

BARRIE MCMAHON

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INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS

(Quote)

Over time, we're asking students to be critical of everything and to constructively be critical of whatever they like, to search for how to make sense of the world. How do you construct meaning? That's really the position in the various contests over the ideologies that were competing. I guess that's the area that we reached eventually: The focus of media education is a sense-making process, or the making of meaning. And to me, as an educator, that was the critical factor, that was the connection between education and media. Because if it's not rote learning, education is about how to make sense of the world.

BIOGRAPHY OF BARRIE MCMAHON

Barrie McMahon has been a classroom teacher, media studies consultant and curriculum manager with the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia. Since his retirement he has taken up positions in the private sector and with Curtin University. He describes his current status as 'author in search of a publisher'. His one-year fellowship in England in 1972 led to his long career focus on media education, and to his subsequent work in global media literacy. He began his career teaching English in a country town in Western Australia.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

How did you become involved in media literacy?

What were some milestones for you along the way?

What were some surprises for you?

What do you see as the significance of media education?

Do you feel that the field has moved in the direction that you think best?

TJ: How did you become involved in media literacy?

BM: There are probably a couple of contextual things that are pertinent to education in Western Australia that I should address before I get into the details of my history in media education. One is that in Australia the state governments control education; there are six States and two Territories and they control the education systems. There are slight variations in each of the States and Territories in the curriculum and there are also variations in the practices. That has been the case since time began but at this moment there are hopes to move towards a national curriculum. But even if that takes, the states will still run education. So that's what's important contextually; in the U.S. local boards run education.

In the late '60s, early '70s, the Western Australian education system was probably the most centralized education system in the world, and it is still highly centralized. So traditionally, innovation came from the top down. Western Australia is a million square miles, that's about a third of the United States, and there are only at the moment 2.5 million people. The philosophy is that, irrespective of the geography, each individual is entitled to quality education. So it is necessary to have education for those in the city and those in the remote areas of a comparable quality.

The third contextual element regarding the '60s and '70s; at the time in Western Australia (actually all across Australia) is that there were no universities offering any courses remotely connected to media education, or even media studies; it was almost a barren field to try to explore. That's the background of what education was like in Western Australia at the time.

TJ: What were some milestones for you along the way?

BM: I had taught for the first eight years of my teaching career in a country town and changed in 1967 into a working class metropolitan school and it was a very different experience. I guess teaching in the country was a breeze because teaching kids down the street, you knew their parents and so on. Teaching in the city was much more factory-like; it was quite a different experience. I was teaching English at the time. I found that I had students in my class who were children of immigrants. They were bright enough kids, but they had little interest in traditional English values such as teaching Shakespeare and other classical literature or even of poetry, words meant nothing to them.

So this was a bit of a challenge; my whole background has been education. I'm not a film buff, although I am these days, nor am I a computer nerd or anything like that, my prime interest is education, so I was looking for a way of engaging these kids in stories that seemed to be relevant to them. One of my jobs was as the head of the department; we were going to take the kids to a camp over the weekend and I thought this is going to be a nightmare, if all we did in the camp was to try to get students to recite Shakespeare and learn poems. We were looking for something a little more lively than that.

One of the teachers said, "I know a person who makes films in drama classes with kids." And I said, "Well, let's bring that person along and see if we can have some satisfaction with the kids regarding filmmaking." At the time, in the late '60s, Super 8 was a big thing, and so at the camp, we used Super 8 and I just watched the kids engaged in narrative and storytelling in a different fashion. They spent hours and hours, not only during weekend camp but afterwards on their own

time finishing their films. So when I got back to the school I telephoned the Education Department and said I needed to find someone either inside or outside of our centralized system, who knows anything about making films because I'd like to learn something about it and then build that into the English curriculum. By coincidence, someone had walked through the door almost the same day from outside the system and said he was interested in doing that.

