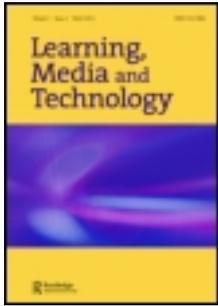


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### Media education goes digital: an introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

# Media education goes digital: an introduction

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This editorial introduction provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities presented to media educators by the advent of digital technologies. It argues that media education can provide an important critical dimension to the use of technology in education, that moves beyond a merely instrumental approach; and that it can help to bridge the ‘new digital divide’ between students’ experiences of technology outside school and their experience in the classroom. The article then focuses on three ways in which media educators need to respond to new digital media: by applying and extending existing conceptual approaches to these new objects of study; by addressing the creative possibilities of digital technologies, and the pedagogic challenges they represent; and by exploring the potential of emerging forms of participatory media culture.

The advent of digital technologies has presented significant new opportunities and challenges for media educators. Over the past 20 years, there has been a massive investment in providing information and communication technologies in schools. To date, however, the emphasis has largely been on providing *access*: some policy-makers still appear to assume that ‘wiring up’ schools will produce automatic benefits, irrespective of how these technologies are actually used. In fact, many teachers remain resistant to the intrusion of technology in the classroom, often for very good reasons, and evidence about its contribution to raising students’ achievement is, to say the least, ambivalent (Buckingham, 2007). The notion that technology will single-handedly bring about a transformation of education has been around for a very long time, yet radical and long-lasting change has largely failed to be materialised (Cuban, 1986).

Now that the initial euphoria surrounding computers in schools has begun to wear thin, we need to look more closely at what children need to *learn* about these digital media. The Italian semiotician Umberto Eco (1979) once argued that if you wanted to use television to teach somebody, you first had to teach them how to use television.

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Eco's argument can equally be applied to newer media. As Eco implies, media should not be regarded merely as teaching aids or tools for learning. Education *about* the media should be seen as an indispensable prerequisite for education *with* or *through* the media. Likewise, if we want to use the internet or computer games or other digital media for teaching, we need to equip students to understand and to critique these media: we cannot regard them simply as neutral means of delivering information, and we should not use them in a merely functional or instrumental way. The meaningful and effective use of media in education therefore depends upon students developing a form of critical media literacy that goes well beyond a training in how to operate the hardware or software.

Yet there are also broader arguments for media educators to engage with digital technology. Digital media—the internet, mobile phones, computer games, interactive television—are now an indispensable aspect of most children's and young people's leisure-time experiences. Young people now enjoy unprecedented levels of access to media although they are also being enthusiastically targeted as a valuable consumer market. For most children, computer is no longer primarily an educational medium as it was 10 or 15 years ago. Their uses of computers in the home are massively dominated by video games; and leisure uses of the internet (for example in the form of social networking, instant messaging and entertainment sites) are becoming increasingly significant. Young people's relationship with digital technology is no longer primarily formed in the context of the school—as it was during the 1980s and even into the 1990s—but in the domain of popular culture.

This has led to what I have termed a *new digital divide*. While the 'old' divide between the technology rich and the technology poor undoubtedly continues, there is also a new and widening gap between young people's out-of-school experiences of technology and their experience in the classroom (Buckingham, 2007). The curriculum subject 'Information and Communication Technology'—now compulsory in UK schools—is typically dominated by narrow training in technical skills. Students are taught about spreadsheets, databases and file management—the *Microsoft Office* curriculum—while outside school, many of them are engaging with technology in much more informal, active and sometimes creative ways. Attempts to bridge this divide through the use of digital 'edutainment' materials, or through the incorporation of the latest technological gadgets, have often proven superficial or self-defeating. It is hardly surprising that so many young people find the classroom use of technology boring, frustrating and irrelevant to their lives (see Levin & Arafah, 2002; Selwyn, 2006).

Media education could have a great deal to offer here. Contemporary approaches to media education have moved well beyond the defensive or protectionist approaches of earlier decades, and the narrow forms of ideological critique that were popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Media education offers a clear and rigorous conceptual framework that can be extended across the range of media, and that goes well beyond the instrumental approach of ICT training. Best practice in media education involves a combination of 'hands-on' creative production and critical reflection, which seeks to build on students' existing pleasures and experiences of media (Buckingham, 2003).

