

Lived experiences of curriculum reform: a netnographic study of Media teachers' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lived experiences of Media teachers in England amidst the A-level Media Studies curriculum reforms, through a netnographic study of interactions on an online professional community of practice on Facebook. The research is a pilot study conducted as part of a broader piece of doctoral research by the author, a teacher-researcher embedded in the teaching community under research. Media Studies underwent radical curriculum changes following the education reforms, and the study unveils teachers' predominantly negative sentiments, stemming from perceived incompatibilities between the reformed curriculum and the epistemological 'spirit' of the subject. Surprisingly, these constraints spurred innovative pedagogical approaches and revealed creative and dedicated teachers. The paper also explores the contentious reform process and raises questions about subject identity, professional autonomy and the impact of knowledge hierarchies on curriculum development. These findings resonate beyond the context of media studies, offering insights into curriculum reform, education policy, online communities and the interplay of subject and professional identity in education.

KEYWORDS

MEDIA STUDIES

CURRICULUM REFORM

EDUCATION POLICY

NETNOGRAPHY

TEACHER LIVED EXPERIENCES

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in the late 1980s as an academic subject for study in schools in England, Media Studies has been a site of conflict and competing interests between academics, politicians and policy makers, educators, society and the media themselves. Its characteristics as a nexus of other subject disciplines and its 'newness' as a subject have

led to many scholarly attempts being made to define its epistemological construction and to forge autonomous identity within the contexts of those overlapping disciplines. Developing a workable curriculum with a coherent conceptual framework that transcends political, educational and societal 'fads' and keeps pace with the rapidly changing nature of the subject means that Media Studies is a subject constantly under intellectual scrutiny

and flux. Alongside this (and perhaps because of this), Media Studies has also suffered from a 'discourse of derision' – as a 'Mickey Mouse' qualification (e.g., Barker & Petley, 2001; Thornham & O'Sullivan, 2004; Laughey, 2010; Curran, 2013; Murdock & Golding, 2014; Bennett & Kidd, 2017) and, as Michael Gove, the former Secretary of State for Education, demonstrated in his 2013 speech, 'What does it mean to be an educated person?' (Gove, 2013),

as a 'relevance' subject (low value) rather than one of 'knowledge' (high value). Therefore, following the UK government's wholesale reform¹ of A-levels and GCSEs in England in 2014, when Media Studies didn't appear in the first two rounds of A-level subjects approved for reform, the Media education community's collective fears that it would be shelved entirely as a qualification did not feel unfounded.

When the announcement came, in 2015, that the subject would be included in the third round of reforms for first teaching in 2017, the initial relief at the subject's 'survival' was subsequently tainted by the protracted consultation period that saw the Department for Education, the Office for Qualifications and Examinations Regulation² (Ofqual), the English exam boards³ and a wide range of representatives from the Media teaching and education community locked in a discordant process to approve the subject content framework for the new qualifications. As a Media teacher in this period, I had first-hand, direct experience of the new curriculum and a keen awareness of the negative sentiment about it that I, and other Media teachers, felt on both an operational and ideological level. In my dual capacity as a teacher-researcher, I was also interested in how one of the online teaching communities of practice – a Facebook group entitled 'Eduqas GCSE and A Level Media Studies Teacher Sharing Group' – was capturing the lived experiences of Media teachers teaching the reformed qualification in the early stages of its implementation. This research is the pilot study conducted as part of a broader doctoral study into the impact of curriculum reform on A-level Media Studies, and looks at the posts and interactions between Media teachers on the site for a seven-day period March, 2020. It also includes data from eight qualitative interviews with Media teachers from that same time period, conducted three months prior to the first examination sitting of the new qualification. The paper begins with a review of the literature

about the development of, and contextual debates about, Media Studies as a subject in the English curriculum. It then moves to outline the methodological approach of netnography used to collect the pilot data, before a discussion of the findings and a summary of conclusions that inform the full doctoral research study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the literature about the curricular development of Media Studies in England reveals a subject trying to forge, calibrate and recalibrate its identity against a backdrop of social, political, technological and educational variables of change. Whilst the genesis of 'media study' in England can be traced back as far as the 1930s, the subject, as a qualification in the post-16 setting, owes much to the generative debates between influential academics and figures in the Media education world. These figures, such as Len Masterman (1994), Roy Stafford (Branston & Stafford, 1999; 2010), David Buckingham (2003) and Cary Bazalgette (2007), articulated the contested history of the subject and derived their differing, and quite often oppositional, positions, visions and hopes for the subject from an essentially wholesale rejection of a Leavisite⁴ 'discriminate and resist' philosophy to positions that have been variously informed by, and branched from, the subject's antecedents of Cultural Studies and Screen Education. These have been subsequently challenged, modified and/or remediated in accordance with how quickly and radically the subject has had to change. Whilst these debates inevitably interlink with and shape how the subject translates into a curriculum at post-16, it needs to be kept in mind that many of these operate on a more polemical, ideological level than is perhaps currently manifested in the everyday 'on-the-ground' teaching of the subject. Bolas, in his comprehensive genealogical account of the hard-won development of Film and Media Studies from 'film appreciation' to 'high theory' in schools, noted:

It was perhaps inevitable that as media education became more professionalised, the classroom teacher would be a less frequent participant in the debate. (Bolas & Miller, 2009, p. 8)

Much of the literature reviewed tends to demonstrate that the area for research is weighted towards these more academic discourses, and whilst there is literature that is clearly about the teaching and learning of the subject and its delivery in a school setting, it is worth noting that there is a comparative dearth of research carried out by practising teachers in a post-16 setting.

A further tension evident in the literature is the popularity of the subject with the students who still choose it in spite of a backdrop of criticism about the value and rigour of the subject. Whilst Media teachers have had to get used to being 'defenders' of their subject against those who perceive it as being of limited value, the subject remains popular with students. Under the curriculum pre-reform, its popularity with them steadily grew to a peak in the late 2000s (Golding, 2019). This was despite a slew of regular criticism from commentators in the media and certain corners of politics and education. Implicit in that criticism is cynicism about, and hostility to, popular culture in the context of academic study – attitudes that perhaps derive from a kind of Leavisite hangover, and which act as a convenient displacement for the fear of cultural degeneration, a particularly prominent feature in the discourse of the political agenda around Media Studies, for example, Barker (1997), Buckingham & Sefton Green (2005), Laughey (2010) and Buckingham (2017). Given the strength of influence that the ideology of US educationalist E. D. Hirsch, a firm proponent of a 'back to basics' content-rich and facts-based education, has had over the past 15 years, it is unsurprising that those invested in Media Studies and who have shaped its direction – media academics, educators, exam boards and

subject associations – have had their autonomy significantly attenuated by policy makers who have made a deliberate move from their historical position of 'arm's-length agency' to 'calling the shots' (Buckingham, 2017).

In his essay 'The Strangulation of Media Studies', David Buckingham (2017) details not only his involvement in the Media Studies curriculum reform process but also an excoriating criticism of policy makers' failure to reflect his and other media academics' and educators' contributions in the final framework. In his description of the lengthy iterative process between the Department for Education (DfE) and the exam boards for drawing up a framework for the new curriculum, he talks of 'contradictory requirements and impossible demands', 'shifting goal posts' and an abstruse traffic light system to indicate how close the framework was to being approved. The presiding influence of Education Minister, Nick Gibb, was clear, with drafts being returned from the DfE⁵ with comments like 'The Minister doesn't like concepts' and clear concern over the quality and demand for the content to be included (*ibid*, p. 7). After the Media Education Association (MEA), the UK subject association for Media education, refused to endorse the framework, Buckingham and Professor Natalie Fenton were enlisted to meet with the DfE. After a hasty redraft, the framework was finally endorsed by the MEA, Creative Skillset⁶ and the British Film Institute⁷ (BFI). Further redrafting ensued, including a public consultation process, and the framework was finally published in early 2016 (DfE, 2016). However, the final product represented a vast departure from what had gone before. The framework featured a significant reduction of practical production, the introduction of specific 'high-quality' set texts and a prescriptive, lengthy and, to all intents and purposes, haphazardly chosen, compulsory list of 21 named theorists. Buckingham reveals how the wording in the draft framework was altered to replace optionality and choice

with compulsory set texts and theorists:

Our draft specified: semiotics (e.g., Barthes); theories of ethnicity (e.g., Hall); political economy (e.g., Curran); and so on. In the published version, however, 'for example' became 'including' – 'theories of semiotics, including Barthes'. In effect, what we had ended up with was a canonical list of compulsory theorists to be studied. (Buckingham, 2017, p. 9)

Despite concerns over the prescriptive and didactic nature of the framework, in the summer of 2016, exam boards submitted specifications to Ofqual, which had now taken over from the DfE. However, all came back rejected. Issues with timeliness of feedback, shifting goalposts, and concerns over the quality of the external consultant employed by Ofqual to provide the media studies expertise, meant that it became a 'bureaucratic nightmare' and exam boards had to 'second guess the minister' (*ibid*, p. 15) whose involvement in the whole process was still clear.

