

North Reading and the Screen Media

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TO AN outsider, there is nothing particularly distinguished about the town of North Reading, Massachusetts. There is no movie house, no public transportation, and only the kinds of stores, service stations, and bars you might find anywhere. Most of the inhabitants work outside the community, many in the industries of Boston's "Electronic Row."

For the young there is little to do and few enough places to do it in, especially in the long winter evenings when the omnipresent TV tubes flicker. Students in North Reading have described it harshly as "Tinytown, U.S.A." A town official says, "North Reading has grown too quickly for its own comfort."

Yet what has happened in this small town is of interest and importance to a growing number of school people here and abroad who are seeking ways in which the traditional education system can come to terms with modern media.

What has happened in North Reading is that in its junior and senior high schools (and it has only one of each), a "Screen Education" Project funded by the Arts and Humanities branch of the U.S. Office of Education under NDEA Title VII ran for two school years in 1967-69. A team consisting of two full-time teachers (one provided by the Project, the other by North Reading Schools) and two part-time research assistants from Boston University worked in North Reading under the direction of David Powell (the Site Director who was also a part-time teacher) and myself. The object was to explore ways

in which "screen education" can be integrated into the normal public school system as an essential area for study, and to report what happens when this is done. "Screen education" is a general term which seeks to be broad enough to embrace both film and television, and which, in fact, now includes such other media as tape (audio and video), slides, and records.

Is it authentic "study," for example, when a group of sophomores, in order to make a film, descends on the local police station to act out and record its fantasy of releasing prisoners from the cells? (There were, of course, no prisoners to release—there rarely are in North Reading—and the group officially sought and obtained beforehand the wholehearted cooperation of the police.) Is it "study" when another group "raids" the local bank à la *Bonnie and Clyde*, with the smiling bank president looking on safely from behind the camera? Or when a third group stages a "lynching" in the cemetery, with TV cameras from Boston's educational channel recording their creative activity?

Perhaps it is "social" study; for all of these, and many other practical ventures, brought the students and the community into a closer and friendlier relationship, and the students' expressed views of the police, fire chief, and other authority-figures underwent a subtle but healthful change.

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Freedom and Inventiveness

In all, nine classes were taught each year. In the junior high school, at the sixth-grade level, Mr. Powell conducted a small experimental class in Art and Communication. In this class, the teacher and the students together explored some of the uses to which cameras (both still and movie), tape recorders, etc., can be put, to create and record visual and aural patterns, and to communicate one's perceptions to others. In many respects, this was the most rewarding of all classes, for there is a freedom and inventiveness at this age which later tends to become subdued.

In the senior high school, three groups of classes were taught:

Grade 10 (sophomore)—Screen Fundamentals (3 sections)

Grade 11 (junior)—Communications (2 sections)

Grade 12 (senior)—Screen and Society (3 sections).

The first two counted for English credit, while the senior course earned either English or Social Studies credit.

The sophomore Fundamentals course was taught on a semester basis, to accommodate as many as possible of the total grade population. This may be described as an elementary "reading, writing, and spelling" class, but in terms of the languages of film, television, tape, and slide rather than that of books. Each student was expected by the end of the course to have demonstrated his elementary proficiency with the tools of these media—cameras, projectors, splicers, recorders, and so on. Projects, sometimes individual, sometimes group, included the making of individual photographs, narrative slide sequences, tapes, and elementary 8mm story films.

The choice of subject matter for these projects was left largely to the students, so that they could find as much relevance as possible for themselves in their assignments. It is interesting to see how frequently they embodied in their stories and themes those attitudes they calculated to be the least "respectable" and most shocking to the adult

world. Thus, an outline for a story film from a group of girls described *What Girls Do at Pajama Parties*, with naïve accounts of pillow fights, smoking, beer drinking, and a culmination when "the girls climb out the window and go looking for boys." Shades of Clara Bow and the young Joan Crawford! Were it not for the almost obligatory reference to "pot," this could have served as the scenario for one of those innocent depictions of "depravity" in the '20's which went under such titles as *Our Dancing Daughters*, *Flaming Youth*, or *Sins of Our Children*. In an earlier film, a bored high school class threw balls of foil at the teacher, who retaliated by throwing them back at the students!

If there is a triviality in many of these exercises, it is, I believe, more apparent than real. These young people inhabit a world in which the trivial is exalted nightly on the television tube—which is, in fact, the brightest and most beguiling light in their skies. Such contact as they may yet have made with what *we* might regard as deeper values has come, in the main, through the dry and dusty pages of classic "literature." Rarely, if indeed at all, have they encountered contemporary live drama or even good modern cinema. Boston, the "Athens of America," is less than 20 miles away, but for many of these youngsters the distance might as well be 2,000 miles.

Yet their awareness of the modes of the screen and radio is very keen and they are eager to improve their understanding in these fields. In their naïve narratives they are at least "telling it like it is" for them in this time and place, and not masking either their rebelliousness or their genuine sense of fun behind grade-getting hypocrisies.

