

Creative subject(s): reflections on the history of Media Studies

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Media Studies: trajectories, histories and perspectives

In this paper, my aim is to offer a Cultural Studies analysis of the growth and development of Media Studies as a school 'subject'. I am interested in:

- investigating the relationships between curriculum development and social change
- considering what might be the relationship between a school subject and the notions of subjectivity it helps promote, shape and form.

Both of these key questions are thus predicated on a way of thinking about the intricate set of influences and responses that might be said to exist between school subjects and society at large, and I shall try to offer a way of theorising this. Having been involved in developing Media Studies in schools for over twenty years, I am vexed by the challenge of trying to figure out what might be the outcomes or effect of Media Studies over the period. This is my overarching question, and although I know at one level that it is unanswerable—for we could never isolate the development of a school subject from other influences; and indeed, what kind of metric could measure this kind of outcome?—I still think that there is some merit in pursuing the enquiry.

This is partly a little indulgent, in that given my own history, I want to find a way of assessing what difference developing Media Studies at school level might have made to anybody; but also, more generally, I want to use the Media Studies example as way of reflecting on the



interrelationships between education as question of national policy, or even as a social system, and the wider culture. In other words, my caution about the effects of a school subject, or the relationship between curriculum and subjectivity, should stand as a test case for investigating these questions more generally.

Most of my accounts of how Media Studies might work as a subject derive from the British context. This is clearly peculiar, but I do not believe that broad interpretive principles derived from this context would be invalidated because of their locality.

Curriculum subjects and subjectivity

Cultural Studies has always placed the study of education at the heart of its project. Early work from Birmingham, such as 'Unpopular Education' or 'Resistance through Ritual' (CCCS 1981; Jefferson & Hall 2006) explored the relationship between youth culture and education systems at a grounded but macro level. Although more detailed cultural studies of education paid great attention to the hitherto silenced questions of power, authority and class formation, especially in the most famous examples of Paul Willis' 'Learning to Labour', (Willis 1978), in that work, and in the earlier scholarship, school was, on the whole, undifferentiated in experiential terms and operated at a macro level. Whilst there has always been a concern to explore how schooling constructs subjectivity, especially in relation to the classic sociological categories of class, race and gender, schooling is often conceptualised (even by some educationalists), in a rather general fashion, as if it is all of a type in its aspirations and operations.

Studies of youth culture (where of course the subjects of research are implicitly and explicitly counter-poised with their lives in and out of school), also tend to operate in this tradition, even though there are a number of studies exploring schooling as radical project. So, the emblematic title of the collection: 'What they don't learn in school: literacy in the



lives of urban youth' (Mahiri 2003), might develop the Cultural Studies tradition of exploring the semiotic work of authentic youth cultures; but I would argue that the study as a whole tends naively to oppose schooling as a monolithic effect. This is partly, as I have already implied, due to a way of imagining school as inauthentic, and youth culture as genuine; but also because many Cultural Studies scholars do not have expertise in examining how fractions of work in school may connect with other aspects of young people's lives, or consider that the experience of schooling itself may not be over-determined by its place as a key sociological category of a State institution, but may exist alongside other axes in the formation of identity.

Some work in the sociology of music and in the subject English has begun to address the nuances of these processes in greater detail. In Music, studies tend to focus on music making, which crosses formal and informal education, and formal and informal sites of validation and performance (Green 2002; Pitts 2005; Finnegan 2007; Fornas 1995). The meaning of music is frequently contrasted with the limitations of school music, but the issues relating to the learning of performance skills cross this divide.

I would suggest, however, that English is the school subject which has paid most attention to how its curriculum specificity might structure processes of identity. Obviously, both Music and English emphasise a notion of sensibility, but although studies of the formation of scientists and mathematicians have been pre-occupied with gender-making, it would seem it is in subjects which deal with the arts that the self is so important. One of the main scholars of this approach is Bill Green who has employed post-structuralist reading theory to explore how the school subject English plays a role in what Hunter (Hunter 1994) calls schools' role in the 'moral production of subjectivity'. Green has explored in a number of pieces how the nature of the curriculum, the exercise of particular pedagogies and production of peculiar, specific classroom discourses have all contributed to a normative



construct of a self—as the object of English education. What, of course, is much more difficult to do is investigate any of these claims empirically. Indeed, what this might mean remains unclear.