So we got some outside help to have the students make these films and they were quite successful. What I also found was that other teachers became very interested as well because it is a great incentive to other teachers to have very responsive students who lap up at everything you put in front of them. So that progressed for a couple of years, and at that stage it wasn't anything more than simply making films as part of English. The idea spread a little bit so we formed an association called the Screen Education Association, which consisted of 10 or 12 people that were from various schools and we would get together from time to time and run our own professional development to learn more about what was going on with these students.

Then in 1972, I had swapped schools a couple of times since then, and had done the same things at the other schools I went to. I applied for an Education Department fellowship or scholarship; we only had one a year where they give someone a 12-month study leave to Europe, overseas or somewhere. I applied for it and I got it.

It was really a bold move on the part of the Department because the fellowship was traditionally given to some senior ranking educator who wanted to introduce a new way of assessment or something like that. But the bureaucrat that I spoke to said, "Look, I don't quite understand what you are doing but it makes sense, you've built a bit of a track record." So in 72-73, I took my family and we went to England to study for a year, at the Hornsey College of Art in London which later became the Kingston Polytechnic. They had a course that was remotely connected to media, something called design education. What attracted me to it was that the method of learning was incredibly flexible; you could effectively map out your own curriculum. I also found that there was another campus that was doing a film studies course so I did both courses at the same time.

Every other bit of study I've done in my life had been external study (part-time study) and here I was a full-time student at 32. It was great fun. We were used to being in such an isolated Australian city (in fact the most remote capital city in the world; the closest capital city is 2,500 miles away) and we'd never been out of Australia before, so during the breaks we would get in a camper van that we had and trip around Britain, and I would visit schools and teachers that I heard were doing a little bit in the way of media education, things like audio tapes, slide programs, sometimes film (although film was a bit expensive). And I would do recordings and so on. So I was soaking up every little bit of experience as I possibly could. During the major breaks and towards the end of the course, we took the camper out around Europe doing the same sort of things, visiting people in different countries who either had some experience with media education and of course as that was happening, I was gathering ideas that were a little bit beyond the original premise of film study.

I was also trying to absorb the different philosophies and ideologies and got in touch with the Screen Education Society for screen education in Britain and the British Film Institute and their equivalents to other parts of Europe as well. They were all very generous with their ideas. At the end of the 12 months in Britain, we came home via Canada and the United States and once again

I did the same thing. The States I found at that time, quite disappointing, actually. I found some contacts in Canada and that was my first contact with the people in Toronto (we're talking 1973 by now). And I had even written to Marshall McLuhan, and he was the most generous with his time. We heard him give a lecture and he spent half a day with me, talking about his views on media education. One of the things that stuck in my mind... I said, "Well its fine if you're here in Toronto, you've got a rich environment in media, but I'm going back to a place in the bottom left hand corner of the earth where there's no such environment; it's going to be pretty hard to know where to start." And his comment was, "That's the best environment you can go into because you don't have to knock down any outdated monuments, you can start fresh."

So I came back to Australia full of ideas and enthusiasm. And McLuhan's prediction proved to be accurate as far as my State was concerned. Victoria for example, had a fairly good history of film culture and the study of film which impeded for awhile (not now) the development of other areas of study in media. The education that they thought was media education was really audio visual aid material, using audio and visual aids to further science or mathematics or whatever. By this time the small Screen Education society that we had established had collapsed. The people had gone on to do other things.

It was normal that when people had done the year's Scholarship study they went back to their previous position. But in September 1974, I met with the bureaucrats and said I wanted to pick a school and establish a viable media education program in that one school. Then we could have teachers and other interested people come in and see their lessons in action. They said, yep, that sounds pretty good (they had a vested interest in getting back the money that was spent on me.)

Yes, there were the usual blockages. With my prime interest in education rather than the gadgets, I was talking about team teaching and all those sort of things, and some of the traditionalists would say, "Ah, team teaching has never worked, we've got to have them sitting in lines in classrooms to have proper discipline." You get all those sort of arguments which just didn't suit the sort of thing that I knew would work in media education, which is having kids in groups working together with maximum flexibility, both inside and outside of the classroom. But eventually they said, "Yes, you better design a curriculum and tell us how much money you want to run it."

