

**Voices of Media Literacy  
International Pioneers Speak: Len Masterman Interview Transcript**

**LEN MASTERMAN**

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**INTERVIEWER: Dee Morgenthaler**

(Quote)

*“...you can teach about the media most effectively, not through a content-centered approach, but through the application of a conceptual framework which can help pupils to make sense of any media text. And that applies every bit as much to the new digitized technologies as it did to the old mass media...The acid test of whether a media course has been successful resides in students’ ability to respond critically to media texts they will encounter in the future. Media education is nothing if it is not an education for life...My own objectives were to liberate pupils from the expertise of the teacher, and to challenge the dominant hierarchical transmission of knowledge which takes place in most classrooms. In media studies information is transmitted laterally, to both students and teachers alike. The teacher’s role is not to advocate a particular view but to promote reflection upon media texts, and develop the kind of questioning and analytical skills, which will help students to clarify their own views.”*

**BIOGRAPHY OF LEN MASTERMAN**

**Len Masterman** was the first person to propose the serious study of the mass media in schools, through the use of key ideas and concepts that would provide a way of studying, in a rigorous and disciplined way, the diverse range of material which constitute media content. Len started his career as a teacher. He became an international sensation with the 1980 publication of his book, “Teaching about Television,” which sold out twice on its print run in the first six months of publication and ultimately sold 100,000 copies worldwide after five years of rejection by many publishers. His subsequent book, “Teaching the Media,” applies the systematic framework he developed to media as a whole; this book was published in 1985. Masterman is now retired.

**INTERVIEW TEXT**

Selected Questions:

***How did you become involved in the field or in the movement of media education...what inspired the beginning of your journey?***

***How old were your students?***

***And how did they receive your material?***

***How did teachers respond to your work?***

**DM: *How did you become involved in the field or in the movement of media education...what inspired the beginning of your journey?***

**LM:** Basically, I suppose there was no such thing as a media education movement when I started. Not only that, but it seemed improbable -- to me at any rate -- that there could ever be a possibility that something as heterogeneous as the mass media could be studied in a disciplined way. That's because the mass media cover such a wide range of different practices, that any idea that you could gather together film, advertising, radio, newspapers, magazines, and whatever else into a coherent field of study seemed fanciful

There were, to be fair, *some* courses existing in schools on media studies, but they weren't really subjects in a traditional sense -- the school ones that I knew of - and there were precious few of them. They would generally consist of an English teacher doing half a term on a bit of film, half a term on advertising, an occasional look at a newspaper or two, and that would be it.

But as for giving any thought to what connected these fields, teachers weren't really getting very far with that. In fact, they weren't really asking that kind of question. They tended to be asking different questions of different media, and that meant that there wasn't really any such thing as "media studies" as a subject.

Sometimes media were being studied in terms of their influence or effects, or perhaps their institutional background, but this emphasis upon the social issues to which media gave rise was really a branch of sociology.

And media was studied within English and English teaching (as an adjunct to literature), so that occasionally an English teacher might use a film as an alternative kind of text, and as the basis for the kind of discussion that you would normally get through studying a novel or a play.

And there's also been a strain of English teaching, which has been pretty hostile to the media, in which you would study media texts, and particularly advertising, from the perspective of its manipulation of audiences and so on.

So what existed up until about the 1960s, where it existed at all, was a study of the media that was highly fragmented and split around different established subjects, but with no coherent approach that might justify the notion that this was a subject that was actually worth studying in its own right.

I started teaching as an English teacher in the early '60s, and I did a bit of media teaching. One of the earliest pioneers of using media within English teaching was F.R. Leavis who was probably the foremost literary critic and academic of his day. He was a Cambridge don, and he saw the media as purveyors of mass culture, a culture of the machine, a culture which was the product of industrial scale production, and marked by a high degree of standardization and uniformity. Education, for Leavis, had to concern itself with inoculating children against this anti-cultural environment. This could be done, he argued, by comparing the life, vitality and originality of the language of a literary text with the pressure towards conformity of most media texts. This approach to teaching and thinking about the media, which has its origins in a deeply-rooted suspicion of the media, still has its adherents today, and is generally referred to as the inoculative approach to media study. Since the media are an almost totally malign influence,

you need to give kids small doses of them, in order to inoculate them against the infection, as it were.

