

Media Literacy in Community Contexts, and sharing experience with the mainstream

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Across the country, media professionals, youth workers, and educators are increasingly engaging young and older people in creative media production in informal community settings. Primarily supported by public funds, the rationale for many of these projects is not necessarily to train participants to become industry professionals. Rather, the aim in many cases is to allow participants the rich depth of transferable experience that media production has to offer. Examples of such projects are; young people producing documentary pieces about issues that effect their communities; using digital media to enhance basic skills in speaking, writing and communication; and recent care leavers producing a video guide for those still in the care system, on strategies for survival when entering the ‘real world’.¹

For participants of such projects to be actively engaged in what is being asked of them – to begin to think less like a consumer and more like a producer – is to immerse oneself in the core principles of media literacy, albeit with a *community media* spin, in practice rather than theory²:

- Access to media equipment and a platform to express ones’ ideas and opinions.
- Understanding the notion of media representation and how mediated audio-visual codes convey meaning, with the opportunity to re-present said codes from within a renewed contextual position.³
- Creation of media *texts* via active participation in the creative process.⁴

Working as facilitators on such community projects, the skills and awareness needed to fully support the participants cannot be left to the media professional alone, regardless of how rich his or her prior experience may be. As Cary Bazalgette noted at the outset of her presentation at the Media Literacy Seminar, “If media literacy is so important, it is too important to be left to the media.” Undoubtedly media practitioners have their unique role to play in the important process of media literacy being recognised as containing vital pedagogic value, but so to do the youth workers, teachers, play workers, and other key stakeholders who have experience of community media, not excluding young people themselves and their parents.

¹ Examples of projects from the author’s co-run media education company, Firstborn Creatives, (www.firstborn-creatives.co.uk)

² A characteristic of the majority of community media projects, which differ from formal education environments, is that they are heavily practical, with most teaching, learning and theoretical understanding happening as part of the creative process or by stealth, not by ‘at desk’ analysis or one-way knowledge transfer. Jeffs and Smith (1999). Willow (2002)

³ Fiske (1999)

⁴ Definitions adapted from Buckingham (2005) and Livingstone, Van Couvering and Thumim (2005)

Rapid advancements in media technology has seen *traditional* literacy and media literacy become so entwined they are inseparable. In fact, what is thought to be *traditional literacy* is actually media literacy that was defined in a past age, and is as important as it has ever been. To resist the fact that texts are now as much time-based as they are literary is a denial that can only last so long. Revolutions of any kind are rarely fast, and educational revolutions are even slower. Whether working in community or mass media, those with more than a passing interest in education know that media literacy has a much more to offer formal education than the well rehearsed responses of working in groups and confidence building, etc. To be (traditionally) literate is to be considered educated, but to be media illiterate is to be ignorant.

Current research on community media seldom, if ever, acknowledges the important differences in aims & objectives between broadcast activity such as community radio & TV initiatives, and the more direct media educational activities such as those described above. These research studies also miss how mainstream education can learn from informal community projects. A key word from media production now needs to be put into pro-active practice: Communication.

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References

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