The fact that 21 named theorists appear on the framework is perhaps the most radical change evident between the old and new specifications, but the insistence on the addition of 'high-quality' set texts is also a significant departure from previous Media Studies specifications. Buckingham voices his concerns over the 'motley collection' of theorists, some of whom are 'sadly outdated', and 'writers who, by any estimate, would be much too difficult for most Master's students, let alone 17-year-olds at A-Level' (Baudrillard, Butler)' (*ibid*, p. 17).

There is not the scope in this paper to discuss knowledge discourses in curriculum in finer detail, but it is important to emphasise that Gove and Gibb were heavily influenced by the US educational philosopher E. D. Hirsch. Both ministers have explicitly stated how his work has informed their own visions of school reform, with both being early advocates for Hirsch's Core Knowledge books for primary age children which

focus on knowledge and facts-based learning, first published in 2006 in the UK by the right-leaning think tank, Civitas. Indeed, and presciently, in his speech to the Royal Society of Arts in 2009, Gove ended by saying that if he were entrusted with power he would 'completely overhaul the curriculum – to ensure that the acquisition of knowledge within rigorous subject disciplines is properly valued and cherished' (Gove, 2009). Therefore, whilst Media Studies as a qualification survived, it appears that the new subject content framework was being made to fit Gove's very distinct educational 'knowledge-rich' vision and that the two were not necessarily epistemically compatible. This incompatibility appears to be the cause of much of the anxiety, disquiet and, in some cases, anger, felt by Media teachers about the reform.

METHODOLOGY

This study takes the methodological approach of netnography (Kozinets, 2019), which is a type of digital ethnography characterised by a precise set of methods for data collection and analysis. Whilst netnography originally derives from research into consumer behaviour in marketing and business, it has been adopted as a popular methodology in a range of other disciplines including education research – for example, Kulavuz-Onal & Vasquez (2013), Janta *et al.* (2014), Kulavuz-Onal (2015) and Tremayne (2022). Indeed, its capabilities to adapt to developments in technology, society and culture, as new phenomena emerge, position netnography (for now at least) as 'a predominant research method for online communities' (Loanzon, *et al.*, 2013, p. 1578). In terms of its place in education, Tremayne (2022), in her study of online education communities on Twitter, asserts, 'the characteristics of [netnography's] focus on a particular group or field site to illustrate that group's practices and interpret meanings, to generate a more action based understanding of that group, means that it is a suitable and transferable

methodology for education research.' Wallace *et al.* (2018), in their study of online communities of practice in Early Education and Care, talk about the need for an active and immersive approach to the object of study. As a teacher-researcher and a member of the Facebook group under study, my emic/etic status as an insider and an outsider placed me in the ideal position to study the posts and interactions between the teachers on the group and to interpret what these revealed about their lived experiences of curriculum reform.

Kozinets (2019) puts forward a flexible framework of six 'movements' and twelve 'phases' in the undertaking of netnographic research. Since many of these movements and phases encompass the initial stages of research – selecting appropriate online sites, ethical issues and so forth – that are required by larger studies, for a small-scale study such as this I chose to focus on the 'immersion' and 'interpretation' that Kozinets outlines in the data collection and findings phases. Kozinets advocates online 'lurking' prior to 'entrée' to the data collection phase, so, as I had 'insider' understanding of the group as a teacher and wanted to observe the naturalistic interactions of the group, I chose to spend a week observing, and not interacting with, the group. The week I chose was in the lead-up to, but not within, the examination period. This was because the teachers, by this point in the year, would have had a significant amount of teaching time and would still be interacting in a more naturalistic way before the revision and exam period started. They were also more likely to be available and willing to be interviewed for the individual qualitative interviews. Therefore the study encompasses:

1. Field observations and thematically coded analysis of posts on the 'Eduqas GCSE and A Level Teachers' Sharing Group' on Facebook over a seven-day period (87 posts in total)
2. Eight qualitative semi-structured interviews with a selection of Media

teachers who were members of the same Facebook group (self-selecting through an open call for participants).

FINDINGS

Whilst the interactions on the group revealed a positive, supportive community, the overriding findings from the pilot study showed that a significant number of the posts and comments were predicated on sentiment about the negative experiences of teaching the new curriculum. As such, each post and interaction across the 87 posts during the week of observation was coded for sentiment. Twenty-one posts were initially coded for containing an 'apologetic tone' or a poster lacking in confidence about their subject knowledge or grasp of the new course in some way, and there were 19 posts coded as members explicitly 'venting frustration or struggle'. Many of these posts were specifically related to the volume of course content, subject knowledge and assessment. An analysis of the word choice used revealed a higher frequency of words like 'struggle', 'desperation', 'stressed', 'help' and 'anxiety' and, although there is inevitably some anxiety about implementing a new course and that teachers who hold negative opinions may be more vocal and active on the group, the large proportion of posts expressing these views presents a theme that the new course carries a lot of negative feeling with it amongst its teachers. This sentiment echoes the views expressed by Connolly (2018).

