

How Critical Reflection Helped Me Resolve The Dilemma of Using the News as a Text

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As we reflect on our teaching practices we may begin to question the relevance of what we teach. We may become aware of pockets of dissonance that cannot be ignored. We must confront the issues and be prepared to change what we may have always done. We need to challenge 'common sense' practice, and examine it in the light of changing society.

This paper shares how the process of critical reflection enabled me to work toward the resolution of a personal professional dilemma. For sometime now I have felt uneasy about using the news, particularly televised news, as a text. My initial misgivings crystallised in response to unexpected learning outcomes as a result of studying the Olympic Games and the Presidential Elections in the USA.

This paper challenges the use of the news as a text.

The Role of Critical Reflection:

‘As men, simultaneously reflecting on themselves and on the world, increase the scope of their perception, they begin to direct their observations towards previously inconspicuous phenomena’. (Paulo Freire, 1972, p.55).

‘All teachers need to be concerned with *what* should be taught and *why* it should be taught’ (Beyer and Apple, 1988 as cited in McGee, 1995, p.30). This deceptively simple statement should form the foundation upon which everything we do as teachers is built. Implicit within this statement is the notion of teachers as autonomous and reflective professionals who interrogate the curriculum in order to meet the needs of

students. Our aim is to provide experiences that will allow our students to access knowledge in order to improve their life chances (Carpenter, 2001). Apple (1993) believes that it is imperative for teachers to reflect upon the nature of the knowledge itself and to consider how it is that schools (or teachers at the classroom interface) select or reject the different kinds of knowledge included in the curriculum, how schools and the society they serve decide which knowledge is 'official', and once it has been included in the canon how it is then ranked. There is often contention about what should be selected; those who believe they have a right to influence the decisions made argue about what should be included and its significance (McGee, 1995).

Apple believes teachers need to consider the texts that are used to help implement the curriculum. To him, texts are more than packages of information or procedures, '...they signify, through their content and form, particular constructions of reality, particular ways of selecting and organising that vast universe of possible Knowledge' (Apple, 1993, p.49). Giroux reinforces the sentiments expressed by Apple and Beyer:

Progressive teachers must ... recognise that both what they teach and how they teach must become subject to critical analysis. Neither the knowledge that teachers teach nor the ways in which they teach are innocent; both are informed by values that need to be recognised and critically engaged for their implications and effects (Giroux, 1999, www.).

A large part of teachers' work is problem solving. We are confronted with dilemmas on a daily basis. The difficulties may be easy to resolve, as they can be technical in nature. Sometimes, however, they are more demanding and challenging to address. This is because they involve ethical, moral, social and political considerations (Smyth, 1993, in Hagenson, 1998). In facing them, we can be forced to acknowledge that we are the source of the problem in the first place. The dilemma surfaces because we have failed to examine the tacit assumptions that much of our practice and thinking is based upon (Ross, Bondy & Kyle, 1995).

The examination of a dilemma helps us to think about the nature of our work, the reasons we do it and the techniques, strategies and curriculum materials we employ.

Critical reflection allows us to step out of ourselves in order to heighten our awareness. Giroux (1983) reminds us, that for teachers:

‘(T)he production of self-awareness is also linked to understanding how curriculum materials and other cultural artefacts produce meanings. That is, teachers must learn to decode the messages inscribed in both form and content in such artefacts and materials’ (Giroux, 1983, p.69).

The success of the process of critical reflection is dependant on a willingness to be informed by theory. Theory may not provide the answer. It does, however, illuminate and inform our thinking as we work toward solutions.

Theory is a point of view. It may be philosophical, it may be based on qualitative or quantitative research. It does not matter. The purpose in considering theory is not to be converted to a particular point of view but to develop one’s own. Sometimes as we consider what is said we find that we connect with part, rather than all, of a particular theorist’s position. The writings of educational theorists such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire show how they have drawn from each other’s work while developing their own positions (Giroux, 1983).