Leavis's background was interesting. During the First World War, he was an ambulance worker, a stretcher bearer, and the kinds of things he must have seen on the battlefield are almost beyond imagining. During virtually all wars, of course, there is an enormous amount of propaganda and censorship. During the Great War, the degree of censorship was such that people at home really didn't know first-hand many of the details of what was happening. So the support for the war never really wavered, and there was a great deal of censorship, and the people who were reporting it, of course, weren't inclined to write about things that might affect patriotism at home and the prosecution of the war, and so on. It is pure speculation on my part, but I suspect that the traumatizing experiences of the war, and the important part played in it by propaganda and mass persuasion, must have played a significant role in his desire to encourage people to look critically and closely at the media.

However hostile Leavis was to the media, however, he could see that its study should have a place in schools. And since he was an academic with a formidable intellectual reputation, that gave quite a lot of impetus to English teachers to use media materials in a critical way in their classes.

For teachers, his important book was one that he co authored in 1933 called "Culture and Environment." It was still in print in '63 when I started teaching. It had gone through about 30-odd impressions. It was a handbook for teachers on how to use the media and how to analyze adverts and so on.

The other book, I suppose, that was around when I started was a book by Vance Packard called "The Hidden Persuaders." I don't know if you've ever come across that. It was really about the use of what he called "depth psychology" in the making of advertising and the influence of psychology within advertising.

And the idea there really came out of the use of psychological techniques by the American military, particularly during the Korean War. And when the war ended, a lot of these people (in what we would now call PSYOPS) were turned back into civil society.

A lot of them found work on Madison Avenue and said, "Look. There are ways in which we can actually use 'depth psychology' for commercial purposes." In fact the use of depth psychology in advertising was never as significant as Packard made out. It was a sensationalist sort of book. But it had a tremendous impact at the time. It was a big seller on both sides of the Atlantic.

**DM: *How old were your students?***

**LM:** When I started teaching I was teaching secondary school so that would be 11 to 18.

**DM: *And how did they receive your material?***

**LM:** They loved it. As you probably know, anything from popular culture that gets into the classroom is well received. So it was always something that they liked a great deal. I suppose the big thing for me as an English teacher was moving on to work with kids who found print

difficult who were not good readers. I was sort of forced to look at what you did as an English teacher which is essentially a print based subject...what you did with kids who equate print with failure and really don't want to have much to do with the written word. So I started with students like that to use film quite a bit.

I came out of a university culture where film was very important in the late '50s early '60s. This was a time when European cinema, and particularly French new wave films, and British social realist movies were of major interest to arts students. It just seemed, at the time, that some of the most significant aesthetic ideas were coming out of film rather than out of the novel or the theater. So it was quite natural, I think, for teachers like me, who were just starting their careers, to use films in their lessons.

So that's basically how I started, as an English teacher who increasingly began to use media material. I suppose it is a similar trajectory to somebody like Barry Duncan in Canada, who was also, I think, English based, who found that the media material he used was pretty appealing both to himself and his students and who began to use more and more of it.

One of the things I discovered in using film, particularly using foreign films, was that of course kids who had difficulty with reading, couldn't follow the subtitles.

I was using films to enable kids with reading difficulties to access the kind of discussions about language and character and thematic issues from which they had been cut off in literature lessons because of their antipathy to print, because of their association of print with failure. Or so I'd hoped. But of course when I showed them a foreign film, their only access to its meanings was via print. But many students couldn't follow the subtitles quickly enough. That was a flop. It was a sort of massive failure on my part and sort of a major, major mistake. How stupid can you be?

In addition I was showing films by Bunuel and Truffaut and John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock and treating them as kind of authors in the same way that you would a poet or a dramatist in literature.

But to the kids I was working with, even when they could get a handle on the basic narrative, these directors were as remote as, I don't know, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Byron and so on. And so it just struck me then, particularly working with more challenging students, that it might make more sense to look critically at what their primary visual experience was; and that, of course, was TV.

What's interesting is that film started to become respectable in education at precisely the point in history where cinemas were starting to close down. And film had fewer credentials to be considered a mass medium than at any other time in its history.

Television was something that kids were watching for 20 plus hours a week. They were spending more time in front of the TV than they were in the classroom. Some of the kids I was teaching didn't have a cinema within close reach. So they never went to the cinema.

