

W(h)ither Media in English? Steve Connolly, University of Bedfordshire, UK

“Round the city of Caxton, the electronic suburbs are rising. To the language of books is added the language of television and radio, the elliptical demotic of the telephone, the processed codes of the computer. As the shapes of literacy multiply, so our dependence on language increases.”

Kingman (1988, p.8)

This quote from the Kingman Report, commissioned by the UK government as in 1988 as an “Inquiry into the Teaching of English” seems startlingly prescient when read some thirty years later. For Kingman, the need to establish the nature and substance of a version of curricular English prior to the development of a national curriculum that included the study of media texts was almost taken for granted. What kind of future did English have as a subject if it could not accept that the idea of texts had moved beyond the limits of the printed word? Such a question makes a clear connection with the Dartmouth seminar and its outcomes, postulating as it does, the idea of both personal and societal growth and development (Dixon, 1975).

At the time of writing however, the study of Media texts within the UK English curriculum has all but disappeared, with the enlightened optimism expressed by Kingman- and those who developed the original version of the National Curriculum in the late 1980’s- apparently forgotten in a rush to return to more “traditional” interpretation of the subject. This chapter intends to give a historical perspective to the study of media texts within English curricula, by both reflecting on the way that this study is conceived of in global terms, and then, more specifically using the UK as an example of the way that the study of media texts has been characterised in the English subject curriculum and its relationship to that subject, from the inception of the National Curriculum in 1988 to its most recent manifestation in 2014. In this time period, the place of the study of media texts of all types (print, moving image and digital) within “Subject English” has shifted considerably, from being seen as an integral part of modern curricular versions of the subject, externally assessed and fundamentally connected to traditional conceptions of reading and writing – to something much less significant. As a consequence then, the chapter has two key aims ; first, to examine how the study of media texts has been and is conceived by a National Curriculum for English – both in the UK and further afield; and second, to analyse some of the reasons for changes in these conceptions in an attempt to explain why the current version of the National Curriculum has expunged the study of Media texts from within English.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

This chapter borrows from a range of research methods in order to examine the documents and discourses which surround subject English both in terms of the NC in England and in other countries. These approaches can, for the purposes of this study, be broadly grouped into two categories; documentary research and discourse analyses. These methods are used primarily because there are many hundreds of documents in both the UK National Archives and the public domain, which constitute both the National Curriculum itself and the work that went into creating it. Consequently

they need to be analysed both as documents in their own right , but also because they make particular uses of language, which form part of the discourse around Media within English.

Educational historians such as Gary McCulloch, suggest that when researching documents there are four “well established rules that apply...and these are generally discussed in terms of **authenticity, reliability, meaning and theorisation**” (McCulloch, 2004; p.42). Within this chapter, the first two rules can be broadly accepted as being, in some senses, unproblematic. All the documents analysed in the three sections below are produced by government departments, teacher organisations or academic departments. For such bodies, authenticity and reliability are significant benchmarks – whatever members of the public may think – and it is most unlikely that such documents will be inauthentic or unreliable. As McCulloch goes on to comment, they will normally be “housed in public archives, well-guarded and meticulously catalogued” (ibid; p.43).

It is the third of these two rules that lead to the need for a further theoretical framework, however. Establishing the meanings (both surface and underlying) of these documents and their implications requires a research method which allows for a closer scrutiny of the language and presentation they contain. Consequently, a rudimentary discourse analysis, of the kind developed by Norman Fairclough (2001) is employed to give some insight into the way that the curriculum might be interpreted and theorised. This kind of discourse analysis owes a good deal to the social theory of Jurgen Habermas, who put forward the idea, in his seminal work *The Theory of Communicative Action*, that discourse, far from simply being about language and the utterances that constitute it, is more a means of regulating social behaviour and the conflicts that arise in it (Habermas, 1987). For Fairclough and others, such an analysis is a way of understanding not only what the text says and what that means, but also how the text is used to enact power in society. As a consequence then, one of the tasks of this chapter is to examine (admittedly in quite an introductory way) what the status of Media texts within English curricula can tell us about various power dynamics; between students and teachers, teachers and governments and governments and their electorates.

