

# DEVELOPING MEDIA LITERACY: CONCEPTS, PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

This document was written to accompany a teaching pack called *Developing Media Literacy*, published in 2014 by the English and Media Centre. The pack itself came out of a four-year research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and contains an extensive set of multi-media teaching materials designed for use in primary schools. This document was intended to provide support for teachers working with the materials in the classroom. It offers a succinct overview of the pedagogy, key concepts and areas of knowledge embedded in the activities, based on knowledge and understanding drawn from media education practice over the last 30 years, and reinforced by the findings of the 'Developing Media Literacy' research. We hope it's reasonably definitive!

The document includes:

**1. Concepts:** What do children need to *know* about media? Media education has traditionally been defined in terms of a set of four 'key concepts': media language, representation, institutions and audiences. This section gives a broad outline of these concepts and what they entail. It also shows what progression might look like across each concept, from the 'entry-level' understanding children bring into school with them, to a more nuanced level of conceptual understanding.

**2. Practices:** What do children need to be able to *do* with media? Literacy can obviously be broken down into reading and writing; and it also involves the ability to reflect critically on how meanings are made. This is also the case with media literacy. In this section, we look at the processes that are involved in 'reading' media – making sense of media texts, and analysing them – and 'writing' media – that is, creating your own texts. We also consider here what children need to know about the contexts in which texts are created.

**3. Processes:** Media literacy has its own distinctive knowledge and skills (concepts and practices, as we have defined them). But it also involves forms of learning that are much more generally applicable; and it can be a useful and exciting way of achieving broader objectives. This section briefly summarises some of these broader types of learning we believe to be particularly significant in media literacy, such as collaboration, questioning, de-familiarisation and decentring, independent research, and critical reflection – many of which overlap with other curriculum areas.

**4. Progression:** Here we have attempted to map some of the ways in which children might develop their understanding and skills in media literacy at different stages in the learning journey. We provide 'maps' of learning progression focussing on each of the key concepts and practices. The model of progression, and the classroom examples we use here, are based on the 'Developing Media Literacy' research, which was conducted in eight schools with children of different ages. (These maps are included in a separate document.)

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## **1. CONCEPTS: WHAT DO LEARNERS NEED TO KNOW?**

### **LANGUAGE**

#### **1. Making meaning**

- Media use various forms of language (verbal, visual, auditory, etc.) to create meanings
- Producers make choices about the meanings they want to create, and select elements of these languages and ways of combining them to convey those meanings
- Audiences also make choices and interpretations, as they participate in the meaning-making process
- The meanings audiences make do not necessarily correspond to the meanings producers intend to convey

#### **2. Elements of language**

- There are different types of media language (for example images, sounds, aspects of design, performance)
- Producers make choices within these different types of language (e.g. different camera shots, angles, movements; ambient sound, music, sound effects...)
- Different technologies offer different possible choices, and new technologies can offer new choices

#### **3. Combinations of elements**

- Producers combine these different elements, for example to create narratives, to describe things, or to construct arguments that audiences will find meaningful
- These combinations also involve choices, for example in editing sequences of images, combining sounds with images, or composing a page layout or a display
- These combinations of elements represent the world from particular viewpoints, and in ways that convey particular messages and values

#### **4. Codes and conventions**

- The elements of language that are used, and the ways in which they are combined, tend to follow established rules and conventions
- Audiences and producers come to recognise these conventions as 'styles' or genres which are common across different media texts
- These conventions become established over time, but they can also change – rules can be broken or subverted, and different styles and genres may be combined

### **PROGRESSION in understanding in this area entails:**

- (1) knowing that there is a process of choice or conscious construction going on;
- (2) recognising the range of choices that can possibly be made;
- (3) acquiring and using a metalanguage to identify those choices, and to identify systematic patterns and conventions;
- (4) understanding that meanings can vary depending upon the context, and upon the interpretation of the audience.