I was teaching film on the grounds that it was close to students' experience. But it wasn't close to their experience at all. So I was driven by the inadequacies of my own analysis to look at

material that was closer to the visual experiences of the class I was teaching. And that's what really led me into TV, and TV teaching. I set up what turned out to be the first ever examined course in Television Studies in British schools.

That was set up in the early '70s when I started working at the University of Nottingham. That gave me the time and the flexibility to go out into a school and teach a much more experimental kind of course than would have been possible if I had been a full time member of the teaching staff.

So I used to go out two afternoons a week to teach this course over a period of four years. The idea there was to just take a single medium and study that in a disciplined kind of way. What was challenging about that was a fact that I have already mentioned: the heterogeneous nature of the media.

That heterogeneity also applies to the single medium of TV. The problem was this: if you are studying TV then in successive weeks you might be looking at news, documentary, sport, advertising, soap opera etc. How is it possible to study such a diverse range of topics in a way that would be focused and disciplined, and enable students to make connections between them? Is there an overarching idea that would enable us to draw these things together within the same discourse?

I spent a lot of time around 1972-73 thinking about this problem. And thinking there was no clear or elegant solution to it. I suppose the big step forward was to recognize a truism: that what we were actually studying was television and not its different subject contents. That is, we were not actually studying sport or music or news or documentary. We were studying representations of these things. We were studying the ways in which these subjects were being represented and symbolized and packaged by the medium. So that seemed a sort of major step forward. It might have been based upon a truism, but it directly challenged the way in which television itself invited its audience to see the medium: as a window on the world, a transparent glass through which we can see "reality" and judge it for ourselves. Or, in the other favorite media metaphor, as a mirror which simply reflects reality. That reality guaranteed as authentic by the medium's seamless stream of continuous images and sounds. What that denies is human agency, the fact that these images are actually produced: selected, edited and packaged. What we are dealing with is not reality, but a symbolic system. Television does not present or reflect reality, but re-presents it. And that notion of re-presentation becomes a kind of professional pun, signaling to the student of TV that in every lesson we will be studying not the real world, but the ways in which it is being represented. The first principle of studying TV, it turned out, was the principle of non-transparency.

Once you accept as a fundamental premise that you are dealing not so much with reflections of reality but with a symbolic system, then a whole set of satellite questions immediately present themselves.

For instance, if we are looking at TV as a representational system, then the question inevitably arises as to who is creating these representations. Who is doing the representing? Who is telling us that this is the way the world is? That their way of seeing is simply natural? It raises, in other words, issues of ownership and control, and the class, ethnicity, age and gender of media owners and workers.

Then we have inevitably to consider the nature of the world which is being presented to us as common-sensed. What are its values and dominant assumptions? And that leads you straight into larger questions about ideology and the socio-political impact of television.

The third set of questions concerns the techniques that are used to create the “authenticity” of TV. Precisely how are the medium’s representations made to seem so true to life? And that leads you into the rich field of media language.

And finally there are questions of audience. How are TV’s representations read and understood by its audiences? How are we as an audience positioned by the text? What divergent interpretations exist within our group? How can these be explained or accounted for? Is it possible to read against the grain of these images? and so on.

So they seemed to me to be some of the key questions and areas of study if one wished to analyze the medium seriously. And that began to look like a reasonably coherent field to study, which is the basic requirement of any kind of academic discipline.

Any discipline worth its salt has got to have a set of coherent questions and issues that it thinks are important. It has to have some key ideas and key concepts with which to answer those questions. And it has to have a particular and characteristic mode of inquiry.

I stumbled into my own mode of enquiry as I went along, making mistake after mistake, and trying to learn from my failures. For example I took as my starting point the study of still images, which was a relatively well-established practice within film studies. However, the pupils I was working with had no formal experience of discussing or interpreting non-verbal levels of communication, so it was necessary to do a good deal of preliminary work on the ways in which dress, gesture, facial expressions, objects etc. were all significant carriers of meaning. We did a full term’s work, primarily through role-play, games, simulations and other practical activities, exploring the constituents and referents of still images, before moving on to what I had previously considered to be the base-line for study, the images themselves.

