What does engagement look like in a Media Studies classroom?

Michelle Thomason,
Bournemouth University, UK

Steve Connolly,
Anglia Ruskin University, UK

Abstract:
In wider discourses about teaching and learning, "engagement" has become something of a contested term, with teachers and educationalists often arguing about what being engaged in education actually involves. This contestation is compounded in media education, because the teacher has to deal with multiple conceptions of audience and, as a consequence, multiple meanings of the term engagement. In this essay, these conceptions and meanings are explored using some primary data taken from surveys of students and teachers from A-Level Media Studies classes, who were asked about both their engagement with the texts they taught and studied on the course, and their engagement with the wider critical study of media texts. The analysis of the data shows varying types and levels of engagement, some of which are personal, some educational and some academically critical. The authors seek to categorise these "engagement events" in different ways and highlight the idea that engagement in the study of media texts is very different to other types of audience engagement.

Key words: Media Studies, A-Level, Engagement, Media Teaching, Teaching Audiences

Introduction

The concept of engagement has a particular meaning within the study of audiences, as evidenced by this particular special edition of *Participations*, but within education, the term has come to mean something a little different. For teachers, and within educational discourse within the UK more broadly, engagement has come to be seen as a proxy term for the relationship between both the student and the subject they are studying, as well as the

relationship between the students and the teacher themselves – in effect, how 'interested' they are in what is happening in the learning process. This view is present in both the academic literature on engagement in the secondary school classroom (e.g. Haward, 2020), and the education commentariat (e.g. Durran, 2017) but notably means something different when considering the engagement of students in Higher Education (e.g. Lawson & Lawson, 2013). For the media studies teacher in a secondary school then, the term is particularly complex, because alongside the notion of having to engage one's students as students, there is also the problem of how they are engaged as an audience, with the texts that are being studied. Through reference to data generated by a small-scale study of A-Level Media Studies students and teachers, this article aims to explore these multiple conceptions of engagement in the media classroom and offer some ways of thinking about both audiences and engagement which may be useful for both academics and classroom teachers.

Reviewing the Literature – Engagement in Education, Audiences in Media Education

The relevant literature for this study covers three broad themes; the concept of engagement in educational discourse; the engagement or encounter between media students in school and media texts; and the concept of audience as an object of study in media studies in schools. This last theme is included because much of the work done by teachers in schools about audience relies upon them getting students to think about themselves as an audience and the perceived ways that they might have to change their relationship with texts in order to study them. In reviewing this literature we hope to give an insight into why terms like in 'engagement' and 'audience' are particularly problematic for media teachers.

For much of the educational literature outside HE, engagement is a largely psychological concept defined 'specifically (as) the attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning' (Marks, 2000). The psychological or cognitive nature of this engagement, Marks goes on to say, is highlighted by both 'affective and behavioural participation in the learning experience'. This cognitive view of engagement is shared by others in the field such as Reschly and Christenson (2013), who suggest that while there is a difference between engagement and other psychological constructs such as motivation, there is a tendency to group such constructs together in the classroom. They and other authors (e.g, Finn, 1989) also see an understanding of engagement as being crucial to understanding why certain students, particularly in the US, do not complete their secondary education.

Other authors have also suggested that engagement is more a social phenomenon however, and that it is the relationships that a student has with both teachers, other students and in some cases families, that determine those elements of attention, investment and interest in learning. Klem and Connell (2004), for example, suggest that the teacher's ability to create a welcoming and nurturing environment for their students will

have a significant on students' ability to engage. This theme is expanded upon by Vallee (2017) who asserts that when academics discuss engagement, they should really be talking in terms of 'student/teacher engagement' because that relationship is integral to whether or not a student is successfully engaged, particularly with excluded and marginalised students. Space does not permit a full review of this academic literature here, but a good overview of the issues can be found in Finn & Zimmer (2013) and this would prove a useful starting point for any interested teacher or academic.

It is also important to note that in popular online discourse in the UK, at least, there is some discussion about the term engagement as shorthand for the way that a particular kind of teaching and learning looks like. This is best characterised by commentators who feel that the term engagement is used to describe a certain kind of classroom where students are 'busy' or 'active' rather than either being instructed directly or passively consuming information (e.g. Ashman, 2016). This is noted by others (e.g Durran, 2017) as being a kind of misunderstanding about the nature of engagement, and that it is of course easy to have lessons in which a lot is going on for students, but does not mean that students are learning anything, Coe (2013) views this type of classroom 'busy-ness' as 'a poor proxy for learning', therefore a term such as 'investment', as Durran suggests, might be a more useful concept to think about this. Interestingly, much of this online discussion, perhaps unsurprisingly, seems to ignore the wider academic literature about the social or psychological nature of engagement, instead focusing on the relationship between what teachers do, pedagogically, and the effect that this has on learners. For this article then, both this academic literature and these wider discussions are important; if both student and teacher see engagement as a desirable educational outcome, this adds a layer of significance to the engagement that students have with both the texts they are studying, and their teacher as presenter or facilitator of those texts.

