Part 2

Critical Learning

Children need to gain critical tools with which to analyse the media and to talk and write about them confidently. This kind of learning is important in its own right, but it needs to be embedded in the curriculum, from the first years of schooling.

4

Rethinking Literacy

Geoff Dean

Chapter objectives

This chapter reviews the history of prejudice that underpins attitudes to non-print media such as pictures and films, and argues for the value of learning about these media in their own right as an integral part of literacy in the 21st century.

This chapter is an argument about literacy, and about attitudes to literacy. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, increasing amounts of information, stories and ideas are transmitted in non-print forms. A large proportion of that material is carried in moving image texts such as television, film and computer games. Yet anybody searching through the school curriculum currently offered to young learners in school at any phase will discover that there is limited attention given to non-print media except in the specialised 'media studies' context. The most common means by which our population receives the vast majority of its information is almost wholly ignored in the education system.

Of the many anachronisms that still dominate our school systems, one of the biggest is the disproportionate privileging of written word literacy as the centrepiece of educational success and communication. As Pam Czerniewska observes:

> Its privileged status can be recognised in the way that writing is regarded in both teachers' and pupils' minds, as the best way of representing learning. Writing predominates over talk as the proof that learning has taken place and the highest awards go to those who can achieve well on written assignments. Writing and reading are among the major aspects of the child's education that parents are anxious about …Adults who cannot write are generally considered by themselves and by others as intellectually inferior. (1992 p4)

Of course, it is absolutely essential that all children are taught to read and write in conventional ways: that universal right is not in question. But, just as children are taught to 'make meaning' from the arrangement of sounds, words, sentences and paragraphs in traditional print texts, so they need to be just as aware of and to understand the arrangement of elements in non-print texts. Being literate today has to include the capacity to notice and understand the composition and framing of shots, the deployment of light, colour and movement, the arrangement of order and duration in aural and visual material; it also needs to include the skills of identifying the sources and reliability of non-print material, and understanding the kinds of truth – and untruth – that can be created through images and sounds.

Much of what currently takes place in schools is based on nineteenth century principles, through a curriculum model and content that are serviced but not transformed by remarkable technological resources. Yet we need learners who are fully aware of the layers of meaning contained in non-print texts, who quickly and confidently make mature engagements with those texts, and who take from them, to the fullest possible extent, the messages, issues and meanings they convey. In an age when anybody can be a media producer by using a simple facility on their mobile phones, editing easily on laptops and playing the finished product through an mp3 portable player, children need to know the potential of these readily accessible communication tools and the power they contain.

This is recognised by the Cambridge Review of primary education in England:

> The more fundamental task [than protection from unsuitable content] is to help children develop the capacity to approach electronic and other non-print media (including television and film as well as the internet) with the degree of discrimination and critical awareness that should attend reading, writing and communicating of any kind. (2009, p 270)

By proposing that this capacity should be an essential feature of literacy, the Review presents us with a considerable challenge. What are

the barriers that need to be overcome if we are to accept this challenge and rethink literacy for the 21st century? What lies behind the negative attitudes that still prevail towards non-print media in our culture, and what arguments can be mustered to overcome them?

How we have got to where we are

When public schooling became compulsory, as a result of the Forster Education Act of 1870, it was designed (against a background of ruling class disapproval) to service the limited but necessary literacy needs of the industrial revolution. Growing industries required hundreds of thousands of uneducated operatives for menial and boring tasks: to tend the looms, operate the machines, hew at the coal face, and plough the land. The workplace, however, also needed slightly better educated workers to act as clerks, book-keepers and copywriters, administering the orders, adding up the figures, writing the invoices and conducting essential communications between the many industrial enterprises. These requirements led to the devising of a minimalist model of 'literacy' to be delivered through the new school system, designed around rigid criteria, rigorously and systematically monitored by Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Reading and writing were taught in mechanical ways, enabling pupils to make the least possible workable sense of the simplest of texts, and of their Bibles. The written word, once the almost exclusive possession of the rich and powerful, was quickly to become the currency of success in this system. It did not matter that a proportion of the school population would 'fail' in this setting; their future working lives did not depend on literacy skills, and there were plenty of labouring opportunities to occupy them. Pictures and illustrations were playing a bigger part in communicating ideas as popular mass culture blossomed towards the end of the nineteenth century, but the visual image played a very minor part in the school educational processes of that time.

