

BARRY DUNCAN

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INTERVIEWED BY: DEE MORGENTHALER

(QUOTE)

...the notion of “representation.” That is the central concept of media literacy. Because it is how we are represented and how we represent ourselves, or *re*-present ourselves. And that notion is being propelled through the decades -- through the '60s to today -- and it is central that how well we talk about representation largely determines the nature of how GOOD our media literacy is. So, representation, the core principles -- what we in Canada call the Key Concepts -- by having those key notions, which often are turned into questions -- that has kept us on track. And depending upon how well you do those things or have answers for some of those questions, that really determines how effective media literacy is in your school or in your community.

BIOGRAPHY OF BARRY DUNCAN

Barry Duncan is an award-winning teacher, author, media consultant and founder and past president of the Ontario based Association for Media Literacy. Officially “retired,” he continues to teach part time at York University and the University of Toronto in the Additional Qualifications course on Media Studies. He continues to produce "Barry's Bulletin," a media education newsletter, for the Media-Awareness Network.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

Describe how you became involved in media education?

Where was that? Where did you study under him (Marshall McLuhan)?

What school was that?

Can you tell me a little bit about how you included it into your teaching?

Did you have your students produce media?

What were your overall goals in education or personally in terms of media education?

After teaching, or during your teaching, were there other organizations that you became a part of?

And this guide focused on the Key Concepts? Were there lesson plans?

Does this Guide still exist in some form?

Major milestones in terms of your journey?

Do you feel that you were one of the few studying under him, that you were one of the first to adapt his ideas into the classroom?

How far do you think the field has come? Is it moving in the direction that you think is best?

Where do you see media literacy fit in terms of the school day?

DM: *Describe how you became involved in media education?*

BD: Well, I go back a fair amount of time. I am back in the paleolithic zone of media education. Like, I started teaching in the '60s. So, that was really the hotbed issues of civil rights, the war in Vietnam – all of those things were very televisual and had a lot of ideological implications. So, while I was not American, a lot of this spilled over into Canada, like draft dodging, draft evading. We were inspired by these situations that were being commodified by the media. So, I was an observer of that scene. And it obviously shaped what I was doing. The other source was the work of Marshall McLuhan. And I had the good fortune to study under him just as he was formulating his ideas.

DM: *Where was that? Where did you study under him?*

BD: Well, that was the early '60s. He published *Understanding Media* in 1964. So he was doing preliminary work for at least six or seven years before he really burst into full flame. Those ideas of looking at not just the content but the form of the media was McLuhan's unique contribution. And so I had the good fortune of being his graduate student in his class along with five or six others. Just as he was hammering out his ideas.

DM: *What school was that?*

BD: The University of Toronto. And of course, I applied some of those ideas to my teaching because I have always been a secondary school teacher. And I taught part-time at the university. But I am first and foremost a teacher and I was fortunate to be in an alternative school with only a small teacher population with lots of flexibility. So I was able to hone my ideas in ways that were relevant. More recently, in the last 10 years I have done a lot of part-time work at the university teaching teachers how to teach media: what we call "provisional qualification courses." And you get a certificate for completing these courses. The last one being your media studies certificate. So that is where I come into it.

Anyways, those were seminal events -- of course with McLuhan, the backdrop of the civil rights, all of these things were being mediated by the media. All that made this very, very important. Just to add one other little factor that we haven't talked about, the people that were doing this in the English speaking world were primarily from the U.K. and the British Film Institute which privileged film, but they were doing some interesting things so there was a little publication called *Screen Education*. In fact, they used that word, we used it for a while up here in Canada, and even in the United States (because I was keeping track of what they were doing in the United States). And they tended to use the term 'screen education' not 'media literacy;' that came later. And for sake of argument, around 1980.

DM: *Can you tell me a little bit about how you included it into your teaching?*

BD: In the case of the media, I was an English teacher, so English has a great deal of kinship with the media because there are key parallels -- whether it is aesthetic, values, or the commercial implications of publishing. English lends itself to it and the kind of sensibility that is characteristic of good English teachers makes them very, very compatible with media literacy. And so I incorporated that. There would be things like a comparison between a novel and a film. There is an obvious example. But looking not just at the similarities but at the differences -- why does the director choose to have instead of 50 characters in *War and Peace*, he boils it down to only 10? Or why does William Wyler, who directed *Wuthering Heights* (the first version in black and white), why did he leave out one generation of characters? Well the answer is that he wants to have a good film. He doesn't want to have a cluttered feeling. So he makes an aesthetic judgment. So those are some examples.

The other would be, very much the production of media. And having that tie in with the notion of what skills are needed to not only analyze but also produce media.