These remarks apply also to the junior classes in Communications, where project work of a similar nature, but more advanced, was required. In the Communications classes, which ran for a year, more emphasis was placed on society's *uses* of the media. Advertising in all its forms was studied, and some of the more successful student work came couched in the form of "mock" television or radio commercials, and in excellently conceived graphics and collages.

Here, a more sophisticated type of revolt, or rejection, becomes apparent. One effort, for example, sharply mocked a contemporary cigarette catch-phrase by showing a shower of cigarette packages descending from the window of a hospital's cancer ward in response to the call of the passing loud-speaker truck.

Formally, of course, TV commercials are the best of our contemporary Western arts, and not unworthy models for imitation. Yet these children, in common with the rest of the "McLuhan generation," made the medium *their* message. In a "radio" exercise taped after studying the classic Orson Welles 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, they too depicted a climax of disaster. Yet instead of the device of invaders from Mars, it was the accidental dropping of a nuclear bomb on Canada which brought about the demise of mankind—"man's technology has created toys which are more powerful than could be imagined. Man has destroyed himself"—as they put it.

In the senior class, as an intended culmination to a continuum of three years' study, a series of feature and short films were screened, discussed, and worked on in a course entitled "Screen and Society." Films such as *The Young Savages*, *Nothing But a Man*, *All Fall Down*, and *Night and Fog* were used as triggers to discussion of problems of delinquency, race, family relationships, and war.

Although there seems little doubt that the general approach of this course was good, there were few ways in which we could determine its total impact. Few of the senior students had the opportunities that were available to members of the earlier screen education classes, so they tended to come to "Screen and Society" without previous education in media.¹ At this age young people seem to acquire the kind of taciturnity with which they cloak their developing suspicion

¹ This condition will correct itself in time, probably, since the Screen Education Project, after the U.S. Office of Education funding ceases, will continue, by decision of the School Committee, and will become an integral part of North Reading education.



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of a "hostile" adult world. Moreover, the kinds of universal social ills and problems evoked by even such a simple film as 12-12-42 do not lend themselves to easily-articulated discussion (let alone solution), so that one can appreciate a certain atmosphere of frustration and bewilderment.

The seniors, in common with all the other students, were more at ease in creating their own media communications, so that, although film making was not conceived as part of the senior course (nor budgeted for!), it inevitably had to be provided for. A 16mm film, *The Rise and Fall of Ralph D.*, made in 1967 in such circumstances, provides an excellent, if slightly depressing, feedback of the confusion caused by our contemporary environment in the minds of North Reading adolescent boys. In this film, such elements as gang fighting, spitting and smoking, student riots, and Nazi symbols are brought into a simple tale of a boy's renunciation of his gang leadership. This comes about through his dream of his own death and funeral, which is filmed with a Bergmanesque skill which integrates details absorbed from both *The Seventh Seal* and the TV coverages of the King and the Kennedy funerals.

Evaluating the Project

Throughout the project, we had in mind a number of considerations. The first undoubtedly was to demonstrate the validity of this kind of work *within the normal school* system. Too often, I believe, a brilliant team equipped with all the impedimenta of modern technology can descend upon a school from the outside, disrupt its normal tenor of life, produce results and reports, and depart leaving little more than faint echoes in its wake. At North Reading, we worked hard to avoid this kind of effect. Our team tried to blend into the system, frequently abandoning ideas because of the disruption they might cause, smoothing out the irritations natural to a teacher who finds a group of student film makers working in the corridor outside his silent classroom, limiting our budget for equipment and stock to what might constitute a reasonable sum for a small school system.

A second area of concern was to find acceptable ways in which we might evaluate our effect on the students. Screen education advocates seem to make large claims for their work. Yet we came to believe that the mechanistic grading methods applicable to an "education" which consists largely of fact acquisition applied only to a small, and decreasingly important, part of what we were about. Closer to our goals, perhaps, was the acquisition by the students of communicative skills in the nonprint media, and in this area we have, we believe, assembled what we think is impressive evidence.

Yet behind all these skills lie the essential personalities, spirits, *souls*, of young people, to be warmed, enriched, enlivened, and—above all—to be treated with respect. Self-knowledge and self-respect, our ultimate goals for our students, come largely from the respect of others. All the team, teachers and researchers, sought always to avoid regarding our youngsters as mere "guinea pigs" in an educational experiment; they were treated as respect-worthy human beings. When tests were administered, they were designed to discover *what kind of self-image* the students were developing.

Testing of this kind is, of course, less realistic than the plain and unsolicited testimonials we received from students themselves, their parents, and others with whom they came into face-to-face contact. In November 1968, for example, a group of North Reading youngsters accompanied Mr. Powell and me to act as co-instructors in a workshop run for high school students from all over the State of Maine. Here is an excerpt from one tribute they received:

You should take particular pride in these young people, since they conducted themselves with a high level of professionalism and represented their school in the best possible manner. My congratulations to you not only for this caliber of students—but also for your advanced curriculum.

One hopes that the day will not be too far distant when such an "advanced curriculum" becomes the norm rather than the exception. □

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