

Young People and Media Making: Engaging Secondary School Students in Critical Media Literacy

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Introduction

The media have a pervasive presence in young people's social and cultural experiences. Many young people's lives today are dominated by media where an average child grows up with television, DVD player, radio, CD players, video games, mobile phones, computers and iPods (Livingstone 2002, Osgerby 2004). The texts and images produced by these media technologies help shape their views of the world. They contribute to educating young people about meanings, norms, values, practices, social relations and patterns of interaction (Buckingham 2002; Buckingham 1998; Buckingham 1995; Felitzen and Carlsson 2000). The meanings, messages and images generated by the media influence their everyday lives, specifically in the personal, schooling, working and the public spheres. The media shape our perceptions and ideas and inform daily decision-making. Gerbner (1999) notes that the media tell stories that animate our cultural environment and reveal how things in societies work, illuminating important and invisible relationships and hidden dynamics in life. These stories carry information and values about family, friendship, love, peace, weddings, education and so on. Furthermore, these stories present practices, behaviours and life-styles that are deemed as desirable or undesirable and actions that bring rewards or penalties (Budd, Craig and Steinman 1999).

The ubiquitous presence of the media demands an educational response that will impart the ability to increasingly understand the complex language codes (print, visual, audio, spatial) in the media. Since the media play a vital function in the life of the individual and in society, learning in contemporary communities should also encompass the use of media, as one should have the ability to understand

as well as to generate multiple modes of transmitting different codes and meanings (Ambigapathy and Kalantzis 2001). The focus on media study in schools is important because most of the visual artefacts are conveyed in complex and pleasurable ways that tell stories about behaviours and styles of life that are desirable and undesirable (Bruce 2003; Alvermann and Moon 1999).

Learning in Malaysia however continues to render visual media study invisible within the formal primary and secondary school settings and there is a clear case for media study to be developed in ways that enable young people to comprehend daily life and media experiences critically as well as to engage actively and creatively in the various spheres (Shanthi and Khoo 2006). The connection with daily life and media here considers a wide continuum of codes and texts that children and young people are exposed to and the forms of learning that encompass numerous aspects of listening, reading, interpreting, writing and production of information and meaning.

This paper is concerned about equipping learners with skills and competence that engage learning as part of social practice and as an area of critical awareness (Masterman 1985; Schouten and Watling 1997). The paper begins by situating and describing a project which focused on media literacy and the production of a series of videos, *Constructing Peace in School Settings* in a community arts project. The paper then elaborates on the production process and the responses of the project participants in media making. The development of this community arts project involved collaboration with three secondary schools, the Research and Education for Peace Unit, Universiti Sains Malaysia and the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) which provided funding.

Changing Media Environment and Media Literacy

A new media landscape is emerging where media cultures are changing young people's lives in both the private and public spheres. Young people are living in an age saturated with the products of a capitalistic culture like shopping malls, video arcades, tabloid newspapers, comics, reality shows, game shows, Music Television (MTV), Interactive games and the World Wide Web (Gunther 1998). The presence of increasing visual media is often linked with intense hopes and fears (Livingstone

2002). The new changing communications environment holds out a promise of a brighter future, especially its enormous potential for learning (Gee 2003). Yet at the same time, it also maintains that the media may harm and manipulate young people where it promotes concentration on the individual self and wasteful consumption (Budd, Craig and Steinman 1999). According to Alvermann and Moon (1999), popular consumption of the above cultural products evokes different responses from different people. For some people the media manipulates popular culture so that the existing hierarchies are sustained; for others it allows subordinated groups to create messages that subvert mass culture's attempts to dominate their lives (Price 1993).

The advent of media cultural forms is often confronted by diverse responses. The growth of media literacy can be traced to different approaches. The intent of media study was first concerned with the supposedly harmful effects of media and there was a move to inoculate media audiences, specifically the young. Media, specifically television was seen as an instrument of evil which corrupted the minds of audiences with immoral ideas, taste, values and lifestyles (Buckingham 2000, Ferguson 1991; Masterman 1985). The approach to media literacy took a protectionist dimension by guiding the audience to assess the positive and negative values.

Media literacy has since experienced several shifts. Following from development in sociology and cultural studies, media literacy attained a critical edge as it moved towards creating communities of active media makers who can be expected to exercise some degree of agency in deciding what textual positions they will assume or resist as they engage with complex social and cultural forces in their everyday interactions (Masterman 1985; Hilton 1996; Luke 1998). The interest in media literacy is seen as integral in preparing today's students to thrive in a social and cultural environment saturated with various forms of traditional and new media (Kress 2000; Luke and Freebody 2000; New London Group 2000).

Ferguson (1991) observes that media literacy is a progressive development of a critical understanding that seeks to extend young people's knowledge of the media and to develop their analytic and creative skills through critical and practical work. He asserts that such work should increase their capacity to understand both the contents of the media and the processes involved in their production

and reception. Underlying his thoughts is the aim to create more active and critical media users who will demand and possibly contribute to a greater range and diversity of media products.

