'Why not *our* way, in *our* world? Developing the learners' voice through curriculum development.'

Damien Homer

Introduction

'The times they are a-changin' may be a lyric from the 1960's but it could not be more relevant for the evolving nature of media education. As new technologies become available, we, as media lecturers, need to think about how we change our delivery of the subject. The issue of making the curriculum inclusive for students on their media courses has become more apparent as technology has been rapidly changing.

The purpose of this action inquiry project is to work with learners, as co-researchers. We must not be afraid to learn from the learners. The staff team (John Jeffrey and Mark Edwards) wanted to find out about the students' perceptions of their learning at macro level (i.e. their experiences during their A Level courses at the college), but we also wanted to drill down to micro level and make the curriculum more relevant at one assessment point which was their course work. Media teaching staff constantly has to update their practice and working knowledge of their subject in the fast developing world of media education. For instance one year Bebo and MySpace are at the cutting edge of social networking, but they are soon superseded, as is being currently demonstrated by Facebook and LinkedIn. This has serious implications for staff that can feel out of date and left behind in this changing landscape. The curriculum can quickly fall behind so the aims of the project are to work with a small cohort of students to develop recommendations as to how we can keep abreast of the modern media world.

This joint practice investigation involved a range of teachers, and eight students. As well as wishing to make the curriculum relevant to the students' learning experience there were the confines of the curriculum to consider. The staff needed to ensure that students still had a clear understanding of the theories that support media education, such as representation, genre, audience and narrative. This was whilst trying to work with the students to make the curriculum relevant to their lives. The hope was that the project would challenge traditional perceptions and stretch both the students, and the teachers, as we explored these subjects together. Through this research I am hoping to achieve an increase in student's involvement within the processes and procedures of the Media and Performing Arts department that I manage. Further to this the team want to build on the premise of listening to the students in regards to the type of subjects with the media courses they find interesting. One of the main benefits of this outcome would be that the teachers could more accurately assess, and implement, ways of engaging the students more effectively in classes.

The group selected was an A Level Media group. The cohort was selected for several reasons, most notably because the small size of the group, meant team would be able to work closely with the

students which may have been more difficult with a larger group. Secondly it also allowed opportunity to develop the 'voice' of the whole group, which is key to this project being successful. There is always a danger in only working with students that are very vocal, or confident, as they more naturally come to the fore. In this project we want to be inclusive and give each individual student a chance to build a more relevant curriculum.

The final reason for selecting this group was that we had regular access to the young people which meant we could work closely with them to achieve the research goals.

The hope is that this project will challenge traditional perceptions and stretch both the students and the teachers as the teaching team and the students explored these subjects together. Through the research I am hoping to achieve an increase in students' involvement within the processes and procedures of the Media and Performing Arts department of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College (hereafter named OCVC).

The reason for undertaking the project, as both manager and lecturer is three fold. Firstly, the desire to develop the teaching within the department, and to listen more closely and coherently, to the students being taught. Secondly, a need to ensure that the teaching team are pushing the boundaries with regards to new developments and initiatives that have not been tried before within the department or, in fact the institution. Lastly, and most importantly, is the aspiration to ensure that students who come to learn within the department are enabled to become more motivated and independent thinkers through this process.

Media and performing arts students are, in the main, by their very nature, communicators. The need to speak in discussions; debates, to perform for others, seek audiences for work, and the need to 'sell one's self' are all key characteristics of media and performing arts students. It is hoped that these key communicative elements will help support a growing interest in enabling students to speak for themselves. It is debatable as to whether, to any great extent the students within the department at OCVC have ever really had a 'voice', besides a survey or end of course review. The aim of this paper is to see what teaching team are currently doing and to try to experiment, through an action research project, as to how we can best move forwards with the involvement of students from creative and media backgrounds.

The context of the study is within a Further Education College in Oxfordshire. The college has several campuses but this research project would be based at the Banbury Campus. The students

involved are all 16-19 A Level students, who are studying full time. There were two other lecturers involved in the research (as outlined above), as we were looking to develop a co-researcher model, which will be discussed later in more detail.