On the whole, studies of media education practice have paid more attention to subject content than to exploring how the discipline might offer a distinctive form of subjectivity. Exceptions here include studies of how Media Studies works to validate notions of a critical self (e.g. Buckingham, Grahame, & Sefton-Green 1995). That study argues that Media Studies *de facto* supported an almost sneering feeling of superiority, as media education bolsters the development of an agentic consciousness that acts as an independent voice. In other studies focusing on the consumption of media pleasures, especially music again, (e.g. Richards 1998), we can see how tensions within the subject discipline, especially those relating to the abnegation of subjective responses and the imperative to externalise personal responses, create disjuncture in the project of Media Studies and its work to produce independent critical agents. But I have jumped the gun here, and we need to unpick these histories of Media Studies to see how it might work to produce notional identities as part of its pedagogic practice.

I shall first turn to the history of Media Studies in terms of its formation as a result of teacher-activism, and as a radical curriculum intervention, looking at how ideas of the subject have developed over the last twenty to thirty years. I will then look at a parallel history of how the subject has been formed in response to changes to debate and crisis in the public domain; and thirdly, I will look at the new sociology of labour in the cultural industries to see if the subject Media Studies has played a role in the formation of social subjects.



Media Studies: a history of activism

Although nowadays Film Studies is an orthodox and respected field of study, as we all know, the origins of Media Studies lie in the gradual process of canonising film as a form of high art and exploring questions of social representation. There is even a nice piece by a young Stuart Hall, doing just this (Whannel & Harcourt 1964). Equally, again as is well known, Film Studies led the way for the use of more systematic critical tools in the Humanities, and early work in Genre theory, structuralism and post-structuralism appeared to need a new field of study as a way of legitimising new approaches and critical methods.

As the field of Film Studies was developed in higher education, and so produced the classic models of academic incorporation (journals, conferences, publications and academic posts), sister disciplines of Media and Cultural Studies emerged and broadly speaking followed similar paths. These paths intersected with local-national conditions, which led the field of study in different directions in different countries. This is, of course, a very brief overview of work that has been well covered by more expert scholars than me (see, for example, Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett 1992; Bazalgette *et al.* 1993; the work of Cary Bazalgette¹; Buckingham 2003). A key part of the reflective literature around the growth of Media and Cultural Studies does, of course, focus around the extent to which the subject-discipline can remain radical, critical or indeed political (in any sense of the word). Again, my interest is not in the details of this journey, but I need to note it in order to locate what happened within the school curriculum at the same time.

Within schools new subject space was carved out over a fifteen-year period, roughly from the mid-seventies. In school terms 'carving out' really means getting accepted by examination boards, which is the key criterion of subject incorporation and confers legitimacy on new subjects. Having public examination certificates gives the subject currency in allowing students to use Media Studies knowledge across the full range of education, training and employment markets.



Over this early period, (with the possible exception of the influence of the British Film Institute), curriculum was not handed down, as with older subjects, from a higher education authority, but, instead, was developed by practitioners in the classroom. A good example from the seventies of this process is the compilation *Film Education, a Collection of Experiences and Ideas* (Gidley & Wicks 1975). This text offered subject content—including how to approach and analyse film text—and a subject-specific conceptualisation of pedagogy, focused on matters such as what power relations should obtain between teacher and taught; what kinds of knowledge should predominate and why. Other touchstone examples include the Inner London Education Authority's teaching pack, *The Visit* (produced by teachers seconded from the classroom)—a classic introduction to editing suspense.

As an enthusiastic teacher-activist in the late-eighties and early-nineties, I was very much part of this tradition and this approach. For example, I worked with colleagues in my local authority to produce an early teaching pack on the music business. Unusually, it was published, (Blanchard, Sefton-Green, & Greenleaf 1989) but the story of its production is the point here. I attended after-work development sessions, went on a residential curriculum development weekend, and worked in the evenings to develop a teaching pack, which I felt at the time would help young people get a better sense of how the music industry mediated and produced pleasures that were important to them. The pedagogy of the pack was simulation-based and involved negotiation and presentations in order to conceptualise the chain of competing interests which go into a music product. The key issue for me was to not only find ways of capitalising on my (privileged?) insight into student-centred interest in music, but also to find ways of using that energy to help students 'discover' nuanced critical knowledge.