One post that stood out in the study was a teacher who expressed her deep anxiety and frustration about the impact of the course on her students.

Just looking at some recent questions about different set texts and exam areas and I've realised I'm completely giving up. I am fully prepared for the worst results of my teaching career. Absolutely no energy to do anything about it. Feel sad for my students but at a loss as to how to help them do well in the exams this year. There's just [too] much content to remember

and confusion around exams for my brain to handle, my 17–18 year old students don't stand a chance.' (Teacher participant, Eduqas Teacher sharing group)

The post itself generated over 66 member comments within a 24-hour period, all concurring with the thoughts expressed in the post ('It's become more [of] a chore to teach than the pleasure it used to be'), with the vast majority also expressing sentiments of solidarity and support. These types of posts have a manifold significance. Firstly, they demonstrate burgeoning evidence that the new curriculum's 'rigour' has materialised only in the form of increased content and a complex matrix of assessment criteria relating to the set texts and theorists rather than the intended 'rigour' of improved academic quality. The dissonance that this has created has also generated anxiety for teachers (McDougall, 2005) and thus, an increased need for emotional support as they navigate the unfamiliar territory of content and assessment.

One of the teacher participants in the qualitative interviews had attended one of the early consultation meetings involving representatives from the DfE, the three exam boards and a variety of academics, Media educators and other media-education-related stakeholders. Whilst clearly a subjective observation, his comments appear to capture the feeling of discord and competing interests between the various parties. He says:

It was crazy, it was full of people and someone from the government taking notes not saying anything. There were HE teachers making insane observations about the ability of the students, begging for research projects... there was an obsession to get critical research back in. A woman from [exam board name redacted] was trying to railroad all this stuff through. Basically, there was this inflexibility mainly around the non-examined assessment.' (Seamus, interview participant)

This observation very clearly mirrors what Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett (1992) had observed when the first Media A-level was brought into the curriculum. They state:

The genesis and development of any new subject is in part a history of contest for curriculum space and of struggle between competing traditions and ambitions. Media education is no exception (Ibid, p. 9)

The negative feelings about the course found in the Facebook group observation data were also present in the interviews. Whilst some teachers expressed anxiety about workload and the quantity of the course content, and concerns surrounding resource creation or understanding the structure and assessment of the course, some teachers also expressed more ideological concerns about the curriculum and its reduced practical component as well as the prescriptive nature and number of set texts and theorists.

This circles back to the ideas set out earlier with the proposition that the reform is epistemologically incompatible with the subject, and the implication of a tension between what teachers feel to be the 'spirit' of the subject and the subject in its institutional, formal and assessable framework (McDougall, 2005). What also emerges from this one observation of the consultation meetings is the inchoate manifestation of previous academic debate about the ideological tension between the horizontal discourse of Media Studies' democratic conception of knowledge (Bernstein, 2018, p. 18) and the vertical discourse of knowledge hierarchies (Lusted, 1991; Buckingham, 2003; Bolas and Miller, 2009; McDougall and Potter, 2015) as espoused by Gove and Gibb. Political context also appeared to inform and influence how teachers felt about their own experiences of teaching the new curriculum. Two teachers specifically posited that the government wanted to get rid of the subject entirely:

When the subject went on to consultation, I was dead sure that it was going to go, that we were going to lose the subject.' (Ben, interview participant)

They wanted to kill off the subject because they don't want young kids, young adults 'knowing'. (Yasin, interview participant)

Michael Gove, 'his cronies' and 'all of Ofqual' were blamed by Megan, another teacher participant in the study, who stated she felt 'dread' about the inception of the new specifications and thought them 'awful'. Yet, from all of this seeming despair and negativity, what comes out very strongly is a group of committed teachers, passionate about, and invested in, their subject. There were over 100 comments from the interviews that were coded as relating to the teaching and learning of the subject and these revealed that many of the teachers in the study had had to change their pedagogical approach from how they taught the previous specifications. This can largely be attributed to the reduction of practical work and the introduction of compulsory prescribed set texts and theorists. In addition, there is evidence in the interviews and Facebook posts that points to teachers changing their practice to how they feel Media Studies 'should' be taught. Evidence from the data suggests that teachers are trying to embrace the 'reflective' and 'playful' pedagogic practices Buckingham (2003) advocated. For example, one teacher recounted how he was inspired by another teacher creating Snapchat profiles for each of the named theorists and stated:

My kids absolutely loved this idea... so they said to me, why don't we each have a theorist name in class. So I'm not going to go and ask "John what do you think about that?" I'm going to say "Stuart Hall, what do you think of that question?" And when they answer, they have to repeat their theory back – so the kids are literally being cultivated, if you like, to use

George Gerbner. They've even done a family tree! Stuart Hall is the dad, Laura Mulvey is the mum and Jean Baudrillard is the weird uncle, which I love. (Ben, interview participant)

Many of the teachers reiterated this sentiment in their engagement with posts about ways to teach different texts or the sharing of new strategies and approaches.

CONCLUSION

A study of the lived experiences of Media teachers teaching the reformed A-Level Media Studies curriculum reveals that whilst the majority of these experiences were rooted in negative sentiment and classroom realities, their interactions and recounting of their offline experiences show much evidence that teachers were striving to make the best of the curriculum as it stood and, within this, semblances of a re-energised professional inquiry, commitment and productiveness. From the creation of the Facebook group in the first place by resourceful teachers, to the buoyant use of the shared drive and the multiple references to teaching and learning and collaboration evidenced in the interviews and Facebook posts, the group was clearly not just a transactional resource, one-stop shop, but an evolving, dynamic and active community of practice that utilised the critical and collective intelligence and motivation of a 'hive mind'. Returning to David Buckingham's essay and account of the reform process, he predicted:

Media Studies has been strangled, although it continues to draw breath. Committed, creative media teachers will still engage and challenge their students – although now they will be doing so despite the framework of assessment, rather than being enabled and supported by it. (Buckingham, 2017)

As such, the pilot findings of this study revealed some emergent themes in the teachers' lived experiences of the reform that informed the broader doctoral study. In summary, these were:

- Teachers' feelings of negativity about the reforms underpinned many of the interactions on the group and manifested in anxiety, frustration and, in some cases, anger and despair. This sentiment indicates an incompatibility between how teachers view their subject and the curriculum they are being asked to deliver
- Despite evidence of negative feelings, the overriding tone of the interactions on the group was positive and it appeared that being part of the Facebook group increased teachers' subjective well-being and promoted a eudaemonic spirit
- Constraints imposed by the reform, perhaps counter-intuitively, have made teachers respond in new and creative pedagogical ways
- Peer learning is a key function of the group and professional 'hive mind' inquiry characteristic in the points above
- Teachers on the group value the free resource support but also the ability to commune with other Media teachers
- The consultation for the reform was mired in conflict between the policy makers, exam boards, educators and other parties involved in Media education
- The lived experiences of teachers can reveal much about the subject identity of Media Studies in the wider context of education in terms of how the subject is taught, resourced, funded and perceived
- The lived experiences of teachers can reveal much about the professional identity of teachers and the professional autonomy (or lack of it) afforded to them.

Whilst this study focuses on the particular context of Media teachers'

lived experiences of curriculum reform in their subject specialism, there is much evidence in the findings that can be generalisable and opened out, not least to the wider doctoral context this pilot leads on to, but also to inform further research into teachers' experiences of curriculum reform, education debates around knowledge hierarchies, education policy, online communities of practice, and teacher and subject identity in the wider educational context. ■

NOTES

1. This study focuses on the 2014 curriculum reform in England only. These reforms were overseen by Ofqual, the qualifications regulator in England. GCSE and A-level qualifications in Wales and Northern Ireland have undergone separate curriculum reforms and are regulated by Qualifications Wales in Wales, and the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland.
2. Ofqual is the Office for Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, a non-ministerial government department that regulates all qualifications, examination assessments and tests in England.
3. The three English exam boards involved in the A-level curriculum reform were AQA, OCR and Eduqas
4. F. R Leavis was a literary critic and an influential proponent in the preservation of seriousness and moral depth in the study of English literature in the 20th Century. He influenced writers such as Denys Thompson, the author of 'Discrimination and Popular Culture' (1964) which decried the perceived debasement of standards in education at the hands of mass (or popular) culture.
5. The Department for Education is the UK government's ministerial department and is responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills in England.
6. Creative Skillset was the name of the former skills body for the UK screen and creative media industries. It was replaced in 2018 by Screenskills.
7. The British Film Institute is a film and television charitable organisation in the UK. Its education arm supports media and film education in the UK and runs programmes for young people wishing to gain employment in the screen industries.

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