

ROBYN QUIN

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INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS

(Quote)

There is so much emphasis on the kids getting their work to look really good and polished that you see a lot of derivative work; that instead of creating something new and exciting they are copying the forms they see in the popular media and trying to get them looking as polished as feature films, music videos, etc. So I don't see much of creative imagination or using the media as a form of critical analysis or analysis of the media itself... So the pressure to get a highly polished piece of work out is very strong but I'm not sure you learn as much with that focus as you do with trying to break the rules instead of trying to copy the rules. What students are doing is internalizing the conventions and very rarely challenging them.

BIOGRAPHY OF ROBYN QUIN

Robyn Quin is Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) at Curtin University of Technology. Prior to joining Curtin, Professor Robyn Quin was Pro Vice-Chancellor responsible for Teaching and Learning and Executive Dean of the Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries at Edith Cowan University. She began her career as a teacher of English Literature.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

Why did you become involved with media education?

What were some of the experiences that you had early on?

Did you see some changes in terms of the purpose of media studies and how the subject was delivered?

What were some other milestones?

What were some of your personal milestones?

Where do you see the field now?

What would you like to see happen?

What would you like to see with teacher training?

(Interview Begins)

TJ: Why did you become involved with media education?

RQ: I was originally a teacher of English Literature and I found students thought it was totally irrelevant to their lives. Just like many other people who became media studies teachers, I was interested in the fact that media studies could be made more relevant to students' lives and what they were interested in, and that many of the same skills of analysis that you develop in the study of literature you could apply to the study of visual images.

TJ: What were some of the experiences that you had early on?

RQ: In the early days of media studies (now I'm talking about '70s), it was very much oriented to practical production work. That was partly the history of its origin. Media studies in Western Australia weren't really like what happened in England or what happened in the United States and Latin America. In many other countries, media studies was either a reaction to the fear of what the media might be doing to people's psyches or intellect, or as in Latin America, that media was breaking down social values, family and religious values. Or in England it was a kind of high culture, low culture divide. In Australia media studies actually started as an answer to an educational problem in that schooling -- the amount of time children had to spend at school -- was increased, and the school leaving age was raised. Previous to this, schools were a sort of sorting ground, they sorted out those kids that were going to go to University and they stayed on for the whole time at school. Those that weren't, left school at 14 or so and went either into trades or got a job. When they raised the school leaving age, there were a lot of students who stayed at school but didn't intend to go to University.

This meant that the curriculum of the school was totally irrelevant to them because the curriculum was very much geared towards what you needed for University study. So media studies really came in as a curriculum answer to the problem of how do you engage young people with schooling who really would rather not be there. So media studies, in its original formation, didn't stretch their intellectual abilities greatly because it didn't require large amounts of writing or reading. And what it did have was a production orientation in the early days. So there was lots of work in film making, taking your photographs, developing and printing in the dark room, making radio programs, making Super8 films, doing animations. Its orientation was very much learning by doing and lots of production work. That was really because of the nature of the school population that it was originally designed to service.

TJ: Did you see some changes in terms of the purpose of media studies and how the subject was delivered?

RQ: Very much so. What I was just describing was a 70s conception of media, which was all about production. Conceptually, it was built on a fairly simplistic transmission model of

communication, the notion that there is a message that goes through a medium and there's a receiver, the audience. Within the model that underpinned media studies, this whole notion that the message was intended.

In the 80s, there were a number of changes to the syllabus across the entire state, which had the benefit that if you wanted to introduce change, then change happens everywhere at the same time. Unlike the United States, where there are highly devolved education systems and education districts the same as in Canada or England, here it is very centralized. So what happened was that there were a number of changes to the syllabus. Those changes were brought about on the initiative of teachers who sit on the syllabus committees. What happened then, was that there was a much stronger emphasis in the new syllabus on the analysis of media and much more emphasis on the distinctive forms of the media. We spoke in terms of the skills and grammar of each media and what I described as the communication chain, the message, medium, and receiver was replaced by a new concept which looked at the construction of messages; the way that they function, the nature of each medium and the effect on the audience.

There were two new concepts that had been absent in the previous decade...one was the concept of the media as a cultural agent, that the media itself had effects on culture and made changes and was both an effect upon and a reflection of changes in community attitudes, lifestyles and social patterns. The means by which these changes were both reflected and promulgated were by such things as stereotypes, symbolism, rituals, etc.