As to studying television, we moved through what are now fairly well established processes of clarifying what images were communicating at their simplest and most literal, denotative levels. I always used to enjoy that because I am not a particularly visually literate person myself. I am very badly color blind for instance. And my spacial IQ is about as low as you can get. So my classes could invariably see far more than I could in the programs we were looking at. And in general terms, it is always a more enriching experience to have thirty sets of eyes scrutinizing a text than simply one’s own.

The next level of meaning, the connotative, exploring what the images suggest, how they operate at a figurative and metaphorical level, is familiar territory for most English teachers. And a text’s deeper themes manifest themselves as connotative clusters, or chains of associations, nuances and suggestions.

Finally, we tried to move on to ideological analysis. Do all of the connotations we have discussed form a coherent ideological position? What are the larger social and political assumptions underpinning the text? It’s not difficult to explore a text’s ideological meanings if value questions have been raised from the very outset in discussing denotative meaning. In fact

it is at the level of apparently innocent description that the most profound choices are being made. Why has this news story/ item of clothing/ facial expression/ been selected rather than another of the myriad possible alternatives?

There will, of course, be differing interpretations of a text's meanings. This is normal. It would in fact be very odd if it were otherwise given the gender, ethnic and class differences which exist in most British classrooms. Differences which have to be not just respected but actively encouraged. But I found it useful to ask the class to hold back from making personal judgments on a text for as long as possible. Irrespective of whether you like it or not, what is it possible to say about the text? How does it work? What does it mean at denotative and cognitive levels? Where has it come from? What is its intended audience? etc. It was an attempt to study the text more scientifically (What is this strange object and what can we say about it that we might all agree is true?) than would be normal in a conventional English class, where establishing the value of literary texts generally has a high priority. And if the student cannot see that Shakespeare is a great dramatist, then he/she is simply wrong.

Raising ideological questions about media texts is a much simpler matter than is generally thought. This is because when you're watching television or a film or looking at a photograph, you can scarcely avoid considering its point of view. It's not like analyzing a poem or a play or a novel, where discerning the point of view might be a tricky task. With visual images there is always a literal point of view. The camera has to be positioned somewhere. Though the BBC used to introduce its news programs with a graphic in which the camera zoomed into an image of the globe from outer space. It seemed to symbolize the idea that there was a point of view, somewhere up in the heavens, from which events below could be seen without any kind of bias.

**DM:** *Right. [laughs]*

**LM:** I once saw a TV news editor quoted as saying that his program did not see events from this or that point of view, but from nobody's point of view. That idea that there is a point of view which is no point of view is deeply embedded within the ideology of television. But the fact is that, when you watch TV, the camera is not positioned in space or on Mount Olympus, where the gods of television can look down from on high upon the frailties and biases of mere mortals. An active, human, physical choice has to be made, here on earth, as to where you are going to position the camera. From which point are you going to view the action. And that phrase, "point of view," describes both a physical and an intellectual position. Where you place the camera can make an enormous difference to the meaning of a story. As one of my students said about news coverage of the miners' strike, the defining industrial dispute of the 1980s: "It makes a big difference whether those police horses are galloping towards you or away from you. It's the difference between being assaulted or protected."

Anyway, I wrote a book about all of this, "Teaching about Television." I had great difficulty in finding a publisher. Nobody was interested in it. Mainly because publishers would quite rightly say, "Where's your market?" to which I could only feebly respond, "Well, I was hoping to create one, really." (laughter) But it was finally published by Macmillan as a favor. Somebody at the director level at Macmillan knew somebody at the Independent Television Authority who'd actually financed some of my research, and they published it as a sort of favor. They published it in 1980, I'd finished it in about 1975, so it took about five years to get published.

**DM:** *Wow.*

**LM:** And what was amazing is that within about six months I was touring Australia... [laughter] ...giving lectures about it, going to North America, and all over Europe and working for UNESCO, and addressing the European Parliament. It sold out twice on its print run in the first six months. And I think it still might be in print, actually, but it sold about 100,000 copies. And all of those publishers who'd rejected it...