Even so, digital media raise new questions for media educators, and throw into relief some of the continuing tensions and limitations in the field. To some extent, these questions are to do with *content*. Is it possible to extend existing curriculum frameworks and methods of study, developed primarily in relation to ‘old’ media like film and television, to these newer media such as computer games—or do they require a different conceptual or theoretical approach? There are also questions to do with *pedagogy*. How can media educators capitalise on the self-evident potential of digital technology, particularly for students’ creative production, and what difficulties do they need to face in doing so? Finally, there are questions that need to be addressed as digital technologies, and the *styles of learning* that are associated with them, continue to evolve. How do media teachers respond to the more participatory possibilities of ‘social software’, for example in the form of the social networking sites that are becoming an increasingly significant aspect of contemporary youth cultures? I address each of these issues briefly in the following sections of this introductory article.

### **New objects of study**

On one level, digital technologies provide media educators with a new set of objects of study. Self-evidently, one cannot teach about the contemporary media without taking account of the role of the internet, computer games and the convergence between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. Much of the popular discussion of this area tends to assume that young people already know everything they need to know about these media. They are often celebrated as ‘cyberkids’, or as ‘digital natives’, who are somehow spontaneously competent and empowered in their dealings with new media—as compared to their incompetent and confused parents and teachers. Yet research suggests that the majority of young people are far from being autonomous ‘cyberkids’: they are uncertain, they lack information and they are often frustrated by the failure of the technology to achieve what it promises (e.g. Facer *et al.*, 2003; Livingstone & Bober, 2004).

At present, there is a lack of easily available support and advice that might help young people negotiate their way through the mass of confusing, contradictory and often unreliable information found in new media such as the Web. There is a need for much more independent consumer advice and public information on these issues although ultimately schools will have to play a central role in developing the ‘digital literacies’ that will enable young people to deal with the challenges of the new media world. As this implies, the skills that children need in relation to digital media are not confined to those of word processing or information retrieval. They need more than lessons in how to use word processors or search engines. As with print, children also need to be able to evaluate and use information critically if they are to transform it into knowledge. Rather than seeing the Web as a neutral source of ‘information’, students need to be asking questions about the sources of that information, the interests of its producers and how it represents the world. They also need to understand that these technological developments are related to broader social, political and economic changes. These are all questions with which

media educators have traditionally been concerned; and there are now several viable proposals for ways of extending these perspectives to analyse the Web in particular (see, for example, Frechette, 2002; Buckingham, 2003; McDougall, 2006).

Nevertheless, other aspects of new media present new conceptual challenges for media educators. For example, the notion of *audience* that is typically part of media education curricula is easily applied to ‘older’ media, but fails to do justice to the interactivity of new media although substitute terms (like ‘user’) are perhaps no more satisfactory (Livingstone, 2004). Studying computer games, for example, necessarily entails not only an *analysis* of how games represent the world and of the audio–visual ‘language’ of games, but also an *understanding* of the process of play as Julian McDougall’s article in this issue implies. Approaching games using concepts derived from older media helps to draw attention to what these media have in common, and the intertextual and economic relationships, for example between games and films. But analysis also needs to focus on the ‘ludic’ dimensions of games—for example, how they manage time and space, the ‘economies’, goals and obstacles of games, and issues such as rules and conditionality (Carr *et al.*, 2006). Similar arguments can be made about the interactive dimensions of the Web, such as the role of links and the hypertextual structure of websites (Burbules & Callister, 2000). As this implies, these new objects of study may require new conceptual frameworks and methods of analysis that go beyond those that have been developed in relation to older media (see Burn, 2004; Oram & Newman, 2006).

### Creative production

Of course, literacy involves writing as well as reading; and the same is true of media literacy. It is in the area of creative production that some of the more exciting educational possibilities of digital technology may be found. This technology can enable quite young children to produce their own multimedia texts, and even interactive hypermedia. As with older media, multimedia authoring packages are now increasingly being used as a means of assisting subject learning in a range of curriculum areas. Here, students produce their own multimedia texts in the form of websites or CD-ROMs, often combining written text, visual images, simple animation, audio and video material, for example on topics in Science or History (Lachs, 2000). Although such productions may draw on elements of popular culture (such as computer games), the content is primarily factual and informational—and in this sense, the preferred genre is that of ‘edutainment’.