So the main focus of literacy teaching in primary schools has remained doggedly fixed on the written word ever since. In the years following the First World War, worries began to grow about the new text forms increasingly attracting public interest. Theories about 'dumbing down' have been a concern of the intellectual elite for many decades. As they became more popular, film and advertising, radio and comics, were depicted as enemies of reading, and as appealing only to the lowest possible tastes. Indeed, a few of those

issues still preoccupy social commentators and those responsible for educational provision today, the latest scapegoated villain being the computer game and its supposed unregulated intrusion into children's lives. According to its detractors, this activity is bad because it reduces personal reading time, unproblematically regarded as intellectually superior.

A number of regular moral panics about the alleged falling standards of literacy recurred at different periods during the last century. Responsibility for these reductions is often laid directly at the door of new media, all of which are seen as capable of distracting the nations' young from their classroom studies. There is often more than a suggestion that such pastimes are identified as targets for criticism because they have popular appeal in a class-ridden culture. The leisure activities of different social classes have, until modern times, rarely overlapped, as can be quickly shown by some crude stereotypes. In the early years of the twentieth century, the middle and upper classes sought their entertainment mostly in the theatre; their working class counterparts attended music hall shows and the cinema. The middle and upper classes read 'literature'; the working class reader was more interested in the 'penny dreadful' and illustrated magazines. Not surprisingly, those who could read and write with flourish and acumen thought highly of their advanced abilities, and identified for themselves a jealously guarded sort of 'club'. Literary critics and other taste-formers, particularly academics such as FR Leavis and the Scrutiny group at Cambridge University in the 1930s, argued confidently that certain texts were superior to others, and that there was even a hierarchical scale that could be objectively applied to classical authors. In the early thirties Leavis and a colleague, Denys Thompson, were prominent amongst writers responsible for pronouncements about popular culture. Yet, their books and pamphlets were not written to explain new media forms, but to protect the general public from their 'pernicious' influence.

A large part of the population was led to believe, by teachers directly or indirectly influenced by Leavisite thinking, that texts with a high pictorial content were somehow second-rate, less worthy of intellectual attention – and possibly even damaging. So, the reading of comics in school was sneered at, or banned outright. Showing films in the classroom was mostly regarded as a form of babysitting, or sometimes as a 'reward' at the end of a unit of work. Likewise the watching of television – and more recently, the playing of computer games – have

been regularly depicted as a shocking waste of children's valuable time. In modern times it is not unusual to encounter parents who believe that as soon as their children can decode letters they should be moved as quickly as possible from picture books to 'chapter' books, in the erroneous belief that the fewer the illustrations the more challenging the book. Such parents can have no idea how many other layers of meaning are being contributed to those texts through their pictorial content. Pictures and images are often regarded as requiring less mental effort to read effectively, and as likely to stunt the imaginative processes that written text is able to encourage. Pictorial content therefore tends to be regarded as inappropriate and second rate in educational contexts. Primary teachers are usually unaware of the trends in comics being read by their pupils in any generation, and few experienced teachers of English have any sort of contact with or knowledge of the sheer range and scope of graphic novel texts, so popular with many of their male pupils.

Such attitudes doggedly live on. In the summer of 2009, when this chapter was being written, yet another dispute about the study of media texts in schools blew up in the press and broadcast media, fanned by the prejudices and short-sightedness of traditionalist educators. Put simply; their argument is that certain sorts of school subject are more worthwhile and demanding than others (echoing the 1930s attitudes to 'literature' versus all other published material). Media Studies, or indeed any study of the media, is regarded by those traditionalist individuals as a 'soft' subject, without a significant 'body of knowledge', certainly unworthy to be regarded as a proper test for entrance at the more prestigious universities. This parallels the situation of little more than a hundred years ago, when English was not perceived as a suitable subject for study at Oxford, and had to be made more 'respectable' by the inclusion of a heavy dose of Anglo-Saxon.

Literacy is not just about the written word

In this book primary teachers are being urged to regard the study of media texts, especially moving image texts, as having the same value and relevance as the study and understanding of word-based texts. Both categories of text are sign and symbol based, and it is necessary in the modern world to be equally fluent in the multiple forms of language through which society communicates with itself.