**DM:** *[laughs]*

**LM:** ...wrote back and said, "If you're ever thinking about writing anything else..." [laughter]

**DM:** *Let us know.*

**LM:** [laughs] And could you give us first refusal? So that was a kind of interesting experience, but what that opened out to me was, of course, the fact that if you could teach about television in a disciplined way, then maybe this framework might work for the media as a whole. And that led me on to write the book that in a way was easier to write, because it was based on quite a lot of thinking and work that I'd already done, and that was, "Teaching the Media." It came out in 1985.

**DM:** *So we're up to [laughs]...*

**LM:** We're up to 1985. We've only got about 30 years to go.

**DM:** *Right. We're doing well. And, actually, you are answering all of my questions intuitively, so there you go.*

**LM:** I'm giving you a sort of chronological account as far as I can remember it...

**DM:** ***How did teachers respond to your work?***

**LM:** Positively really. In the TV book I wasn't being prescriptive. I simply described my own practice, and a lot of teachers thought, well I can do that. And in places like Canada and Australia groups of excellent teachers with an interest in visual literacy were already starting to come together, and it was a happy coincidence from my point of view that they were grappling with exactly the kind of questions that I had been thinking about. I was pretty lucky with my timing.

**DM:** *Right.*

**LM:** Back in the UK the response was patchier. I was invited to give a paper at a national conference organized by The British Film Institute in London in 1981. It was the first time that I had spoken about taking a conceptual, rather than a content-centered, approach to media study. Teachers seemed to be very enthusiastic, but BFI staff were somewhat cooler. Unsurprisingly so, really, since I was challenging the taken-for-granted pre-eminence of film within the study of the media. This did not stop the BFI themselves advocating a conceptual approach in 1989 (without acknowledgment) in their own national curriculum statements on Media Education. Coming late in the day to this approach (similar developments had already



taken place at a national level in Canada, Australia and Scotland), the BFI nevertheless trumpeted this as a “new” development. It was new in only one disappointing sense. There was no reference anywhere within the BFI scheme to the concept of ideology or even to media values. You have to remember that all of this was happening at the height of Thatcherism, and that the BFI’s very existence was dependent upon a substantial multi-million pound annual grant from the state. So in this sense, the BFI’s approach was understandable. But it was an emasculation of the conceptual approach rather than an endorsement or development of it. After all, the whole point of that interlocking conceptual structure was to investigate how the media function as consciousness industries: how they attempt to set agendas, manage opinion, construct identities and produce social meanings. Ideological study was the glue that gave the other concepts their purpose and cohesiveness. Take ideology out of media study and what are you left with?

The BFI’s claim was that they were aiming to create more active and critical media users. Their crucial move was to attempt to de-politicize the notion of criticality. They were advocating a form of criticism which had strict limits, and could be comfortably subsumed within the theory of consumer sovereignty. You know, you exercise your criticality by choosing one newspaper or program or brand rather than another. What’s ruled out of court is any examination of the kind of wider political, economic or historic contexts which give to the study of the media its meaning and depth.

There was a particular irony about the direction in which the BFI was seeking to take media education, because the 80s and 90s saw a proliferation across the media of consumer-orientated lifestyle journalism and broadcasting. It continues to the present day. You can scarcely pick up a newspaper or switch on TV without being bombarded by articles and programs about home improvement or travel or fashion or cars or food and drink, and other consumer-based activities. It’s compelling evidence of a symbiotic relationship between the content of the media and the interests of advertisers. Any study of the media has to grapple with this phenomenon: to investigate, analyze and seek to explain it. But to do so you have to have access to a critical perspective which stands outside of it. What the BFI was suggesting was a strategy that was complicit with it: media education as just another set of consumer choices.

If the BFI wished to exclude ideological considerations from the study of the media, an academic critic, David Buckingham, has determinedly misunderstood my position on the role of ideology. I used the term ‘demystification’ to describe the process of challenging the perceived naturalness of media images, insisting on their representational quality, and in doing so making explicit their suppressed ideological function. Buckingham re-interpreted this as a model in which the teacher is the bearer of superior truths which are imposed upon students, who exist in a deluded state of mystification, and are in need of liberation by teachers from their false beliefs. Given that the teacher already has the answers to his/her own questions, my “theory” would entail the hierarchical transmission of knowledge via a narrow and authoritarian pedagogy. From this it must follow that my emphasis upon developing students’ critical autonomy through the use of active and participatory teaching methods is, simply, a “rhetorical declaration”.