Discussion of media students' encounters with texts and their relative engagement largely comes from the field of media education, which frequently assesses how students in schools view the texts that they are asked to engage with in class. This literature spans work done in primary schools (e.g. Marsh & Millard 2000; Parry, 2014) through to students working with film texts in upper secondary school (e.g. Burn & Connolly, 2020) . Some of this literature is connected to wider work on the role of popular cultural texts in education and the way that students respond to the teachers' attempts to bring items from the students on milieu into the classroom for study, such as that carried out by Buckingham (1998), Sefton-Green (1995) and Connolly (2008). Recent changes in both the statutory curriculum and the examination system in the UK have meant that there have more recently been fewer opportunities for research at the encounter between young people and popular cultural texts in the classroom. For a fuller explanation of these changes and their effect, see Connolly (2017, 2021), but one effect of this has meant that much of the interesting research in this area has been carried out in primary schools (e.g. Scott, 2019; Cannon, 2018) where there is a good deal of analysis of the way that teachers might use popular cultural texts in the classroom and the concomitant use of these texts to promote both

literacies and production work. While some of these accounts of young people's engagements with popular texts in the classroom do comment on what students like or dislike (e.g. Burn et al, 2010, Daly et al, 2020), there is little analysis of the way that students form views about the relationship between what they are taught and what they engage with - hence the focus of this article. It might also be useful though to consider the relationship between learning and fandom for certain students, and the potential existence of what Henry Jenkins calls the'aca-fan', (2011) as this may also influence engagement in the media classroom. This concept is considered further below.

Of all the key concepts associated with Media Studies (Institution, Language, Audience, Representation, Narrative) audience is both the most ubiquitous, but also the most elusive. Furthermore, children encounter the notion of audience in other curriculum subjects and of course in their daily lives. Outside the classroom, everyday discussions and public debates about media are bound to entail assumptions about actual or potential audiences, even if those assumptions are rarely made explicit or put to the test. In the classroom, the study of media often invites learners to challenge their own assumptions about audiences and those of others. Given the focus on analysing and creating media texts, everything that media educators do necessarily entails some kind of engagement with the issue of audience. Indeed one of the fundamental aims of media education is to enable children to share, to understand and to reflect critically on their own experiences as members of diverse media audiences (Buckingham, 2003). In teaching audiences, we encourage children to step back from their own immediate experience, and to consider how they and others might be targeted or addressed by media, and the different ways in which audiences might respond or behave. This reflexivity is an important element then, in the teaching of the concept, as illustrated by the work of Buckingham and Harvey (2001) who suggest that one of the key functions of teaching about audience should be to make children consider the relationships between 'intentions and results', particularly when they are involved in creating media texts. Traditionally the concept of audience has provided a tool for the discussion of broader issues about the uses, influences and effects of media, and how they relate to other aspects of social experiences. However, in response to the changing media landscape there have been recent calls for a move away from considerations of mass audiences as target consumers of the products of mass media industries. Bennett et al. (2011) suggest that web 2.0 and the proliferation of media, repositions, or at least disrupts, the simplistic media-audience binary and calls for a greater recognition of the agency, civic engagement and creative production activity that are now available so that audiences are no longer simply seen as targeted groups. These views of the teaching of audience, then, demonstrate that the notion of engagement with media texts requires complexity and nuance; the teacher must help the student to a) make sense of their own engagement with texts, and b) other people's engagement with those texts, and c) do this an engaging way!

Context and Methods

The study set out to answer to three overarching research questions:

- How does the media student view themselves as a member of an audience both inside and outside the classroom?
- How does the teacher think about the students in terms of being an audience both for media texts and for their teaching?
- What does the above have to do with the concept of engagement?

The study used two online questionnaires to establish answers to the above questions by asking a range of more detailed questions about a) the extent to which media students both found their Media Studies lessons engaging and were engaged by the texts studied, and b) the extent to which teachers thought the texts engaged those students, both on a personal and an academic level. For the purposes of clarity, the definition of engagement provided to the students on the questionnaire was as follows:

> Engagement here is defined as taking an active interest in the subject, which might mean not just attending lessons and doing assignments, but also any of the following: asking questions about texts or ideas raised in class; watching films or other texts beyond those studied in class; thinking about what you have learnt in class in relation to texts not studied in class. If you think about questions raised by Media Studies when you are not in your media class, you are engaged! If you think about the texts you have studied outside of class, then you are also engaged!