## **REPRESENTATION**

### **1. Representing reality**

- Media do not simply present the world, but re-present it: they construct versions of reality
- Media producers make choices about what to include and exclude, and how to represent particular events, social groups and ideas
- The same aspects of reality (people, events, places, ideas) can be represented in different ways, depending on the purposes of the producers
- Representations make different claims about realism – about the extent to which they should be regarded as realistic

### **2. Types and patterns**

- Media representations involve processes of selection and combination that tend to follow regular and established patterns
- These patterns can serve as a kind of shorthand for audiences, enabling them to interpret media quickly and economically
- These patterns or stereotypes can change over time, and both producers and audiences can use them in playful ways

### **3. Messages and values**

- Media representations inevitably communicate messages, and convey particular values, ideologies and beliefs about the world
- What is included or excluded, what is selected, and how particular aspects of reality are represented may all reflect or convey particular viewpoints or biases

### **4. Audience interpretations**

- Audiences make sense of media representations in light of their own experiences of, and beliefs about, the real world
- They make judgments about how realistic (plausible, authentic, accurate) media texts are, and hence how far they can be trusted
- They may choose to accept or reject some (or all) aspects of a given representation
- The influence of media values and ideologies is therefore likely to be complex and diverse, and will depend on many other factors
- Audiences' interpretations, judgments and preferences may change over time, and in different contexts, in ways that reflect changing experiences, values and aspects of identity

## **PROGRESSION in understanding in this area entails:**

- (1) recognising the basic *fact* of representation or mediation;
- (2) becoming aware of how representations are constructed – processes of selection and combination;
- (3) becoming aware of patterns and regularities in representations, and the values that are at stake in these;
- (4) becoming aware that representations change over time, can be interpreted in different ways, and are not straightforward in their effects.

## **INSTITUTIONS**

### **1. Production practices**

- Media are produced for audiences by individuals, groups and larger organisations
- Most media production involves teams of people doing different jobs, which involve different skills
- Different people and different technologies are involved at different stages of pre-production, production and post-production
- The process of production shapes the final product, although some people in these teams have more power to make decisions and influence the outcome than others

### **2. Ownership and power**

- Media products are generally owned (copyrighted) by the organisations that produce them, rather than the individuals who actually made them
- Media organisations are also owned, and can be bought and sold
- Media owners often own other media organisations, and may have interests in a range of different media
- Media organisations compete for audiences in order to make greater profits, or to enhance their reputation

### **3. Media economics**

- While some media are funded by the government, or not produced for profit, most media companies are seeking to make money from their work
- The media are an important commercial industry, which operates on a global scale
- In some instances, media are free to use, but are funded by income from advertising
- Reaching large audiences can be a good way to generate profit, but sometimes more money can be made by targeting specialised audiences, especially wealthy audiences

### **4. Regulation**

- Media companies are not completely free to do what they like, but have to follow various laws and rules
- These rules have many different purposes – for instance, to protect children, to make sure the media tell the truth, or to make sure there is fair competition
- The rules are made and enforced by different organisations, and sometimes by media companies themselves
- People may have different views and understandings of these rules, and they are not always effective

## **PROGRESSION in understanding in this area entails:**

- (1) realizing that there is a 'they' who make media;
- (2) understanding the different people and interests (including commercial interests) involved in media production;
- (3) understanding the media industries as a form of commercial business, but a fairly risky one;
- (4) recognizing that media companies are powerful, but that there are limits to their power.

## **AUDIENCES**

### **1. Reaching audiences**

- All media products are produced for, and consumed by, audiences
- Some media are addressed to small, specialised audiences, while others are aimed at a mass general audience
- Media producers imagine and make assumptions about their target audience(s), which may or may not be accurate
- Media institutions target audiences both through the content and appeal of media themselves and through the ways in which they are marketed, circulated and distributed
- Different audiences can be reached in different ways by using different media technologies and platforms, often in combination

### **2. Defining audiences**

- Audiences are grouped and categorised in various ways, by age, gender and social class, as well as by aspects such as lifestyle and taste
- Media producers conduct research on audiences, using a range of methods to find out about their habits, tastes and uses of media
- These ways of defining and gathering information about audiences are not always reliable, and sometimes several different methods are used

### **3. Audience uses of media**

- Audiences use media in very different ways in their everyday lives
- Audiences access media using different technologies and platforms
- These differences partly reflect social differences (age, gender, social class), but they also reflect individual tastes, lifestyles and priorities

### **4. Audience interpretations and pleasures**

- Audiences may interpret the same media in very different ways, and have very different tastes and preferences: they may enjoy, but they may also critique, subvert and resist
- These differences partly reflect social differences (age, gender, social class), but they also reflect individual tastes, lifestyles and priorities
- People's media practices are also connected to their identity – their sense of who they are, and who they want to be
- Audiences' responses to media can therefore be difficult for media producers to predict

## **PROGRESSION in understanding in this area entails:**

- (1) awareness of the importance of audiences;
- (2) understanding differences between different audience groups' media uses and preferences;
- (3) understanding how media producers target and address audiences;
- (4) awareness of the complexity and difficulty of 'knowing' audiences, and a willingness to challenge stereotypes and simple assumptions about them.

