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Broadcasting, Language and Schools

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Abstract

This is a short essay about the history of educational media in schools. It is also about educational theory, linguistic theory, and the language we use when we talk and write to each. This is a short essay about the history of educational media and educational theory in the UK. I'll be talking mostly about the place of audio-visual media, in primary school education. The history of education is usually identified with the history of schools and schoolteachers. Nowadays, it is more common to research broader aspects of education, such as architecture, diet, museums. This is partly because it is felt that a lot of the most useful groundwork on the history of schools has already been done, and there is not so much more left to say. It is also because we are starting to think more and more that education does not begin or end with schools, and that other influences on education are just as important. This essay is about the use of media in education.

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Some definitions.

I will be mainly talking about primary school education, which in the UK means school from the age of four or five, to twelve or thirteen. By educational media, I will mainly be referring to television and radio programmes for schools, and school text books. These were produced by the BBC from the 1920s to the 1990s, with a peak of output coming in the 1970s, when BBC Schools programmes were used in 90 per cent of UK Schools. It seems that there is something about the medium of television or film, and of radio, that counteracts or contradicts the system of schools and schoolteachers. Indeed, the other reason that historians have lost interest in schools is that it seems that there is something impossibly problematic about the system itself. It has proved surprisingly difficult to create a system of schooling, and apply it to society, that does not have fundamental problems with it in one way or another. As soon as the system is changed to solve one problem, another appears somewhere else. Some problems pertain to power relationships and disciplinary structures that exist within schools and their effects on students. Some problems have been about deciding what and how to teach students. Some problems have come from the differences that exist between the social class backgrounds of students. All these problems seem to have something to do with the nature of social organisation, and so are very deep and important problems to solve.

As a media historian, I want to address these problems, but I think that the best way I can approach them is through explaining what has happened in the twentieth century as mass media has been applied to mass education, and to see what happened and what went wrong. It may be that the problems and contradictions that emerge when media is applied to schools highlight points of rupture and points of opportunity, and show a way to reform schools and education, and media.

In a different way, the story I am going to tell is about the difference between thinking and doing. In this way I explore the history of educational theory in the twentieth century, when we grappled with this problem, and tried to apply the distinction to the organisation of the school system. Of course, the distinction between abstract things and concrete things has a long lineage in philosophy. In the twentieth century it has also spilled over into more applied disciplines which have roots in philosophy, such as linguistics and psychology, and of course educational theory, or pedagogy. Recently we have perhaps made real progress in the scientific study of the human mind, and of human behaviour. We have tried to apply these findings to our education system, with diverse and complex results. Perhaps this is because despite all our progress, it still seems very confusing and difficult to see what the difference is between thinking and doing – or if perhaps these are just two ways of describing the same thing.

A good place to start the history of educational media in the UK is in the 1920s. This is because this saw the

start of educational broadcasting, and there were also important developments in schools. Schools at that time were quite diverse and there were several different types. The main difference was between schools that were funded and run by the state, or rather local authorities, and schools that were run and funded privately. Only about five per cent of children went to the private schools (confusingly, often called public schools, for historical reasons) -but entrance to university and the higher tiers of politics and public service were limited to graduates from these schools. Most other children did not stay on in school past the age of fourteen. In the 1920s, the BBC began broadcasting radio programmes for use in schools. At the time, some thought that radio could be harnessed as a tool of mass education, because it would allow the very best speakers to broadcast lessons which everyone would be able to hear. At first, the reaction from teachers was highly critical. The quality of the programmes was considered to be very low. In order to win the confidence of the teachers, the BBC brought them in as advisers who made sure that what the BBC produced was suitable for use in schools, and that it was what the schools wanted. However, some people still thought that there was something unique about the power of radio. In fact there was a comparable movement at the same time in the UK in documentary film. Long before the term 'propaganda' took on the negative connotations associated with totalitarian states, it was used in a positive way by John Grierson. Grierson thought that propaganda could be used as a way of educating for mass democracy, and he wanted to use film in a creative way, that would make complex affairs interesting for normal people. His ideas were not so different from those of public relations and marketing specialists in the USA, which he had learned about while there on a Rockefeller scholarship. But there was always a big difference between what the BBC could do and what Grierson wanted.