Thirty five students studying A-Level Media Studies from two different inner London sixth form colleges aged between 16–19 years old responded to the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents (66%) were in the second (A2) year of their A-Level and the remaining number in their first (A1) year, including two 'restarters'. Both colleges are characterised by their diverse ethnic demographic and have a significant number of students with lower socio-economic status (SES). This context is particularly important to note as students of lower SES tend to have display lower levels of engagement and lower levels of achievement in standardised test scores (OECD, 2017, Sirin, 2005, Tomaszewski et al, 2020).

The perspectives of A-Level Media teachers were also sought via a link to a questionnaire posted on the three Facebook groups associated with the different exam boards. Thirty two teachers of A-Level Media Studies from a range of different schools and colleges from around the UK responded anonymously to the teacher questionnaire. The teachers were given the same definition of engagement as the students and asked to respond to a series of questions which related to their views on how their students engage with the texts on the course.

Discussion

Much has been written about the democratising nature of the subject and how, through the accessible study of popular culture and academic validation of students' own personal spheres and cultures, Media Studies seeks to address some of the inequality experienced by students of lower socio-economic status (Buckingham, 2003; Bolas, 2009). With this in mind, one of the key ways of exploring student engagement in a Media Studies classroom is to consider *how* and *why* they become engaged in the subject and the media texts they are presented with. In order to do this, we firstly needed to ascertain how engaged the students in the study felt about their A-Level Media course in general and to what extent they had had opportunities to engage with texts in class, that they chose to watch, listen to or use in their everyday life. The vast majority (91%) said they felt engaged with the media texts on their course 'all' or 'most' of the time with no one saying they were disengaged, and, again, the vast majority (94%) said they had had regular or some opportunity to engage with the texts they chose to consume in their everyday life. No one said they had not had any opportunity. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we can make the assumptions that there appears to be a good level of engagement with their A-Level Media Studies texts amongst the students who responded, and that their exposure inside the classroom to the kind of texts they choose to engage with outside the classroom is sufficient enough to provide a meaningful dataset for this study.

Media students frequently cite their reasons for wanting to study the subject because of its relevance to their everyday life and a desire to understand more about these media texts that they construct much of their identity from and within. Asked why they wanted to study media in the first place, responses by the students in the study included:

> I love analysing texts and scratching out the hidden meaning behind something it [sic] interests me. I am also a very creative person, I love designing stuff and have a lot of ideas.

> To learn something new and something that I use everyday in my life, which is social media, and learn the background of media.

> I also thought it had a close link to society today and would give me a better understanding of the world around me.

> [It's] a field that will never be out of date, media is always changing and improving, this ensures everything I study will be relevant.

Implicit in the above responses is the students' own perceptions of themselves as participants in their own media worlds and a nascent desire to examine these worlds in a more academic context. Just as Henry Jenkins coined the term 'aca-fan' to describe the

unique standpoint of an academic who also identifies as a 'fan', these students are also beginning to use the language of an incipient 'scholarly audience'.

Using the notion of 'student-as-audience' presents a useful entry point to examine how they engage with the subject both within and outside the classroom. As suggested above student engagement, as a concept, is a slippery one and as, whilst there are 'concrete' ways of defining engagement through observable classroom practice and student behaviour, much of this is also 'abstract' and far more complex to observe. Students' self-perception of what engages them is also a critical part of this process. For example, students of media inevitably arrive on the course having almost exclusively engaged with media texts on a personal level as an 'individual' audience member. Their affective engagement with media texts is often what gets them 'through the door' and hooks them in, but it is their cognitive engagement with media texts which they encounter on their studies that will likely sustain their engagement in the longer term. As outlined previously, Durran (2017) defines this through his exchange of the word 'engagement' for 'investment'. He views this as 'making an input for gain, not just joining in' and whilst 'absorption' and 'enjoyment' as qualities of engagement are desirable, learning needs to also take place for engagement to turn into progress. Ainley (2016) describes the move from a priori interest (the hook) to active learning and acquisition of knowledge as 'the switch'. A study by Frenzel, Dicke, Goetz and Pekrun (2009) showed that older students, like those who participated in this study, are more inclined to articulate their engagement in a subject and make this 'switch' through references to competency and perceptions of knowledge value. With this in mind

• *How does the media student view themselves as a member of an audience both inside and outside the classroom?*

Any discussion of how students view themselves as audience members *inside* the classroom inevitably has to recognise this is always going to be implicitly or explicitly informed by their experiences as audience members *outside* the classroom, so to try to extricate the two neatly from one another is a failure to acknowledge the importance of the symbiotic relationship that exists between them, and also how this symbiosis may generate a further 'higher order' level of engagement with media texts well beyond the confines of their A-Level Media Studies education. Whilst it is beyond the realms of this research to be able to assess this type of longer-term engagement, this study examines the interrelationship of the texts students engage with as audiences both in the classroom and outside of it, in their own lives and the impact this has on their development as media students.