## **PRACTICES: WHAT DO MEDIA LEARNERS LEARN TO DO?**

Our focus here is on what learners need to be able to *do* with media – and in particular how they *make meaning* from and with media. This is partly about ‘skills’, but it’s important to emphasise that we are not mainly thinking here about *technical* skills. We’re also talking about the ability to analyse, to communicate, to express meaning, and to reflect on these things.

We have broken this down into three components, although they are very much related to each other. We are emphasizing the analogy with literacy here, and calling the first two components ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ media – although obviously we are talking about visual, audio-visual and digital media, not just print. Reading is about interpretation, understanding, response and critical analysis; writing is about expression, communication and creative production. Both involve imagination, reflection and the making of meaning. Our model draws out the similarities between ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ media, and the need to generate a dynamic relationship between them.

Even so, it’s important to emphasise that media education is not about reading and writing in isolation: we also need to understand the *contexts* in which these things take place. This is our third element here. As we come to understand reading and writing in context, we look at how a given text relates to other texts, and how texts are produced, circulated and read or used by different audiences.

Finally, we should stress that meaning-making is also about pleasure – about emotional response and enjoyment. It is not entirely rational or controllable, and it occurs at a sensuous or even physical level as well, perhaps especially in the ways we respond to and create music and images.

### **A. READING MEDIA**

By ‘reading’ we mean interpreting or understanding media texts, but also analysing them in systematic ways. We make meanings as we read a text, responding to all sorts of signs and cues; but *analysis* involves breaking things down into their constituent elements, and then looking at how those elements are combined.

#### **1. Constructing meaning**

Making meaning from any text is an active process. It involves imagination, inference, speculation and interpretation. It’s a matter of emotional responses as well as rational ones. Readers bring various kinds of prior experience to their reading – experience of the world and of other texts they have encountered. They also need to make judgments about who created the text, why they did so, and who they were trying to communicate with. Reading media therefore involves thinking about:

- How the text makes you think or feel – your own response, and what makes you feel that way
- What you think the text is trying to communicate - the author’s intentions and point of view
- The audience for whom you think the text is intended, and how they might respond to it
- Whether or not you think the text can be trusted – does it give us an accurate or reliable view of the world?

Progression in this area entails:

- Becoming more reflective in identifying and explaining your responses or interpretations, and what makes you respond in the way you do
- Making more critical judgments, and making more active use of your other experience of the world and of other texts
- Recognising that authors may have multiple intentions (and texts may have multiple authors), that intentions may be confused or unclear, and that they may vary according to the context and function of communication
- Recognising that texts may communicate different or multiple meanings to different audiences, and thinking about why people interpret things in different ways

## **2. Selecting**

Media education isn't just about interpretation and response to texts: it also involves reflecting on your own responses, and how those responses are produced. This often involves close critical analysis of the various elements from which a text is made, and of how they are combined together. Looking at the elements of a text means breaking it down into its component parts, and thinking about how each of them was selected. This involves:

- Knowing the range of resources and tools that are available to create meaning, across different modes and media
- Understanding how these resources can be used and adapted for different contexts and purposes
- Thinking about how and why these resources have been chosen in order to express or communicate meaning, and what other possibilities might have been used

Progression in this area involves:

- Being aware of a widening range of meaning-making resources
- Identifying and distinguishing between significant and insignificant detail
- Being able to use an increasingly detailed metalanguage to identify and describe these elements
- Being able to reflect on the potential or actual consequences of the choices that have been made, and considering potential alternative choices
- Moving from description to analysis and explanation

## **3. Combining**

Analysis also means looking at how these various elements are combined together, and the contribution this makes to the overall meaning. This entails:

- Looking at how elements are combined into temporal sequences or design layouts, for example to construct an argument or a narrative
- Understanding how and why elements from different modes are combined, e.g. written language and images, or sound/music and moving images, and the consequences of this
- Understanding how particular combinations of elements function to create suspense, to convey a particular point of view, to inform or persuade or entertain or shock...