The BBC was severely limited by the terms of its charter, and the practical requirement to keep the government and the goodwill of the people and institutions on its side. It was not even allowed to report on any 'controversial' issues, or any issues at all that were being discussed in parliament, until two weeks later. There was even confusion at first as to what part of the BBC the news department should fall under – and at first 'news' was part of the education department, until it later moved to the 'talks' department. The BBC always had to be careful that it was not stepping of the toes of private industries. It faced complaints from the press, the music halls, publishers, and of course teachers. In any case, it was always disputable how much use a radio would be in a classroom. There was no technology for pre-recording programmes. Classes had to tune in when the programme was broadcast live from the BBC studios. Many teachers never got used to the position of sitting quietly while the BBC took over their classes from them. The breed of professionals who grew up in the education department of the BBC at this time developed a kind of energetic pragmatism that allowed them to survive and thrive. Many were women. The leader of the department in its early days was Mary Somerville, and the greatest producer was Rhoda Power. Power, whose sister Eileen taught medieval history at the new London School of Economics, made history programmes that were time-travelling dramatizations, rich with music, sound effects and action. They captivated childish minds and assured the survival of the Schools service.

But Schools broadcasting could not have survived had it not been able to persuade educators of the time that it was suitable for their methods. It did this by emphasising the 'extension of experience' that radio could afford. The term 'experience' appears again and again in the BBC's description of its educational programmes, and this is not surprising -as it was also a buzzword in the contemporary progressive theory of education. It is never easy to describe exactly what progressive education was supposed to be. It was associated with a range of thinkers, who often had in fact quite different ideas, including Jean Piaget,

Froebel, and A. S. Neil. One of the most influential in the 1920s was John Dewey. Dewey thought that a functioning democracy required a well-educated and informed populace who knew how to adapt and interpret information and events in order to make good decisions collectively. He also thought that education and work should be intimately connected. It of course was obvious to him that education should be the responsibility of the community or the state. One of Dewey's most important and influential ideas was that learning came through experiencing things for oneself – that one learns by doing. Dewey did not think that education came from concentrating on the facts of a subject and then imparting them to a passive class. The class could only learn the facts and the skills by solving problems together and experiencing things for themselves.

This idea of learning by doing has always been one of the most problematic for educational media. Film, radio, and most of all television, have always been accused of fomenting passivity in their audience. How can you be active while watching a screen? The BBC gave two answers. Firstly, it said that broadcasting could offer children a kind of proxy 'experience' of things that they were not able to experience themselves, because it was not practical for schools to take children to see them. Secondly, they argued that broadcasts offered inspiration for teachers to create projects out of them. However, despite the inventiveness of the programmes, and the willingness on the part of some teachers to play along, the compatibility of educational broadcasting with experiential methods was never resolved. Of course, the compatibility of formal schooling with experiential methods was never resolved either – it proved very difficult to find the resources for most schools to approximate the kind of teaching that Dewey and other reformers recommended. Some schools, such as A.S. Neill's Summerhill, took a radical direction and gave democracy to the pupils. But in general, most teachers were uncomfortable with the potential collapse of discipline, and the difficulties of organising such a system.