I am interested in this history and it is germane to this presentation because I want to bring out how teachers have been involved in the making of curriculum, and how this story (to an extent) shows how the use of teachers as an *avant garde* (perhaps in other analyses as a



Trotskyite fraction), developed a curriculum based on a particular model of pupil engagement. The child or learner in these early Media Studies work is working-class; often from a minority ethnic culture and is, to an extent, being offered educational experiences which will help the learner foreground those instances of exclusion which have been effaced by the mainstream.

What I am getting at here is that the pedagogy of early Media Studies worked to produce a student-centred knowledge base; a progressive form of active pedagogy—and that this curriculum model derived from an activist cadre, working with a notion of engaged youth. Clearly, the critical radical position of these teachers drove their aspirations for their students.

If we fast-forward to the present day, the subject Media Studies is now ingrained within the education system. Large numbers of students take it at higher level as an examination subject. This is now a matter of concern:

Media, film and TV studies has overtaken physics in popularity as an A-level subject this summer. Those sitting physics exams dropped 2% to 28,119, while those choosing media subjects increased by 5.1% to 28,261.²

Within the lower levels of the curriculum Media Studies is now a recognised area of study. But incorporation by the UK Qualifications and Curriculum (QCA) has, of course, driven out the subject's critical edge, and, more importantly, the development process is no longer owned by teachers. Indeed, a recent attempt to set up a national teachers' association has been met with very weak response and a problematic membership age profile.

The social or student subject inscribed in current curriculum is expected to know a corpus of terminology which has become normalised as 'proper' media knowledge. Examinations



have replaced course-work; the role of practical work, making and producing media, has become circumscribed, and the progressive pedagogy of learner-centred activity has been replaced with the memorising of key texts, knowledge and information. Much of the earlier politics of the subject has moved away from direct engagement with questions about representation, to more complex understandings of power in institutions and audience. Reward for possession of a language of opposition has, to an extent, been complemented with reward for possession of language of analysis.

Now some of this process is inevitable, and I am absolutely not trying to make a superficial comparison of the comparative value of early and later approaches. This history of activist-led initiatives and then State incorporation is not special as a process, and will happen again. Equally, the larger trends of decreasing teacher-activism and increasing curriculum regulation are part of bigger processes of centralisation. My interest here is more in the way that this history leaves a memory or trace of its origins in the kind of subjectivity produced by what Harvard University's Project Zero might call 'good media studies work', and that in seeking to evaluate the impact of Media Studies on both young people and curriculum, we need to consider the distinctive features of this history.

Public discourses around the media: from hard to soft regulation

The story I have just told would not be accepted by all supporters of media education: indeed, it would be heavily criticised as romantic, partial and inaccurate. A second history can be told which does not see Media Studies as the inheritance of a progressive pedagogy or a radical student-centred curriculum, but instead, sees it as part of shift in State control of private pleasures: as part of a new regulatory regime.

In this account, the growth of Media Studies is part of a larger strategy of media literacy. In the UK this is a highly visible function of the new regulator, the Office of Communications



(OFCOM), which has developed a media literacy strategy in recent years. Media literacy, as a number of commentators have noted (Buckingham et al. 2005), performs a normative function in this context. In the context of moral panics (Barker & Petley 1997; Gauntlett, 2005) and in an extremely current review commissioned by the new UK Prime Minister to investigate putative harm of exposure to the media³, media literacy serves as a device to replace the challenges of physical censorship (now all but impossible, due to changing technologies) with education.

Here, being in possession of media literacy is presumed to act in a prophylactic fashion, working within the citizen-subject to enforce the 'capillaries' of power—as Foucault would put it.