What happens, if as a result of reflection, a teacher identifies an area of practice that causes concern but which does not appear to be problematic for other teachers? In this instance, does one over-ride one’s feelings and teach the subject anyway? Alternatively, does one avoid teaching the subject knowing that other students within the same school are having the instruction and experience that provision is not made for? Neither option is ethical or responsible. Antipathy towards teaching a particular subject is never reason enough for avoidance. A thoughtful and responsible teacher will critically reflect on such a professional dilemma in order to resolve it (Ross, Bondy & Kyle, 1995).

My Dilemma:

In my classroom practice, I have become increasingly resistant to the use of ‘Current Events’ as a context for learning in either Social Studies or English. The reason for my reluctance lies in the use of ‘news’ as the text that furnishes the information to be worked with. I find it difficult to use a resource that provokes so many negative

responses at a personal level. My antipathy was somewhat reinforced as a result of the comments made by students in my Year 8 class after using the 'news' as a resource for learning.

The source of my reservations:

...any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary (McLuhan, 1994, p.16).

Reading and watching the news is commonly considered to be of educational benefit to students, particularly in Year 6 and above. Many teachers include perusal of the news as part of the homework schedule. 'News' is considered to be a legitimate source of information about local, national and world events.

Like many other schools in New Zealand, our school selected the Olympic Games and the Presidential Elections in the USA as topics of study. At that time, the news became an important source of up-to-date information and commentary. The intended outcome of watching the news was that students became more informed. While this outcome was met, the unintended outcome also met was knowledge gleaned from classroom discussion topics that revolved around the sexual proclivities of Mark Todd and Bill Clinton.

I began to think about other messages contained within the news and how these might affect my students. If the news is 'a window to the world', then I was becoming increasingly occupied in thinking about what kind of a world was on show and why it was considered to be a necessary body of knowledge. If the aim of education in a democratic society is to increase the life chances of the students we teach (Carpenter, 2001) then how relevant were some messages?

(N)either news nor language are transparent windows on the world. They are both like maps of the world. A map differs from the terrain it indicates in very obvious ways, without ceasing to maintain a relationship which allows us to recognise the terrain through it Clearly a map is an abstraction from reality (Hartley, 1982, p.15).

There is a need to bear in mind that news, as constructed text, requires an understanding of the codes and conventions that govern its form. Like McLuhan (1964), Manzi and Rowe (1991) point to the need to make strange our experience of reading and viewing, and to challenge the notion of the transparency of texts. Unfortunately the meaning in the news is made so 'apparent' that minimal effort is required on the viewer's part.

I began to question my use of a resource that required me to set aside the criteria usually applied to the selection of texts for learning. Faire (1995) outlines the following guidelines for selecting texts/resources while planning a unit of work:

... read each resource/text and evaluate it – will it contribute to student's knowledge, is it suitable for the level and needs of your students, is it accurate and does it have literary value (Faire, 1995, p.233)?

Faire's process suggests that part of a teacher's brief is to select and *screen* resources in order to provide the most effective material. This useful, if somewhat pragmatic, approach addresses practical and educational concerns. However other considerations need to be made to ensure that selection is also based on moral and ethical grounds. These relate to the information itself, how it is received, and the unintended outcomes that may result.

We need to ask whether the information encompasses the addressing of equity issues of culture, race, ethnicity, gender and class (Anyon, 1979, in Giroux, 1983). We need to consider the ability of the students to understand both the implicit and explicit meaning embedded within the text and also to question its veracity, particularly when the information may be contentious. These are vital considerations if our aim is to encompass more than the student's acquisition of information. They are also important if our efforts in providing learning experiences are to be emancipatory (Freire, 1973) and grounded in a desire to 'empower children to become full participants within a democratic society' (Ross, Bondy and Kyle, 1995, p.15).

If the above criteria is applied to the news as a text, it appears that the news fails on many counts.

In order to investigate my concerns further, I turned to the work of educational theorists, media commentators and those who work within the news media. The focus of my reading centred around television news as this is the form that most of my students access. A study undertaken in the USA revealed that of those surveyed about how they sourced information about the world, 50% cited the television as their only source. Fifty five percent also stated that television news was the source they were most likely to believe (Anderson & Meyer, 1988, cited in Chandler, www).

A survey of my students showed that while some students had access to up-to-date newspapers, the majority used the television news as their source for homework and research tasks.