The second major change was the conception of the audience, in the 70s the notion of a receiver was an individual getting a message from the media that was a message intended for the individual. In the 80s the audience was conceived as not simply as individuals but as members of a shared culture or sub culture. So I am suggesting that in the 80s media studies had a turn towards cultural studies and that was really influenced by the Birmingham Center for Cultural Studies under Stuart Hall and his work on television and audience, and also the work of Roland Barthes on popular culture. It got away from the behavioral emphasis in the early approaches which saw the media influence people in sort of a direct stimuli response model: you watch something violent, you do something violent. That was completely replaced by a new conception of the media as an all pervasive, social and political force but the influences were indirect, subtle and maybe even imperceptible. The earlier sort of direct correlation disappeared from the conception of the syllabus.

Interestingly, the study of audiences changed a lot, so the idea that an audience would be directly influenced didn't appear in the new syllabus; it was more David Molley's 'Nationwide' studies that said that audiences are unpredictable, or that you can't say how any audience will actually read a media message because people bring to any reading of their own social, cultural, political, moral baggage which would determine their readings.

If we look back at the various syllabus revisions, it was a very busy time in the 80s because I think ideas were changing, pedagogy was changing and the syllabus was trying to keep up. So by the time 1986 came around, the syllabus was organized under 5 key understandings. They were the problematical nature of the mass media, media products as constructions, methods of construction, who had control of the construction and audiences. We were seeing the media

products as much more complex than had been seen in the early days. And that actually affected the way that it was taught in that there was a lot more detailed analysis of individual texts. Students were taught to look at montage, visual symbolism, the musical score and how that influences their reaction to the images.

You've got to see that this was partly made possible by technical innovation. Previous to the 80s, you couldn't stop a frame and so the notion of actually being able to look at a piece of footage frame by frame wasn't possible before you had stop/start video. And so once upon a time, film was a five-minute film roll, it passed through the gate and you couldn't go back and capture it. With video facility, with a freeze frame facility, you could hold a single image from a film and pour over it at length. I think there is a kind of a relationship between technological advancement and the way that people were teaching because it actually made it possible to do close analysis of the image.

So what we saw coming through the 80s was a much stronger emphasis on textual analysis, so if you saw the 70's as days of production, the 80s became the days, if I wanted to generalize, of textual analysis. That appealed to a lot of teachers, especially to teachers who had been educated in traditional English studies because they were already good at textual analysis. They knew it worked. They could analyze a poem to death; they could analyze a short story to death. They could pour over language and critique it. They were transferring those skills over to visual images. So they were able to transfer their print skills of practical criticism to moving images. That meant a lot of English teachers were then happy to be teachers of media; they were previously less uncomfortable when they thought they had to do practical work and they didn't know how to use a camera. But when the emphasis came to textual analysis and what they would call practical criticism, they thought, "That's neat, I could do that because they were used to doing it before and now they could do it with films".

At the same time in Australia there was a huge increase in the population; there was a large influx of immigrants. The birth rate had gone up in the 60s so these children now were in high school in the 70s, so there was a much bigger demand for teachers. And we weren't training qualified media teachers at that time; we had only just started training media teachers so we saw a lot of people switch over from being English teachers to being English and media teachers or just media teachers with actually the minimum of training. They might do a workshop that Barrie McMahon and I ran, a couple of workshops maybe, but that was about all. What they were actually doing, was transferring their English skills to moving image classes. So what you saw was a huge increase in the number of students studying the subject and teachers who were dedicated to the teaching of that subject. So I guess the 80's saw a real change in terms of the conception of the subject, how it was taught and what was taught within it. What was happening at the same time was that teachers, and this is partly reflective of what was being done with textual analysis, were trying to make the subject more academic.

Within Australia, there was a hierarchy of important and non-important subjects. The important subjects were those ones that led you to University that you had to pass to get into University. The non-important subjects were the ones that weren't counted for University entry. So you got within schools this hierarchy of subjects. The bright students did the important subjects and got into University. The other kids took the non important subjects that wouldn't get you into

University. Teachers greatly resented that because media studies were seen as non-important; therefore they wanted to make media studies more academic. They fought very hard to have it accepted as what we called a “University entry subject.” Now to do that, they had to show that media studies were a lot more than about making films. It was about higher order thinking, higher order reading skills, in this particular instance, it was about reading images; it was a lot more writing about reading the meaning of images because previously students were just writing about what they saw, or writing about what they heard.

