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Learning and Teaching Media Literacy in Canada: Embracing and Transcending Eclecticism

Michael Hoechsmann & Stuart Poyntz

Canadian teachers are, like most informed media educators, participating in an eclectic circus. We are enthusiastic pragmatists, selecting from a rich menu of critical, cultural, and educational theories and filtering them for classroom use. Because of the small number of trained teachers, the majority use only snippets from a variety of sources: a few quotes from McLuhan, English studies, a diatribe from Neil Postman, a bit of Noam Chomsky, and the rest culled from resource guides, mass media text books, articles, television documentaries and news programs. (Pungente, Duncan, & Andersen, 2005, p. 150)

Media literacy grows on fertile terrain in Canada, an area of study that is increasingly legitimized by school curriculum initiatives supported by provincial Ministries of Education, and one that can count on a formidable and enthusiastic network of teachers and teacher organizations which provide well-informed research and resource documents to interested teachers. If anything, Canada's experiment in media literacy so far has been one led by these teacher networks that have initiated and supported media literacy through sheer determination, an inspired and committed group of educators willing to go to great lengths to address the conceptual gap between traditional school-based literacy practices and programs and the media saturated information environments that young people inherit in a world where communication has become defacto multimodal (oral, print, visual, aural). Teacher-led networks such as the Canadian Association for Screen Education (CASE, founded in 1968), the Association for Media Literacy (AML, 1978), and the Canadian Association of Media Education Organizations (CAMEO, 1992) have impacted directly on educational practice, and have seen through a variety of outcomes: almost every province has at least some provincially mandated curriculum requirement in media literacy; thousands of teachers across the country have been exposed to some form of professional development in media literacy; Media Awareness Network (MNet), a non-profit clearinghouse for media literacy materi-

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als (www.media-awareness.ca) has been established; up-to-date Canadian research on media literacy has been undertaken by teacher activists, university scholars, and non-profit organizations (Canadian Teachers Federation [CTF], Vanier Institute for the Family, and MNet); major international conferences have been organized here in Canada (New Literacy Conference, 1990; Constructing Culture Conference, 1992; Summit, 2000); and many thousands of high school and elementary students have been exposed to at least some instruction in media literacy. Additionally, in 2006 and 2007, CTF and MNet have undertaken the development of an annual National Media Education Week that is intended to promote media literacy in homes, schools, and communities.

Though it may be fair to say that media education in Canada is exemplary in global terms, it would be a mistake to suggest that there is a Canada-wide coherent program or approach to media education (Pungente, Duncan, & Anderson, 2005). Media education remains for the most part a curricular add-on in schools, inconsistently applied from one jurisdiction to the next and not undergirded with sufficient professional development to ensure quality teaching. There are exceptional programs in certain schools and some Boards, and the political will is there in some provinces to make curricular change, but, in general, this is one domain of study where the variety of approaches and outcomes is extraordinary. At the most fundamental level, there is a problem of definition that plays itself out in school classrooms and in pre-service education contexts. There is a tremendous slippage between critical media literacy that is focused on interpretation or “demystification,” old style AV “edutainment” (film versions of classic novels, for example), cultural studies of youth approaches that embrace the dialectic between youth culture and media consumption, new pedagogies focused on media production, and utilitarian IT approaches in new technology education. In the same building, you might find teachers who adapt media education to teach Excel spreadsheets, critical analyses of Disney and McDonald’s, film versions of literature such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and video production for such national contests as the Department of Multiculturalism’s Stop Racism! Contest and MNet’s i-Media Podcast contest. Faculties of Education follow along similar paths, teaching media or technology, and sometimes both. There are, of course, educators who see the big picture and feel confident enough to dabble across these domains, but formal media education in Canada today is still largely dependent on keener teachers with media passions or backgrounds and local administrators who see the light of the profound cultural changes that follow in the wake of technological developments in the fields of communication, some new and some over a century old.

Despite the apparent eclecticism of approaches, there is a history that unites many of the practitioners of media literacy in Canada. The work of Len Masterman (1985, 1983, 1980) is crucial here. The notion that media literacy fosters conceptual understanding through both analytic and production activities has been at the centre of teacher practices for over two decades. Often called the “key concepts

