NEIL ANDERSEN
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INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS

(Quote)

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BIOGRAPHY OF NEIL ANDERSEN
Neil has taught film and/or media studies in high schools for over 30 years. He has been a computer resource teacher, helping teachers integrate technology into their curricula, and has given numerous educational keynotes and workshops across Canada, in the US, Asia, Australia and Europe. Andersen has taught media courses for teachers at the University of Toronto, York University and at Mount Saint Vincent University. He is an executive member of the Association for Media Literacy and on the Boards of the Media-Awareness Network and the *Journal of Media Education*. He has made movies and videos, authored student textbooks, teacher resource books including *Scanning Television*, journal articles, over 200 study guides, and designed interactive CDs, websites, programs, and posters. Currently, Neil is a presenter, consultant and writer.
(http://cmns.athabascau.ca/featured_courses/mediaLiteracy/authors/)

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

Neil, why did you become involved in media education?

Earlier, you said it wasn't so much that you found media literacy as media literacy found you. Can you elaborate?

As you became involved in media education, what were your goals?

What are some milestones that you've seen along the way in terms of the development of the field and how that's affected you, your work, and vice versa?

What has surprised you as you've gone along?

How far do you feel the field has come and do you feel like it's moved in the directions that you wanted to see?

Are there some steps that can be taken or are there some ways that you think this could be remedied?

Could you report a bit on your experience with students on media education through the years, what you've seen in terms of their responses, and how that affected your teaching?

You had mentioned that you really saw students engaged in media education who maybe weren't engaged in school otherwise. Who are those students? What do you think the difference is?

Are there some thoughts that occur to you about the field, or observations that you'd like to share in terms of where you think the field is moving?

TJ: *Neil, why did you become involved in media education?*

NA: I think media education chose me rather than me choosing it. It's been a lifelong journey—a very happy experience for me because I found something that I really enjoyed. I started when I was four years old going to the Saturday matinee with a group of friends and we would trudge off through the Winnipeg winter and for 25 cents I would get movies and a chocolate bar and a drink. The movies would be 6-7 items: a trailer or two, a feature but then also a cartoon, a serial, a travelogue and a newsreel. They were really fun times with my friends as well as just watching all this stuff. And as an adolescent I had an unusual access to the university alumni movie club and I was able to see foreign movies that other people weren't seeing. They were esoteric and sophisticated so I've had a rather long exposure that way. Also, I was able to have both a movie camera and a still camera from a relatively young age, again at 12 or 13 so I was making home movies and shooting a lot of pictures for the family. And then I used that interest to go into the high school camera club and I shot a large number of the photos for the yearbook or whatever other tasks were asked of me. So it's been a long time in terms of production, and then when I was in the university I discovered movie courses and I started taking those and even changed my major. That was because of this previous experience and attraction. Then through a further series of happenstances and luck, I discovered the Association for Media Literacy and started a life-long association with Barry Duncan and the other people with whom I shared a common interest. It's one of those situations in which you find like-minded people and you enjoy their company, they help you grow, you help them grow, and everybody is happy in that environment.

TJ: *Earlier, you said it wasn't so much that you found media literacy as media literacy found you. Can you elaborate?*

NA: It's just so compelling that I can't leave it alone. Sometimes – I've become a pariah -- I would object to a particular commercial or billboard, or statement in the newscast, and people look at me and

say, "what's your problem!?" and what's happening is I'm listening, watching and contextualizing and applying some of my theoretical understanding to it that they aren't aware of. And I have had the same feedback from my students. I had a student once tell me that she was no longer allowed to watch television with her family. They actually ordered her out of the room because she was making critical comments and spoiling their enjoyment of the experience. And I take that as a compliment but I appreciate the fact that you can become the pariah.