The media literacy project described in this paper is one that attempts to enable young people to find their voices and their places in their school communities. The project facilitates students to media-making and making meaning that encompass various combinations of words, visuals, audio, video, gestures and other data related to the creation of peace settings in school communities. This collaborative, action-research project took place in Penang with Form Four students from Penang Free School, Union High School and Sungai Nibong Secondary School from 2004 to 2006. Practical work in media literacy is conceived as any work that actively encourages learners to produce and critically reflect upon the production of representation and meaning through the use of sound and image as well as informs the cultural positions of the producers, their themes and their audiences (Watling 1999). Building from the works of Masterman (1985) and Schouten and Watling (1997), we attempted to map a possible way in which media literacy, specifically visual media might be studied in a more critical way in secondary schools.

Making Visual Media - *Constructing Peace in School Settings*

The project encompassed two phases. In the first phase, the students participated in surveys that examined their knowledge, attitudes and practices on peace and conflict issues in school settings. The survey focused on teacher-student and student related conflicts, the root causes of these conflicts as well as the control mechanisms that regulate and manage these issues in schools. In addition, the 16 year old students noted their media habits and viewing patterns and practices and their favourite television programmes. The sources, origins and emerging issues in examining peace settings in schools helped the student groups to identify common problems confronted in school settings. The findings of the survey have been published and are not discussed in this paper (see Shanthi et al. 2007 for a discussion of survey findings on peace issues among secondary school students).

This paper directs attention to the second phase, where the student groups engaged in practical production work. After thinking about a number of projects, they decided to work on dramatic video programmes. The following stages were observed in the practical production phase.

Deciding the Topic

The student groups needed to determine topics relevant to the issues emerging in their respective schools. They held several discussions to find out how much they already knew and focused on problematising the topic.



Photo 1 Project facilitator talks about issues on peace and conflict in school settings.