The international context – Media in global English Curricula

A number of countries around the world who have adopted the idea of a National Curriculum have a clear place for the study of media texts within that structure. Perhaps the two which most clearly present contrasting ways in which this positioning might occur in the anglophone world are the National Curricula of Australia and New Zealand. In the New Zealand English curriculum, reading media texts is seen as being of being absolutely equal status to any other kind of printed or spoken text. The initial introduction to the English “Learning Area” in the curriculum document clear states that

“In English, students study, use, and enjoy language and literature communicated orally, visually, or in writing.”
(Ministry of Education, 2007;p.18)

From the outset here, the use of the word “visually” implies the idea that not all the texts that students will encounter – either in terms of making or viewing – will be printed word texts. The curriculum document goes on to suggest that young people studying English in New Zealand need to

“be effective oral, written, and visual communicators who are able to think critically and ...learn to deconstruct and critically interrogate texts in order to understand the power of language to enrich and shape their own and others’ lives” (ibid.)

It is interesting to note here how the curriculum explicitly links effective communication with deconstruction. While one cannot know how this statement is actually enacted in every school in New Zealand, the document carries a strong sense of a “parity of texts”, where notions of cultural and textual value are worked through by the student in cooperation with the teacher, rather than imposed. Concomitantly, there is no prescriptive content underlying this curriculum framework. This lack of prescription, along with the explicit inclusion of the words “oral” and “visual”, suggests that modes of communication have a similar parity. This encourages both teachers and students to see media texts (alongside others) as having a status within English. While as Rata acknowledges (2017) this lack of prescription can present some problems, it is not a quality apparent in the most recent version of the English National Curriculum for English.

The Australian NC for English –at least for Secondary schools - provides an interesting contrast to both the New Zealand and English frameworks. Here, there is a great deal of specificity, with examples given of what students should be learning in three different strands- Language, Literature and Literacy. It is fascinating in itself to see the curriculum organised on these lines rather than in terms of Speaking, Reading and Writing as in the UK, but such delineation does allow for some clear guidelines about where media texts might be positioned within the English classroom. A closer look at the Year 9 Literacy strand for example, illustrates exactly what Australian students are expected to be able to do with Media Texts, requiring that students;

“Analyse how the construction and interpretation of texts, including media texts, can be influenced by cultural perspectives and other texts” (ACARA, 2017;p.21)

The curriculum document goes on to identify a number of ways in which this analysis might be carried out, including;

- *comparing perspectives represented in texts from different times and places, including texts drawn from popular culture*
- *identifying, comparing and creating relationships between texts (including novels, illustrated stories, social issue cartoons, documentaries, multimodal texts)*
- (ibid.)

For some teachers, such prescription might be unhelpful. Aside from the issue of how this analysis and identification might actually work in classroom practice – an accusation that can be levelled at many curriculum documents –for some professionals, such examples might be deemed unnecessary or worse still, patronising. However, whatever professional position the teacher chooses to take up, it is likely that they will prefer either the more less prescriptive New Zealand approach or the more prescriptive Australian one. In terms of the study of Media texts within English, it does not matter, because both curricula, implicitly or explicitly, accept the integrality of their study.

These two examples can be augmented by many others (Holland, Spain, USA etc.) – where the study of media texts has a place within the teaching of English and other subjects. While these countries may not have positioned this teaching through a National curriculum, such prevalence makes it all the more mystifying that in England, such study appears to have been all but abandoned.

The National Curriculum in England 2014 – Whither Media?

The 2014 version of England's National Curriculum contains no mention of media, moving image, multimodal or even news texts. There are one or two brief mentions of culture in relation to reading and writing, but these appear to be (largely) about the cultural contexts of what the curriculum documents call "literary tradition". As discussed below, previous versions of the NC saw media and moving image texts as an integral part of the English curriculum, particularly in the way that they were conceived as being a gateway to other cultures and texts (more of which below).