Although the development of the Internet comes at the end of the period of our history of Media Studies, both it and the development of domestically consumed videos and then computer games threatened the regulatory regime governing publication and performance which had held sway for the preceding seventy years. Over the period there was a succession of moral panics and this sort of coverage is, as I am sure you will recognise, typical of the genre.⁴

Yet, following extensive consultation and research in 2004, OFCOM produced its own strategy for media literacy⁵, and, under a section called *Advice to Consumers*, presents a rather thin set of advice and links to other education organisations.⁶

This takes us to a version of Media Studies which posits a very different kind of pedagogic subject⁷. As a number of commentators have noted this child or learner is constructed as citizen-consumer (Buckingham 2003). The pedagogies described here are transmissive and normative. Unlike the child-centeredness of the activist curriculum, this learner is a-cultured, a-historical and objectified. The politics of representation which I have suggested



led much of the energy in the previous history has been replaced by a very British notion of disinterested reasonableness. The product of this learning (although again empirical evidence is scarce) has opportunities for group work, creativity and discussion—but just in case, the QCA lays down benchmarked outcomes to show progression.

It is very easy (especially at a Cultural Studies conference) to mock this kind of public-interest discourse. And again, that is not my intention. I just want to show that parallel to a history of curriculum being led by social actors there is also one of State regulation, mainly benign, aiming to produce ratiocative reflective citizens. Whether discourse is really concerned with the young people who are the objects of its interventions, or the contemporary political constituencies which authorise their interventions, is a question we will come back to. And finally, to return to a sub-theme of this presentation, we have to ask what kind of empirical study might be able to evaluate the claim for this approach—how could we assess whether the population had become more media literate? This is a challenge that we need to take up if we are not destined to repeat the kind of media panic-led review, like the Byron enquiry I talked about before, indefinitely.

Media Studies and work—workers and practices

I should say right away that my third type of history is even more problematic in terms of tracing causality, but, as I shall argue, if we exclude it from debates about the impact of the introduction of Media Studies as a school subject, and if we do not think about the longer-term impact of producing Media Studies students and graduates, it is very difficult to offer any kind of rounded or honest appraisal of curriculum.

Although it is not usual to talk about the impact of a school subject, especially one usually chosen as an option for older school students, in terms of influencing (or being influenced



by) larger patterns of workplace change, I want to consider the relationship of Media Studies to broader patterns of changing labour behaviour.

There is a considerable body of research into the sociology of work which argues that work in the cultural industries (which would include the media) and more generally in the creative sector—although here definitions can get very loose—is at the forefront of structural changes in the nature of work.

Studies like Andrew Ross' 'No Collar' (Ross 2003) or Lloyd's extensive ethnographic study of gentrification and employment in a suburb of Chicago (Lloyd 2005), argue that cultural workers exemplify a form of 'precarious labour'. Attempting to seek employment in areas with an over-supply of highly qualified people, aspirant creatives have internalised values of self-exploitation, often working in unpaid, non-unionised capacities, in lengthy periods of apprenticeship, whilst seeking to 'break into' full time work. Often blurring the boundaries between creative work in the 'digital bedroom' (Livingstone 2002), and hobby-ism, the new regimes of work blend play, work, personal space and employed labour in unparalleled degrees. Unparalleled, that is, in the history of labour studies—excepting the iconic status of the bohemian life of the artist.

Playing their part in the production and dissemination of 'cool', young creatives frequently attempt to build up post-training experiences in order to develop a competitive employment portfolio. In the Chicago study of Wicker Park, Lloyd (2005) showed how features of employment in the creative sector, especially as they relate to personal disposition and the ability to perform style, cool and hip-ness, are all attributes which lead to exploitation and even self-exploitation in the service economies of large cities. The point was well underscored the last time I went to a café in the Adelaide Central Markets with UniSA academic Jackie Cook, who asked all the waiters and waitresses to tell her and me about their frustrated thespian careers.



These facets of subjectification; of developing a self who is pliable and responsive to these labour conditions, has been analysed within larger structural changes in the economy, in particular within Boltanski and Chiapello's vision of the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007). This study follows in detail the process of re-structuring at work, looking at the various ways in which workers have been subjected to changing features of subjectivity to compete and participate in the modern workplace, and in so doing, the authors argue that the post-sixty-eight generation has been incorporated and recuperated by forms of capitalist production.