It had become clear during the 1930s that change was needed to the system of organised schooling, and that a new pedagogy and a new system was required. The eventual outcome, which came in 1944, had only vague reference to what the progressives wanted. Part of the reason for this was the need to maintain some continuity with the past, and the maintenance of the social order that went with it. However, there was another reason that shaped the new state school system, which was instituted in 1944. One of the things that the teachers had learned from progressive methods was that children differed from each other in some classifiable ways. This was obvious: of course every child is different, but during the 1920s a way of testing children's mental capacity and behaviour had been developed. This came from the burgeoning field of mental measurement and psychological classification that emerged from the laboratories of Europe and the USA in the inter-war years. Here, the idea that everyone was born with a certain amount of aptitude in different fields was established, which predetermined their ability to learn to do certain tasks in adulthood. It was this notion more than anything that determined the course of the new system of schooling that came into practice after the war. All children would go to primary schools, which would all be more or less the same type. At the age of eleven, each would sit a test. Those who showed aptitude for abstract and verbal reasoning would go to 'grammar' schools (another term with archaic roots), and were destined for the higher professions, administration and academia; those who were good with practical skills and mechanics would go to 'technical schools', and from there to leadership of industry; the rest would go to 'secondary moderns', and be prepared for the normal economy. The private schools were left alone and continued to take the richest pupils.

Two big problems quickly emerged. Firstly, despite the fact that the three types of school were supposed to

have, in the famous phrase of a secretary of education, 'parity of esteem', predictably, the grammar schools were the most coveted and sought after places to put one's child. Secondly, and even more seriously, post war shortages meant that very few technical schools were ever built. In effect, an intended tripartite system was in fact a bipartite system, with only twenty per cent of pupils gaining a grammar school place. In some cases the selective entry system to grammar schools favoured working class students who did well in the test, and received a standard of education that they would not otherwise have received. However, it was soon found that middle class students were greatly favoured in winning grammar school places, and that middle class parents were very reluctant to allow their children to attend secondary modern schools. The new school system was to present schools broadcasting with the opportunity to promote itself afresh.

Television was said to be able to present abstract concepts in a concrete way, and so make them more understandable to audiences of pupils such as those in the secondary moderns, or the technical schools, who could not deal easily with abstractions in a purely verbal manner. Therefore most school television programmes were aimed at these schools, and uptake in grammar schools was much less pronounced. However, in general, the popularity of school broadcasting grew and grew. The 1960s also saw the expansion of school television into primary schools. Again, much of the theory that developed would concern the difference between abstract and concrete concepts, but this time a strain of sociological activism would be at work.

During the 1950s the field of sociology had burgeoned as new research methodology had rapidly increased the quality of the knowledge of societal conditions. One question was important above all: why did people tend to stay in the social class they were born in – why was there so little social mobility? As the process seemed to start at the very beginning of life, researchers looked at childhood, the family, and school. Nevertheless, it seemed difficult to explain why working class children, despite having been born with equal potential, quickly developed what appeared to be lower educational aptitudes. At the same time, researchers of language also became interested in the details of how people really talk to each other. They turned their attention to the difference between middle class and working class language, and began to look for what the essential nature of the difference was -while assuming that there really was one. The next step was quite obvious. Could working class children be failing at school because they weren't learning to talk in the required way at home?

Basil Bernstein grew up in the East End of London, and formed his ideas teaching early school leavers how to drive. He began to theorise that working class children did not only sound different to their middle class counterparts, but that there was something conceptually different too. He thought that there were essentially two 'codes' operating in language. One code was useful for interpersonal language, and assumed that the two speakers were aware of roughly the same things at the point of speaking. It was useful for talking about things in the here and now, and for speakers who were at the point of speaking assumed to have a different statues of some kind, like soldiers of different rank. The other code was better for talking about abstract things, and assumed that the speakers had roughly equal status. Bernstein began to think that while middle class children were trained from birth to be able to use both codes, those from the lower middle class were never given practice at home in the second code. Because the second code was the one favoured and required at school, these children would always have a disadvantage when they got to school. This gave the BBC a new and very difficult task.