So I did that, and picked out a school, a school that was just starting out, that only had Years 8 and 9, so that the program could grow with the school. The condition I laid down from the start was that every student in the school did media education as a subject and that we would have a place on the time table equivalent of any other subject in the school. And they agreed to that.

So that's what we did for the first couple of years. We just grew the program within the school and teachers from outside came in almost in uncontrollable numbers to see what was going on, and even those who weren't interested in starting media education program, specifically, were interested in building it into their English programs, their science programs or whatever. It was good that the period coincided with an era with the Australian government, when after 23 years the Conservatives were ousted in the federal government and the Labor party came into power for three years. One of the changes was that a lot of money was injected into education innovation and professional development, so we took advantage of that money in professional development and ran courses for teachers -- extensive courses, five days; we worked 12 hours a

day to develop some skills. And we had to do it ourselves, teachers had to do it, because as I mentioned there were no teacher institutions at all in Australia who were providing such courses.

What I've found is that the most adaptable teachers were those who had about 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 years of experience who were good teachers but looking for something new that would excite their students. We developed a group of enthusiasts amongst scores of teachers, hundreds of teachers. The program became so big that one school couldn't handle it. By this time the idea had spread to several schools and other people took it up, but on the professional development side of it, one school just couldn't keep up. So I convinced the bureaucrats in the Department to give me a mobile resort, at first I thought maybe a big London bus, a big red double decker bus, but we found that it wouldn't fit under the bridges in Western Australia so we had to abandon that idea. And I settled for a 22 foot caravan, towed by a truck with a built-in television studio in the back. The caravan in particular, and the truck was well suited to the teachers' needs. We used to call ourselves the Mickey Mouse Multimedia Mob, I'm not sure if Mickey Mouse has the same meaning in America. We use the term Mickey Mouse to talk about something cheap and something nasty.

We actually thought it was a great motif to go with because what we wanted the teachers to use was equipment that was cheap and sometimes nasty because that's all they could get a hold of. If you're going to need a \$30,000 mini television studio before you set this up in your school, it was never going to happen. But if we could say to them, look, you can buy a Russian 35 mm camera for \$6, you've got a chance of getting something going. So we actually had the T-shirts with Mickey Mouse on them, cameras out of his ears, everything like that. And I got the teachers themselves during the Christmas holiday (we have a long period of holiday, it's during summertime) to come in and they worked fitting out the caravan and I got some people who knew something about it, volunteers, and electricians, plumbers, to figure out the technical bits. So the television studio was all done with portapacks, I don't know if you remember VHS portapacks, heavy things...awful! But we modified them so we could use them in the studio. Then we used that truck and the caravan to go around the State and also the metropolitan area to teach teachers and also to give demonstrations.

We'd get a class of kids into the caravan and the teachers would come with them and watch the kids engage in film education, photography, audio sounds, you name it. So in that way, we were able to give the same sort of service in the country areas as the city. By this time, the Education Department has acknowledged that the program was quite a success and they gave me more staff. I think that's one of the key differences in what happened in Western Australia and what happened in Toronto. In order to beat the system in Australia, you'd have to use the system. I needed to have senior bureaucrats who were favorably disposed to what I was doing; whereas in Toronto, where it was quite decentralized, it was the Professional Teachers Association who really carried the momentum. For years, no one was employed by the Canadian education department on a salary to further media education.

TJ: It sounds like you were able to really establish media education at grass roots, provide professional development, do the modeling, really attract people to it, and then it was multiplied because it was presold. And so then people started using it, implementing it into their own classrooms, and that in turn embeds it into the curriculum.

BM: Yes, I think that's a very good summary. I wouldn't know how to go about it in the United States, because your system is so different. It would be hard, I don't think the model I used here, would work in the States because it is so decentralized. I spent time with some of the great media educators in the States like Kathleen Tyner. I think that her influence is limited because of the decentralized structures. The sort of things that she does and the sort of concepts that she generates are just brilliant and I don't know how they would spread across the system because there is no system as such. Very hard.