It is useful to begin with examining the kinds of media texts students are engaging as audiences with outside of the classroom. They were asked the question 'What kinds of media texts do you like watching/listening/using in your everyday life outside of college?'. Whilst the responses covered a wide range of media, the most commonly cited were television ('Netflix', 'TV Series' and 'documentaries' were frequently mentioned within that

category), films, music ('Spotify' and 'Apple'), YouTube and Instagram. Whilst social media figured prominently in nearly all the students' responses, video games, online news/journalism, podcasts and music videos were also cited. Some responses were more specific and named individual texts or genres such as webcomics, Anime, Korean dramas, the Wisden website, Disney and *Eastenders*. These findings demonstrate that whilst the students are accessing their media through new media platforms, their consumption as audiences is diverse, and in some cases, rather specialised. Interestingly, only one student cited media production '(making videos') as something they liked doing in their everyday life.

Following on from this, the students were asked about the texts on their Media A-level they felt had engaged them the most. The answers, as expected, did still cover a range, but the three media forms of film (*Black Panther*, *The Jungle Book*), video games (*Assassin's Creed*, *Minecraft*) and music video (Beyonce's *Formation*) were cited the most frequently. These do correlate with the media forms the students said they liked to engage with outside of class. Interestingly, though, forms such as television and social media, which the students said preoccupied their media consumption as audiences outside of class, did not figure as frequently in the kinds of texts they felt engaged them in class. In addition, advertising and print media, two forms which were not cited as particularly engaging to students outside the classroom, also featured prominently. The authors take this 'disconnect' – between the prescribed texts and the media interests of the students – as evidence of the misplaced attempt to make the content of this course more 'difficult' by inserting historically venerable texts into the examination specification. This is indicative of the wider change in the curriculum in England, discussed above, and is also apparent in other subjects such as English (cf. Yandell, 2016). To explain further, there is some notion that by making students study old media texts, they will be challenged to move beyond their intellectual comfort zone. Perhaps more sinisterly though, there is also some sense here that those regulating the course of study have a particular conception of the curriculum which reinforces conservative ideas about cultural heritage. David Buckingham (2017, 2019) has explored this notion in some depth, but for the purposes of this study it is worth emphasising that this attempt to 'force' students to engage with media forms that are no longer relevant to them, really ignores the nature of epistemological inquiry which is at the heart of media education. As one of us has argued elsewhere, (Connolly, 2020) because knowledge in Media Studies is agile, rather than fixed within strict subject borders, the idea of an historical or canonical knowledge implied by this sort of curriculum is really much less relevant.

For social media not to be mentioned at all in this context, yet consistently cited as the one media form they are all engaging with outside of the classroom, is interesting and can perhaps be explained in two ways. It may be due partly to the students' perceptions of the scholarly activity involved in the study of different media forms and texts. Perhaps because social media is so ubiquitous, familiar and embedded so personally in their daily lives, it may not present as something they feel they need to 'know' more about and that other media forms, namely ones that require a more traditional textual 'reading' (print

media and advertising, for example) might be considered as something more worthy of their scholarly attention. Secondly, it may be explained by the current scope of the curriculum. Online, social and participatory media is one of the named forms on the A-Level specifications (DfE, 2016) but the study of this, as with all of the other forms on the A-Level specifications, takes a case study textual approach (and often ones which outdate quickly) rather than one that explores the different social media platforms, and how audiences use them in different and evolving ways, therefore this may impact on the level of engagement students have with this area of study.

This again leads back to the drivers behind student engagement as audiences in the classroom, and how these are linked to the satisfaction and pleasures of learning. The affective language of pleasure was used by the students in the questionnaire about the texts they engaged with the most, and expressed specifically with words linked to enjoyment and discovery. For example:

> I enjoy playing video games and I love all the games in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.

> It's really cool to see what goes into the thought process behind [video games].

> It was really exciting to learn about the context of the film [*Black Panther*].

It is interesting to note that several students referred to engaging more with texts if they had personal familiarity with the texts being studied.

> Because I'm familiar with them, I can better understand the concepts and it's more engaging to have that knowledge for something you like.

> It is something familiar to me and I enjoyed learning about Disney I never knew before.

> They're things I am familiar with and want to learn about.

All the students in the study agreed that some level of familiarity to texts on the course is preferable but a small proportion (31%) said they enjoyed having a combination of familiar and new/unfamiliar texts to study on their course. Of the students who said they had had regular opportunities to study texts which were familiar to them, the majority (85%) said that this had increased their engagement with the subject.

> I have found that I am more engaged when I am learning about something I enjoy.