Buckingham’s criticism fell at the first academic hurdle. In any academic dispute it is a minimum requirement that the case against which one is arguing should be rendered accurately and fairly. And that means it should be expressed in a way that one’s opponent would recognize as being accurate and fair. My immediate response to Buckingham was that he was attributing to me views which I did not hold, and had, indeed, argued very specifically against. His account of my classroom practice is not only described in terms which are abhorrent to me, but is flatly

contradicted on almost every page of my books, which demonstrate not simply the importance, but the absolute necessity of active and participatory methodologies in order to achieve the goal of students' thinking independently. Buckingham was kind enough to say that my approach to media study had defined the field for a generation of teachers. But his account of my approach was one to which I cannot imagine any teacher (myself included) would wish to subscribe.

If you make very clear from the outset to a fellow academic that he is attributing to you views that you do not hold, it is reasonable to expect that he will refocus any future criticisms he may wish to make on views that you do hold. Sadly that has not been the case. Though I made my position clear over 25 years ago, Buckingham has chosen to ignore this inconvenient correction, continuing to use as the starting point for much of his writing what has now become a ritualized critique of views I have never held. In the normal way of things this would not matter very much. Every writer is used to having his/her work subjected to comment which may be inaccurate or badly informed, and rather than offering further rebuttals I have left teachers to reach their own conclusions. However in the intervening years, Buckingham has achieved the position of Professor at the Institute of Education in London. It is a prestigious position, which may lead some to regard Buckingham's comments on my work as having some degree of seriousness and authority. They do not. Hence the need for further refutation.

Buckingham makes a simple but fundamental error. Where I call for a recognition of the ideological role of the media, Buckingham mis-interprets this as the imposition upon students of a specific ideological agenda. Where I argue for the importance of raising ideological questions, Buckingham has it that I am mainly concerned to provide ideological answers. This is the purest nonsense. I am not interested in the slightest in students replicating the views of their teachers (though this is precisely what is aimed for in many other subjects). I do not want any student to be a mini-me. What I have advocated over my professional lifetime is the importance of students' developing their own critical autonomy, by having access to a wide range of critical questions to which they will have to provide their own answers. There is an important reason for this approach. The acid test of whether a media course has been successful resides in students' ability to respond critically to media texts they will encounter in the future. Media education is nothing if it is not an education for life. This is the reason why I have placed so much emphasis upon students' ability to respond critically to unseen media texts in the formal examining of media studies. Indeed as the Chief Examiner of a national Media Studies examination syllabus in the 1990s, I was able to encourage hundreds of teachers to move away from the familiar process of having their students regurgitate dictated notes, using short-term memorization - you know, learn the information for the exams and then forget it - and concentrate instead on the development of transferrable analytical skills. To say that these are merely rhetorical declarations and that students are being regarded as deluded dupes simply will not cut the mustard.

The precise reason why Buckingham should continue, to this day, in virtually everything he writes, to ascribe to me views and a method of working to which I have never subscribed, and which I formally repudiated over two decades ago, is a puzzle. But it has become a kind of academic stalking. It appears, however, to be necessary in order to establish the originality of Buckingham's own contribution to the field, which concerns the importance of valorizing pupils' own media experiences. This is, of course, a commonplace -- every media teacher's starting point. You teach media because you wish to bring the experience of pupils into the classroom, to validate that experience, and to encourage students to reflect upon it. My own objectives were to liberate pupils from the expertise of the teacher, and to challenge the dominant hierarchical transmission of knowledge which takes place in most classrooms. In media studies

information is transmitted laterally, to both students and teachers alike. The teacher's role is not to advocate a particular view but to promote reflection upon media texts, and develop the kind of questioning and analytical skills, which will help students to clarify their own views.

Buckingham's original contribution to media studies turns out to be, in fact, one of the taken-for-granted assumptions upon which media teachers have always based their work. It can only arrogate to itself any originality by postulating the existence of an imaginary version of media studies in which teachers were propagandists, and pupils were media dupes.

I look forward to the time when Buckingham finally comes around to recognizing what teachers saw as important over 25 years ago. That is that you can teach about the media most effectively, not through a content-centered approach, but through the application of a conceptual framework which can help pupils to make sense of any media text. And that applies every bit as much to the new digitized technologies as it did to the old mass media. But that's another story.