Now, my challenge here is that taking these features of structural change as presented to us through this literature, and indeed a host of more detailed studies of creative labour, like Sean Nixon's study of British advertising executives (Nixon 2003), Neff *et al.* on entrepreneurial labour (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin 2005) or Christopherson's analysis of the internationalisation of labour in Hollywood (Christopherson 2006), leaves us asking what, if anything, we can now say about the work of Media Studies in preparing the labour force for this kind of employment? In other words, can we trace a relationship—theoretically, if not empirically—between the work done at school and at the individual level in preparing people for this changing kind of employment regime? Is this a fanciful connection, and, as I have already implied, how could we construct it as an empirical enquiry?

I think it is a fair question to ask because it seems to me that the current focus on the creative class (Florida 2003) and the alleged potential of the creative economy cannot ignore the groundwork done by the development of subjects like Media Studies, even at school level, in the changing dispositions, skills, values and attributes of young workers. On the whole, people tend to begin to ask these questions about graduate employment and changing work patterns. However, it seems that some of the subjective work underpinning these analyses of the changing nature of labour must begin earlier, with people at a younger age, and that schools in general and academic subjects like Media Studies in particular, must



play a part in clearing the ground, as it were, if not in the development of accounts of specific features. One of the problems I have with Florida's thesis is that he does not consider how the creative class is made and maintained—it simply appears, as if out of nothing; while the sociology of creative labour tends not to consider young people who have not already achieved graduate status. Yet, I would suggest that important preparatory work must go on at a subjective level prior to their entry into the labour market.

I can see two kinds of work in the Media Studies project that might support this thesis. The first is more ideological and consists in valuing the media as an object of study. Media Studies is clearly part of an upsurge of interest in the centrality of culture in general, and this must perform some ideological work in validating the media as a field of study *a priori*. Secondly, the emphasis on project work within Media Studies pedagogies, including the emphasis on team work, negotiation, and the presentation the self in a reflexive and 'pleasing' manner seem to me to be features of 'precarious labour', as described in my description of the Wicker Park study mentioned above, which have been taught, valued and even graded. The feature of Media Studies which monitors personal behaviour, (compliance, team work, negotiating skills) is part of the project of the discipline of the self which is a crucial element of contemporary educational discourse. In the UK now a number of higher-level core skills are directly regulatory and normative in this 'moral' domain.

From this point of view Media Studies has played its part alongside a raft of other shifts in subject disciplines over the period, to produce the new creative class. Again, I acknowledge that this is difficult to prove—in fact it would be difficult to investigate in the first place—but notwithstanding, we need some kind of theorised relationship to conceptualise the emergence of Media Studies as an academic subject in terms of its contribution/s to the development of new kinds of labour. We cannot imagine that such parallel developments are purely co-incidental.



Histories and politics

So where does all of this leave us? I have suggested three perfectly plausible histories, explaining the growth and nature of the school subject Media Studies over the last twenty to thirty years.

The first is pragmatic and contingent. In ascribing curriculum and pedagogy to the motives of individual teachers working in very particular contexts, I am seeking to show how much personal agency may lie behind what others may see as immobile and externalised practices. At the same time, it is very difficult—perhaps impossible—to begin the kind of empirical study that might be necessary to really explore the impact of one school subject, however new or ‘different’, on either cohorts or on the wider society.

Secondly, I have tried to explore how an enterprise like Media Literacy—which seeks to complement and perhaps replace older methods of control and regulation—might impact on society, although this, too, is difficult to imagine. At the same time, a story of the historical conjunctures of changing labour practices and changing schooling processes would appear to emphasise a kind of economic determinism. And this, of course, might threaten how we value the agency of teacher-activists. It is all too easy to tell a story where the narratives of agency are ‘over-written’ with the narratives of labour force structuration. Or I suppose, depending on your politics, you could also tell a story where the structuring narratives of the re-making of labour are re-inscribed by the use of a narrative of agency.