Before considering the relationship between these different areas of literacy, it is necessary to face and overcome the attitudes outlined above. Teachers have to be offered opportunities to discover and explore for themselves that 'literacy' need not be the increasingly limited notion espoused in the late 90s by such influential agencies as the National Literacy Strategy, and adopted by most English primary schools. Few schools, despite the wholesale universal adoption of this literacy programme, have ever discussed, analysed or come to any agreements about what they believe actually constitutes 'literacy', or what 'literacy' should mean in their particular circumstances.

A more recent document endorses our proposition that literacy is not just about the written word. Sir Jim Rose, commissioned by Government to review the primary curriculum, noted in his Interim Report (2008):

> The central importance of literacy, generally understood as the ability to read and write, is undeniable. However, the concept of literacy has broadened so that the values, for example, of scientific, technological, mathematical and economic 'literacy' are recognised by society and schools to a far greater extent than ever before. The effects of being 'illiterate' in this broader sense are all too obvious and likely to deepen as the world our children inherit depends increasingly upon understanding in these domains. (para 2.25)

Less than a year later, the term 'media literacy' looked set to acquire a status similar to those 'literacies' listed by Rose, when Secretary of State Ed Balls acknowledged its importance in response to a report on the impact of the commercial world on children's well being.[1] But, as in Rose's list, the very designation 'media literacy' implies something additional, not integral to literacy itself.

Schools attempting to establish a mature position in regard to the adoption of a definition of literacy could benefit from paraphrasing the Charter for Media Literacy (2004):

> To be media literate means being able to choose and access, understand and analyse, create and express oneself from and in a range of media.

With minimal change, this definition could be helpfully broadened to apply to all texts, and to rethink literacy for our modern age:

> To be literate means being able to choose and access, understand and analyse, create and express oneself from and in a range of texts.

Points for Practice   Every Picture Tells a Story 2

Geraldine Walker

The aim of this activity is to encourage children to think about how particular elements in any image can be used to help tell a story, and how images in sequence can form the basis of a story. It will also alert children to what needs to be added to images in order to make a satisfactory and believable story.

Download up to 10 images from the web. They could be linked to a specific topic which is being covered in class or they could be totally random.

Photocopy the sheets and give a copy of the images to individuals/pairs/small groups. If the school can afford it, the pictures could be in colour, which is more visually stimulating.

After looking at the images they need to discuss which pictures they want and then decide which one they will discard in order to make the pictures tell a story.

Glue the remaining images onto paper in order, storyboard style.

When finished, Blutack their storyboards onto the wall.

Each group then takes it in turn to look at the way one or more of the other groups have arranged the images.
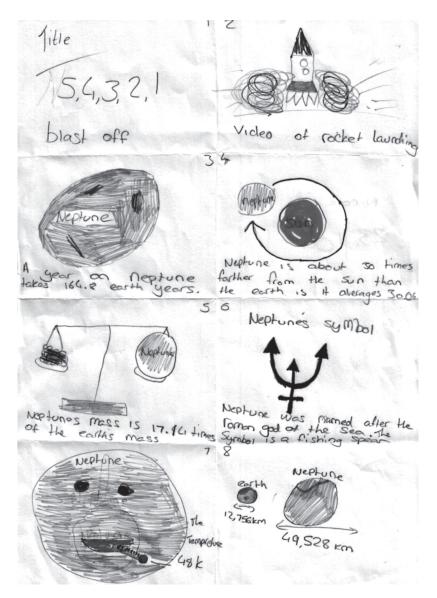
Looking at each storyboard, they should note which image has been discarded, which image was used to begin the story with and which was discarded. In each case, they should consider the possible reasons for these choices.

Then – in turn – each group tells their own story to the class. Discuss what needed to be added to the storyboard in words in order to help the story to make sense.

Developments

1. Write the story underneath the images with words or sentences.
2. Repeat the exercise with the same pictures and choose a different image to discard. How does this change the story?
3. Use this as a first draft of a story and begin to expand the work linked to character/description of place/tenses.
4. For children with English as a second language – ask them to tell/write story in own language – write subtitles in English or vice versa.
5. Tell each group which picture they have to start and finish with and see how they arrive at the ending.
6. Turn the story into a short time-based text. Download the images into software such as Photo Story (available as a free download) or Movie Maker ('bundled' on most PCs).