TJ: *But back to Australia...what were some surprises for you?*

BM: One of the things that surprised me was the lack of contest about the various ideologies that had to come into play. This started to become very noticeable once we tried to inject media education into the formal curriculum. In Western Australia now, media education is part of the formal curriculum from kindergarten, preschool if you like, through to Year 12. Every year there are some formal skills that need to be taught and understandings of the media that need to be taught. In doing that, obviously you need to adopt some ideological positions. Those who were teaching were very conscious of the visions that were sometimes in contest with each other. The people who were authorizing the curriculum didn't seem to be aware that this was contestable, and that really surprised me.

For example, some of the materials that we were drawing from then were using professional development resources by Douglas Lambs, who had the audacity to question television and its market focus. Douglas Loundes was a well known Marxist. In fact, he later went to go work for Gaddafi, so it might not have been a good move. But, obviously we weren't adopting his position; we were using his materials with a Marxist perspective in it, as well as other materials with other perspectives as well. And even a bit later on, the whole idea of cultural studies and the contest between the cultural studies approach and the more linear approach that was prevalent in the United States -- they were the contests that we had to try to resolve. Some of the papers that Robyn Quin and I wrote found that sometimes, you have ideologies that completely oppose one another, and you have to go with one rather than the other, but the surprise to me was that those who were approving the curriculum didn't see this. I think the reason was that at the senior level, deep down they didn't think that media education was important or significant.

TJ: *What do you see as the significance of media education?*

BM: Over time, we're asking students to be critical of everything and to constructively be critical of whatever they like, to search for how to make sense of the world. How do you construct meaning? That's really the position in the various contests over the ideologies that were competing. I guess that's the area that we reached eventually: The focus of media education is a sense-making process, or the making of meaning. And to me, as an educator, that was the critical factor, that was the connection between education and media. Because if it's not rote learning, education is about how to make sense of the world.

At the time that Robyn Quin came to join me in 1981, we found that there were no materials around for teachers, so Robyn and I started writing books. The Education Department wouldn't do the publishing so we published them ourselves. The first of the dozen or so books that we put out gave teachers some ideas about how to approach media education; the last resource we wrote

was in 2010 on multimedia/social media. These resources are characterized by giving the teachers structures to work with, because I think that's the key in education, to give kids some kind of scaffolds. Kids know about soap operas and they know more about computer games than I do. But what they don't have are the scaffolds, the structures of how to make sense of it all, and that's the job of the teacher to do that.

TJ: Well I hope that's a criteria that people in the field will take note of because it's so essential and so often missing, really from what I've seen. That's a really essential point.

BM: And, I think those sorts of structures have got to be implied or built into the formal curriculum documents, which is sometimes an area of contest, the formality of it. Not the ideology but the formality. The other great thing that's happened in the last couple of years in Western Australia is that the professional association has revitalized itself and that's going great. The Education Department is giving the teachers a framework that's built into the curriculum but now the teachers are more in charge of their own discipline. On the east coast of Australia, Queensland always had a fairly strong professional association, so has Victoria but for a while in Western Australia it died away.

TJ: Do you feel that the field has moved in the direction that you think best?

BM: In the mid '80s I felt that in Western Australia media education was on a plateau. I would go into some classrooms and I would see exercises that were not only the same that we were doing in the '70s with students, but sometimes they would use exactly the same films. I thought goodness, where's the cutting edge gone?

I think that's changed in the last few years, especially in the upper school level. There were a number of reforms made to the upper school media education syllabus. With this recent movement to a national curriculum, I think media will come in the arts curriculum, which is unfortunate, because arts tends to be marginalized in Australia. I think it would've been better placed in the communication area, but nevertheless this discussion gives the chance for teachers to have a significant input into what media education will be in the future; this has injected more life into the debate. It's taken a stab at the conservative mold again, and there are young people who are forging away.