So how did this situation arise? How did the UK move from a position in which the study of media texts was seen as an essential part of English to one in where such study was considered so unimportant as to not be mentioned? Part of the answer to this question is cultural and ideological and will be discussed further below but part of it is simply in some ways, about political happenstance. In 2010, a General Election brought a coalition government to power in the UK and the incoming Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove) made it very clear that the new government was going to be marked by a range of reforms, many of which were explicitly positioned as returning education in the UK to a more traditional place. These reforms were introduced via a white paper – the first stage of the law and policy making process in the UK - entitled "The Importance of Teaching". (DFE, 2010) This document, widely believed to have been largely authored by Gove personally, spoke of the need to return to "traditional subject disciplines" (p.42), "blazer and tie uniforms, prefects and house systems" (p.37) and "rigour and high standards" (ibid.) . Aside from the significant detail that many of these phenomena had been in evidence in UK schools prior to the arrival of the new government, the document was clearly designed to set a tone; to differentiate its educational agenda from that of its predecessor. For Gove, widely seen in both political and educational circles as an ideologically-driven neo-liberal , there needed to be a clear line drawn between the educational past and the future and this line would be established by a new National Curriculum. A more in depth analysis of the reasons that lie behind this return to tradition, and how it specifically pertains to Media Education is offered by David Buckingham (2017) and may be of particular use for readers unfamiliar with the UK context.

"The Importance of Teaching" promised that teachers would be consulted about the proposed curriculum – drafts of which were made available at the start of 2013; and a consultation duly took place. Respondents were simply asked if they had any comments about the draft curriculum as a whole , and then if they had any comments on specific subjects, such as English. A number of organisations, most notably the National Association for the Teaching of English(NATE, 2013) , and the English and Media Centre (EMC, 2013) responded pointing out the absence of any reference to media, multimodal or moving image texts in the curriculum. The English and Media Centre's response described this absence as a "glaring omission" , pointing out that

"A curriculum for the 21st Century that does not mention the media, or the many different ways in which people produce, encounter and critically read digital and visual texts, is one which fails to prepare pupils for important aspects of English in the real world." (EMC, 2013, p.1)

The summary report on the consultation (DFE, 2013) did not acknowledge these concerns, or indeed, many of the concerns raised about the English curriculum as a whole. The entire set of responses regarding the English curriculum - of which there were nearly four hundred – was summarised in five bullet points . (Spoken English, Grammar, The absence of Drama, The Primary

English Curriculum and the Structure of the Proposals). It was becoming very clear to many interested parties that not only was the study of Media texts being excluded from the curriculum for English, but also that the aforementioned curriculum was being redrawn in very narrow terms., and that new curriculum, with its lists of grammar and “representative Romantic poetry” as building some the clear ideological foundations– namely, that it would equate ideas of literary heritage with rigour.

The final draft of the NC (DFE, 2014) appeared to be very similar to the original proposals, at least in the sense that there was no place for the study of Media texts within English. It is worth pointing out here, that for some schools this was not a problem, either because they welcomed the return to a more traditional curriculum, or because they were academies (in the UK, these are state funded schools that are virtually completely autonomous and are not bound by the national curriculum), or because some more adventurous practitioners interpreted the absence of advice as a signal to do whatever they wanted to (Grahame, 2012) However, there was the sense that harder times were coming for English teachers who wanted to make the study of the media an integral part of their classroom work. Further reforms to GCSE English and English Literature, which replaced coursework with Controlled Assessment and then lengthy closed-book exams focusing on pre-20th century literature and poetry reinforced this sense further.

Media In English : The National Currciulum in England 1988-2010

So if that is now, what was then? There are more than thirty separate files in the UK National Archives pertaining to the development of the English component of the original National Curriculum published in 1989. Each of these thirty files contains hundreds of pages of documents, many of which relate to the English Working Group established in order to consult on and devise the curriculum. A good proportion of these many thousands of pages are devoted to the place of Media in that English curriculum. There are minutes of meetings, submissions from School Inspectors, teachers, academics and civil servants, position papers, conference proceedings and hand-written notes from ministers to their underlings, many of which consider the role of media texts in the English curriculum alongside literature and language.