Figure 8.1   Hannah's Animoto plan

A secure literacy

Virtually every four-year-old child arrives in the classroom with an already well-developed experience of moving images. Nearly all have watched hundreds of hours of moving images in their homes on television or DVD, and possibly at the cinema. Every evening they will return home to accumulate yet more hours of that experience.

Some of the material they encounter will have been produced specifically for their age group, but much will have been originally aimed at adults. Most of those children will own their own collections of favourite texts, including popular animated films such as the *Shrek* or *Toy Story* series, or moving image products associated with their favourite toys. These DVDs will have been played again and again, and some children will readily quote extracts of the dialogue verbatim, and explain (and quickly locate) their favourite scenes. What most of them will already have begun to understand – as can quickly be established by careful questioning – are aspects of narrative, character, episode and some simple visual conventions. Some will be able to articulate differences between moving image animated texts and those involving live actors. A few may have begun reflecting on what activities are possible in real life, and what activities are only possible in animated contexts. Shirley Brice Heath reminds us, in her massive social study published in 1983, that 'long before school, their language and culture at home has structured for them the meanings which will give shape to their experiences in classrooms and beyond'. These texts will have been an important funnel for shaping the way that small children encounter and perceive the world, and a school system that respects and caters for the needs of the individual should be capitalising on this knowledge.

Helen Bromley relates an experience that must have been repeated hundreds of thousands of times, in all parts of the country (although DVD has now replaced video for most pre-schoolers):

> The video culture was … much in evidence when I was privileged to make visits to the homes of reception class children. Whatever differences existed between the homes, they all had one thing in common, and that was video ownership. Videos were strewn about the floor, or sat alongside books on shelves or in their own cabinet. In one home Callum was watching *Thomas the Tank Engine* on video, whilst he played the story out in front of the TV with his road mat and toy engines. The story involved a trip to the woods and as Callum played, he related the story of a trip he had made to the woods with his mum, matching the experiences to Thomas's. (1996, p 72).

Yet, the majority of teachers fail to take advantage of the invaluable experience children are acquiring at an importantly formative time. Almost immediately on entry, schools prepare pupils for word-based literacy practices, usually ignoring the moving-image based 'literacy' already acquired. But this situation can be changed. Increasing numbers of teachers are gaining confidence in exploring the use of moving image texts and the equipment that creates them.

A few educationalists have recently made the argument that closer attention to media texts in the Early Years and primary classrooms is justified, because they know that such study can lead to the enhancement of mainstream word-based literacy. Increasing amounts of research have recently been conducted to explore how the study of pictorial materials can play a positive role. Eve Bearne (QCA 2004/2005; Bearne and Wolstencroft 2007) has conducted a number of studies based on what some educationalists call 'multimodal texts' (posters, non-fiction book illustrations, web pages and graphic stories involving mostly still pictures). With Jackie Marsh, Bearne has also written an important report on the experiences and achievements of primary literacy advisers trained by the British Film Institute to lead on the development of 'moving image media literacy' in over 60 local authorities. The findings of this research make a strong case for giving greater status to the exploration of moving image as part of the primary curriculum. Positive outcomes from it include:

- Children are usually enthused by watching the text, and concentrate avidly, paying close attention;

- After watching a text, children need little encouragement to begin talking and sharing the experience they have just encountered in extended discourses;

- Whilst watching such texts, children listen very hard and notice much detail about the dialogue, commentary and music, which they remember better from having heard them aloud;

- Watching moving image texts enables children to think immediately about and notice the ways that settings, characters and plots contribute to meaning – which will all be necessary considerations as the children encounter written narratives;

Case Study 1   Alternate Reality in the Classroom

Angela Colvert

A mysterious email arrives and is read aloud by the teacher to the class of 8 and 9 year olds. It's from two secret agents, Onyx and Violet Linton. In it they explain that there's a beast on the loose and that they are in desperate need of help! After an initial explanation as to why their class has been selected, the children decide to investigate the web address included in the email. They find out about a place called Ocean Estate and its inhabitants in their search for more information relating to this strange creature. As the week goes on the children's ideas develop as more information is revealed, distributed over a wide range of modes and media. The people of Ocean Estate post webcam diaries, write and respond to messages on the community forums and can be contacted by telephone. In order to solve the mystery the class discusses the importance of the information with each other, with Onyx and Violet and the residents of Ocean Estate both on and offline. They decide on the next steps: the questions that need to be answered and elements that need further investigation. They couldn't solve the mystery without the help of these strangers, but they must act with caution. When contacted the residents respond, and when asked they are even prepared to send special artifacts through the post: maps, books, even 'potion ingredients'.