And this was all a part of the effort to make the subject a legitimate University entry subject, and therefore get the same status as subject like mathematics, science, English, history, etc. Okay, that kind of effort to make a subject more academic happened in other subjects; you can read histories of school subjects and see that it happened in geography and biology in England; it happened in commercial studies in Canada, so that what was previously seen as the study for students who were going to become secretaries became business-oriented for people who might want to go onto University and study commerce. So it is something that tends to happen amongst teachers, they want their subjects to be seen as important. So part of it, is a bit of a self-investment for those teaching the subject because they want to get the status. Of course, unless you taught one of those important subjects, it was very hard to get promotion to be a head teacher, because the head of department was always the lead person in the academic subject. So, media studies tended to be within the English department, but the person who was head was always the person who was the expert in the teaching of English, not in the teaching of media studies. So there was a vested interest in the teachers trying to get their subject accepted as an academic subject for their own career and focus. So issues of status, status of the subject, status of the teachers; it was quite important in modern curriculum. It wasn't purely an intellectual move; it was a political move on the part of teachers. So there was a lot of work put in by teachers to try to have media studies accepted as a subject that would lead to university entrance.

There were a number of submissions made for university entrance status and they got rejected by the responsible authority. One of the reasons for rejection was that teachers insisted upon having some production work and the examining board would say, “How are we going to manage that, we can't possibly have exams and practical work in them.” Mind you our art teachers have been accepting portfolios for years. They also said that the less academically able were doing the subject so, therefore, if you put it up to the level of university entrance, then these students wouldn't pass and there would be nothing for these students so the whole reason for the existence of the subject would disappear. And there was also, let's face it, some resistance, from the established subject areas who didn't want another one in their spot because if you introduce a new subject, fewer students will do another subject, so there's a certain amount of competition between subjects about popularity.

There was also some resistance within the media studies movement from other teachers who didn't want to see media studies as an academic subject and who thought that its reason for being was about empowerment of less academically able students to have curriculum relevant to their lives and how they spent their leisure time. So the resistance was from within the movement and without.

There were two groups of teachers; those who were very keen to see it become a highly academic subject and those that weren't. And then from without, there was a certain perception that media studies was sort of like Mickey Mouse in terms of being low level, too simple, too much about having fun not enough about hard work. And so those struggles went all throughout the 80s. At the same time, the universities were introducing media studies as a discipline within Bachelor of Arts degrees. That was partly the British influence where cultural and media studies had been within universities for quite some time. Here in Western Australia it hadn't been. If you went and did a Bachelor of Arts you did traditional subjects such as Geography, History, Literature, American Literature, Australian Literature, and Colonial Literature, whatever. And at the university I'm now at, Curtin University (which was then called the Western Australia Institute of Technology) introduced media studies. And it became extremely popular and it had very strict quotas because so many students wanted to get in. It had a both practical and theoretical side to it. You could study film, but alongside it, you had to study film criticism. John Fiske came here to what was then called the Western Australia Institute of Technology and he transformed the English department into a cultural studies department. And when that happened, the university was drawing large numbers of students, and so the other two universities in Western Australia then introduced the same subject in competition. So you had developing at university quite an academic study of the media that wasn't matched by the study that was going on at the primary and secondary schools.

There's a disjunction there in many ways. So although students couldn't get into universities with media as a subject, once they got to university, they could study media which in itself presents as a bit crazy. And teacher education faculties were also then introducing media studies as a discipline for teaching but you weren't allowed to only be in media studies, you had to be in media studies and also in English so there was still this notion that you had to be out there teaching something serious as well as something not serious.

At the same time, the curriculum advisory staff had in the 70s been located in a school, and the school was then kind of the hub of media studies. Barrie and I were moved into the head office, and being moved into the head office gave us a certain legitimacy because you're in the bureaucracy, because as I said, it is a very centralized system and change here comes from the top down, not from the bottom up.