What are the effects of gathering information in this manner? Does the medium itself determine the meaning which is made (McLuhan, 1964)? The news as a text needs to be scrutinised not only for veracity. Questions of intent should also be considered. Is television news a neutral conduit for the dissemination of information and facts, or does it reflect the view of a particular social group? The analysis of the news as a media product must be undertaken if it is to be used as a teaching resource.

(T)o study the media is to study meanings - where they come from, what they are, how far they are intentional, how they are built into media material, and how they are incorporated into our own thinking (Burton, 1997, p.31).

The messages we receive 'come to define how we see the world' (Burton, 1997, p.31).

Apple (1989, p.86) counsels that in order to appreciate the effect of a text, critical attention needs to be '... paid to the ideological, political, and economic sources of its production, distribution and reception.' Texts are in effect 'cultural commodities, pieces of merchandise' (ibid). Publication is seen as a commercial enterprise and as such, any texts chosen are those that were already the most popular in manuscript form. The knowledge that becomes available is that selected in order to generate profit (Febvre and Martin, 1976, cited in Apple, 1989, p.86).

Prior to this study I had not applied this understanding of texts to the news, either in its televised or printed form. I understood the provision of news to be in the nature of a public service. I thought that production costs were simply offset by the inclusion of advertisements. I did not see the news as a commodity. Apple (1993) contends that the news is basically a vehicle used to deliver the viewers/readers to the advertisers as a 'captive audience'. A recent article in a journalism publication states:

(W)hat most of us think of as the *content* of news media, sponsors see primarily as the context in which their ads appear (Fair: Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, 2001, www).

Is the sponsorship of the news problematic? New Zealand journalist, Tony Wilton (1995) believes sponsorship is unethical. Its effect undermines the integrity of the publication, and the ability to publish without 'fear or favour' - because sponsors can become influential in deciding what counts as news.

John Fiske (1987) writes that the real purpose of televised news, particularly its early evening programming, is to '... lead into their prime - time schedules'. The intention is to '... consolidate the family audience in front of the set for the prime-time, prime-profit advertisements that are wedged apart by programmes for the next two or three hours' (Fiske 1987, p.281).

If Fiske's assertion is correct, by directing students to watch the news I am encouraging them to settle for the evening in front of the television. This exposes students to some less than salutary programme content, and to advertisements which will manipulate their buying habits. However, what choice do I have if I want them to develop their understanding and knowledge about the world? Is this kind of knowledge so essential that personal misgivings should be ignored?

According to Apple (1993, pp.99-100), in the United States the focus on the 'need' to know about the news came about as the result of surveys that found students unable to answer a number of general knowledge questions. For example students identified Chernobyl as Cher's full name. The survey results led to assertions that the perceived

ignorance about the world meant that students did not know enough for them to participate in a democratic society.

Similar concerns surface in the New Zealand context. The New Zealand Herald reported the results of a survey which exposed an alarming lack of general knowledge in high school students. I suspect that this led to a good number of children having an overdose of 'current events' tasks loaded into their homework schedule. However as Fiske points out, 'the basic definition of news as factual information that its viewers need in order to be able to participate in their society gives us only half the story' (Fiske, 1987, p281).

'General Knowledge' about the world is something of a misnomer. What is often tested relates to the ability to remember facts or information:

There is a significant difference between information and knowledge. Information is one-dimensional: linear or horizontal, fragmented and quite useless in itself Information provided by a teacher or a textbook is generally and wrongly perceived as knowledge (Bragaw and Hartoonian, 1988, cited in Barr, 1995, p.135).

This statement could be applied to television news. The fragmented nature of information as presented on the news is obvious. The speed at which the information is delivered works against its ability to be synthesised, as there is little time for an analytical 'reading' of what is presented. 'If something is not understood there is no opportunity to "freeze" information so that they might stop to reflect ... or to assess more rigorously the validity and truth value of an argument' (Giroux, 1988, in Bodin, 1995, www).