model,” a crucial assumption in this framework is that facility with conceptual understanding leads to comprehension, empowerment and informed democratic practice. Masterman’s influential text *Teaching the Media* (1985) was really the first comprehensive treatment of this pedagogical method. Using slightly different designations, and drawing from work in political economy, British cultural studies, and semiotics, Masterman argued that students need to engage with issues of production, language, representation, and audiences to address how meaning operates in the electronic media. These concepts allow one to map mediated experience and are especially important when students create their own texts. Youth production has never been Masterman’s field of expertise, but he didn’t ignore the benefits arising from student-made work. He cautioned that early production projects can imitate the programming children and young people regularly see, or turn media education into an exercise in technical writing. But he also described how this work enables youthful confidence and critical understanding to flourish.¹ When undertaken with a critical lens, production is a “necessary means [for] developing an autonomous critical understanding” (Masterman, 1985, p. 27; Sefton-Green, 1995). In this way, Masterman attempted a synthesis of the expressivist traditions in British media literacy alongside more provocative analyses of media language. Literary and ideological forms of deconstruction were at the centre of his framework and were understood to hold the potential to empower students to investigate how hegemony (particularly in relation to class) operates in the mainstream media.

With *Teaching the Media*, Masterman’s critical pedagogy influenced teachers around the world. His work was formative in shaping media education and production curricula in the UK throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, while also influencing educational publications by organizations like the British Film Institute (BFI). In Canada, Masterman’s (1985) text was a key resource informing the design of Ontario’s secondary school curriculum in 1987.² This curriculum, in turn, influenced the development of media literacy curricula in the remaining provinces and three territories in the subsequent two decades (See http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/media_education/media_education_chronology.cfm for details).

Sefton-Green (1995) has argued that at least one reason Masterman’s work was so influential among teachers is that deconstruction lends itself to assessment in schools. Even when students are producing their own work, it’s possible to assess whether they are right or wrong in their use of a specific sound design or a genre style. It’s also easy to assess for correctness where one is concerned with a student’s analysis of an advertisement or their assessment of the lighting and editing techniques used by news broadcasts. Because of this, while Masterman’s pedagogical framework was intended to discourage educators from using the key concepts model to support a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum (Morgan, 1998), this has not always happened in practice. Indeed, Morgan’s (1996) research in Ontario in the 1990s indicated that teachers tend to use deconstruction as part of a fairly traditional pedagogical formula

in which students are asked to assess for truth and other non-negotiable outcomes in analyzing the media. Where this was a disappointing result, Masterman's work also posed a larger problem specific to our concern about the relationship of youth media production and a broader media literacy strategy.

In the context of the 1980s, Masterman attempted to negotiate an important shift in thinking about media education and youth media production. He was especially concerned to move both fields away from evaluative judgments that discriminate against the mass media as lesser forms of culture. To do this, he emphasized investigation in media education and media production with the aim of having students determine how meaning is constituted and circulated in popular culture. Ideological deconstruction in many ways was and is the central drama in this project. This, however, posed a difficulty for Masterman. On the one hand, his agenda was more nuanced than some (Buckingham, 2003; Sefton-Green, 1995) have argued.³ At the same time, Masterman's most important writing was produced in a time when ideological deconstruction meant leading young people toward autonomy relative to the hegemonic conditions operative in media environments. Media education and youth media production come to inform democratic practice when they lead young people to an emancipatory condition which is somehow free of the constitutive influences of the mainstream media. Evidence that Masterman conceives of media literacy in this way is apparent when he frames deconstruction as a rational, objective form of analysis that distances students from the media's influence. It is about a process of demystification that politicizes and positions students on the outside of media culture so they can act in ways that lead toward alternative social futures. Or at least that is the hope. The difficulty is research in both classroom settings and informal learning environments has been hard pressed to show such outcomes (Buckingham, 2003, 2000, 1996; Goldfarb, 2002; Sefton-Green, 1995). Moreover, it is not entirely clear what autonomy vis-à-vis the mainstream media would mean today in an era of participatory, two-way flow media.

While Masterman's work has provided some ground on which to unify teachers' practices in Canada, various problems remain with this framework. Magnifying these shortfalls is the fact that since the early 1990s, there has been a renewed focus and interest in production pedagogies within media education. In Canada (as in the U.K. and the U.S.) informal education groups—community associations, not-for-profit arts organizations, and university-community partnerships—have played a particularly important role in these developments (Buckingham, 2006; Goldfarb, 2002; Goodman, 2003; Harvey et al., 2002; Sefton-Green, 2006). To the role of the non profits we will return below. Schools have also been significant sites for production courses, but in the 1990s, budget shortages and the association of practical work with vocational training streams discouraged schools from opening new programs (Goldfarb, 2002). This has changed over the intervening decade as schools have ramped up their technology offerings and have made significant

purchases in hardware, but now the question has emerged of what to do with the new tools at the schools' disposal.