Summary of methodology

Kember (2000) argues that action research is a wide-ranging field and includes many areas of the working world aside from teaching. Action research has been found in 'diverse fields including management, social welfare… and the health sciences.' So the approach is not narrowly contained within education and this is important when thinking of action research as a method.
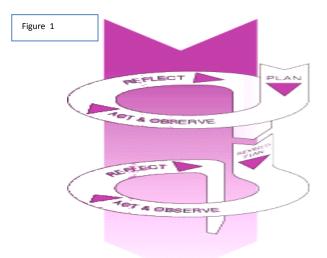
There are many different theories and approaches to action research but it is generally accepted that it can be split into three main areas. Carr and Kemmis (1986: 165-166) stated that these were; firstly a project that was susceptible to improvement; secondly a process of spiral cycles, and thirdly widening the involvement of the process to collaborate with others.

The best way to start action research planning is to reflect on one's individual pedagogical practice and identify an area which is problematic or could be improved upon. Cohen et al (2001) state that there are several areas with which to consider when planning action research. They include teaching methods, evaluative procedures, continuing professional development of teachers, management and control. As one can be seen from this list there is a multitude of different areas from which one can start the process of action research but there must be a definitive need identified, as is shown by Zuber-Skerritt (1996b: 83):

> *"The aims of any action research project or program are to bring about*
> *practical improvement, innovation, change or development of social*
> *practice and the practitioners' better understanding of their practices".*

Action research or enquiry is not a new approach. Whitehead and McNiff (2006: 21) discuss how this method was developed in the 1930s by Kurt Lewin. He was keen, as arguably am I, to use action research as a tool which you give to 'workers' to encourage greater involvement and would probably improve their productivity'.

The approach had fallen out of favour until the 1970s when it received fresh impetus as a form of professional development for teachers. The method was adopted into teaching courses as a way of reflecting on one's teaching practice and seeking to improve aspects of it.

Figure 1

Ref: Kemmis, S. & R. McTaggart (1988) as

This method seems to be well suited to the subject for several reasons. Firstly the cyclical nature (see figure 1) of the process as discussed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) is key to the continuous strive for improving teaching and learning.

The main body of the research was based around small focus groups where the students could talk about their experiences at the college at a macro and micro level. The students also had a 'media usage' chart (see appendix 1) which acted as a questionnaire of their views at the start of the research process so we could gain a better understanding of the different types of media they engaged. This allowed us to mould the plans accordingly.

As this project was based on developing the voices of the students on the programme we used the class as the research sample and much of the data collected was qualitative, as we discussed through semi-structured focus groups, how we could move the curriculum forward to be more relevant to their student life.

Another research method used was interviews with the staff team. During these interviews we discussed ways in which we could change the subjects usually taught under the umbrella of media education, and how we may help support the students as we worked together, as co-researchers, to further develop the curriculum.

The students all completed a consent form (see appendix 2). The form outlined their agreement to be involved in the project, but also informed them that they could withdraw at any time if they felt they did not want to continue. The consent form also outlined the possibility of them being filmed

as part of the project as the teaching team thought it would be good to have a visual representation of the process.

The projected impact of the interviews, focus groups and questionnaire was to be able to spend more time, effort and focus on actually listening to learners and staff to effect real change on our media curriculum. These were not usual activities for the A Level staff and students to undertake and the project allowed us the space and freedom to achieve real life development of the learners voices.

Literature Review

Bragg and Fielding (2005: 109) explain how different levels of collaborative engagement can positively affect both the teacher and the students. From adapting this model the 'co-researcher model' appears to offer the most benefits and allows a level of input from both parties:

> *'Whilst student and teacher roles are not equal, they are moving more strongly in an egalitarian direction. Students move from being discussants to being co-researchers into matters of agreed significance and importance.'*

The rise in access and greater involvement of young people in the education system is certainly not a new concept. Gunter and Thompson (2005: 839) describe how these terms are enshrined in our laws as part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) but also our own 'appropriate legislation such as the Children Act (2004)', which states that children and young people have the 'rights to express views and to be heard.'