In other words, it is not necessary to try to offer a totalising narrative that might seek to combine all of these histories into one story. Although my overarching query might have been to explore how we tell a story of impact—what might be the effect of the introduction of a school subject, like Media Studies?—my more precise question was about the relationship of subjectivity, as an outcome, to the curriculum and pedagogy which have developed around Media Studies.



I am partly interested in this because of its methodological difficulties. How could we assess or investigate subjectivity as an output of education? By asking this question I am also deliberately trying to throw the emphasis away from skills and knowledge as outputs (which are no less problematic to measure in reality, even though common sense says they are) towards an approach to education which looks at the processes of subjectification. It is very difficult to ascertain how one subject discipline plays a distinct role in a complex process.

Setting aside all of these caveats and all of these disclaimers, we are still left with the political question of the nature of the enterprise in which we, as teachers of Media Studies, are actually engaged. How do we cope with the idea that our work may simply be underwriting the preparation of precarious labour, and that the creative class is so not much radical, critical or independent, but self-exploiting, and engineered to maximise profit?

Whilst asking these question takes us to a level of generality where discussion may be of limited value, there clearly is a key political issue within the culture of Media/Cultural Studies teaching, as our subjects have moved from the margins to the powerhouse of the creative economy.

Paradoxically, and perhaps unsurprisingly, debate and concern about the social purpose of Media Studies was, I suggest, more intense when the subject was marginal than when, as now, it actually occupies a fairly central place in the academy. As a 'modernist enterprise' (Buckingham 2003), imbued with the belief that teaching could determine the moral action of potential citizens, there was much debate about the precise nature of the impact of the developing subject, whereas, even though as a subject Media Studies will always be subject to sporadic attacks by conservatives, its contribution to the 'value-chain' in the creative economy leaves it much less space for political manoeuvre. Given the age and generation of many media scholars and teachers, and, as I suggested above, how subjects leave traces of



their disciplinary formation in core texts and emergent canons, there will always be some kind of irritant in the mix, however mainstream Media Studies becomes.

Conclusion

Through reflecting on the comparative histories of the growth of the school subject Media Studies, I think I have identified three key principles in any attempt to determine the effect or outcomes of a curriculum initiative on the formation of any subject/discipline influenced forms of subjectivity.

1. The first of these is the need to integrate empirical investigation along with theoretical description. Here, I have told no stories of people, or even actually described any behaviours. I have noted the difficulties in constructing empirical study, but not advanced any kinds of solutions or even any research models. This is not usual in the literature I have used here, but it shows a fundamental weakness in most approaches to answering these types of question.
2. I have followed many contemporary scholars in suggesting that critique is incorporated and recuperated. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), in particular, argue that explicit opposition to changes in late modern capitalism can now be traced in the current 'new spirit of capitalism', and that both social and what they call 'artistic critique' have influenced how current forms of production and labour now operate. More modestly, I have tried to argue that we can see how forms of media learning, which may have been imagined as agentic and critical, have become incorporated by analyses of structuration and economic determinism. The huge Digital Media Learning initiative supported by the MacArthur Foundation that I alluded to earlier, can well be seen in this light in its attempt to *post-hoc* rationalise the outcomes of market processes as stepping stones in the increase of economic productivity.



3. And thirdly, I have suggested that curriculum, and to an extent pedagogy, are just as oriented toward deriving legitimacy from contemporary political settlements, as in the case of media literacy, as they are concerned with their object—children and young people. And if this is true then my interest in outcomes, in tracing the effect of curriculum in terms of changing subjectivities, must always be out-of-step with the discourse which constructed the subject discipline in the first place. There will always be a time lag between the impact of teaching (and the discourse by which it is authorised) and the effect of learning (and the field into which such authorisation is put to work).

Overall, I have tried to steer a middle-way between the exercise of tactics held by innovators in the *avant garde* and the development of market trends. For me, the test for Media Studies will come in the next five to ten years, as speculation about the long-term reality of the creative economy comes home to roost. At the moment, Media Studies has been part of, party to and critical of, the boosterism that has driven changes in the leisure and cultural industries. Whether it continues to surf that wave or is carried off in the undertow will, I am sure, occupy many of us in the years to come.

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