

# Groundbreaking Assessment from Australia

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Source: Strategies For Media Literacy

Excerpts digested from Media Analysis: Performance in Media in Western Australian Government Schools 1991, by Robyn Quin and Barrie McMahon. Reprinted by permission of authors.

Australia has one of the longest track records for media education in the world, with media analysis as an integral component in the curriculum. In Western Australian secondary schools, media analysis skills are outlined in the secondary English syllabus. Some students also take an optional media studies course. In Western Australia, media analysis is not formally a part of the elementary curriculum.

The Western Australian Ministry of Education has just released its report of the first comprehensive effort to measure media analysis skills for lower secondary schooling. Media Analysis: Performance in Media in Western Australian Government Schools 1991, by Robyn Quin and Barrie McMahon analyzes the results of assessment in media analysis undertaken in Western Australian as part of Monitoring Standards in Education, a program that provides a comprehensive picture of student achievement in relationship to predefined standards.

## The Test

In September 1991, assessment in media analysis was undertaken by a random sample of Year 10 students comprised of 1425 students from a cross-section of secondary schools across the state, representing almost 8% of Year 10 enrollment.

A team of teachers developed a continuum of student outcomes in media analysis based on the syllabus documents. The students were given two tasks: 1) to analyze part of a television situation comedy; and 2) to analyze newspaper advertisements.

## The Instrument

A media analysis continuum was used as the basis for the development of assessment instruments and subsequently, for marking student work. The continuum identified two stands:

- 1) a \*\*\*Content Strand employing the organizers of Language and Narrative; and
- 2) a \*\*\*Context Strand containing the organizers of Production/Circulation, Audiences and Values.

In addition, ten levels of difficulty were developed for each of the organizers. An example of the ten difficulty areas for the organizer "Language" in the Content strand are:

1. Identifies simple iconic symbols (e.g. no smoking signs).
2. Links simple arbitrary symbols to their meaning (e.g. ring and marriage).
3. Identifies symbolic significance of color, gesture, expression. Identifies symbolic use of music, SFX, voice style. Distinguishes one shot from the next in the sequence.
4. Selects appropriate images to establish a given mood. Identifies shot types (e.g. closeup, pan).
5. Recognizes the organization of symbols into codes. Links shot types to a purpose (e.g. establishing shot). Selects and organizes images and sound to match a given mood.
6. Identifies editing techniques for continuity. Identifies the emotive value of language, especially as it applies to race and gender. Identifies the emotive effect of a given montage (e.g. advertising).
7. Identifies medium-specific conventions in continuity editing (e.g. eyeline matches).
8. Links some codes to cultural values. Recognizes the interdependence of visual and verbal codes in the construction of meaning (e.g. voice and appearance of newsreader credibility).
9. Recognizes the values operating in a given product (e.g. the values in a family sitcom).
10. Analyzes a complete media product in terms of the cultural values it reflects/projects (e.g. the patterns codes and conventions of a complete news program).

## The Results

Most students performed at mid-range levels of difficulty (Levels 4 and 5) on the continuum for both tasks. The students demonstrated great skill in identification, i.e., "picking out" certain elements such as character types, stereotypes, etc. These were the kinds of skills at Level 1-3 in difficulty.

The level of performance dropped markedly when students were asked to use higher level skills requiring the analysis of the relationship between shot type and purpose; program content and context; program and target audience; and genre.

Less than 10% of the students demonstrated media analysis skills higher than Level 6 on the continuum. These levels embraced issues relating to culture and meanings of text. A small number of the students were able to link the media codes to cultural values; to use the concepts of preferred meaning and cultural/subcultural readings. They were also able to provide examples of the social outcomes of stereotyping.

Quin and McMahon concluded that "most students have many of the basic skills of media analysis, but have not yet reached a stage where these can be used to effect. The existence of basic skills is encouraging, but unless students develop the capacity to make the link between particular media texts and the broader cultural context, the skills have little value."

### Analysis of Results

The report advances two possible explanations for the weakness in establishing cultural context for media analysis. One is that the expected outcomes may be too high and that fifteen-year-old students do not have the necessary life experiences to leap from identification of media components to a cultural analysis of mass media. A second possibility is that current teaching methods do not equip the students adequately to make the necessary connections. A combination of the two is speculated to be the most likely cause.

In addition, girls performed better than boys on every task. Two possible explanations for the gender imbalance in the results were 1) A literacy factor, in that girls generally tend to demonstrate superior performance in reading and writing; and 2) The test itself may hold a gender bias. Some researchers, for example argue that females are more skilled in "reading people," that is in recognizing and interpreting such non-verbal signs as body language, dress gesture and facial expression.

It is also possible that the boys did not identify in any way with female characters in the media products. Research indicates that girls tend to identify with both male and female hero figures, but boys identify only with male heroes.

Quin and McMahon also argue that "Women are comparatively disadvantaged and receive less favorable representation in the media. It could be that females have more to gain from recognizing the cultural underpinnings in our media and more to gain in challenging them."

Not surprisingly, students from English speaking backgrounds performed better on the tasks than those from non-English speaking backgrounds. This was especially true in the area of examining audience appeal of the programs. Quin and McMahon report, "Non-English speaking background students...are not [culturally] well placed to identify mainstream groups and 'other' groups because they are reading from the outside. They do not have the familiar day-to-day perspective on the likes and dislikes of the mainstream group."

Surprisingly, simply watching television does not lead to better media analysis skills. Students who view television less frequently performed better on the tasks than those who were frequent viewers and this trend was more pronounced with boys. This was statistically significant in the case of the boys who were required to analyze a situation comedy. Frequent users of television, particularly boys, performed at a lower level on the task than those who were infrequent television users. Quin and McMahon comment, "It is

overly simplistic to assume that students who watch more television automatically know less...It may be that the key to the poor analyst/frequent user correlation has to do with other factors such as social circumstances and attitude to schooling." This wide social data was not part of the sample group.

#### In Summary

The Monitoring Standards assessment program in media analysis skills indicated the following:

- 1) the large majority of students demonstrated a high level of ability in the fundamental skills of media analysis;
- 2) Girls are consistently more skilled in media analysis than boys;
- 3) some groups, notably those students from non-English speaking backgrounds, have significantly lower levels of media analysis skills than the sample as a whole;
- 4) students have an inadequate understanding of the social context and social impact of the media.

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