Progression in this area involves:

- A more confident understanding of the different ways in which elements can potentially be combined, and the consequences of this

- Using a more detailed and complex metalanguage to describe and identify how elements are combined
- More focused and explicit awareness of the conventions, for example of editing or page layout, and of the ways in which these can be played with, challenged or subverted

## **B. WRITING MEDIA**

By 'writing' we mean *making* media – the use of media to construct, express and communicate meaning. Like reading, this process of meaning-making happens at a holistic level, as well as through more specific processes of selecting and combining.

### **1. Creating meaning**

At an overall, holistic level, being able to create meaningful texts depends upon:

- Defining your intentions – what you want to communicate
- Defining your audience – who you want to reach
- Defining your impact – how you want your audience to respond

Progression here involves:

- Being explicit about your intentions, audience and impact, and being able to explain and justify your approach
- Making more effective use of planning tools (e.g. treatments, storyboards, mock-ups, play, simulation)
- Recognising that intentions may vary according to the context and function of communication
- Recognising that you may have multiple intentions, and that these may change over time; and being able to reflect on this
- Recognising that audiences may be diverse, that they may respond in diverse and unpredictable ways, and why this can occur

### **2. Selecting**

Making meaning depends upon selecting from the range of possibilities that are available.

This involves:

- Being aware of a range of resources and tools that are available to create meaning, across different modes and media
- Understanding how these resources can be used and adapted for different contexts and purposes
- Being able to play and experiment with these resources, and make judgments about their effects
- Choosing from among those resources in a conscious and deliberate way in order to express or communicate a meaning
- Reflecting on the consequences of potential or actual choices in terms of the meaning that is created or communicated

Progression here involves:

- Being aware of a wider range of possible meaning-making elements
- Being able to use a more detailed metalanguage to describe and identify elements, according to purpose and context
- Making more systematic, explicit and informed choices
- Understanding and using established conventions, and being able to play with, challenge or subvert these if appropriate

- Becoming more competent and fluent in the use of technical tools (hardware and software)
- Being more able to reflect on the potential or actual consequences of the choices you make, and re-draft or re-work texts accordingly

### 3. Combining

Creating meaning also involves combining these different elements into a coherent text. This entails:

- Organising elements into sequences or design layouts that convey an argument or narrative that will be meaningful for your audience
- Combining elements from different modes or media, e.g. written language and images, or sound/music and moving images
- Understanding how particular combinations of elements function to create suspense, to convey a particular point of view, or to persuade

Progression here involves:

- More sophisticated and deliberate manipulation and combination of elements
- Becoming more confident in using planning tools (e.g. storyboards) and editing tools (e.g. software)
- Reflecting on the consequences of different actual or potential combinations
- Being able to use a more detailed metalanguage to describe and identify conventions
- Being able to create more complex or challenging or innovative texts, appropriate to intention and context

## C. TEXT IN CONTEXT

Texts are not produced or consumed (written or read) in isolation: what and how they mean depends upon the social contexts in which people create and experience them. Media education involves understanding texts *in context*. In our conceptual framework, this relates particularly to the areas of *institutions* and *audiences*: it is about who produces a text, who consumes it, and why they do so. However, there are particular ways in which media educators make this movement 'out' from the text to the context, and then back again.

### 1. Intertextuality

We approach any given media text with a range of previous experiences of other texts. We interpret texts in the light of other texts we have encountered, which may be similar or different in all sorts of ways. We make judgments about what *type* of the text this is, and adjust our expectations and our approach to reading accordingly. Texts often use conventions or formulae that we recognise, and this can make the process of interpretation simpler and more efficient. However, they can also play with, subvert or directly challenge conventions. 'Intertextuality' is the literary term that refers to this idea of how a given text relates to other texts.