So the 80s brought a huge change in what we conceived of the subject. If you look back at some of the material that came out of the years, there was a lot of work on stereotypes and representation...the representation of race, the visual coding in film and in television, cultural representation, sexism, genre narrative, and semiotics started to become terms being used. So the sort of work that was being done was no longer, "Go out and make a documentary of your school." It was, "Explore the concept of the representation of gender in magazines or in popular film, etc.," so the content changed quite radically.

What happened later on was that there was a reform to the whole secondary education and all subjects became eligible for entry to university. That was a fair bit later down the track. So if I then move to the 90s, there were further changes, not as radical as the change from the 70s to the 80s. When I say the 70s - 80s, it wasn't like an overnight change; I'm talking broad changes across those decades. Now media studies had been introduced at a time when education policy

was really focused on the notion of a socially just and equitable society where schooling was for everybody, schooling should be relevant to everybody, schooling wasn't just about weeding out some students and putting the bright ones to university.

In the 90s that discourse virtually disappeared entirely. What was driving the nation was to be economically competitive; an industrially restructured society. And that economic imperative it was believed should drive the education of young Australians, in other words education was not geared to make you a better and more well rounded person, it was to make you a productive earning member of society, by which I mean you would pay taxes and contribute to the whole good of society. So there was a really big change in the educational discourse. This was partly because of youth and unemployment; this had been gradually growing through the late 80s and into the early 90s, so educational discourse leaned in the direction of how we've got to make the youth more employable, they've got to have skills to get them jobs. We can't just have them good at school to make them well rounded people; the job then of schools was to start training people for jobs. And that again had some effect on media studies. Media studies teachers tried to demonstrate that they could provide job ready skills, which this notion of pouring over the text and analyzing it to death couldn't demonstrate. So, it happened across all subjects that they were all more vocationally oriented and everyone had to make an effort to show that they were actually giving skills to students for life post school.

So there were a number of bureaucratic changes and one thing that happened was that the job that I had as a curriculum advisor was abolished. They abolished all curriculum advisors and said that curriculum development should be led by the heads of department in schools. The professional development money that Barrie and I used to use to run centralized workshops for staff was taken away at the center and given away to schools, and schools could use it on whatever they thought was important. So there was a change in the structure of education as well as a sense of its purpose.

What was being demanded of media studies was to incorporate traditional literacy skills: writing, reading, speaking and listening, exactly the same as what was in the English syllabus. What people saw then was that the English syllabus also started taking on the study of visual texts; previously it had only looked at printed texts. So there was this anxiety amongst media teachers that English was taking over their ground. And as a kind of a backlash to that, they actually increased their production element to differentiate themselves. So they were trying to make themselves look different to English. Since media studies was a wholly school-assessed subject, with the idea that these subjects needed to cater for the broad range of students and for the requirements of the workforce. So media studies became, along with a number of other subjects, slightly vocationally-oriented, wholly school-assessed, for kids that weren't going to go to university but needed to be able to demonstrate specific learning skills.

This continued on right through the 90s and into the early 2000s, and what happened then was there was a total reform of what was called post-compulsory for schooling. Post-compulsory ages 16 and 17, because students could still leave school at 15 if they went into a job or training. Then post-compulsory school was reformed on the basis that every child stay in school until the year 12 at which they turned 17. By doing that, the education authority said that we should no longer be weeding kids out at a young age, saying that the choice of the subject you do

determines where you can go when you leave school. Rather, the educational authority said, all subjects are equal. Any subject you do will be externally examined and will count for university entry.

Now it's not as simple as that, because some subjects are seen as harder than others, and therefore are scaled, but that was the theory, and that's still what's in existence today. So if you jump forward to 2011, media studies is a subject that counts for university entry, it is externally examined, it does consist of both a production element and a written element: it's roughly weighted 50/50. The production element is done at school but they have to produce alongside the work if it be a film or a video or images, a written discursive piece that describes the process of production, what they learned from it, the barriers, etc.

TJ: What were some of your personal milestones?

RQ: I was a teacher of media studies, then I was a curriculum advisor, then I went to the university sector and taught media studies in the university sector. And I taught teachers who would be teachers of media studies. I was probably at the forefront of some of those changes of trying to make those changes both conceptually and pedagogically. Part of that came about because there was a funny disjuncture for some years while I was teaching media studies and I was still teaching with the syllabus that had students doing a lot production work and lots of freedom to express themselves. I was studying for my master's degree in media and that was very much influenced by cultural studies and was highly analytic. I had this kind of disjuncture about teaching one thing during the day and then having a different outlook at night in my studies. I guess that was part of the push, part of why the content of media studies changed. I mean all school subjects show a history of trying to become more academic. What that actually means is determined by those who actually construct and design the curriculum. And Barrie McMahon and I were largely in control of the curriculum so what got put into it, we saw as worthwhile knowledge.

