

TEACHER TRAINING FOR MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE UK

Published in *Medienimpulse*, Vienna April 2007

Any explanation of educational provision in the UK at school level has to be contextualised in the particularities of our system. In the first place, there are four education systems in the UK: the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own systems and, although the last two remain closely aligned with the system in England, they are increasingly diverging as their devolved national identities become stronger.

Secondly, the systems of public examinations for young people of 14 and over also differ between the four nations, with Scotland, again, having examinations at slightly different levels and stages than the rest of the UK. The other three nations operate essentially the same programme, in which 16-year-olds take a General Certificate of Education (GCSE) and a substantial number of 16-18 year olds study for Advanced Level ("A" Level) examinations, split into the AS (taken at age 17) and the A2 (taken a year later). There is also a wide range of other, mainly vocational, qualifications available to this age-group. Further changes are under way: Wales is starting to establish a "Welsh Baccalaureat", and England is setting up a Diploma system which will attempt to bring vocational and academic qualifications closer together and might eventually replace "A" Levels.

A further idiosyncrasy is that in England, the examinations are set and administered by a number of private companies ("Awarding Bodies"): schools are free to decide which Awarding Body's examinations they would like to use, for any subject. Although this system is regulated by Government and generally taken to be fair and equitable, there are of course differences in required content between the different bodies because they are, essentially, operating in a market. In addition, students have a free choice of subjects at "A" Level – from an enormous range – and a substantial amount of choice at GCSE beyond the required "core" of English, Maths and Science.

The immense complexity of this system means that initial teacher training in the UK cannot possibly prepare teachers for all the examination courses they may be required to teach, especially in newer and more marginal subjects. Most teachers – in secondary schools anyway – qualify as teachers by taking a one-year course (the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education or PGCE) after the completion of their first degree. Most of the time in a PGCE course is spent on practical training in schools, rather than in the academic classroom. There is therefore little time to allocate to specialist study. For this reason, initial teacher training departments in universities tend to admit students who have a first degree in a mainstream school subject (ie not media), so that they can be assumed to have good subject knowledge and the teacher training can focus more on pedagogic technique. The university is thus more likely to achieve a higher pass rate.

Although candidate numbers for specialist courses in media subjects – Media Studies, Film Studies, Moving Image Arts etc – are increasing at both GCSE and A Level (now topping 100,000 annually – about 6% of the 14-18 age group – and putting this sector into the top ten of student preferences), the relative novelty of the subject area means that the State system of funding for initial teacher training does not yet recognise media as a subject warranting its own funding. It is assumed that teachers training in, say English, will be able to teach media as well. This assumption is now being disputed, and it is likely that in the near future, requests by universities wanting to offer more specialised initial training for teachers who want to teach media at GCSE or “A” Level will be granted funding.

Currently, many schools want to offer media subjects because they are attractive subjects to students and thus help the schools increase their numbers of students aged 16+, for whom they can then get additional funding. But the schools find it very difficult to appoint experienced media teachers. Often they adopt the same attitude as Government: “anybody who can teach English can teach media”. In consequence, there are many teachers desperate for in-service training in media, which effectively in this case counts as another form of initial training, since they have never had any media training so far. These people face two hurdles: firstly, having to get their school to accept that they really need it, fund the training and release them to attend courses; secondly, finding a provider within reach who will offer appropriate training.

Most teachers of examination courses in media attend at least one training day offered by the relevant Awarding Body. But such training usually concentrates on the technicalities of the examination itself, rather than on subject knowledge. Aspirant media teachers are thus driven to seeking training where they can find it. This may be from private companies specialising in teacher training, or it may be from non-profit organisations such as the English and Media Centre and the British Film Institute, both of whom offer accredited courses in media teaching. In addition of course, many teachers work very hard to train themselves, using books and the internet to develop their own subject knowledge.

For children and young people up to the age of 16, all four UK nations require some kind of media learning in their general school curricula. These curricula are obligatory in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but are offered only as “guidance” in Scotland. This requirement is relatively marginal and is mainly located within English, although there are some elements in arts subjects and Citizenship, and in Wales within Welsh language teaching. Media learning is also only required at secondary level, although in Northern Ireland there are now also some requirements at primary level too. The marginality of the requirement means that initial teacher training takes little account of media, allocating maybe a day or two within the whole PGCE course.

However, interest in media education continues to grow in the UK, and there is increasing recognition that it should be seen as a normal part of every child’s

general literacy, rather than something separate and optional. For this reason, there is increasing interest in the development of structured and continuing in-service provision at local authority level, with over 50 local authorities out of the 147 in England having made a specific commitment to the development of media education in their schools. The growth of specialist media arts schools¹ – of which there are now over 40 in England – means that primary schools located near to such schools are developing their own media education expertise, because it is part of the specialist schools' remit to work with their local community including their “feeder” primary schools and to share their expertise and usually lavish resources. At initial teacher training level, some universities offer optional additional sessions or course modules in media, so that there are increasing numbers of newly qualified teachers in the UK who have some sort of “taster” training in media education.

Nobody in the UK who cares about media education is happy with this situation. But curricular requirements and initial teacher training provision are closely linked. Until there are clear and specific requirements for media education in the school curriculum, especially at primary level, media education will continue to be perceived as marginal or “special” – the province of enthusiasts rather than of every teacher. There are signs that UK curricula are soon to become rather more liberal, or at least less prescriptive, with more onus on teachers to organise the curriculum in ways that they think will enable their pupils to achieve higher standards. In such a context, it is likely that media education would thrive and in consequence, more initial teacher training in media would be offered. The ideal outcome would be a transformation of initial teacher training in English, accommodating a much wider range of “literacies”, including media.

We do however need better accounts of what sustained and systematic media education could look like, better accounts of learning progression, and better criteria for assessment. Media education is still far too dependent upon self-celebratory accounts of short term projects, both in and out of school, as its means of promotion. Media education cannot be just about pedagogic techniques: it has to be grounded in robust evidence about real – and sustained – learning. Such evidence would be needed to form the basis of any initial teacher training in the future.

Cary Bazalgette
Media Literacy Researcher and Consultant

8,827 characters
1,407 words

¹ Secondary schools in England are encouraged by Government to opt for “specialist status”, securing private sponsorship as well as additional government funding, to offer a curriculum which emphasises a particular area, such as languages, sport, technology, media, etc.