> Learning about things that I'm already familiar with makes it much more enjoyable to learn further about it and unpack everything rather than just watching it or listening to it.

It is important to point out that familiarity to a text or media form should not be confused with finding that text or form 'easy', it should be viewed, rather, as a more accessible 'way in' to critically engaging with a text. Here we can infer these students already possess a schema for understanding these texts which, in turn, provides a more accessible way of engaging with them, and capitalising on their disposition as learners. Whilst it appears that a level of individual pleasure is derived from the study of texts which are culturally close, personally familiar and relevant to the student, this in itself is not enough. For 'invested' engagement to take place, this has to be coupled with a level of challenge or critical interaction that extends the students' intellectual understanding of the media texts they encounter, and it is also desirable for students to recognise that therein lies a 'deeper' pleasure - the 'switch'.

Indeed, an examination of the language that the students used in how they engaged and got pleasure from studying the media revealed a semantic field of words relating to a desire to engage more critically with texts such as *'analysis', 'hidden meanings' and 'symbolic meaning'.* Whilst the acknowledgement of different audience perspectives were not mentioned explicitly, several of the students' responses implied that they experienced scholarly pleasures in discovering and understanding something new within or about the texts.

> Figuring out the hidden messages within front covers is what excites me and drives somewhat of a thrill in me. It almost makes it a sort of mystery with the references as clues. It also indicates how much effort producers go through to put the amount of detail they do.

> I feel like there are many deep hidden meanings embedded that not a lot of people see.

The role of the teacher is particularly crucial here, through their encouragement of students to move from the position of individual audience member to that of the 'super-audience' (Connolly, 2013), by which the student suspends their own personal responses, to critically engage with the text from a number of different, previously unfamiliar, perspectives. The concept of the super-audience effectively involves the teacher encouraging the student to see all the possible things in a text that a normal audience might see, but also the kind of things that generally only academic audiences would look for. In some senses, it is an artificial construct, but it

represents the position that many textual analysis and other media examinations and assignments expect students to adopt.

Out of the students in the study who said they had some or regular opportunity to study texts they chose to watch/listen/use outside of the classroom, the vast majority (85%) agreed that studying texts they liked or were familiar to them had some bearing on increasing their engagement but 62% of *all* the students who responded to the questionnaire said that they enjoyed engaging with different media texts, regardless of whether they are familiar or not to them (compared to the remaining 38% who said they preferred to study texts that they like, familiar with or that are relevant to them). Some of the comments reflect this intellectual impetus to develop their critical engagement with texts drawn from outside their own personal sphere of reference.

> If [the text] was always suited to me, I feel my knowledge would be fairly limited in understanding the broader aspects of media. I feel this way I can understand more varieties and understand more.

> I wouldn't mind studying a media text I don't enjoy because, after all the lessons and the whole class engaging with the media text, this will give me the boost to further analyse the media text, and then I will enjoy it.

> Personally I want to be able to understand any media text that is thrown at me. That will give me a general understanding about the media industry, so it doesn't crucially affect me whether I'm familiar with the content or not.

Interestingly, for those students who said they *hadn't* had regular opportunity to encounter texts that they choose to engage with outside the classroom on their course, a smaller proportion (32%) than the group who had some or regular opportunity said it would have increased their engagement, and the small majority (52%) said it would not have made any difference whilst 16% (a total of 3 students) said it would have decreased engagement.

Across all the findings from the student questionnaire, there appears to be a compelling case for making the following observations:

- That there is likely to be Increased engagement in the classroom through the use of texts familiar/relevant to students in their everyday life.

BUT

- There is also a desire to expand understanding/critical thinking via a range of media texts, both familiar and unfamiliar. In effect, students want to become a more scholarly kind of audience.

- How does the teacher think about the students in terms of being an audience both for media texts and for their teaching?

It was clear that the respondents to the teacher survey spent a good deal of time thinking about the extent to which the texts they taught engaged their students. The majority of teachers thought that the texts they worked with in class engaged some of their students some of the time, but many teachers saw this inconsistency as being about the ability of different texts to 'connect' with students. For example, these two teachers both saw the historical nature of some of the texts on the course as having positive and negative aspects:

> Mine have been keen to know more about Britain's cultural past through the texts like *Life on Mars*, *Vogue* and *Dream*.

And

> The advertising and film industry texts tend to spark interest and engagement but some that are so far removed from students' lives (*Late Night Woman's Hour*) or just out of date (*Zoella*) are more challenging in terms of engagement.

These kinds of comments are typical of responses which see engagement as something which is important for the teacher's ability to do their job. When students are engaged with a text, they are very probably likely to be more engaged in class generally, and so it is hardly surprising that teachers are a little preoccupied about which texts are engaging and why. Many of the respondents made comments about the dated or irrelevant nature of some of the texts on the course, with one teacher's frustration being summed up by the following statement:

> Some texts are barely accessible. Clearly chosen by middle-aged and possibly middle-class adults. *Vogue* requires so much contextual teaching it's crazy!