The move to involving service users (personalised agenda) in public services has grown in prominence within the confines of the 'New' Labour movement since 1997. Analysis of this developing ethos or mantra will be addressed later on within this paper but its status at the forefront of government policy underlines its relevance not only to the sector within which I work, education, but also to a wider public debate around the rhetoric of government.

The need to involve and develop the voice of the students has been a passion of mine since I first started teacher training, indeed many theorists' within teacher training believe student centred learning is vital to good teaching practice. Petty (2004), Minton (1991), Reece and Walker (2003) all highlight the need for learner or student involvement as being essential to the different pedagogical approaches they discuss. But the learner voice can often just be engineered as a box ticking exercise

in which the learners are given some level of 'right to be heard', but is limited to a survey of end of module review.

The learning pyramid (see figure one) demonstrates how important it is for students to be kept interested in classes in a variety of ways but the National Training Laboratory (NTL) argues that the most effective way of retaining information is through student-based activities.
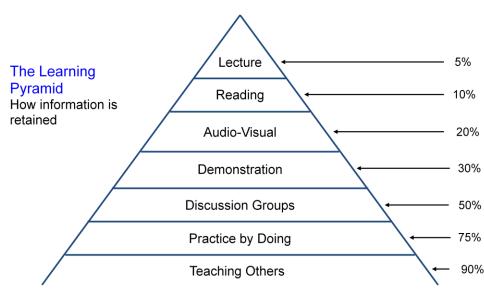
Figure 2

The Learning Pyramid
How information is retained

Lecture	5%
Reading	10%
Audio-Visual	20%
Demonstration	30%
Discussion Groups	50%
Practice by Doing	75%
Teaching Others	90%

National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine

Further justification for investigating the use of involving students in the processes of education comes from the recent proposals to amend the educational laws. The principal of the bill is to extend the minimum leaving age from school/college from 16 to 18 years old. Stewart (2008) discusses the impact of this which will mean that school (and thus six forms and colleges) governors will have to 'invite and consider pupils' views'. Before this it was seen as best practice or as the latest initiative that educational establishments should be seen, if they are deemed to be progressive, to be adopting.

There is a body of educationalists who believe that we as teachers are restricting young people, students and pupils by giving them a rigid education system. Gribble (http://www.davidgribble.co.uk/ accessed) argues that:

> 'In conventional schools children are literally prisoners: the law keeps them in. Learning according to inclination is not an option; children's inclinations are not considered relevant; adults tell them what they must learn.'

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Developing students as independent thinkers means working with them to challenge the perception that learning is a one way activity where the teacher imparts their wisdom, this project has challenged this stance by allowing the students to build their own lesson in which staff are informed about up to date media practices from the students challenging Gribble's assertion.

Whilst this could be seen as quite an extreme standpoint there are many other people working in education that feel some sympathy with this stance, particularly institutions such as Summerhill School. The school, which was subject to an Ofsted inspection in the late 1990's leading to a court case in which there appeared to be attempts to close the institution down due to its perceived inability to conform. Although started in the 1920s these so-called 'democratic' educational establishments are well established worldwide, particularly in United States, with six institutions relying upon these principles in Britain

Further to this are more current developments in this field which highlight the important part of the national educational debate that is the 'student voice'. Examples include Phoenix Education Trust, English Secondary Students' Association, Futurelab, Carnegie Young People Initiative plus a plethora of organisations such as Young People's Learning Agency, British Youth Council, Children's Right Alliance, National Children's Bureau and National Youth Agency to name just a few. An organisation that is specifically aimed at further education, which is obviously the main focus of this paper, is The National Learner Panel (http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/AdultLearning/DG_068290 [accessed 06/12/10] which 'was set up by the government to give learners a say in the development of further education at national level.'