DM: *Did you have your students produce media?*

BD: Oh yes. We were dealing in the early '70s with what they called the Sony Portapak. It was in the day of Super 8 still being carried on and the Sony Portapak which was tape -- we tried the best we could with those things. It gave kids an opportunity to try -- even though it was very primitive technology. It gave them a sense of the potential of the medium and that is what's important.

DM: *What were your overall goals in education or personally in terms of media education?*

BD: Well -- let's look at the over-arching notion -- it would be, to quote Len Masterman, the notion of "representation." That is the central concept of media literacy. Because it is how we are represented and how we represent ourselves, or *re-present* ourselves. And that notion is being propelled through the decades -- through the '60s to today -- and it is central that how well we talk about representation largely determines the nature of how GOOD our media literacy is. So, representation, the core principles -- what we call the Key Concepts -- by having those key notions, which often are turned into questions, that has kept us on track. And depending upon how well you do those things or have answers for some of those questions, that really determines how effective media literacy is in your school or in your community.

DM: *After teaching, or during your teaching, were there other organizations that you became a part of?*

BD: Well, you see I founded the Association for Media Literacy, back in 1978. And it was because of the work that organization did that we, first of all, got media education as a mandatory component in the curriculum from grade 6 to grade 12. And with the success of the Association for Media Literacy the other provinces were reviewing their curriculum. And when

you have a major curriculum review you look at things that are there -- what you have and what you don't have -- and they realized that they didn't have media literacy. That there was obviously a gap. And so we came along and we had the famous *Media Literacy Resource Guide*. And that became -- even in the United States -- a kind of underground best seller. At least in New York City. But it became the basis for encouraging people to say that "we can do this as well." And not only just in Ontario but in the United States, and certainly, all across Canada. So what it led to is the mandatory component, in English (it has always been tied in with the subject) but it became mandatory from coast to coast in Canada from K - 12.

DM: *And this guide focused on the Key Concepts? Were there lesson plans?*

BD: Everything was generated with reference to those Key Concepts. To a certain extent there were lesson plans but we didn't have a detailed set. People would adapt them to what we called "teachable moments." The teachable moments are the things like the War in Vietnam, 9/11, the Tsunami, Katrina. All of those things are mediated by the media and need to have the structure of the media, the ideological implications of the media in order to clarify what is happening. Any current environmental crisis like the one in Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico, etc. The way those are covered by the media -- that's a teachable moment right now.

DM: *Does this Guide still exist in some form?*

BD: It might be available online. It might be very well be. The exact title is *The Ministry of Education Media Resource Guide*. It came out in 1989. You can try "Ministry of Education." I should have a better answer. Copies are out there. It is still very useful, but naturally so much has happened in the last 15 years that if you based your course on what are the guiding principles in that document you would be doing an injustice. We need to reconcile traditional media with this new media. Henry Jenkins points out that we are into this convergence culture.

So the Association for Media Literacy is still in existence. Still very active. It started in 1978 and we held the largest conference ever held on media, called Summit 2000. And prior to that we had two big international conferences. We had the most dynamic, active, soul searching about media and kids and "how do you do it?" at those conferences. And the Americans, like Renee Hobbs, etc., were inspired by what we did. So at the conference in '89 they were really keen to get going. And they had a session at our conference. One for Americans about "how do we get going?" And so, you can argue quite easily that the seminal input was what we did at those conferences. We had 1500 media educators attend. So that's the largest that has been held. It was held in Toronto.

DM: *Major milestones in terms of your journey?*

BD: A lot of the things that I have already spoken about, but my recognition of Marshall McLuhan, because he was an academic and he was dealing with elementary school teachers. Some of his ideas, when adapted and translated, were very much what was going on in education. It was at a fairly academic level.

DM: *Do you feel that you were one of the few studying under him, that you were one of the first to adapt his ideas into the classroom?*

BD: Yes, I think so. But I also say that his ideas were sufficiently complex that at times it was out of reach. I would be bullshitting if I said I understood everything he ever said. He had this evening class, and I went to this evening class with McLuhan and he just exhausted us intellectually because he had so many insights into what was going on in culture -- that he was five steps ahead of everybody. Readings that were exhausting and raising the key questions. It was really extraordinary because he was right on the money on most things and what is interesting is that in the last 5 years there has been a major revival of McLuhan with all kinds of books coming out on analyzing his ideas, etc. And resurrecting old video tape. He anticipated some of the major things in terms of the impact of computers -- you know, things like YouTube and Facebook. There is no problem in seeing the impact of his ideas on those phenomena.