Even so, it is important to differentiate here between education *through* media and education *about* media—or in other words, between the use of media as a teaching aid and the study of media in their own right. There are two factors that distinguish the use of digital production in the context of media education. The first is the explicit focus on popular culture: media education means engaging with students’ everyday experience of digital media, rather than using it opportunistically as part of another form of subject learning. The second is the element of theoretical reflection—the dynamic relationship between making and critical understanding that is crucial to the

development of ‘critical literacy’. In the context of media education, the aim is not primarily to develop technical skills, or to promote ‘self-expression’, but to encourage a more systematic understanding of how the media operate, and to encourage more reflective use of the media. This emphasis emerges strongly from several of the articles in this special issue, particularly those by Claire Charles and by Ola Erstad, Øystein Gilje and Thomas de Lange.

To some extent, digital image manipulation or video editing merely represent more efficient ways of doing the things that used to be done with analogue technology. However, there are some significant differences in the *process* of production that have much broader implications for students’ learning. Digital technology can make overt and visible some key aspects of the production process that often remain ‘locked away’ when using analogue technologies. For example, when generating images with a digital camera, students are able to draft and re-draft in a manner that is similar to contemporary approaches to the teaching of writing; and in the process, the selection of images can become a matter for more explicit deliberation and reflection. This is even more apparent when it comes to post-production. For example, editing digital video enables students to address complex issues about the selection, manipulation and combination of images and sounds in a much more accessible way than was possible using analogue technology (Burn *et al.*, 2001).

The ability to manipulate and edit moving images in a digital format can offer a degree of flexibility and control that particularly lends itself to the kind of self-conscious reflection that is essential to media education and to ‘critical literacy’ more broadly. Yet whether or not this potential is realised is not simply a matter of the technology: it is primarily a question of pedagogy—a point that is discussed in several of the articles here, particularly those by Kylie Peppler and Yasmin Kafai, and by Rebekah Willett. Opportunities for reflection, deliberation and dialogue still need to be systematically built in to the process, even if they seem like a distraction from it. In this respect, it seems particularly important to resist the tendency to individualise the process, and to insist on the need for *collaboration* in digital production.

One of the key issues here is that students will come to digital production with very different experiences both of technology and of forms of digital culture outside the classroom. It would be quite romantic to assume that young people have some kind of automatic expertise with technology, or that they will necessarily be able to use it easily and quickly. Indeed, a majority of software programs students might use are designed for professionals, and are very time-consuming to learn—as Rebekah Willett’s article in this issue explains. The digital divide places some middle-class children at a significant advantage here, not just because they may have greater access to technology and newer software applications, but also because of the greater cultural capital at their disposal—for example, through their parents’ greater experience of computers at work and their involvement in other social networks.

Getting ‘hands on’ experience with digital technology is therefore only a beginning. *Access* needs to be seen not merely in terms of access to technology or to technical skills, but also to *cultural forms of expression and communication*; and it must be acknowledged that students’ access to (and familiarity with) those cultural forms is

likely to be quite variable. For example, students who are less familiar with the Web will see the creative possibilities of this medium in a very different way from those who are using it all the time at home; and students will inevitably find it easier to work with genres or media forms (such as computer games) with which they are more familiar (Sefton-Green, 1999). These differences have challenging implications in terms of how we teach, particularly in settings that are culturally and socially diverse.

### **New styles of learning**

Children's everyday uses of computer games or the internet involve a range of informal learning processes, in which participants are simultaneously 'teachers' and 'learners'. They learn to use these media largely through trial and error—through exploration, experimentation and play; and collaboration with others, both in face-to-face and virtual forms, is an essential element of the process. Traditional forms of teaching, which involve the transmission of a fixed body of information, are largely irrelevant here. This is even more apparent with the more recent rise of 'participatory' media (Jenkins, 2006)—in the form of social networking sites, file-sharing, wikis, blogs, and other forms of 'social software' discussed by several of the contributors to this issue.

As this implies, the 'new digital divide' between children's leisure uses of technology and their experiences in the classroom is not simply a matter of content, but also of style. Compared with the demanding multimedia experiences many children have outside school, much classroom work is bound to appear unexciting. Even where they do use computers and other media in schools, many children complain that this is far too limited and restrictive (Facer *et al.*, 2003). Children who use these media extensively at home are likely to have a strong sense of their own autonomy and authority as learners—yet this is precisely what is so often denied to them in school (Levin & Arafah, 2002). We may be seeing a widening gulf between the styles of learning that are cultivated by formal schooling and those that characterise children's out-of-school experiences. Children are now immersed in a consumer culture that positions them as active and autonomous; yet in school, a great deal of their learning is passive and teacher-directed. Indeed, it might be argued that this situation is potentially explosive—perhaps particularly for boys, who may be highly self-confident users of technology but who are increasingly perceived as failures in the context of school learning (though see Epstein *et al.*, 1998).