This adventure was an alternate reality game (ARG) designed for the class by an inventive class of 10 and 11 year olds in the same school. It was based on the novel *Mighty Fizz Chilla* by Philip Ridley (2002 London: Penguin Books) and was created in response to the challenges of bringing the story to life for their peers. These older children were hidden behind the scenes during play, writing and acting in role as the characters from Ocean Estate and prior to play the children had spent most of the school year designing the experience and making the necessary game-elements: films, websites, artifacts etc. This exciting cross-curricular project, which met the requirements of the National Curriculum, was developed in discussion with the children, who contributed to its content and the pedagogic construction. They shared their understandings, expertise and ideas in discussion with others in the class both online and offline, and used the same

communication technologies to plan and design the game as were later used to play it.

The older children wanted the texts they produced to appear authentic and believable and didn't want to reveal themselves to the younger class as the creators of the game until the concluding moments of the experience. They experimented with the affordances and communicative potential of the modes and media at their disposal and in so doing demonstrated and developed a sophisticated understanding of the media practices and texts with which they engage.

Conclusion

However, these findings only emphasise the value of learning about non-print media as a support to traditional literacy. The argument needs to be taken further. These media represent key areas of development and understanding in their own right – and are likely to become more essential areas of knowledge as our cultural practices, and the growing ubiquity of technologies, continue to change our relationship with how we employ signs and symbols.

Literacy in this wider sense has a direct relationship with children's lives beyond school. It is only right that they are equipped with the correct tools to make the best sense of the multitude of non-print texts they will continue to encounter. They live in an age in which, as Robert Scholes reminds us:

> …language and other semiotic systems and their associated media of communication have in the course of history multiplied and penetrated more and more deeply into our daily lives. We are, at present, like it or not, the most mediated human beings ever to exist on this earth…One needs to be able to read, interpret and criticise texts in a wide range of modes, genres and media. (1998, p84)

This is an enormous challenge to the education system in terms of training and resources, and it is not surprising that policy-makers have resisted its implications. But in the years since Scholes wrote this, we have started to see the development of techniques and approaches that offer teachers simple, practical ways of dealing with non-print texts in the classroom and building them into their literacy teaching. Digital technologies make it increasingly easy to access, study and make non-print texts, both in and out of school. There is a growing body of classroom practice that exemplifies ways of tackling non-print media in the classroom, and increasing numbers of teachers are surprised and delighted by children's responses to a literacy teaching approach that takes their full range of textual experiences into account. The barriers to rethinking literacy, then, are not so much practical and financial as attitudinal. A key element of arguments directed at overcoming these attitudes must therefore be to demonstrate that we have inherited a long tradition of literacy teaching that is grounded in outdated attitudes to class and culture. The first step in rethinking literacy is to give ourselves permission to move on.

References

Alexander, R. (ed) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: Final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review* Abingdon: Routledge.

Bearne, E. & Wolstencroft, H. (2007) *Visual Approaches to Teaching Writing* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Bromley, H. (1996) 'Video narratives in the early years' in Hilton, M (ed) *Potent Fictions; Children's Literacy and the Challenge of Popular Culture* London: Routledge.

Czerniewska, P. (1992) *Learning about Writing* Oxford: Blackwell.

Charter for Media Literacy (2004) at www.euromedialiteracy.eu (Retrieved 30 December 2009).

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009). *Children's Plan Two Years On: next steps to achieve outstanding children's services* Press release, 14 December 2009, at www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2009_0251 (Retrieved 28 December 2009).

Heath, S.B. (1983) *Ways with Words; Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leavis, F.R. *(1930) Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* Cambridge: The Minority Press.

Leavis, F.R. and Denys Thompson, (1933) *Culture and Environment* London: Chatto and Windus.

Marsh, J. and Bearne, E. (2008) *Moving Literacy On Leicester*: UKLA.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2004) *More than words: Multimodal texts in the classroom* London: QCA Publications.

Scholes, Robert (1998) *The Rise and Fall of English New* Haven: Yale University Press.