Chandler (1996) draws attention to the fact that 'segmentation' which is employed in the creation of advertisements is also a feature of news programming. The fragmentary nature of news items means little history or explanation is offered of causes or processes. News programmes are said to have what semioticians call a 'metonymic' structure, one that leads to simple images being made to stand for complex issues (Chandler, 1996, www). This is a form of what Bernstein (cited in Giroux, 1988) calls

'symbolic violence'. Viewers have little time to consider what process is at work, or the effect that process may have in shaping worldviews.

If we assume that the news teaches the viewer about the world, then what kind of teacher can it be? There can be no dialogue with the 'teacher'. This form of teaching is what Freire (1972) describes as a 'banking approach to education'. It is an approach where:

(T)he teacher teaches and the students are taught ... The teacher talks and the student listens The teacher chooses the programme content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it (Freire, 1972, p.51).

Freire believes this kind of approach has grave consequences for the learner. 'It attempts to control thinking and action, leads men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power' (ibid, p.51).

Does the news lead us to adjust to the world as we are swept along by the pace of delivery of 'Current Events', accompanied by graphic and arresting footage?

News as it is presented on TV works against the formation of 'real' knowledge. All that can be gained are generalisations and stereotypes. Specifics such as dates, names and place names are easily forgotten, however certain kinds of events and portrayals of people recurring over time build a particular construction of the world:

The Social Construction of Reality is a very basic premise for how and why individuals view the world in a certain manner and what role the media plays in shaping that view. While *reality* incorporates the notion of having an objective independent existence or occurring in *fact*, the social construction of reality accepts at its very nature a subjective 'experience' with reality either via media coverage or media dictation (Pollock, 2001, www).

Gramson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson describe the process:

We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. And the special genius of this system [the Media] is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible (Gramson, Croteau, Hoynes & Sasson, 1992, in Pollock, 1996).

Fiske (1987, p285) notes that '(T)hird World countries, are ... conventionally represented in western news as places of famines and natural disaster, social revolution, and of political corruption.' The language that accompanies visual representations of certain groups also serves to build and reinforce stereotypical views. Workers striking for better work conditions or pay are said to be making demands while employers in trying to reach settlement are said to be 'offering' terms. This deceptive portrayal does not reflect the real balance of power. The words employed in news reports to describe events or people, work to produce particular meanings. For example, consider assaults that are labelled as muggings and people carrying out acts of insurrection presented as either 'terrorists' or 'freedom fighters', depending on the politics of those reporting (Fiske, 1987).

The portrayal of children and adolescents also requires analysis. News items about children and young people on New Zealand television focuses on their involvement in irresponsible and anti-social behaviour, as suffering from terminal diseases, freak accidental injuries, or as victims of physical and sexual abuse. This does not represent the reality of the lives of the majority of youths and children. How does this 'knowledge' help to build young people who will be able to take their place in society?

The messages about young people are beginning to be challenged. The Los Angeles Times reports that although homicides by juveniles dropped 68% from 1993 to 1999, as a result of unbalanced reporting most people in the USA believe youth crime is on the rise (Texeira, 2001, in Children Now, www). Giroux (1999, www) states, '(Y)outh are no longer at risk but considered the risk.' He goes on to say that the combined effects of news reports and representation of youth culture in a recent spate of films has

reinforced the assumption that the young are in need of medical treatment and increased supervision and discipline. These reports have resulted in the demand that the age at which children can be tried as adults for violent crimes to be lowered (Giroux, 1999, www).

If young people are increasingly portrayed in a certain way is it possible that this could become a self-fulfilling prophecy? A self-fulfilling prophecy is '(T)he notion that the expectation of an event can make it happen; it starts with a false belief which causes new behaviour: thus making the false belief become a true positive reality' (Campbell and Simpson, 1992, in Tauber, 1997, p14). This possibility has made me concerned about the effect of news watching on Polynesian and Maori students; news broadcasts regularly highlight the offending of young Polynesian and Maori men.

The school that I teach in has a large number of children from immigrant families. Immigration is portrayed as a serious problem in the media and in public debate (Philo and Beattie, 1999). These writers analyse the portrayal of migrants in the news media in Great Britain and demonstrate a portrayal of immigrants as a burden on the welfare system of Great Britain – a position which is not evidence based. The prevailing view is that the country is burdened by the presence of a multitude of immigrants living in the best council houses, taxing health resources and claiming all sorts of monetary benefits. Reports in the news media in New Zealand have fuelled similar beliefs.

