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## Assessing learning from practical media production at an introductory level: the role of writing

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Bragg, Sara (2011). Assessing learning from practical media production at an introductory level: the role of writing. Media Literacies: A Critical Introduction (2012).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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**Assessing learning from practical media production at introductory level:  
The role of writing**  
By: Sara Bragg

It is widely accepted that being media literate includes the ability to *produce* media alongside accessing, understanding and analyzing them. But what does making media achieve in the media education classroom?

Students generally enjoy and are motivated by practical work although pleasure alone may not seem a sufficiently academic rationale. In introductory level courses, specific vocational skills training is rarely a central aim – not least because some learners may be more confident with key software and tools than their teachers – although the production process may develop generic competences, such as ‘working with others’, ‘communication’ and so on. Primarily, the intention is that students learn *from* rather than *about* media production, coming to understand and question key concepts of their course (such as audience, representation, institution), more deeply than they would through only studying existing texts. To produce media, students must draw on the knowledge they have unconsciously imbibed as audiences, which therefore – it is argued – makes it available for reflection and analysis. There is a social justice aspect to this, too: other school subjects take little account of literacies beyond print-based and even deride learning from low-status media rather than more highly valued cultural forms, whereas practical production can recognize and reward such expertise (especially where outcomes are formally assessed), enabling ‘non-traditional’ students to score more highly than through essays or exams.

Although being able to generate intelligible and appropriate media texts in itself arguably demonstrates understanding, educators tend to ask that more explicit evidence of learning is submitted alongside the product, in the (usually written) form of an evaluation, reflection or commentary. Yet such assignments often prove unsatisfactory; they are unpopular with students, whilst teachers complain that they fail to relate key concepts to the product, that they are descriptive rather than analytical or make claims about the product reflecting obdurate wish-fulfilment rather than cool appraisal. The essay format may help academically confident students compensate for weak products but unfairly penalize those who struggle with academic conventions, whatever their creative talents – an issue partly addressed by diversifying the range of permitted media (video, audio) and genres (blogs, commentaries).

The problem, I suggest, is not that students are deficient nor that writing is unnecessary and unimportant; it may instead lie in the assumptions made in the framing of tasks and the guidance given to students.

For instance, media production is sometimes conceived as ‘putting theory into

practice', and begins only after instruction in media theory and techniques for textual analysis. Students are expected to use this material in their own productions - and in their writing to recount (in effect) how helpful their teachers have been. But this epistemological model surely overestimates the contribution of explicit knowledge to learning and action; and it is insufficiently interested in what other, unexpected and varied, frames of reference might in fact be relevant to students. It would be better to ask students to discuss in detail how their own texts relate to existing media genres and forms with which they are familiar, how they have selected, combined and shaped material to their own interests. Provided students are reassured that such 'bricolage' is creatively legitimate (rather than scholastically criminal 'copying'), they can be surprisingly eloquent on such matters. And what they reveal may in turn help teachers appreciate their students' personal media passions and how they might build on them pedagogically: learning in the classroom should not be only one-way.

Secondly, students are commonly asked to write about 'why' they worked as they did - that is, to illuminate the reasons behind their actions, how they planned the work, and how their 'intentions' were 'realized' in the final product. It is hardly surprising if they then fabricate improbable stories about how masterful and in control they were, how they bent technology to their will and manipulated the world to achieve their predetermined grand plan. Perhaps they are merely being polite in not wanting to expose the delusion embedded in the very demand for explanation - that we can capture the understandings implicit in our practice, in a complete way, within a rational framework. Of course, the modernist institution of school invests heavily in the ideal of the self-knowing, autonomous subject for whom this would present no challenge. But students know well how disjointed and ad hoc media production processes are in practice; how they improvise (can we make this garden look like a jungle?), are limited by circumstances (the battery on the camera runs down, editing time is short), have to work with what is possible rather than what they want (no car chases...) and must rely on others (to turn up, to act, to comment) in ways that both help and hinder them. In so doing they are more, not less, creative, but we do not help them tell us this.

John Shotter's description of a 'knowing of the third kind' (1993) is apt here: it refers to knowledge derived from one's circumstances, which is neither abstract (knowing that or knowing why) nor technical (knowing how); it is practical in that it enables us to act 'appropriately', but it is a background knowledge that one thinks *out of* in order to act *into* a situation. If media-making mobilises such knowledge, no wonder students struggle to explain 'why' or realize their intentions - because they respond to and negotiate with circumstances, events and other people, because their understanding shapes their practices but in ways that at the time may feel simply instinctive.

To foreground and validate such ways of knowing, teachers could ask students to discuss how they worked in practice, their tactics for overcoming the frustrating limits

of technology and circumstance – perhaps in class presentations during the production process, to share ideas and generate collective solutions and further questions. They are likely to be formulated as narrative or descriptive accounts, but these are not inferior to ‘analytical’ academic genres; they should be valued in their own right and assessed in relevant terms – such as, for how clearly they outline the dimensions of problems encountered and solutions found, their utility in other situations.

What is implicit in students’ texts can also be explored through ‘reception’ studies using ‘real’ audiences, as educators have long known. Work can now, of course, be showcased online although local audiences may be more motivated to respond and more aware of cultural reference points. However, evaluation, saying how ‘good’ texts are according to ill-defined criteria, is at most gratifying and rarely illuminating. Audiences instead *describing* the texts – what they are about, what they think they mean – may more effectively help students appreciate their work from the perspectives of others, realize that they have created unintended meanings, and what impact these might have on others, becoming therefore ‘accountable’ for their representations, in retrospect rather than in advance. If teachers too eschew value-judgements for description using the specialised vocabulary of media analysis, they may return students’ knowledge to them in a form in which they can take pride and for which they can be accredited.

My comments here imply at most only minor adjustments to existing practice: nonetheless, I hope they might help generate more meaningful writing from students, and stimulate reflection on our theories of knowing, learning, and creativity.