With the advent of personal computing and the integration of educational technology approaches into teacher education, a media literacy curriculum can now be undertaken that ignores the mass media and focuses solely on new software applications relevant to the classroom. In our estimation, however, a broad media literacy strategy involves a structured engagement in media interpretation, media production and cultural readings of the everyday life of youth. Within each of these domains there are differences of approach, in part due to evolving paradigms and schools of thought that have captured the imaginations of media educators along the way. The most confounding clash of orientation, however, involves emerging approaches to the use of new technologies in schools where technological mastery is seen as an end in and of itself. This is less the case in schools and community programs with an established media education program. Here, teachers and facilitators are more likely to see clearly the ways in which newly accessible video editing suites and emergent broadcasting (or narrowcasting) opportunities in the Web 2.0 platforms can enable forms of production that were until recently only possible in the well-resourced and highly specialized workplaces of the media industries. Given, however, that the schools with an existing media education tradition are the exception, not the rule, the clash of orientation over how to effectively use technology in education, as a creative tool in media production, or as technical skills training, continues to be a cause for concern.

In the rush to introduce new technologies into Canadian schools, objectives and outcomes can be lost sight of, overwhelmed by the "gee-whizzery" of technofetishism, often on the part of educators unfamiliar with, and intimidated by, the new technologies themselves. This is not a story exclusive to Canada. When Larry Cuban was surveying the landscape of technology in education in the Silicon Valley area of California, where the dot-com industry was located and where one might assume a certain comfort level and familiarity with technology use, he found bleak conditions. Says Cuban:

The billions of dollars already spent [by school districts] on wiring, hardware, and software have established the material conditions for frequent and imaginative uses of technology to occur... Nonetheless, overall, the quantities of money and time have yet to yield even modest returns or to approach what has been promised in academic achievement, creative classroom integration of technologies, and transformations in teaching and learning (2001, p. 189).

Of course, for every sceptic, there is a dedicated teacher out there, making a difference with the new tools now at our disposal. More often than not, however, the results are uneven. Good teaching in the new technologies is often the luck of the draw: an inspired teacher, a privileged school or an innovative program for at-risk students. While Cuban's *Oversold and Underused: Computers in the Classroom*

(2001) is now somewhat dated, it has held true as a clarion call to educators and administrators, the source of a number of key questions we must ask ourselves when implementing new programs and pedagogies.

Beyond Eclecticism

To remedy the “eclectic circus” that is media literacy in Canada today, we feel that two further steps must be taken: one, is to introduce and augment media literacy curricula and full fledged courses in pre-service and in-service education; and, two, is to take stock of, in order to learn from, media literacy initiatives that are flourishing in the non-formal, non-profit education environments of youth serving community organizations. Ultimately, we should come to common terms on what the media literacy agenda includes and excludes, buttress and expand teacher development in this domain, and include in the discussion best practices from outside of schools. These imperatives have become more acute given developments in media technology that have provoked profound and dynamic changes in the way media is consumed and produced today. The “eclectic circus” referenced by John Pungente SJ, Barry Duncan, and Neil Anderson—three pioneers and relentless advocates of media literacy education in Canada—is unsustainable in a context in which newly convergent technology and media draw pedagogical energies in separate directions, students communicate, work and play simultaneously on the same machine, and in which provincial curricula in media and technology education require the greater and greater integration of critical and technical capacities and know-how into the teaching day. The “eclectic circus” will always be remembered for its dazzling feats, elaborate staging and talented team of performers. This is a remarkable chapter of the history of media literacy in Canada, a largely grassroots-led set of programs and initiatives, the success of which has occasioned the need for future orientations that link the energies of instructors and researchers in Faculties of Education with activists in the non-profit youth-serving sector and the already existing network of teacher practitioners, media professionals, Ministry of Education curriculum developers, and non-profit organizations such as MNet.

Given the broad eclecticism that exists in and between media education initiatives, some consistency of programming and training needs to come from the country’s Education Faculties. If media education in Canada is going to evolve beyond the inherited “eclectic circus” tradition, Faculties of Education are going to have to play a key role, both in terms of research and in pre-service and in-service instruction. We embrace the spirit of bold risk-taking, dazzling acts of wonder, and the eclectic team of talented animators implied by the “eclectic circus” metaphor, and we value the assertion that media education “must be a grassroots movement” (Pungente, Duncan, & Andersen, 2005). We do, however, wonder if media education must *only* be a grassroots movement, or whether the time is nigh to add the institutional weight of universities into the mix in a more formal and long-term

manner. This is easier said than done. At this stage, Faculties of Education provide a mirror image of media literacy development work by teachers and teacher organizations. There is little consistency between programs, and most often media literacy is seen as a curricular add-on that is just another special interest fighting for valuable time in an overcrowded teacher education curriculum. As mentioned above, the ways in which a media literacy curriculum is taken up can vary from teaching a software application such as Excel or PowerPoint, showing a film version of a literature classic, to making a video in class, to critiquing a popular culture movie. Most significant, with the advent of personal computing and the integration of educational technology approaches into teacher education, a media literacy curriculum can now be undertaken that ignores the mass media and focuses solely on new software applications relevant to the classroom. The quantum developments in educational technology have drawn resources and attention away from many spheres of educational research and study, but one of the most immediately affected areas is media education which has to a great extent fallen below the radar in the curricula of Faculties of Education.