A book chapter cannot really do justice to this rich vein of educational history, but it is possible to give an initial sense of the way that media featured in English during this twenty-two year period by considering three different sets of documents. These are

a) Submissions to the English Working Group –or EWG – whose task it was to come up with the framework that would form the basis of the English Curriculum from 1990 onwards;

b) The final report of the EWG *English Ages 5-16*, commonly referred to as the “Cox Report”

c) The finished version of the 1990 NC and subsequent revisions of it in 1993 , 1995 and 2007;

The nature of the published consultation and curriculum documents means that b) and c) are relatively easy to summarise briefly and an attempt to do so, alongside an analysis of these documents is included below. However, the group of documents that form a) is much more extensive and the discussion presented here can, for reasons of space, constitute only a relatively selective analysis of the evidence provided by them. In effect, there are a handful of examples,

included here to illustrate the kinds of discussion that were undertaken in order to establish the role of Media in the English curriculum. It is hoped that a more expansive interrogation of these documents will be carried out in future.

Submissions to the EWG

The National Curriculum English Working Group was established in the Spring of 1988 in the wake of the Kingman report, an enquiry into the teaching of English in British (as they were at the time) schools. Kingman had looked forward to the development of a common curriculum for English the institution of the EWG was part of a wider move by the UK government to develop a National Curriculum. The EWG was headed by Professor Brian Cox, who was Pro-Vice Chancellor and Professor of English Literature at the University of Manchester. The group was expected to produce a report which would form the basis of the National Curriculum for English and was composed of a number of senior teachers, academics, inspectors and teacher educators (the writer Roald Dahl was also originally a member of the group, but resigned midway through the groups deliberations) who met across a number of weekends throughout 1988. They discussed the potential content of the NC for English, and very aware that their work would be the basis for that curriculum document, took care to organise their final report into sections that they thought would reflect the breadth of English as a subject. Consequently, not only Media, but also Drama, Knowledge About Language, SEN and Equal Opportunities all made an appearance.

Many submissions were made to the EWG both from individuals concerned about the form and content of the finished curriculum and other interested groups of teachers. There were also some extensive discussions about individual topics which were minuted by the civil servants in attendance. In terms of Media education, both these types of document reveal a great deal about the importance and status of Media within English. Some of the submissions made, with the benefit of thirty years distance, might be viewed as being elicited from the “usual suspects” within British Media Education (Cary Bazalgette, David Buckingham, the fledgling subject association for Media – TEAME, Len Masterman and many others) but what is most revealing about the whole process is the time and space they were accorded to press their case for the importance of Media within English. Similarly, it is clear that many of these contributors were approaching the fundamental connections between Media texts and Literary texts from a wide variety of viewpoints. In their submission David Buckingham and Philip Drummond of the IOE (TNA; ED282/85/2) suggested that

“It can be argued that it will be precisely through the mass media that children will receive their most powerful social experiences of written and spoken language. At the same time, verbal language forms but one component of the broader ‘audio-visual’ language which characterises media texts, and which in turn requires a broader notion of audio-visual literacy.

(Buckingham & Drummond, 1988)

For Buckingham and Drummond the relationship between Media and the English curriculum is a sociolinguistic one; for students’ language and literacy to develop, they must be exposed to written and spoken language and this exposure will occur through the media. This view makes for an interesting contrast with the contribution submitted by Len Masterman, for whom the connection is more between texts and cultural value.

“...the history of media education within our schools has been, to a large extent, a history of the changing meanings of discrimination, a concept inflected and stretched finally to breaking point by attempts to apply it to the media...”
(Masterman, 1988; p.2)

For this particular researcher, what is striking here is the tacit acknowledgement in the documents gathered and retained that there are a range of views about the relationship between English and Media and that they are all an essential elements in thinking about what was, at the time, a new curriculum. A word like “discrimination” here, with all its Leavisite connotations, has a resonance for teachers today. When they read sections of the 2014 NC which refer to “high-quality, classic literature” (DFE, 2014) some may wonder, as Masterman implies, who is doing the discriminating and who is defining what “high quality” means.