For media educators, as for teachers in general, this has challenging implications for pedagogy. Students will increasingly be developing 'customised' media environments, in which they take it as their right to select and use media to suit their individual needs. Increasing number of students are likely to have access to media production technologies outside the classroom. These will be used to 'sampling' and 'remixing' existing media although this is bound to raise uncomfortable issues about plagiarism, copyright and intellectual property. Mass audience media such as film and television will continue to be important and will continue to be owned and controlled by large corporations. Yet the boundaries between mass communications

and interpersonal communication may be breaking down, as young people are actively participating in a culture of specialised ‘niche’ or individualised media.

Even so, there is a danger of romanticising these issues—a danger that has been particularly apparent in some recent discussions of the educational value of computer games (e.g. Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2006). The discussion of ‘learning styles’ and the educational application of the notion of ‘multiple intelligences’ has sometimes been extremely mechanistic, not least in discussions of digital technology (see Buckingham, 2007, for a critique). And despite the promise of ‘social software’, there are also distinct limits to the kinds of participation that are possible, the kinds of people who are able to gain access to it, and the social consequences it is likely to have.

The implications of these developments, in terms of both *what* we teach and *how* we teach, are potentially profound. There will be a continuing need for media educators to insist on some fundamental, well-established critical principles. Yet we cannot afford simply to carry on business as usual. To some extent, new digital media require a rethinking of existing conceptual frameworks and pedagogic practices, in ways that take many of us well beyond our ‘comfort zones’.

### **Remixing learning, media and technology**

The curriculum subject of ICT—at least as it is defined in the UK National Curriculum—seems singularly ill-equipped to address these challenges of the ‘digital age’. At the risk of annoying at least some readers of this journal, I would argue that it should be replaced by an extended form of media literacy education as a core curriculum entitlement for all students. Yet, as I have implied, digital technologies also require a broader rethinking of the conceptual frameworks and practices of media education, and of literacy education more broadly. As the media converge, the logic for separating verbal and visual media, or electronic technologies and non-electronic technologies, will come under increasing pressure. In the process, the boundaries between previously discrete areas of the curriculum—and particularly those which are broadly concerned with culture and communication—may come to seem quite obsolete.

The articles in this special issue address these challenges in various ways. Julian McDougall explores the discontinuities that arise when a new object of study—in this case, computer games—is introduced into the established framework of Media Studies teaching. As he suggests, the potentially ‘transgressive’ aspects of this new cultural form and the equally radical aspirations of media educators may well be compromised by the persistence of traditional modes of assessment. Claire Charles explores the contrast between ‘official’ and more student-centred uses of digital technology in the context of an elite Australian girls’ school. She argues that the school’s use of sanctioned images of ‘girl power’ provided relatively narrow definitions of feminine achievement, which were problematised and to some extent challenged by the students’ web-conferencing debates in the classroom.

The remaining articles focus primarily on the experiences of digital media production. Kylie Peppler and Yasmin Kafai provide a very positive account of the

opportunities presented by new forms of digital production software, not least in terms of how they enable young people to ‘remix’ existing media resources and engage in the broader ‘participatory media culture’ that is now emerging. Rebekah Willett addresses some of the difficulties that arise when young people are invited to produce interactive digital texts (again, computer games). She shows that attempting to bridge the divide between children’s everyday engagements with digital media as ‘consumers’ and the experience of production is far from straightforward, not least because of the limitations of the available technology. Finally, Ola Erstad, Øystein Gilje and Thomas de Lange explore the ways in which students ‘remix’ existing media texts in their creative productions, and the implications of this for broader notions of ‘digital literacy’. They argue that media educators need to exploit the considerable potential of these new forms of participatory culture, while also insisting on the key conceptual aims of the field.

Taken together, these articles provide reflections from quite different cultural contexts (the UK, Australia, the US, Norway) and from different educational settings (from formal examination classes to informal out-of-school workshops). In various ways, they reflect on the new challenges posed for media educators at a significant point of transition in the development of the field. As current theories and practices concerned with media and technology continue to converge, it is increasingly likely that new educational ‘remixes’ may begin to evolve.

### Notes on contributor

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