As we have noted elsewhere, this frustration arises from the conditions which were put upon the design of the course when the Media and Film qualifications in England were redesigned in 2017 (Connolly, 2019). However, there is another question here which this discussion needs to address. To what extent should the job of the media teacher involve introducing their students to texts which are challenging, and are beyond their experience? These problems are not new, and it has been suggested elsewhere that it is not the

challenge of new, or even historical texts that is the difficulty for media teachers, but rather the process by which this occurs. One of us has explored the notion of a dialectic of familiarity (Connolly, 2013) which offers a way of explaining how students might be introduced to texts of this nature, but as the model points out production work is a fundamental engine within this process and this has a much reduced role in the course these students are following. The siting of these texts in a high-stakes, all-or-nothing exam environment also undoubtedly skews the nature of the challenge they present – they are texts to be 'learnt' rather than explored. Indeed, even those who firmly advocate the study of historically unfamiliar or foreign texts within the media and film curricula suggest that this is done with one eye on the present (e.g. BFI, 2015)

These kinds of responses then, suggest that the level of engagement that particular texts have for particular students is an important consideration in the process of teaching a Media Studies class. However, these views are made even more complex when one considers the teacher own views of the texts being taught. The question of whether or not the teacher needs to be engaged with what they are teaching is more vexed for school teachers, one suspects, than it would be say, for teachers in Higher Education. Teacher responses to the texts on the A-Level specification show that there is a similar irregularity to those opinions held by their students. For example, the following were two amongst several to suggest that teachers found some of the prescribed texts as tedious as their students:

> Some of the texts feel really irrelevant to current media environment or are really dry therefore, I engage with them for teaching but would not really describe myself as being part of the primary audience.

And

> Some of the texts are interesting to a degree but I feel I am labouring points a lot. *Zoella* is a particular low point. The music choices are awful and limiting, dreary pop. *Black Panther* sends me to sleep. I like *Daniel Blake*. I like teaching newspapers. I have never played a video game in my life and really struggle with AC3L, it's not particularly popular with students either. I don't expect to like all the topics, it's not about my tastes but the A level does seem to be a very limiting range of mainstream and dull, dull, dull.

As well as emphasising the point made previously about the agility of knowledge within Media Studies, these kinds of comment raise some very serious points about teacher agency. Julian McDougall (Andrews & McDougall, 2012) has used the term 'pedagogy of the inexpert' to describe the kind of negotiation that occurs between the media students and the media teacher's knowledge of particular texts, so that the learning created becomes a kind of joint assemblage. For this kind of pedagogy to occur, both parties must have some 'skin in the game'. They must both be invested, to use James Durran's term, in the texts

being studied in order to create a successful learning experience. It is interesting to note here that some teachers work 'outside the lines' of the specification by using a range of other texts, not prescribed by the exam board, to catch students' interest in the course, during induction periods and at other times (Thomason, forthcoming)

What these teacher responses demonstrate, we would argue, is the fact that it is really very hard to teach Media Studies via a set text approach. As David Buckingham (2019) has noted, not only is teacher autonomy damaged by this level of prescription, but it actually has the opposite effect intended by the act of prescription; in effect it creates only a superficial understanding of the texts under study by making the text something to be learned only in the context of sitting the exam at the end of the course. One teacher in the survey recognises this, saying:

> Some content is rich and diverse and relevant although a better approach would be to have more generic skill sets to apply to a range of rich texts instead of single case studies.

The obvious, but perhaps unhelpful, response to this comment would be to say that this is how A-Level Media Studies courses in England worked prior to 2017. Examinations sought to assess a range of key concepts and themes by allowing students to write about examples of texts that they had worked on with their teachers, and were given credit for their ability to apply that conceptual and textual knowledge when faced with generic or thematic questions. This however was not considered rigorous enough by the Department for Education and so we have a set-text model of Media Studies which in reality probably engages very few people, teachers and students alike.

What does the above have to do with the concept of engagement?

