
Critical interventions

David Kear discusses possibilities latent in the BTEC Digital Media programme.

In PSE 45, Colin Waugh (1) argued that critical education requires practitioners to examine the programmes on which they teach, strengthening areas where a critical approach is already in place and identifying points at which it could be extended and reinterpreted. In his tribute to Joyce Canaan (2), Colin developed this approach, indicating the need to train ourselves to recognise opportunities that exist within mainstream vocational units in each major occupational field for integration between critical pedagogy and vocational course content - opportunities, then, in Joyce's terms, in the 'margins and cracks' of mandatory course units. BTEC specs have always had spaces where critical thinking approaches could be deployed with considerable effect. This could potentially enable students to develop and apply critical thinking to aspects of the media in terms of media representation and the structure, ownership and organisation of the industry, and to acquire confidence in research skills, thereby leading to a level of competence in media literacy.

From this perspective, I will discuss approaches to the *BTEC Level 3 National Extended Diploma in Creative Digital Media Production* (3). BTEC programmes are strongly vocational and targeted to 14-19 students who are often defined as academic underachievers. More concerning is the claim that BTEC offers a route into the industry for socially disadvantaged young people. Having said that, this BTEC programme can facilitate the development of sophisticated creative software and research skills, and can be challenging and enjoyable for students.

However, years of teaching in FE convinced me that BTEC courses were not a route into the industry. Tracking students confirmed this understanding. Those who did make it were already making creative projects and had contacts who could arrange internships, while a few others achieved through luck, diligence and parental investment in tech to set up in business. In 2014 Pearson/Edexcel introduced more stringent assessment in deadlines and submission in BTEC programmes, part of a drive to make these programmes more 'academic', which resulted in externally assessed mandatory units that were introduced in 2016. In spite of this, BTEC Level 3 remains a pre-vocational qualification which does not seriously equip students for entry to the creative industries, although arguably the Digital Media programme at least gives students software and thinking skills to support a wider range of job opportunities. BTEC students are also at a further considerable disadvantage, leaving at 18 with a level 3 qualification and often with a meagre portfolio of work, and now competing with graduates - ie people who are older, more self-reliant and independent, with enhanced skills, who, crucially, are willing to work for the same exploitative wages and conditions.

I want to focus on three units in this Extended Diploma programme that provide a clear opportunity for critical pedagogy. Two of which, *Unit 1: Media Representations*, and *Unit 5: Specialist Subject Investigation*, are both mandatory units assessed externally; and, with some considerable re-

interpretation, *Unit 2: Working in the Creative Media Industry*. To help students to prepare for a possible career in the creative industry it's necessary to identify priorities. As Victoria Walden (2), among others, points out, production skills, usually defined by students - and by many teachers - as hands-on practical software skills, are not in short supply in the industry. What the industry actually requires are skills of 'organisation', 'creative thinking', 'project management' and 'problem-solving', which clearly require a different approach to that of students learning a narrow set of production skills competencies underpinned by the fetishism of technology often seen in media departments.

Unit 1 is a mandatory unit in this programme, and is assessed through an on-screen examination set and marked by Pearson. This unit requires an understanding of how, through a range of media, 'meaning, messages and values are constructed through formal and stylistic elements'. Pearson tend to privilege the formal and stylistic elements in the assessment, but the essential content in the unit specification opens up a great deal of potential in the delivery of the unit to explore representations, media reception theories, semiotics and the 'effects debate'.

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Most media teachers would have little difficulty in delivering this unit with a critical pedagogy. In fact, apart from a large section on stylistic and technical codes, the awarding body is actually encouraging this approach. Although some teachers may feel compelled to 'teach narrowly to the test', or, as Ainley and Allen (3) describe it, operate little more than an exercise in 'information processing', this unit presents a genuine and exciting opportunity to explore audience positioning and to go critically beyond the media reception models offered by Pearson, for example by exploring the Frankfurt School background underlying the hypodermic (sometimes called 'inoculation') model and the limitations of the Uses and Gratification model, and by extending Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding. The section on technical aspects could be delivered through the selected production units for the programme.

Unit 2 is a problematic unit in terms of actual opportunities in the creative industries. Indeed, the *Wolf Report* (2011) viewed vocational education of this type as a 'deception' in terms of obtaining employment. However, with a sensitive approach to

student aspiration, it is possible to deliver this unit in a way that meets the BTEC assessment criteria but crucially also enables students to develop an understanding of the economic structure of the sector. There is no shortage of evidence to show that the current pattern of employment is that of a casualised, outsourced precariat, as Standing (4) describes it. Ainley and Allen (5) provide a provocative account of the limitations of education, training and prospects for young workers. Buckingham (6) also paints a bleak picture of the opportunities in the sector. This is characterised by unpaid or low-paid internships and freelancers on short-term contracts, while intense economic competition, combined with rapid technological change and hence skills redundancy, results in high staff turnover. Employment is often unpredictable and insecure, with few opportunities for training, long working hours, and poor conditions. Young workers attempt to survive all this in the hope of future opportunities.

It is worth pointing out that many BTEC practitioners, such as Victoria Walden (7), while recognising the limitations of BTEC Media programmes, have devised innovative teaching strategies to enable students to acquire the skills that the industry actually requires, of personal organisation, creative thinking, project management and problem solving, this being achieved through the production units and by recreating a working environment in the classroom, as far as this is possible, and using management techniques such as Agile and Scrum.

Unit 5 is a research unit based on a media issue set by Pearson. In January 2020 the subject was 'the depiction of violence in the media and its impact on young people'. With a critical approach, this unit will enable students to develop skills and techniques to carry out reliable and valid research, and also to interpret data. The unit content demands to be delivered with critical classroom strategies before students undertake independent primary research on the set topic, starting with a breaking down of a culture of plagiarism and the use of unfiltered internet sources such as Wikipedia. This approach effectively builds student skills in identifying and recognising the validity of sources, and develops a confident ability to spot fake news and conspiracy theories. It encourages a desire to challenge and to offer a critical perspective on what appear to be commonsense and self-evident explanations of events.

I have tried to show how a critical pedagogy can make appropriate and innovative interventions but

also deliver the specification content, finding the margins and cracks for creative teaching strategies so as to develop critical thinking and critical literacy.

References

1. Colin Waugh (2008) 'Critical education', in *Post-16 Educator* 45, p24.
 2. Colin Waugh (2019) 'Organising critical pedagogy in margins and cracks: a strategy for vocational HE?' (unpublished paper). (Copies of this and the above article available from cwaugh1@btinternet.com.)
 3. Accessible at: <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/btec-nationals/creative-digital-media-production-2016.html>.
 4. Victoria Walden (2016) 'How can BTEC teachers support young people to be prepared for careers in the media industries? A reflection on pedagogy.' *Journal of Media Practice* 16.
 5. Patrick Ainley and Martin Allen (2010) *Lost Generation? New Strategies for Youth and Education*. London: Continuum.
 6. Guy Standing (2011) *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.
 7. Ainley and Allen, op. cit.
 8. David Buckingham (2013) 'Teaching the creative class? Media education and the media industries in the age of "participatory culture"'. *Journal of Media Practice* 14.
 9. Walden, op. cit.
- BTEC Programme: <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/btec-nationals/creative-digital-media-production-2016.html>
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Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.