These media representations marginalise groups of people and they come to be regarded as what Freire (1972, p48) calls the 'pathology of the healthy society'. I do not want my students to be affected or rather, infected, by this kind of media view.

The ability of the news media to offer up a person or section of the community to the viewing public has a powerful effect on our lives. The news media becomes an institution that is able to discipline us. This ability can be explained by Foucault's theory of power relations (Fillingham, 1993). The news media becomes a form of the 'Panopticon' as it scans both those in public and private life. When we watch the news we become increasingly aware of the surveillance capacity of a medium that is incessantly gathering information about events and the people involved in them. The

news presents people as 'us' or 'them'. While we are in the role of 'us' we can watch 'them' realising that at any time the tables could turn.

The news allows us to see people at their best and their worst, usually their worst. The news teaches our children that our leaders and sporting heroes may have 'feet of clay'. Children also learn that if they are unlucky enough to become very sick they might become 'newsworthy' themselves. Children come to realise that no personal tragedy is considered private as they watch close-up shots of grieving relatives at funerals. In the aftermath of most awful events, a reporter and camera will be present to interview and record. Even our dying moments can be recorded and beamed around the world. This was recently demonstrated by the televised death of a young Palestinian boy in his father's arms, as his father tried to shield him from the gunfire of Israeli soldiers.

Foucault's theory of the normalisation effect of the 'gaze' means that people no longer need the threat of death by public spectacle in order to keep them 'in line' (Fillingham, 1993). However, it would seem that the media is able to employ both the 'gaze' and the 'spectacle' as political commentator. Colin James' (2001) article in the New Herald, entitled "Public Executions in Living Colour" demonstrates this:

We don't feed Christians to lions anymore. We don't have bear baiting ... and witch hunts, but turn on your television any evening, almost any channel, and enjoy public executions in multiplicate, from news to nightcap TV One's trailer for its serious current events programme, *Assignment*, promises protest, tanks and titillating mayhem. We veil murder behind a screen and call it civilised (James, 2001).

'If it bleeds, it leads.' is an expression which circulates in newsrooms. James (2001, *ibid*) states, '(C)elebrities, confrontation and crime are the three ciphers of Media ratings.' It becomes clear that those who comment on the media and those who work within do not share the sentiment that is held by teachers that the news is about reality, truth or democracy. I continue to ask myself whether it is an ethical practice to direct my students to what is a version of 'truth', spiced with gratuitous violence, inane celebration of 'entertainers' and intrusion into the most intimate moments of a person's

life. The news does not yet show sexual intimacy but surely its clamour to broadcast 'live footage' of somebody's dying moments is just as pornographic?

Neil Postman (1989) says that we should be traumatised by what we see on the news. How is that possible? If we consider how each item is separated in its presentation by the smiling, familiar and reassuring faces of Judy Bailey and Richard Long we can get a sense of how this works. Brian Edwards refers to this presentation as the 'Cootchie Coo News.' He is scathing in his assessment of this type of broadcasting which he describes as a 'superbly choreographed, roller-coaster ride of the emotions, from warm fuzzy to cold prickly and back again' (Edwards, 1995):

The homely style of news presentation...may seem innocuous, but is in reality a palatable form of propaganda. The sympathy, prejudice, approbrium, outrage, excitement, so subtly but so incessantly conveyed on One Network News, all serve to reinforce a view of the world and the society we live in that is populist, commonsensical, obvious – the majority view...and a dangerous trend in society (Edwards, 1995. p24).

It seems that the news is looking less 'real' or capable of supplying the information needs of a democratic citizenry.