These issues, we would argue, demonstrate that the concept of engagement is both multifaceted and conceptually complex for Media teachers and students. To return to that idea of the 'super-audience' for the moment, it is worth using this as a means of understanding the complexities involved, by seeing that point at which the student reaches 'super-audience' status as one of a series of 'engagement events'. We would propose that these events might look something like this:

1. The teacher engages their students as a teacher (Educational Engagement)
2. The teacher engages their students with texts as regular audience (Viewer Engagement)
3. The teacher engages their students with texts as super-audience by encouraging them to see the text in certain new ways (Academic Engagement)
4. The student understands how a range of other audiences engage with that text (Academic Engagement)

The students' own engagement with texts outside the classroom might potentially help or perhaps hinder this process, but we see that engagement in totally neutral terms. If the students' engagement with the texts being studied creates different readings or interpretations of them to their teaching, this can be a positive thing even if it creates difficulties for the teacher. It is important to note as well that these events might not happen in this particular order or indeed at all. One might imagine a situation in which a student is very engaged with a text as a regular viewer but does not want to engage with the text academically. Similarly, students can be very engaged with texts academically in spite of their teachers, rather than because of them, bypassing educational engagement altogether! More problematically though, these engagement events might depend to some extent on the teacher's own engagement with the text, which is why ideas about autonomy and agency are crucial here.

Conclusions

The data presented in this article is only a partial representation of that which was collected for the study. The range of student and teacher responses show that engagement with texts is a serious matter for those teaching and studying the media at post-16 level. However, by examining some of these recurrent themes with this data, it is possible to make a number of key points about the particularity of engagement in the media classroom.

Firstly, for good educational engagement generally, and engagement with media texts, both teachers and students must have some agency over the texts they teach and study. Even if it is just one section of an exam response, or optionality in creative production tasks, it is clear to us as researchers, that choice and agency are likely to give better engagement. Secondly, this principle is important, we would argue, because in 'real life' audiences have choice, and to both engage with a text and understand the way that audiences engage with texts there must be some agency in order to reach these understandings. We should say here that this does not necessarily mean that either student or teacher will enjoy what they are studying or teaching, but in having such agency, there is at least some appearance of control on the part of the student or teacher, and this makes engagement more likely to occur.

Biographical notes:

Steve Connolly is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Anglia Ruskin University, where he teaches on a range of postgraduate courses. His research interests centre around media education, curriculum and learning processes of all types, and has published a number of book chapters and articles in these areas. He is also a visiting fellow at the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University and Chair of the Media Education Association. His first single-authored book, 'The Changing Role of Media in the English Curriculum' will be published later in 2021. Email: steve.connolly@aru.ac.uk.

Michelle Thomason has taught media at post-16 for over twenty years and held a variety of head of department and cross-curricular leadership roles during that time. She currently teaches at an inner London sixth form and is a lecturer on the post-compulsory teacher training programme at UEL whilst completing her doctorate in education at The Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University. Her thesis is on the impact of the 2014 curriculum reforms on A-Level Media Studies and the online communities of practice that emerged as a result. Other research interests include media education and media literacy, subject-specialist pedagogy, teacher identity, digital ethnography and gender equality in teaching. Michelle is also on the executive board of The Media Education Association. Email: thomasonm@bournemouth.ac.uk.

References:

Ainley, Mary. (2012). 'Students' Interest and Engagement in Classroom Activities'. In Christenson, S., Reschly, A. L., & Wylie, C. (2012). *Handbook of research on student engagement*. Springer EBooks. New York, Springer.

Andrews, B. and McDougall, J. 2012. 'Curation pedagogy: Further toward the inexpert' *Medijkske Studije* 3(6): 152–167.

Ashman, G. 'Engagement is not a useful concept' available online at https://gregashman.wordpress.com/2016/03/14/engagement-is-not-a-useful-concept/ (Accessed 4th Jan 2021)

Bennett, P., Kendall, A., & McDougall, J. (2011). *After the media: Culture and identity in the 21st century*. Oxford. Routledge.

BFI (2015) *Screening Languages: Summary Report*. British Film Institute. Available online at https://www2.bfi.org.uk/education-research/screening-languages (Accessed 31st May 2021)

Bolas, T (2009) *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies* Fishponds, Bristol Intellect.

Buckingham, D (2019) 'What's wrong with set texts?' Available online at https://davidbuckingham.net/2019/06/12/ticking-the-boxes-whats-wrong-with-set-texts/ (Accessed 21st Jan 2021)

Buckingham, D. (1998) *Teaching popular culture: beyond radical pedagogy*. London, UCL Press.

Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture.* Cambridge, Polity Press.

Buckingham, D. 2017.'The Strangulation of Media Studies' available online at www.academia.edu/34424271/The_Strangulation_of_Media_Studies (Accessed 4th Jan 2021)

Buckingham, D., & Harvey, I. (2001). "Imagining the audience: language, creativity and communication in youth media production". *Journal of Educational Media*, *26*(3), 173-184.

Burn, A. & Connolly. S (2020) 'Unable to go it alone: Restating the case for a strengthened English/Media relationship' in Daly, C. & Davison, J. (eds.) *Debates in English Teaching*. 2nd edn. Routledge.

Burn, A. and Durran, J. (2007). *Media Literacy in Schools: Practice, Production and Progression*. London, Paul Chapman Publishing.