TJ: Where do you see the field now?

RQ: I'm no longer teaching media studies, I'm entirely in the administration of the university. But I'm still on the curriculum board for the subject. I see the attitude to media production now as being extremely sophisticated, and I'm not sure that the emphasis on producing polished pieces of work places a sufficient emphasis on what you're actually learning about manipulating the medium. There is so much emphasis on the students getting their work to look really good and polished that you see a lot of derivative work; that instead of creating something new and exciting they are copying the forms they see in the popular media and trying to get them looking as polished as feature films, music videos, etc. So I don't see much of creative imagination or using the media as a form of critical analysis or analysis of the media itself. I see a lot of reproduction of popular media and I think that's partly due to being externally examined; it does count to get into university. The students are very keen to be seen to get it right and have a good product. And the sophistication of some of the equipment now that's available for domestic use is such that they can produce highly polished products. You're not sitting any longer on a flat

bed trying to stick pieces of film together with a little bit of clear tape; they're doing it digitally and they can get it wrong a million times until they get it right without any loss. So the pressure to get a highly polished piece of work out is very strong but I'm not sure you learn as much with that focus as you do with trying to break the rules instead of trying to copy the rules. What students are doing is internalizing the conventions and very rarely challenging them.

TJ: What would you like to see happen?

RQ: I'd like to see more studies of resistance and more studies that aren't mainstream popular culture. These are easy to teach because students know them very well. I'd like to see more effort done with independent work. One of the problems quite frankly is laziness and ease of access. It's much easier to get a video tape out of the local library or copies of popular film than it is to get any kind of independent work. I'd like to see the Media Studies Teacher Association and the media department put more energy in getting access to a lot more disruptive types of work, works that challenge the thinking, because without that kind of stimulus I don't think the students can do it; they don't have that world experience to think about what a disruptive text might look like. The closest thing you would get to that is if you're looking at those Michael Moore documentaries but by and large as works go, Michael Moore's stuff is pretty conservative in terms of its form and its approach. His radicalism just lies in tilting in the windmills of big business. It's a pretty poor excuse for a disruptive text I think. But that's about as far as they'd go, and I think that's an outcome of access to more exciting and innovative works. It's about their own lack of knowledge of them and how to deal with them which is a problem of universities and the way they train teachers. And it's a fear of the power of education, the examination system. What happens if the examiners have never seen these texts, and don't understand them? They fear their students are going to get marked down; it's much easier to get them to write about Avatar which everyone will have seen than it is about an independent text. So the external examination system brings its own restrictions.

TJ: What would you like to see with teacher training?

RQ: When students apply to do their teacher training, they earn either a bachelor of education or a diploma of education (the diploma you do on top of a degree). They have to elect what they want to become teachers of, usually they do two areas which usually match how school time tables work. So if you'll be a science teacher able to teach some mathematics, it's very rare to find some English literature teacher who teaches math. They kind of sort themselves out prior to going to do their diploma of education. But you might see a math teacher who can also teach physical education. So we still largely see social sciences teachers also able to teach media studies and English teachers able to teach media studies because that's largely how the time tables of school work in terms of how they are put onto the time table.

So once a student comes to a university, they then enroll in the course of study that they want to teach. If they already have a degree in media studies, they don't do any more content study. What they do is the pedagogy of how you teach. If they do a bachelor of education which is a four-year degree, they do their content study alongside their pedagogical studies so they'd be studying media studies at the same time as they are studying education. That's just two ways of becoming a teacher. So they are very much predetermined, that when they leave, they will be

applying for jobs that are specifically for media studies teachers. Whereas from most of what I've seen in North America, people drift over to it as opposed to being trained to do it, so although when they are doing English studies they may do some media studies, but they are not specifically media studies teachers.

Every school here offers media studies, so therefore when students decide "I'll become a media studies teacher," they know that there will be job opportunities for them because every school offers that subject.