Noam Chomsky (1999) asserts that the news is a form of propaganda, the purpose of which is to manage public opinion. This idea was foreign to me, as I understood our press to be free from the control that he describes. I believed that the control of public opinion through its communication systems is an anathema in a democratic society. In the film documentary 'Manufacturing Consent' (Achbar, M., Wintonik, P. & Symansky, P., 1992), Chomsky describes the media as an ideological system that serves the powerful elites in society. He explains the role of politicians, intellectuals and academics in manufacturing the consent of the people so a government can pursue its desired end. The role of the media in this process is to produce consensus amongst the public towards those in charge of government and business. Manzi and Rowe (1991, p45) state that when considering media products we need to ask, 'who has the power to construct and maintain a certain pattern of meanings and with what effects?'

Media analysts Branson and Stafford (1999) suggest that most news journalists share and present a view that confirms the views of those in society with power and influence. Journalists and teachers are generally middleclass; this could explain why teachers accept the news as showing the world as it really is; the view matches their 'habitus'.

In 'Rich Media, Poor Democracy', Robert McChesney (1999) describes how the world's media and communications system are now controlled by an oligarchy of trans-national corporations. He attests that this power base has led to the commercialisation of our news systems. He also believes that we need to consider whose purpose is really being met. As a result of monopolies and resulting influences we are facing a new form of cultural hegemony. The spread of media products throughout the world threatens to turn every community into what Shor (2000) calls a 'suburb of Hollywood'. The news needs to be considered as a commercial media product in order to consider its role in shaping our worldview.

Tunstall (cited in Bodin, 1995, www) describes the effects of cultural imperialism that undermine authentic, traditional and local culture. He believes that the slick commercial products of the media industry are battering real cultures out of existence. According to Strinati (1992, p.431), the media messages made possible by the rapid technological advancements in global communication systems have led to '... the construction of the postmodern condition' which is manifested in the '... the gradual disappearance of the traditional, long-standing and once legitimate frames of reference in terms of which people could define themselves and their place in society.'

My thoughts turn to our last school disco where most of the girls turned up looking like Brittany Spears or Jennifer Lopez. The boys were all dressed in the oversized uniform of the 'boys from the hood'. As McChesney (1999) points out, our children are 'marinated' in commercialism from birth.

A Way Forward?

My literature search confirms my fears. However, as much as I would like to protect my students from the destructive influences of the news and media I know that is impossible. The media engulfs us. 'We live in a media saturated society' (Eldridge, 1993, p342). The news is all around us. We wake up to it in the morning on

our radio alarms, we use it as a time check as we drive to work and we catch the headlines on the billboards outside the corner shop. If we cannot avoid it, we can learn to 'read' it:

....we become 'news literate' as we learn and accept codes and conventions; we as individuals come to perceive and interpret the world partly in terms of these news conventions; as a group we come to make up 'reality' as we go along, perceiving it in terms of the ordered language system we have learnt from the news (Hartley, 1982, p.5).

This is the way we currently read the news. What is called for is a different strategy, possibly an approach that Shor (2000) maintains can challenge the status quo. Shor advocates that critical literacy can help students to become aware that language and knowledge are not neutral (Shor, 2000).

(T)he fundamental purpose of critical literacy is to transform schools and society, not simply to change the ways that students study texts (McCaffery, 2000, www).

McCaffery believes that New Zealand teachers have yet to take up the challenge of enabling critical literacy. This could be because 'we have failed to address the power relationship that Neil Postman (1985) has called the struggle between the 'first curriculum' of the mass media and the 'second curriculum' of the schools' (Hobbs, 1998, www). Sizer (1995, in Hobbs, 1998) describes the great 'silences' in public education concerning how the hearts and minds of American children are increasingly influenced by information and attitudes gathered from the media and the commerce it depends on. New Zealand children are also immersed in this system.

I have acknowledged my concern for the students I teach. In order to resolve my dilemma I need to rise to the challenge of the 'first curriculum' by sharing with students the techniques which will enable them to critically interpret all texts in order that their reading of them will help them to control the world, not just words (Freire 1972, Lankshear 1990, in McCaffery, 2000, www).

There is a need for teachers to first critically analyse the news themselves, indeed all media products, and to ‘...teach our students to become critical thinkers in relation to the media’ (Eldridge, 1993, p 346).

‘A democratic civilisation will save itself, only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection, not an invitation to hypnosis’ (Umberto Eco, 1979, in Hobbs, 1998, www).

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