TJ: *As you became involved in media education, what were your goals?*

NA: Well I see media literacy as life literacy because if I can't understand and use the current communications forms effectively then I'm not going to be an effective person either on a civic level, on a personal level or on a vocational/career level. I'm just not going to be as effective. I've been able to prove that to myself. I've worked very hard in my life to become accomplished in a variety of things, so I make movies and videos, design websites and posters, write books, etc., partly because I want to understand the codes and the conventions and the processes that are involved in those activities. So, I've only ever done one podcast, but I did a podcast because I wanted to understand it. I did a half-hour podcast and went through all of the processes and editing for it. I don't want to make a career of it but I've always felt that if I put myself out there and try these things out and understand them then I can be more effective. The analogy I made in my media book was, once you have played a sport, you are forever changed as a spectator because you have a greater appreciation as a spectator watching it being played. I think this is the same notion, to me significant for all of my students and I now teach teachers. But I point out to them that our students, as adults—even as teens—are going to have to be facile in a variety of media forms no matter what job they're in because now almost everybody now may not build a website but certainly must interact with a website and understand how it works. We have so many people who are blogging, texting, or tweeting. You have to understand the codes and conventions of those in order to know the effects. So many jobs regularly involved people in media production by using microphones or cameras, so this is not something that you go to California for and live in Hollywood and hope to get a job. That whole notion is long gone. This is a situation where wherever you happen to be and whatever job you happen to be doing, you are a part of media consumption and production. Since it's life literacy, I'm very committed to try to encourage this for each and every person so that they don't end up missing out. Really, call them the disenfranchised because we actually can create poverty by design if we aren't more careful.

TJ: *What are some milestones that you've seen along the way in terms of the development of the field and how that's affected you, your work ,and vice versa?*

NA: There have been several. I started working in Super-8 and I taught film production. Using Super-8 for quite a number of years and then the change into videotape at some point, and then linear editing, then nonlinear editing. Certainly the digital change has been extremely profound. I still think it hasn't been examined to the extent that it needs to be. I don't think we appreciate the profundity of the move from analog to digital. I suspect it's because we've been affected so profoundly by it that it's hard to see it. But that's certainly one huge shift, one that has allowed some people to call it democratization. I think that's an overstatement but there is certainly YouTube and things like that which represent a move towards democratization. It's not a worldwide movement by any means, but among the privileged it might be. The other thing, however, that changed for us in the Association was a profound shift from text-centered study to an audience or cultural study. We were motoring along very happily and presenting mostly a text-centered approach to media studies where we would assume that the meaning was in the text and that if we understood the codes and conventions of the text, we

could tease that meaning out. Then somebody wrote an essay that criticized us, rather soundly, and said that we were making a big mistake because we were not acknowledging audience and the role of the audience. We read that with great interest and we changed as a result of it. We acknowledged that the paper was making statements that were valid, that we had been missing a huge piece and that we needed to change. About that same time David Buckingham visited the AML and he was doing the same thing where he was making the point that the text is not irrelevant but it isn't as important as the various uses that people are putting it to. That reinforced that cultural studies notion and made a profound shift for the Association because we started to rethink what we were doing; we started to reformulate our teaching strategies and our presentations at that point in a very positive way. Those were two really big shifts that occurred for me and I feel I have lived the history of media literacy education because I started in the early '70s and I'm still working in it.

TJ: *What has surprised you as you've gone along?*

NA: What has surprised me? Oh, well there are a lot of small surprises. One of the things that I've tried to do is to make a point of paying attention to the new innovations and to try them out, to experiment with them. I think what is fun is to see how people use things for purposes that were not originally intended. I think that's very exciting: when you see somebody take a machine or a program or something that was written for this and is using it for that. And that is extremely valid and clever and personally useful and you think how wonderful that that person has been able to subvert or exploit a text or technology for a purpose that no one else had ever imagined. Those are moments when you really understand the fun of the technological opportunities that we have.

TJ: *How far do you feel the field has come and do you feel like it's moved in the directions that you wanted to see?*

NA: It certainly hasn't moved as fast as I would like. The implementation of media literacy education is proceeding at a snail's pace if it's proceeding at all. I find that very frustrating. What I just can't understand is that, if this is so exciting to me why isn't it exciting to everybody else? Am I seeing something they aren't seeing, or am I missing something that they are seeing? I don't understand. I've talked to people in other countries and there is an implementation dip in other places as well. The jurisdiction I'm working in has a huge accountability issue focusing on reading and writing. It has privileged reading and writing to the point where media literacy education has suffered—as have speaking and listening education. So we've got six language strands at work in a school but only two of them are being implemented in a serious way. I can't see that changing any time soon and it's quite unfortunate because the balance is not there.