Whereas the development of media literacy initiatives in Faculties of Education was growing in the early 1990s, it has been somewhat displaced by a new emphasis on utilitarian, IT approaches to educational technology. In a recent audit of course offerings in educational technology and media education by Canadian Faculties of Education, for instance, Hoechsmann found that of 309 courses, 250 focused on educational technology, 59 on media education. And, as a follow-up to the 2005 CTF "Kid's Take on the Media" research report, then-CTF President Terri Price sent a letter to all Canadian Deans of Education asking them to designate a faculty member who would respond to some questions about media literacy offerings, and encouraging them to send the answers to Hoechsmann. Not even one response was received to this request. Whether this was the result of bad luck or an indication that Faculties of Education do not have the faculty on hand with interest in this domain is a question open for interpretation. Pungente, Duncan, and Andersen have decades of experience in media education in Canada and have had exposure to Education faculty members in universities across the country. Their recommendation in this regard is that "Faculties of Education must hire staff capable of training future teachers in the area" (2005, p. 157). New directions in educational research include multiliteracies and new literacies, two approaches to the changing nature of communicational technology, practice and pedagogy, and a great number of junior faculty and graduate students are embracing new media environments as research foci. This is the time to establish some coherence in media literacy curriculum and pedagogy in our pre-service and in-service professional development and the nucleus of expertise that is emerging portends to an exciting future. While it is clear that emerging media scholars in Faculties of Education should consult the rich repository of methods and practices developed by media literacy pioneers in Canada, this is not enough in the new contexts of participatory Web 2.0 applica-

tions and a burgeoning field of study in educational technology. We feel strongly, however, that when looking for models for approaches to teaching and learning media production we have to look outside of both schools and universities to the non-profit sector where media production flourishes in contexts unconstrained by inherited traditions.

Community Media Education

Like music, the arts, and athletics, media education is also taught and learned outside of school contexts, both in the informal context of peer to peer learning and in the semi-formal contexts of community youth serving organizations. In Canada (as in the U.K. and the U.S.), informal education groups—community associations, not-for-profit arts organizations, and university-community partnerships—have played a particularly important role in the development of hands-on production centered approaches to media literacy often centered around models of empowerment and youth voice (Buckingham, 2006; Goldfarb, 2002; Goodman, 2003; Harvey et al, 2002; Sefton-Green, 2006). In this work, informal organizations have tended to conceive of youth production as the pivot point through which a dialectic of “doing” and “analysis” merge (Buckingham, 2003, p. 133). The effect of this is to render production as praxis, which means young people are afforded opportunities to locate themselves and their work in relation to larger social worlds, not simply by acquiring a set of conceptual tools, but in how they make sense of these tools through creative acts.

Capacity building. Empowerment. Citizenship engagement. These are the key words the non-profit sector regularly uses when preparing grants to fund innovative new media projects for youth. Underlying these buzzwords essential to successful grant writing the real practices of aiding youths’ self-expression, preparing youth for life in a digital world, offering young people healthy recreational activities, preparing youth for careers in the media, and building community bonds (Charmaraman, 2006, p. 43). In contrast, school-bound educational discourses on youths’ production work can tend to toward the instrumental and the didactic. As educators with visions of critical literacy dancing in our heads, we try to enable new forms of expression, while balancing our roles as the gatekeepers of the social pyramid of symbolically mediated power relationships and, in the service of social justice, as advocates of fair play. We must be cautious, however, that we are not preparing a generation of students to be data entry clerks, blessed and cursed with a new generation of technology.

Outside of the institutions of formal education, many non-profit organizations are providing a context for youth to use technologies as innovative tools for learning and self- and group expression. One of the key features of how the use of new media technologies in the non-profit sector differs is in an outcome-oriented sense of project.