Cheminais (2008:1) argues that the Every Child Matters (ECM) policy which was introduced in 2003 means that educational establishments have to have pupil/student voice at its centre, furthermore:

> *'Every Child Matters places a moral obligation on schools and other*
> *educational settings to acknowledge the rights, voice and choice of its pupils.'*

Reference to this government policy now has to appear on all schemes of work throughout the academic year with justification of how OCVC are addressing the five ECM outcomes. These outcomes relate to the rights of children that are using public services, but perhaps the most relevant is 'make a positive contribution'; the implication of which is that students not only come to school or college to learn but also to give something back. Bragg and Fielding (2005: 111) underline the core theme of this project which is to get students and teachers to learn from each other, not to

just make it a one way dialogue of teachers imparting 'our perceived wisdom' on young people but that we should look to:

> *'...create conditions of dialogue in which we listen to and learn from each other in new ways for new purposes.'*

Media educationalists could develop the process of learning from learners to a far greater extent, the subject is fast moving across a range of convergent platforms. This is ideal territory for the co-researcher model to be explored through curriculum development.

What we did

The students worked, in pairs, over several weeks in classes and computer rooms to develop their project so that they could then 'peer teach' another group. Staff and students discussed the nature of the projects they could undertake and how, both students and teachers, could make the subject of 'media' more relevant to their lives instead of sourcing materials and resources from an older era.

The first research project was raised was on gaming, in particular 'first-person shooters'. The traditional media student's concepts that underline this study could be representation, narrative and ideology. It was felt that this project could be split into two sections as it is rather a big subject to tackle.

The next area of possible study would be audience theory through the study of the soap opera 'Hollyoaks'. It was discussed that older theories, such as uses and gratifications and The Hypodermic Needle Model which relied on passive audiences, could be challenged as audience interaction with the programme can happen on multiple levels and platforms (website, You Tube, 4OD etc), instead of being reliant upon the audience watching in the evening on television.

The final area of study was based around ownership and access of media organisations and conglomerates. It was felt that we could look at the ownership of big organisations such as MySpace and Facebook. Also by what means do people have access to these forms of media?

From these four topics the teaching team in conjunction with the students were put together in groups two according to their interests:

Research subject	Theoretical frameworks	Student co-researchers
Gaming 1	Representation and Ideology	Student A and Student W
Gaming 2	Narrative and Ideology	Student J and Student AL

| Hollyoaks | Audience Theory | Student N and Student S |
| MySpace and Facebook | Ownership and Access | Student K and Student F |

The project is ongoing but to date the students have researched their subject matter, led class discussions on their subject, prepared presentations, rehearsed and adapted their work in line with feedback from peers and teaching staff, and lastly delivered their work to a large group of diploma students (see You Tube video http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnQEylxonNc).

Findings

Through the project of adapting the curriculum and working with the students as co-researchers there have been a many lessons learnt for the next cycle of the project. This small scale research project will doubtlessly grow and evolve but so far these are the main findings:

Expectations

Throughout the process the students have been at the core of the idea. However it is fair to concede that at times the level of commitment to the project has diminished as well as being undertaken enthusiastically. Part of the problem was that some of the students saw it as an additional task to their course. Even though the work they have done on their projects has direct relevance to their coursework and will help inform their final exams later this year, at times the students felt they had to do more work than necessary. However mainly the project has been an exciting and rewarding part of my teaching experience, although one could argue that my expectations of their engagement with the project were perhaps too high, as this was only one class a week for what is, for the students, a very busy full time A Level programme.

Guidance

The co-researcher model as I have applied it to this project has been largely teacher led which was something I felt had to happen to ensure that we kept within the time frame of the RDF programme. Ideally it would have been preferable to have the students leading the project and deciding how they could deliver to their peers. Also I had to signpost to suggested readings and areas they could explore through their research, with more time I would have liked them to develop a more independent learning process but with limited access of an hour and half a week this was not feasible or possible.

Changing the way we work

One of the most positive aspects during this initial phase of the research project has been engaging with the students with subjects that interest them. The work the students have done will now be able to be imbedded in our future curriculum delivery in A Level Media Studies at OCVC. Although this model of engaging students with relevant material to their daily lives is particularly pertinent to media education I can see that it could be applied to other subjects. A key area of achievement within this process has been students delivering to other students in a 'peer' led process which has been successful and enjoyable for both the teaching team and the students themselves.

Bibliography – 'Why not our way, in our world?'

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