Understanding intertextuality as a reader therefore involves:

- Comparing a text to other texts you have encountered – noting similarities and differences
- Identifying the textual features that are shared with other texts, or different from them
- Identifying how and why texts are similar or different – for example in terms of form, content and genre; in terms of their function and purpose; in terms of when and where they are produced; or in terms of how they might be used or read

Understanding intertextuality as a writer also involves:

- Making deliberate and explicit choices about how to refer to and draw on other texts, for particular purposes
- Being able to make use of existing models or conventions, and/or purposefully challenge or play with them

## 2. Paratexts

It's very rare to encounter texts in isolation. Media texts (including books!) are typically packaged, marketed or promoted in various ways. They are surrounded by critical reviews and the commentaries of fans; they are classified in catalogues, archives and shop displays; they often 'spin off' into other media (books become computer games, computer games become movies); and in some cases, they spawn a wide range of merchandise, from toys and clothing to lunchboxes and even food. These things give us all sorts of indications about what type of text this is, and how we should read it. These surrounding phenomena are sometimes called 'paratexts', although they are also texts in their own right. They are often a key focus of attention in media education.

Understanding and using paratexts as a reader involves:

- Gathering and analyzing paratextual evidence
- Thinking about the reasons why paratexts might be produced, and by whom
- Identifying how paratexts might inform or influence the reading process – what kinds of readers they seem to be aiming for

In producing or writing media, learners might also create their own paratexts – marketing campaigns (posters, advertisements, covers, web-pages), reviews and 'fan' texts, merchandise – as a way of reflecting on the audience and context of their production.

## 3. Wider contexts

One of the main reasons why we study media in the first place is because media tell us something about the wider world. Media education inevitably leads into much broader speculation about the wider contexts in which media are produced and consumed. As we move out from the text, we ask questions about why and how this text came to be made in this context, by these people, at this particular time and place. We also speculate and make judgments about why particular texts might be socially, culturally or politically significant – why they *matter*, and for whom. We explore the themes or issues that media address, the needs and desires they claim to fulfill, and the functions they serve in people's everyday lives and in society as a whole. In the process, much larger historical, social, economic, cultural, political and geographical questions are likely to be raised. Our research shows that young children are capable of raising and engaging with these kinds of questions. It is here that links with other curriculum areas can also be developed.

Progression in this area involves a growing ability to relate text to context. This involves:

- Recognising intertextuality – noticing and analyzing how texts draw upon and refer to other texts, taking account of similarities and differences between texts, in terms of genre, form, theme and purpose
- Making informed use of paratexts to reach conclusions about the contexts of production and consumption
- Becoming more confident in discussing the relationships between texts and their broader social, cultural and political contexts, and using evidence and logical argument to make well-founded generalizations

## **PROCESSES: LEARNING ABOUT MEDIA**

Media education involves a whole range of different types of learning. We have identified some that are more specific to media in our 'making meaning' framework. However, there are many other types of learning in media education, which overlap with other curriculum areas. We identify some of these here, and further examples are highlighted in the online videos that accompany this document.

### **1. Collaboration and communication**

Knowing when it is appropriate to work individually or in a group, and developing the capacity to do both

Collaborating with others, understanding and taking roles in a group process

Reciprocity: communicating opinions and respecting those of others, accommodating a range of views

### **2. Creativity**

Thinking beyond received wisdom, imagining alternative solutions, innovating, challenging assumptions

Using imagination and intuition

Being ready to improvise and experiment with available possibilities and resources

Being able to use and move purposefully beyond established conventions

### **3. Argument and debate**

Generalising and abstracting, applying concepts to understand and explain specific experiences

Questioning others constructively, respecting others' views, and being open to critique

Supporting arguments with evidence and examples

Making links across disparate areas or topics (for example, media education concepts or areas of media)

### **4. Finding out**

Learning to ask questions, speculate, hypothesise and theorise

Research – formulating clear questions, gathering evidence methodically, synthesizing and analyzing data systematically

Noticing and taking account of details, nuances, patterns

Using and evaluating a range of methods, tools and sources

### **5. Reflection and evaluation**

Planning and pre-empting potential problems

Being comfortable to test out possibilities, draft and redraft

Systematically evaluating your own work, or your contribution to a collaborative product

Noting and reflecting on how ideas and processes change over time, and the reasons for this

Meta-learning – being able to identify and discuss your own learning processes

### **6. Confidence**

Feeling comfortable about bringing in your out-of-school knowledge and experience

Feeling confident in the value of your own opinions, and in responding to others' critique

Being constructively self-critical