Non-profits in Canada, run in many cases by and for youth, are producing innovative new media work on issues that concern them, whether those be social justice, environment, anti-bullying campaigns, anti-racism, or getting the youth vote out to the polls. These types of organizations are realizing the potential of the Internet and other digital platforms as the printing presses of the new era, taking advantage of the new two-way flow of information to make their voices heard. Another common feature of new media work in the non-profit world is a non-hierarchical approach to the sharing of expertise, breaking down the old distinction between teacher and learner characterized by Freire's banking model. Of course, the idea that the Net Generation is technology savvy is a truism postulated in the popular and academic press (Tapscott, 1998), and lived on a day-to-day basis by many educators in and outside of schools. But, in general, outside of schools, this unsettling of historical teacher-student relationships is not seen as threatening, whereas in schools the jury is still out. In the non-profit world, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to learning, and no real reason for everyone to know everything. In many of these contexts, young people are working in teams, combining talents in design, music and writing to produce multimodal material. In the best of circumstances, learning happens as a corollary outcome to a task at hand, and purpose and play intersect.

There is currently no summative study of such initiatives in Canada, but Charmaraman (2006) quotes from a study by Campbell et al. (2001) in the United States, which notes that the mission of youth media programs tends to fall into the following areas: (1) youth voice and social change through creative expression and/or political and social action; (2) career development; (3) positive youth development, including increasing young people's sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and power; (4) media literacy in order to produce critical viewers and producers; (5) academic improvement by focusing on increasing literacy skills, critical thinking and reflection, imagination and problem solving; and (6) narrowing the technological divide for communities who typically lack access to resources (p. 46). We have both worked with youth in an educational capacity for a number of years in such settings, Hoechsmann at Young People's Press, a national news agency for youth, and Poyntz at Pacific Cinémathèque, a film institute mandated to explore, promote, and engage with the changing nature of media culture. The characteristics of and approaches to media work in the non-profit youth organizations enumerated across these pages captures our experiences accurately. We recognize that we were working in contexts unencumbered by neither institutional tradition nor oversight by school boards and Education ministries, and that we were free of the constraint occasioned by scholastic assessment and evaluation. In regard to the latter, we are well aware from other teaching contexts that once the hard reality of grades enter the equation, some of the magic of teambuilding and individual and group discovery is lost. Nonetheless, we feel strongly that the models of pedagogy and engagement in youth media production found in the non-profit sector are of high value at this

historical context where media becomes increasingly participatory and media education evolves further into the domain of production.

There is a steady stream of scholastic work emerging on youth media production and projects in the non-profit sector (Charmaraman, 2006; Goldfarb, 2002; Goodman, 2003; Hoechsmann & Low, 2008; Hoechsmann & Sefton Green, 2006; Kearney, 2006; Maira & Soep, 2005; Poyntz, 2006; Sefton Green 2006). The time is ripe for dialogue across sectors to expand and consolidate differing visions of, and approaches to, media literacy and it does appear that the best path for the ongoing development of media literacy is indeed to embrace eclecticism. Nonetheless, there are direct challenges to the future health of media literacy practices in Canadian classrooms that require a consolidated, multi-sectoral response. Ultimately, the apparent complexity of integrating technology into education can make a utilitarian approach appealing in some sectors of the formal education system, given a generalized apprehension on the part of many teachers to incorporate technology into sedimented classroom practices. As well, as we have argued, there is a dire need for enhanced media education for pre-service and in-service teachers that requires a consolidated effort on the part of Faculties of Education. Eclecticism of approaches and visions emerge from the grassroots, including, in this case, individual teachers and teacher associations, as well as workers in the non-profit sector. This is the dialogic nature of our work, and it deserves to be acknowledged and encouraged. The new technologies have occasioned talk of models of collective intelligence and distribute cognition, concepts which slip easily into a grassroots model of media education. Transcending eclecticism, however, requires a partnership, whether tacit or formal, of all educational sectors, including the university. It would be unfair to suggest that the dialogue has not been in existence throughout the decades, but it is certainly a dialogue that should continue to grow. Media literacy in Canada will continue to flourish as we bring our approaches and vision together.

Notes

¹ For instance, Masterman (1983) argues his notion of critical reading “needs to be complemented by practical video work, the production of media materials for students themselves, and by the use of simulations through which a range of alternative codings can be explored” (pp. 11-12).

² Ontario’s Association for Media Literacy developed their key concepts list to support this implementation process, while a similar list was developed in British Columbia in 1994 (Andersen et al., 2000; Media Awareness Network, 2007). Other lists with a significant degree of overlap are used in curriculum documents around the world (Buckingham, 2003).

³ For instance, Masterman neither dismissed production work, as Sefton-Green (1995) suggests, nor was he interested in a top-down model of pedagogy, as Buckingham (2003) argues.

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