Education now started before school – in pre-school, which would now become not just a time for play and

nurturing before school began, but also a training ground to bring all pupils up to standard and make them ready for school. Television could be a bridge between the home and school, by bringing the world of education into the home in an easily accessible way. At the beginning of the 1970s, the BBC began a series of programmes which were designed to promote conversation between mothers and children – the right sort of conversation which would allow the right sort of language use to develop. The BBC produced programmes containing depictions of a narrator speaking to children about things in children's daily lives, such as people in the street, or a visit to the zoo. This was also a tenet of the new kind of 'child-centred' education – children were to be exposed to things safely within their own worlds. However, problems began to emerge with the theory quite quickly. Firstly, researchers such as Bernstein found it very difficult to determine in any detail what the difference really was between the codes that he had hypothesised. Even more problematic was the fact that it was hard to get any rigorous experimental data. This was because the theory hypothesised that the different codes pertained to different contexts or functions, but in order to test this, it was necessary to engineer a particular context of function. But experimental conditions were too simple, and tended to show the wrong things.

In the USA where Bernstein's theory had made a big impact – though it had been used for policy on race rather than class – there was a fascinating and damaging critique by William Labov. Labov had spent his career studying the difference between speech in different parts of New York, but he was looking for easily identifiable variables, such as the voicing of the letter 'r' in words like 'farm'. He found that people in working class areas were more likely to pronounce the letter unvoiced (like most English accents), whereas people in upper class areas were more likely to voice it (like some parts of England, Scotland and Ireland). This spread could be seen geographically and was fairly consistent. Labov was also interested in the same things as Bernstein – the sociological aspects of language -but came to completely different conclusions. He thought that working class language was just as good at dealing with conceptual issues as middle class language was – it just did so in a very different way. All that Bernstein had identified, thought Labov was that working class people tended to assume more background knowledge in their audience, whereas middle class people were more used to speaking to people whom they didn't know, and so supplying background information automatically. The issue remains unresolved to this day – and the place of literacy in early child education is still disputed among theorists, despite its central place in the curriculum.

The BBC's school service continued to be popular throughout the 1970s and early 80s, but it began to face problems for several reasons. One reason was that it was expensive and unglamorous. Making really good educational programmes was as expensive as making good documentaries, but they had a much more limited audience. This was particularly noticeable in the Open University programmes, which were pitched at undergraduate level, but all too often consisted mainly of a presenter speaking to camera, with rudimentary presentation. During the 1980s, many education programmes were shunted into late night transmission, expected to be recorded on videotape by schools and stored for use in class. This removed the possibility of casual daytime viewing, and further locked the programmes to the policy of schools.

Unfortunately for the BBC, government policy on schools was about to change significantly. The most important change was that school curricula, previously the preserve of schools and teachers to determine, was now to be set by central government. This meant that the BBC was much more restricted in the type of content it could produce in its Schools programmes. These were now judged for their usefulness to a curriculum, whose materials could be sourced easily from many other providers, rather than its intrinsic merit as a creative educational product. More changes to the law surrounding public service broadcasting

meant that the BBC's main competitor, ITV, stopped producing School television altogether. The final blow to the BBC's Schools service was when a move to online provision was blocked, after protests from commercial publishers.

What happened to the theories of language which had seemed to hold so much promise in the 1960s? Literacy (and numeracy), moved ever more closely to the centre of the primary school curriculum, as studies consistently found that the most literate and numerate pupils always did best at school, especially those from lower income backgrounds. This meant that project-based work, and arts and crafts, which had been promoted by the progressives decades earlier, became increasingly irrelevant to primary schools under pressure to improve standards in reading, writing and mathematics. The distinction between abstract and concrete language, of such great interest to mid century theorists, and crucial to understanding what was meant by the term 'literacy', has also proved too complicated for schools to cope with. The idea that media could be harnessed and used for its strengths, to educate, has been largely forgotten.

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About the author

Steven Barclay received an undergraduate degree in History and Philosophy from Glasgow University (2003 – 07), and then trained in television production. He worked as an editor in the television industry, and for an educational publisher making classroom films. He later studied a Master's degree in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD at the Communications and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster. He received the prestigious Quentin Hogg Scholarship in September 2017. His work focuses on BBC Schools and Education theory. He has also worked as a teacher in schools, language schools and in community education.