Now one of the things that I see happening is that we now have an expanded definition of media study. At one point it tended to be film television, radio, popular music, that was it. We are now taking some of those things and using the term popular culture. In fact my textbook, which is in use all over Canada, is called *Mass Media and Popular Culture*. And we get into things like Barbie dolls, theme parks, graphic novels, we are going beyond what people used to be calling media literacy with film, etc. So back in the '60s early '70s you tended to have a great deal centered on film - both the making of and the study of film. So they brought with them very traditional notions of media, like they wouldn't look at things like ideology -- that was too controversial. And Americans were fearful of the term that you would be a Pinko Communist ready to swallow up the minds of the young. A lot of nonsense. So people like Liz Thoman wouldn't use the word - she would say that "media is a business." And in doing that she left out the real cutting edge ideas - that people like Noam Chomsky and Robert McChesney and others had drawn attention to. You are not going to do anything that is cutting edge if you avoid those particular intellectual domains.

So we have new paradigms that have emerged that try to do justice to the ecological/technological changes.

There is stuff that we found that was unproductive or inadequate. A great deal of the work done in the media in the United States was not teaching what media was *about* -- it was teaching *against* the media. Media were seen as something that is negative, distraction, that has bad values, that is un-Christian, it is just bad news with no sense of pleasure in it.

So, you've got in the United States, and to a certain extent in Canada, people who thought the media was bad, and it was not easy for you to come along and proclaim its benefits because we were, in a sense, already killed in action before it really got going. So that negative view of the media was something that we wanted to avoid. It doesn't mean that we weren't concerned about sex and violence and video games, we are, a lot of those things are not too healthy, but to have those negative things driving a whole media literacy curriculum was most unfortunate. So it is no surprise that we had the break-away movement in the United States -- the ACME group (Action Coalition for Media Education) -- which tends to have a negative view of media literacy. So a major milestone was trying to create a positive/healthy viewpoint of all of these things.

DM: *How far do think the field has come? Is it moving in the direction that you think is best?*

BD: There is NAMLE (National Association for Media Literacy Education) in the U.S. and they seem to be doing a fairly good job. They seem to be landing on their feet. And they are doing their best. I have been to every one of their conferences. But they seem to be on the right track and I think they have a long way to go. I think we all need to find the vocabulary, find the means to have a sensible middle ground, which means we are not going to be totally celebratory, nor are we going to be giving the media a bad rap. We have got to find a compromise. So I think we are getting a little closer to that.

The title of the conference, “Bridging Literacies,” was a good one from the Detroit conference. Because we have had all of the academics who have looked at things like visual literacy, the librarians looked at information literacy, you get aesthetics. You get all of these competing literacies, and that is not a bad thing...but there needs to be a way to bridge these and that has not successfully happened. Critical pedagogy has a lot to offer, but people like Henry Giroux and others have made it somewhat obscure. The important ideas behind critical pedagogy are still there. I want to see how that can be situated in a pedagogy, I want to see them having a major role in bringing the key ideas both of traditional media and new media -- of bringing them together and making all of these things as meaningful in the curriculum and the so called convergence and the culture of connectivity -- all of the new directions -- all of that stuff has to be reconciled with the traditional. And if we do a good job at that we will be successful.

If you look at the core principles and key concepts -- there are groups out there that are doing some aspect of it. But the danger is that the richness, aesthetic, ideological, commercial -- if they are not explored then we leave the major things out of the model(s) that are needed to deconstruct media and to acknowledge the complexity.

The librarians need to have an opportunity to see how publishers can determine what we get in our textbooks. We need to look at the influence of textbooks in the curriculum. Show how textbooks will limit what teachers can do simply by NOT offering or what is absent. All of that kind of stuff needs to be debated. If we leave that out we have an impoverished notion of the media and that is a very sad situation.

DM: *Where do you see media literacy fit in terms of the school day?*

BD: I'd say, as an overview, in theory it should be everywhere. Like even people that teach mathematics can claim that they can do some media literacy. The most obvious places are clearly English and social science and humanities. Because there is a compatibility: you are looking at themes and values and the paradigms that govern the way we structure our courses and dialogue with kids. That's the first part of the answer.

Part two is getting to the subjects that have the greatest amount of compatibility and by having an infusion of media literacy skills and by having a critical edge to what you are doing. It is not enough to get these kids to use the internet, to get data, that is great as just the beginning. But how do you problematize? Well, we are seeing that there are all sorts of problems with Google as we speak. And so if you left out the whole business of neutrality and privacy -- what's included and what's excluded (in terms of Google) -- if you leave that stuff out then you are giving kids a very unrealistic view and you are not giving the teachers the skills or the kinds of questions that should be raised.

Those things will always be critical. There is a temptation to have traditional librarians that have a limited, fearful approach -- and we are worse for wear.