In some respects, these submissions are what we might expect from consultation processes. Academics and teachers always have strong views on the nature of curriculum. What is more surprising perhaps is the role of the inspectorate, revealed by a closer look at the minutes of the EWG. For the purposes of this chapter, the most interesting of these is the record of an EWG meeting held on the 23rd June 1988 (TNA; NC/EWG88) which was addressed by James Learmonth, then a member of Her Majesty’ Inspectorate for Schools (HMI) and latterly an academic at Canterbury Christchurch University. Learmonth was a former headteacher who had a career long-interest in media education (Bolas, 2007), and the minutes record him giving a summary of the state of media education in English Schools at the time and then identifying what he saw as the priorities for Media within English. These were firstly, “the development of a curricular framework for media studies” and secondly, what Learmonth refers to as “institutionalising the work”. It would appear that what he means here is that at the time of the meeting, Media education generally relies upon the efforts on a small hardcore group of teachers and that their ideas and practices need to be incorporated into the national curriculum and other structures in order to make them truly effective. For Learmonth, it is clear that “institutionalising” here is not a negative term, but rather one that legitimises what those teachers are doing. After Learmonth’s presentation, there is a wide ranging discussion, recorded in the minutes, about the ways that the EWG might formalise this institutionalising process. It is interesting to note here, that the minutes of this meeting never suggest anything other than the idea that Learmonth – despite having the dual role of regulator and policymaker - is a collaborator in the process of devising the curriculum, operating within John Dixon’s “spirit of Dartmouth” (see below) . Teachers today might wonder if such a meeting of minds would be possible in contexts where relationships of this kind are often more antagonistic. These are just a small number of examples of documents which form part of the deliberations of the EWG. However, they do give a small insight into a process which suggests that those involved really saw a significant role for the study of Media texts within English, and as will be suggested below, these deliberations led to a reasonably significant role for that study in future versions of the curriculum. These deliberations in and of themselves, evoke “the spirit of Dartmouth”. John Dixon’s belief in the democratic participation of teachers (Dixon, 2009) is manifest in these documents and the ideas expressed within them.

The Final Report of the EWG

When the Cox report was finally published in March 1989, quite a lot of the deliberation was captured and a broad consensus was evident in the chapter devoted to Media in English. This three page section of the report highlighted a tension still evident in Media education today, in that the final third of it considered the sometimes vexed relationship between English, Media and Information Technology, but the first two pages do capture the critical, cultural and creative relationships that exist between the two areas of study. In prefacing the chapter of the report with the quote from Kingman, at the start of this chapter, the EWG was emphasising the way that both “the media” and technology had to have a relationship with English in the new curriculum and a closer analysis of the chapter bears this out. Early on in the chapter, the report makes a cultural argument not unlike the one made by Len Masterman in his submission to the group:

“Television and film form substantial parts of pupils’ experience out of school and teachers need to take this into account. Pupils should have the opportunity to apply their critical faculties to these major parts of contemporary culture.”

(DES, 1989; p.103)

For the EWG then, concepts of criticality and culture make a natural connection with Literary texts, suggesting that there is room for both “heritage” and “cultural studies” models of the English curriculum – if one accepts that these are two distinct things and not, as Julian McDougall suggests, simply the study of “text” (McDougall, 2006). However the report also acknowledges the kind of socio-linguistic connection made by Buckingham and Drummond’s submission as well:

“Media education, like drama, deals with fundamental aspects of language, interpretation and meaning. It is therefore consonant with the aims of English teaching. In fact, media education has often developed in a very explicit way concepts which are of general importance in English. These include selection (of information, viewpoint, etc.), editing, author, audience, medium, genre, stereotype, etc.”

(ibid.)

The language used in this acknowledgement might be characterised as post- structuralist in its tone (suggested by words such as “interpretation” and “meaning”) and indeed it is clear that for the EWG, the linguistic and analytical act of deconstructing texts is a significant aspect of the English curriculum. In effect, the 2014 curriculum is probably a rejection of the importance of these ideas; an attempt to return to a period in which structure and agency were not things that English teachers concerned themselves with. This return to a reductionist, absolutist view of the subject - in which a spirit of inquiry is replaced by an over-emphasis on factual knowledge - is presented and defended by statements which suggest that such an emphasis is necessary because “standards” have fallen. These kinds of (admittedly contested) value-claim, return the debate about the English curriculum to the immediate aftermath of the Cox report in which ideological entrenchment on both sides of the argument replaces a considered dialogue about where English teaching should go in the 21st century.

Interestingly, much of the detail and intention of the EWG’s report regarding Media in English did not make it in to the final published National Curriculum, much to the chagrin of both Professor Cox

himself and the rest of the EWG. In an extraordinary move, Kenneth Baker, then Secretary of State for Education decided to publish the last three chapters of the report (which contained the recommendations of the group) before the preceding 14 where the complex detail and argument about the curriculum was laid out. While this was obviously not all to do with disliking the parts of the report that were to do with media education, it did send a signal that both Baker and the government he was part of were not going to accept the EWG's advice verbatim.