Burn, A., Buckingham, D., Powell, M. and Parry, B. (2010). 'Minding the gaps: teachers' cultures, students' cultures'. In *Adolescents' Online Literacies*. D. Alvermann. New York, Peter Lang.

Cannon, M. A. (2018). *Digital Media in Education: Teaching, Learning and Literacy Practices with Young Learners*. London: Palgrave.

Coe, R. (2013) 'Improving Education: A triumph of hope over experience'. Inaugural Lecture of Professor Robert Coe, Durham University, 18 June 2013.

Connolly, S (2020) 'Towards an epistemology of media education: Confronting the problems of social realism' *Culture, Pedagogy & Society*. Published online 27th April 2020. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1759129.

Connolly, S. (2008). 'Artistic reasons/practical reasons' – cultural identity and popular culture in students' digital video production. *Journal of the Scottish Media Education Association* (AMES), 44, 34–37.

Connolly, S. (2013). *Learning Progression in Secondary Digital Video Production*. PhD Thesis. London. Institute of Education.

Connolly, S. (2019). 'W(h)ither media in English?' In A. Goodwyn, C. Durrant, W. Sawyer, L. Scherff, & D.Zancanella (eds.), *The future of English teaching worldwide: Celebrating 50 years from the Dartmouth Conference* (pp. 175–190). Abingdon: Routledge.

Daly, M., Thomson, J. and Chambers, J. (2020) 'Securing a place for film within the ongoing life of a Scottish state secondary school'. *Film Education Journal,* 3 (2), 160–74.

Department for Education (4th February 2016) Media studies GCE AS and A level subject content Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-as-and-a-level-media-studies [Accessed online 24 January 2021]

Durran, J. (2017) 'Making the Investment' Available online at https://jamesdurran.blog/2017/07/24/making-the-investment/

Education At A Glance 2017: OECD Indicators. [online] Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2017_eag-2017-en> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Finn, J. D. (1989). 'Withdrawing from school.' *Review of Educational Research*, 59, 117-142.

Finn, J. D. and Zimmer, K. S. (2012) *Student Engagement: What Is It? Why Does It Matter?* United States: Springer.

Frenzel, A., Dicke, A.-L., Goetz, T., & Pekrun, R. (2009). *'*Quantitative and qualitative insights into the development of interest in adolescence*'.* Paper presented at the European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction (EARLI), Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Haward, T. (2020) 'How do students engage with visual sources in the teaching and learning of History?' *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(2), pp. 364-378.

Jenkins, H. (2008). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York University Press

Jenkins, H. (2011). 'Aca-fandom and Beyond.' Available online at (http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/aca-fandom_and_beyond_jonathan.html) (Accessed 5th June 2021)

Klem, A. M., and J. P. Connell.(2004.) 'Relationships Matter: Linking Teacher Support to Student Engagement and Achievement.' *Journal of School Health* 74: 262–273.

Lawson, M. A. and Lawson, H. A. (2013) 'New Conceptual Frameworks for Student Engagement Research, Policy, and Practice', *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), pp. 432–479.

Marks, H. M. (2000) 'Student Engagement in Instructional Activity: Patterns in the Elementary, Middle, and High School Years', *American Educational Research Journal*, p. 153.

Marsh, J., & Millard, E. (2000). *Literacy and popular culture: Using children's culture in the classroom*. London: Sage.

Parry, B. (2014). 'Popular culture, participation and progression in the literacy classroom.' *Literacy*, 48(1), 14-22.

Reschly, A. L. and Christenson, S.L. (2012) 'Jingle, Jangle, and Conceptual Haziness: Evolution and Future Directions of the Engagement Construct.' In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (p. 3–19). Springer Science + Business Media, USA.

Scott F (2019) '"Knock, knock, it's Freddy!": harnessing young children's digital and media skills and interests to foster creativity and digital literacy in makerspaces'. *Media Education Research Journal*, 8(2), 95-104.

Sefton-Green, J. (1995). 'Do I look like a prostitute?' in Buckingham, D., Sefton-Green J. and Grahame, J. (eds.) *Making Media: Practical Production in Media Education*. London, English and Media Centre.

Sirin, Selcuk R. (2005) 'Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Review of Research'. *Review of Educational Research.*75. 417 - 453.

Tomaszewski, W., Xiang, N. and Western, M. (2020), 'Student engagement as a mediator of the effects of socio-economic status on academic performance among secondary school students in Australia'. *British Educational Research Journal,* 46: 610-630.

Vallee, D. (2017) 'Student engagement and inclusive education: reframing engagement', *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 21:9, 920-937,

Yandell J. (2016) 'The Impact of Policy on Teacher Education and Literacy Education in England.' In: Kosnik C., White S., Beck C., Marshall B., Goodwin A.L., Murray J. (eds) *Building Bridges*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.