In Ontario, we have media literacy mandated and we have very articulate learning goals but it still isn't happening in most classrooms. The faculties of education seem to have been stonewalling this. We've got seven faculties of education in Ontario and I work in one of those and then do some freelance work in another one. But I'm only aware of one person at one of those faculties that is doing any media literacy education. And this is at a time when it's mandated for all of the teachers, so six faculties of education are graduating teachers to whom they haven't given any preparation. So there's small wonder that this isn't being implemented well in the classroom. This has been true for quite some time. I'm talking about a curriculum that started talking about media education in 1987 in a fairly serious way, then in a very serious way in 1998, and yet here we are, these many years later and these faculties of education are not supporting it. I'm pretty disappointed in that. I was actually hoping to be a full time person supporting media literacy education in a faculty of education but that employment never

materialized. I'm teaching one course, and it's to teachers who are selecting, enjoying, and appreciating the course greatly. But it's a very small percentage of people.

TJ: *Are there some steps that can be taken or are there some ways that you think this could be remedied?*

NA: One is to put proper emphasis on it and try to re-balance the various language strands in the schools. Ironically, there isn't a course that isn't involving media because they are using computers or they're showing videos or they have a smart board or whatever—all of these things are in constant use in schools. And yet these people aren't using them as effectively as they could if they just understood them a little bit better.

I don't think that this system is giving teachers the kind of support they need. It's running them down, it's exhausting them, and they are not open to new ideas because they are just in survival mode. You can't learn new things when you're in survival mode. We know Maslow's hierarchy of needs says that all learners have to have some sort of comfort level and a little bit of leisure before they can accept and start to work on new ideas. So if it's the few teachers that I work with who have self-selected to take my course and learn from it, that's fine. But the rest of them are just trying to get through the day, and if they've got any spare time, they need to relax.

The system needs to foreground new learning for teachers, and put it out there as a priority and it has to provide both time and money if it expects it to get implemented. They certainly are putting that energy into reading and writing. And the balance of language needs to be made and it isn't being made.

TJ: *Could you report a bit on your experience with students on media education through the years, what you've seen in terms of their responses, and how that affected your teaching?*

NA: There have been a range of responses. A number of my students have gone into the media industry. A couple of my students have gone into media education. At one end, you have people who are excited and inspired to the point where they make it a career. And I'm sure there are a large number that took it as an interest course, and that's fine too. This needs to be compulsory if not a standard course for all students and not an elective as it is in high school, so for Ontarians media education is a part of all English courses. All students take English courses, so on paper media literacy education occurs for every student, and so it should for reasons I suggested earlier. So I had that range of students, those that have said, "Okay, this is interesting, thanks very much," and others that have said, "Okay, this has changed my life and I'm going to do this ongoing for my life." I think I have to remind myself that I don't want everybody to become a media teacher or media producer—it's important that we just have that awareness, that expanded literacy, that multi-literacy, that I think everybody needs.

TJ: *You had mentioned that you really saw students engaged in media education who maybe weren't engaged in school otherwise. Who are those students? And what do you think the difference is?*

NA: That's a good question. There are some people who go to school because they want to get through it. They have their eye on the post-secondary, they want to become a pharmacist or engineer and they realize they have to put their time in and complete the assignments in high school in order to

get the marks that will get them that post-secondary entry. You can ask those students any number of irrelevant, silly things and they'll go along with you because they've got that larger goal.

There are other students who only want to do something that is currently and personally relevant. They can't see that distant goal and, in many ways, they are more interesting and fun to teach because they are genuine in their responses. Those are the students who are unaffected by a very theoretical course, something that they can't see as personally relevant. So the courses I was teaching in media were very personally relevant and I actually made an effort to do that. As I taught my high school courses, I would start off by saying, "This course is not about media. This course is about you and how you relate to the media and what you are thinking about and which things you find pleasurable and which things you don't." There was a certain attraction there, I was being very deliberate in that statement but also true.

I invite my students to talk. In fact, I think talk is really underrated in school and I would have extended conversations with my students, whatever the issue or technology that we were discussing because, as they talked, they had to think through their relationships, their values, and their uses of things. So the talk was very useful and powerful that way, and it was also developing their ability to think and express themselves. It was a win-win in many ways.

