much more problematic. These students were often extremely adept at using dominant media genres and conventions for their own purposes. Yet particularly with less able students, who found it much more difficult to articulate the rationale for their work themselves, we were often left guessing about their intentions. Here too, the written log may not be of much help, and actively penalises students whose contribution to practical work may be both thoughtful and constructive.

Furthermore, when it came to self-evaluation, it was clear that students' perceptions of the aims of both subjects were often quite different from those of their teachers. In both cases, the dominant rationale would appear to be an instrumental one. English was defined as a means or 'increasing your vocabulary', of learning skills such as spelling which may be necessary for future employment; while the primary rationale for Media Studies would appear to be its ability to provide information about, and practical experience of, media production. Nevertheless, the concerns articulated by students in this more formal kind of self-assessment, or in interviews with the teacher-researchers, did not necessarily translate directly into their behaviour in the classroom.

Here again, critical work on popular media texts often seemed to be perceived, by teacher and students alike, as a matter of 'stating the obvious', which was often enjoyable, but actually taught them very little. The work which really succeeded in motivating students was that which offered practical opportunities to articulate and to intervene in their own subcultural concerns - for example, those of black music and street fashion.

Ultimately, the problem is that what often seems to count in terms of formal assessment is the students' ability to employ an abstract academic discourse. Yet this discourse may not connect with their existing understandings, or with what they themselves regard as important. As in my research into television literacy, there is a distinct danger of divorcing 'conceptual understandings' from the social contexts in which they are acquired and situated, and from children's affective investments in the media.

6. Conclusion: the limits of a discourse

In this paper, I have raised a series of questions about the value and the consequences of students gaining access to 'critical' academic discourses about the media. Ideally, the acquisition of an academic discourse should make it possible for students to reflect on their own experience in a systematic and rigorous way. In Vygotsky's terms, an academic discourse provides a body of 'scientific concepts' which progressively transform children's 'spontaneous concepts', and thereby give them greater control over their own thought processes.

Nevertheless, I have argued that a 'critical' discourse about the media may sanction a rationalistic approach to popular culture, which fails to engage with children's subcultural experiences and their emotional engagement with the media. It often embodies a form of intellectual cynicism, and a sense of superiority to 'other people'. It may result merely in a superficial irony, or indeed a contempt for popular pleasures, which is merely complacent.

The implications of this debate in terms of developing a critical pedagogy in media education remain to be explored. As I have indicated, the Vygotskyan perspective may offer a productive alternative to the rather sterile opposition between advocates of 'progressive' and 'conservative' approaches to critical pedagogy. While acknowledging the central importance of children's existing knowledge and the need for 'active learning', it also stresses the necessity of students acquiring and participating in dominant academic discourses.

While I would agree that giving children access to privileged discourses is vital, it is equally important that they should

learn to interrogate them. The claim that academic discourse is inherently 'scientific', and thus superior to the 'ideology' of popular discourse must be open to question. As I have argued elsewhere [51], the concepts and methods of analysis teachers introduce to students must be seen, not as neutral tools for the acquisition of knowledge, but as themselves ideological.

NOTES

1. See Buckingham (1990a)
2. For a critique of this approach in media education, see Lusted (1986)
3. For example, Masterman (1980), Bethell (1983)
4. See Alvarado (1981) and Masterman (1981/2); Buckingham (1986) and Masterman (1986); Williamson (1981/2, 1985). Lusted (1986) offers a useful summary of these debates.
5. There are significant parallels here with the current debate about 'genre' in English teaching - a debate which itself looks strangely like a re-run of the Kosen/Bernstein debates of the 1970s. Ken Jones (1989) offers a clear and useful account of these general tendencies in critical pedagogy.
6. Sullivan (1987)
7. Entwistle (1979)
8. For example, Fiske (1987, 1990)
9. John Fiske's recent work has had a particularly bad press for this reason. See, for example, Morris (1990) and Donald (1990).
10. Buckingham (1986)
11. For further examples, see Cohen (1988), Williamson (1981/2), Dewdney and Lister (1988)
12. See Richards (1990)
13. See Hudak (1987), and many of the studies contained in Buckingham (1990a)
14. This is particularly the case in Masterman (1985): see Buckingham (1986)
15. See Buckingham, Fraser and Mayman (1990)
16. See Bazalgette (1989), British Film Institute Working Party on Primary Media Education (1987, 1988), and the work of the BFI/Nuffield Foundation Project on Media Education in the Lower Secondary School
17. For a critical overview of these developments, see Gleeson (1990); for reviews of media courses, see Blanchard (1989), Burton and Dimbleby (1990)
18. See National Curriculum Council (1990); Buckingham (1990e)

19. For example, Masterman (1980)
20. See note 16
21. Particularly Connell and Hurd (1988): this position is also supported by Donald (1990)
22. Buckingham (1990d)
23. See Blanchard (1989) on GCSE; Bazalgette (1989) on primary media education; Bowker (1991) and National Curriculum Council (1990) on secondary media education
24. This question occurred in the London and East Anglian Group GCSE exam paper for 1988.
25. Buckingham (1990c)
26. Vygotsky (1962, 1978)
27. Bruner (1986); for an empirical study based on these ideas, see Edwards and Mercer (1987)
28. See Hodge and Tripp (1986), Dorr (1983), Buckingham (1987a)
29. See Sefton-Green (1990)
30. For example, Potter and Wetherell (1987)
31. Buckingham (1986)
32. See Williamson (1981/2) for an account of the problems with male students 'doing' anti-sexism
33. Cohen (1988)
34. This position is explicitly proposed, for example by Masterman (1980) and Bethell (1983)
35. This project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council UK (grant no: R000 22 1959). I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Valerie Hey and Gemma Moss to this research. My own account of the research will be published in Buckingham (1992 forthcoming). For an account of the theoretical background, see Buckingham (1989); and for a discussion of methodology, see Buckingham (1991 forthcoming).
36. For an overview of this tradition, see Turner (1990)
37. These arguments are developed in Buckingham (1991 forthcoming)
38. See Cullingford (1984), Buckingham (1987a)
39. Donald (1990)

40. Buckingham (1989)
41. Walkerdine (1986)
42. See Bourdieu (1984)
43. See Buckingham (1987b), part four; Grahame (1991 forthcoming)
44. Ferguson (1981)
45. Masterman (1985)
46. Lorac and Weiss (1981), Stafford (1990)
47. Grahame (1990)
48. Buckingham, Fraser and Mayman (1990)
49. This research is being conducted in collaboration with Julian Sefton-Green.
50. For more detail, see Buckingham (1990a)
51. Buckingham (1986)

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