The National Curriculum – 1990, 1995, 1999, 2007

In the twenty year period from 1990-2010, the National curriculum programmes of study, both for English and other subjects underwent a number of re-writes. These “versions” of the original 1990 curriculum came about as a result of a number of different factors; for example, teacher dissatisfaction with the original programmes of study (POS) led the government to appoint Sir Ron Dearing to review them and this, in turn led to the 1995 version of the curriculum. Space does not permit a full account of these decisions and revisions here, but suffice to say there was a fair amount of political wrangling about the content of the programmes (Byers, 1994) . In the case of the study of media within English, it is interesting to look at the language used, and the way that it evolves as time progresses. This evolution is, I would suggest, indicative of a number of phenomena that could be observed in this period, perhaps most notably the convergence of media and print texts in new technological forms and the fact that more English teachers were teaching Media Studies alongside their main subject discipline.

It is interesting to note that, as in the original submission of the EWG, there are references to media texts which appear throughout the programmes of study for Speaking & Listening, Reading and Writing. In the writing POS, for example, teachers are often encouraged to get students to write scripts for television and film. However, it is in the Reading programmes of study that use of media texts is most clearly identified, and so this analysis focuses on the way that these are presented.

In the original 1990 version of the National Curriculum, the Reading POS suggests that

“Pupils should be introduced to a range of media texts and be encouraged to consider their purpose, text and intended audience”

(DES, 1990; p.32)

This paragraph of advice is preceded by a longer paragraph which refers to, amongst other things, *developing “powers of discrimination”* when considering a range of media texts.(ibid.) These two short paragraphs at least capture some flavour of the discussions of the EWG, in that both directly and indirectly reflect ideas about purpose and audience, cultural awareness and an ability to connect issues of literacy with the mass media.

However by the time the revised 1995 curriculum is published these two paragraphs become condensed into one.

“Pupils should be introduced to a wide range of media e.g. magazines, newspapers, radio, television, film. They should be given opportunities to analyse and evaluate such material, which should be of

high quality and represent a range of forms and purposes, and different structural and presentational devices .

(DFE, 1995;p.20)

Note here, the origins of the phrase “of high quality”, which recurs in a different context in the 2014 version of the NC in relation to literary text. There is no use of such a phrase in the original EWG report, or indeed in many of the submissions to the EWG, and as such, one may suspect that it has been inserted by other means; it does perhaps demonstrate that Cox was right to see his report as unpopular with the politicians reading it.

When the curriculum was revised again, in 1999, there were some further developments from a media texts point of view. Most notable of these was the clear acknowledgement of the difference between print and moving image texts. The Reading POS was extended from its 1995 wording to reflect this;

“Pupils should be taught:

- a) How meaning is conveyed in texts that include print, images and sometimes sounds*
- b) How choice of form, layout and presentation contribute to effect (for example; font, caption, illustration in printed text; sequencing, framing, soundtrack in moving image text)*
- c) How the nature of and purpose of media products influence content and meaning (for example; selection of stories for front page or news broadcast)*
- d) How audiences and readers choose and respond to media.”* (DFEE, 1999; p. 35)

Media Studies teachers will probably be the first to note that this curricular guidance effectively asks English teachers to cover three of the four key concepts used in their subject (Media Language, Representation and Audience) and there is tacit acknowledgement here that for at least some teachers, the subject silos of English and Media Studies are converging around a third subject – what Julian McDougall has suggested we might just call “Text” (McDougall, 2006). While this was probably not the case for all teachers interpreting the National Curriculum guidance, it meant at least, that all students were being exposed to a range of media texts in English, because exam boards introduced compulsory Reading assessments which involved Media texts at GCSE level in English. This state of affairs broadly remained unchanged from 1999 to 2010. The wording of the POS highlighted above is largely consistent in the 1999 and 2004 revisions of the curriculum. Perhaps most interestingly of all in the final iteration of the NC prior to the change of government , published in 2007, the Reading POS for KS3 uses the term” text” in an interchangeable way throughout the curriculum guidance:

Reading for meaning

Pupils should be able to:

- a) recognise and discuss different interpretations of texts, justifying their own views on what they read and see, and supporting them with evidence*
- g) understand how audiences and readers choose and respond to texts*
- h) understand how the nature and purpose of texts influences the selection of content and its meanings*

- i) *understand how meaning is created through the combination of words, images and sounds in multimodal text* (QCA, 2007)

Here, reading and seeing are the same thing. No distinction is made between printed, visual or multimodal text and the use of a word like multimodality suggests that implicit in the construction of the curriculum is the idea that in the 21st century, language and literacy are heavily reliant upon the successful encounter between the student and texts, which do not necessarily only occur in the printed mode. This final pre-2010 version of the English Curriculum is moving towards (if not already at) a point at which the media and printed texts are fully integrated with each other within the subject. There can be little doubt that the subsequent changes to the NC, post-2010, are designed to “turn back the clock” to an idea of English that excludes such integration on the grounds that near-mythical, pre-NC versions of the subject were somehow better or more worthwhile.

Conclusions

While this analysis of a set of apparently obscure documents in an archive in London might seem to reveal a peculiarly English set of problems, the sense of what has been lost from the curriculum points towards more global concerns. It is possible to see the excision of media texts from school English as part of a wider set of trends; the focus on mechanistic drill-based methods of teaching writing in the US, established by the Common Core State Standards (Peel, 2017); the demand for a national phonics screening check in Australia; some of the objections to the liberal ideological tone of the New Zealand curriculum. All of these phenomena hint at an abandonment of the growth model of English cultivated by those present at Dartmouth in 1966.

There are however, a number of voices set in opposition to both the newest version of the curriculum and the way it appears to be part of a wider global trend towards a more conservative and less growth-orientated version of English, most notably those behind the series of documents entitled “Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan” (Richmond et al., 2016). These reports identify a number of deficiencies in the 2014 NC and suggest an alternative model that might be adopted in its place. While the authors acknowledge that their ideas will be at odds with legislators, they go out of their way to stress that, in the 21st century, it seems at best remiss, and at worst, illogical to exclude the study of Media texts from the English Curriculum.

“A particular blind spot in the new orders, across the piece, is the almost total absence of any recognition that in the second decade of the 21st century the children and young people in our schools are surrounded by electronic and digital media.” (Richmond et al., 2016a)

The authors proffer an alternative curriculum (Richmond et al, 2016b) which puts the reading and writing of media texts at its heart, alongside a clear sense of developing students as critical readers and their view gives a good deal of consideration to what a sophisticated, mature English curriculum has the potential to look like. One other important point that they make is about the abandonment of “the principle of general entitlement” (Richmond et al., 2016a.p19); because of legislation in the UK which effectively frees certain schools (broadly those described as academies) from any obligation to deliver the National Curriculum it seems pointless in having one at all. As David Buckingham has pointed out, writing in relation to the position of Media Education generally, this is part of a wider paradox in which there is both greater centralised control of education but also greater deference to the free market. (Buckingham, 2017) With such a “paradoxical politics” (ibid, p.1) at play it is hardly surprising that there is an illogicality present in the current English curriculum.

Importantly, these voices hark back to the ideas present in the original Dartmouth seminar. John Dixon, writing in 1975, nearly a decade after the gathering, suggested that the shifting ground of culture and its relationship with English as a subject might produce the kind of knee-jerk reaction that the 2014 NC has come to resemble:

“Under such pressures there is a tendency to panic, to define an external curriculum—a system into which teacher and pupil must fit—instead of helping teachers, in departments and larger groups, to define for themselves the order and sequence that underlies their best work. There was considerable agreement at the Seminar that such panic measures were to be avoided” (Dixon, 1975. p.137)

Here then, is a salient reminder of how far English teaching has come since Dartmouth; not only in the way that teachers have continued to reflect and act in the best interests of their students, but also in the way that they have attempted to make their subject best serve those interests. This thing that they do –teaching English – which includes exploring the way that media texts communicate meaning, is far too significant to be left to the whims of politicians, and as such requires that they keep hold to things that both the colleagues at Dartmouth, and those people who were involved in the development of the original National Curriculum, articulated as being central to the study of English.

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