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TJ: *Neil, are there some thoughts that occur to you about the field or observations that you'd like to share in terms of where you think the field is moving?*

NA: One of the issues that has been bandied around is whether or not media literacy education should be separate from other things, whether it should be integrated with everything that we do. It's a really tough, tough thing to consider. I was actually given an opportunity when Ontario rewrote the curriculum in 2005. I said, "Ideally, this shouldn't be media education—it should be a part of everything else. There shouldn't be a separate media strand in the English curriculum; it should be integrated with everything else." And the Ministry of Education officer said, "Well, is that the way you want to revise the curriculum?" And there was a long pause while I pondered that. Even though I believed that that's how it should be, I said, "No, because if we take the strand out, it will be easier to ignore." But the fact is that math, geography, history and science teachers, whether they are teaching a subject in high school or elementary school, can and should be integrating media literacies into most of their lessons. So this is the point I make with my Faculty of Education people and they are very comfortable by the time we're finished in seeing ways that you can do media literacy in 5 minutes in another lesson rather than having to make it a separate lesson or separate unit. This isn't an easy thing for everybody, however, and until it gets to be easy, I think media literacy education is going to have to maintain a separate position.

So it's a conundrum because, as proponents of media education, we ideally would like to see it become so integrated it becomes invisible but the reality that it wouldn't be integrated, it would be non-existent if people didn't have to evaluate it. So I think we are in a transition and it's going to be a long one.

TJ: Yes, I hear you on that. Right now, I'm here with a colleague at the digital media conference in Long Beach, California being sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation. The conference is really fascinating, interesting, and it's a very energetic crowd. Of course I would guess, there's probably not a single school superintendent or principal. It's a crowd that's not an education crowd, unfortunately. So we are hearing about using media, exciting new media projects, students engaging in media production and so on. And Neil, I'm sure you've been at many of these kinds of things too, and unfortunately, I don't sense that there's really a framework for understanding media as a system or you know the real media literacy learning in a sense of really understanding media and seeing how to connect it to other subjects in a way that teachers can understand and learn how to do that. And so, I totally relate to what you're saying about how it becomes invisible and unfortunately the adults, the teachers don't really have the understanding of the discipline. And since they don't, they can't translate it, they can't incorporate it, so we've got this big disconnect between what we know how to do, and yet other people not knowing how to do. They haven't had the chance to learn.

NA: I have certain sympathy for teachers who don't teach media literacy even though they are mandated to. If they never had it in pre-service or in-service, how can I be angry or disappointed that they're not doing it? The only way I can be disappointed is that they didn't do what I did and that was to put themselves out there and learn it to find either the people or the courses to take and learn it. And I've done that out of a personal responsibility and commitment in that I don't think I'm serving my students properly so I learn both. By both, I mean first of all I learn the literacy skills and then I learn the teaching skills. So I think, "Why haven't other people put themselves out there and put in the hours that I have put in to learn what I know and therefore support students in something that is important?" That's the only way I can be disappointed in them. My greater disappointment is in the system.

TJ: And it is the problem that none of us grow up learning this literacy in school, and so it's invisible in that way, and then it's not taught in teacher education, so they don't have a real way of coming where they're supposed to be. There needs to be that kind of disruption in the system to be able to really insert this and even some of those efforts have been disappointing like calling for mandating, and it not happening. Some of that is because people don't know how, just not taking initiative, different outcomes like that but then coming and seeing how ubiquitous the technology is and the media, in a way, I guess just that is kind of forcing the issue more, and so at least there's that encouragement.

NA: It's going to be a one-by-one conversion, at least until we get some critical mass. And that's also the new marketing right? The new marketing is to sell to people individually, one at a time, and it looks like we are going to have to do the same thing. And that's why I continue with my Faculty of Education teaching, because I can work with these people for 125 hours each on a personal level. I can have a much more profound influence than in any other way, so when most of these people have finished with my course, I'm pretty confident that they can go back to school and work media studies into their curriculum in a valid way and help their students.

TJ: Yes, I hear you and I guess the comfort there in what we're saying is that nothing happens without the grassroots. The grassroots has to be there and so it's a tough and long and slow haul. At the same time when you see the effects, and you see people you know who are taking up the mantle, you know that something's gotta give at some point.

NA: How long has it been since Al Gore said that he was going to wire the nation and we were all going to be connected and it was going to be wonderful? And now that looks rather naïve doesn't it?

TJ: Yea! Although, the spread of the technology has been phenomenal.

NA: Of the technology, not the literacy.