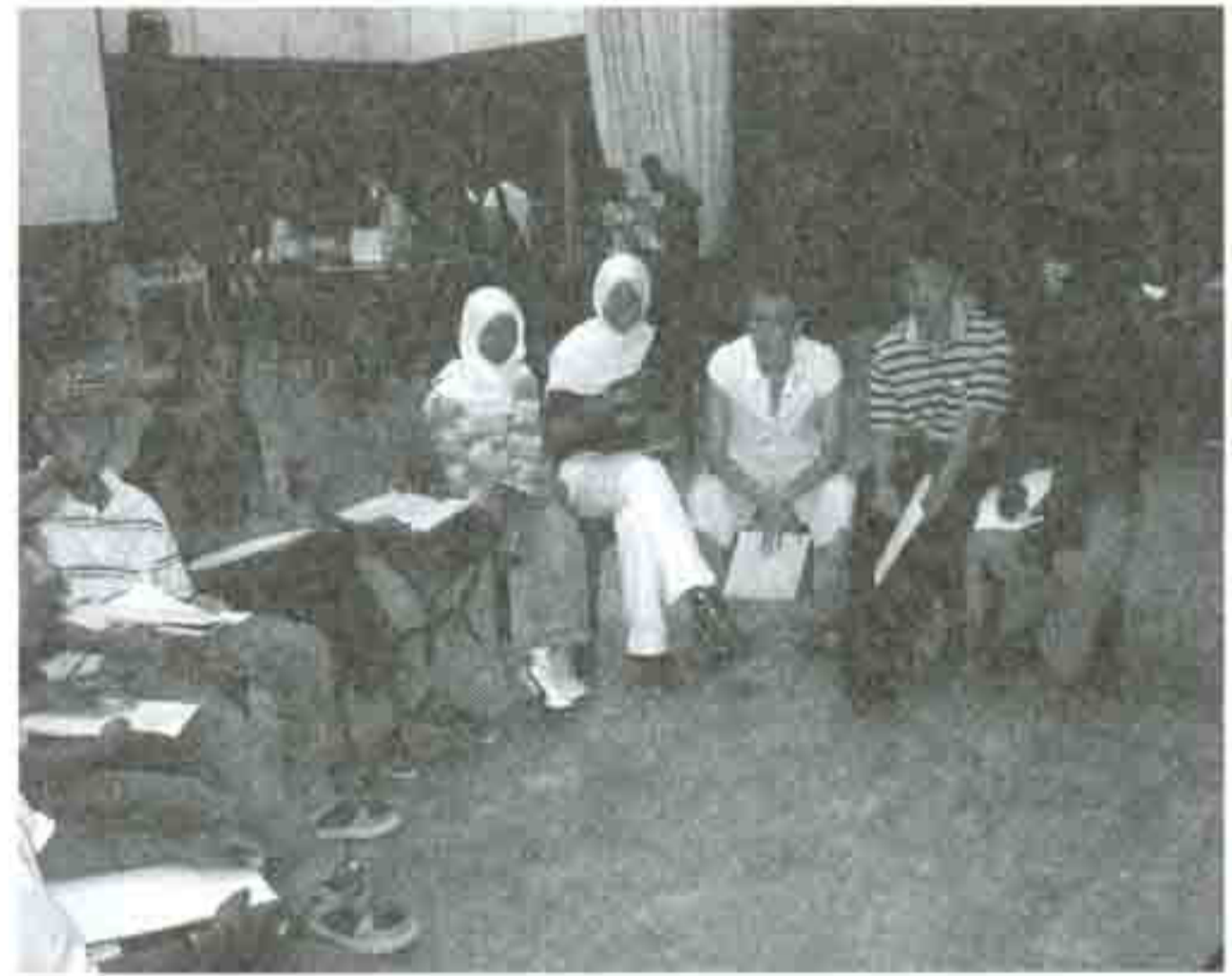


Photo 2 Students discussing on topic ideas.

Evaluating the Idea

After deciding on the selected idea, the student groups discussed the following aspects of the project: Intention of the programme, the significance of the topic to the school community, interests it could serve and the possible barriers and difficulties that could arise. The students realised that not all topics were readily accepted by school authorities and in some cases, the students had to negotiate with the school authorities to pursue their interests. All the student groups revealed a strong and emotional connection to the selected topics. They talked about unusual and special interesting dimensions in the topic that needed to be highlighted.



Photo 3 Students voicing their experiences and observations on problems in school settings.



Photo 4 Participants evaluating ideas that can be pursued in their production projects.

The group members also examined the possible prejudices of the group so that a fair interpretation of the problem was presented.



Photo 5 Students presented their topics and discussed key challenges they might encounter in production work.



Photo 6 Students developing projects.

Following this, the groups worked on the time frame and the budget of their production.

The group decided on the precise focus of their projects and developed propositions as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Constructing Peace in School Settings

Schools	Title of Projects	Problem	Proposition
Sungai Nibong Secondary School	Sekolah Kita, Wajah Kita	Jealously and prejudice towards smart students will not build a intellectual culture in schools.	Students should study hard together so that they can produce a learned culture in schools.
	Ada Apa dengan Sekolah	Disturbing other students in school wastes time.	Students should work hard to gain knowledge and build good characters in school.
	The Right Judgement	Being involved in negative activities like vandalism in school will not bring a good future for students.	It is important to decide on productive activities that will help students to develop good friends in school.
Union High School	Handphones in Schools	The presence of hand phones in schools can bring problems to friendship.	Attention should be given to friends and no handphones should be allowed in schools
	Right Way	Some friends influence good students to do inappropriate things in school.	Students should make good choices about making friends so that they study well in schools
Penang Free School	Don't Care	The presence of apathy and lack of social commitment among students in schools.	Students should be responsible and work towards the creation of positive school surroundings.
	Unfriendly Friends	Misunderstandings and bullying among students disrupt conducive school settings	Students in a school are all friends and should be friendly to each other so they can build peace and harmony in the school.



Photo 7 Participants learnt about camera work and the sequences of shots that can be constructed to tell stories.



Photo 8 Students attended workshops on camera work and editing.

Designing the Project Treatment

The group paid attention to the following: The kind of pictures and sounds that could be recorded to give an accurate representation of the problem. They expressed the viewpoints that would be used and those that would be omitted given the limitations of time and duration of the video programme. As they started to work on their storyboards and scripts, the groups talked at length regarding the information, images and messages as well as the positive and negative models that would drive the topic that was being constructed in their stories. The student groups observed the complex process of arranging ideas logically to ensure that the sequences in the programme are well constructed and that the content of the programme matched the objectives of the project.

Moving on with Camera Work, Editing and Post-Production

Several workshops were run to impart skills on video filming, editing and post-production techniques for the student groups. The students picked actors from their respective schools and showed much enthusiasm in accomplishing a successful programme. They toiled over the work schedules, work management and the several takes of scenes and sequences need for the completion of their project. As the project progressed, the student groups observed the new learning experiences and challenges that they encountered. They were committed to the project and developed strong friendship ties among the team members. There were also moments of frustration and difficulties that needed to be ironed out; but the students were determined to carry out the project. They noted that the project gave them opportunities to engage with acting and directing and revealed many hidden talents in their teams. They also realized that media production involved a lot of hard work and long hours but they enjoyed the project as it enabled them to create messages and ideas related to the themes of their projects in critical and creative ways.



Photo 9 Students explored acting and directing.



Photo 10 Appreciating work done behind the visual scenes

Analysis of the Project

In the final screening of the projects, all the student groups from the different schools gathered together with fellow friends, teachers and family members to watch the productions on the big screen. The students then talked about the material that was used in the video productions and the ways it was reflected in the proposition of the project. They felt that their production projects threw light on the possible solutions to the problems identified in their respective topics. More importantly, the student groups screened the projects in their schools and learnt many things about the significant sources of power and interests served in the related project.



Photo 11 Students assessing the images and messages presented in their production work.

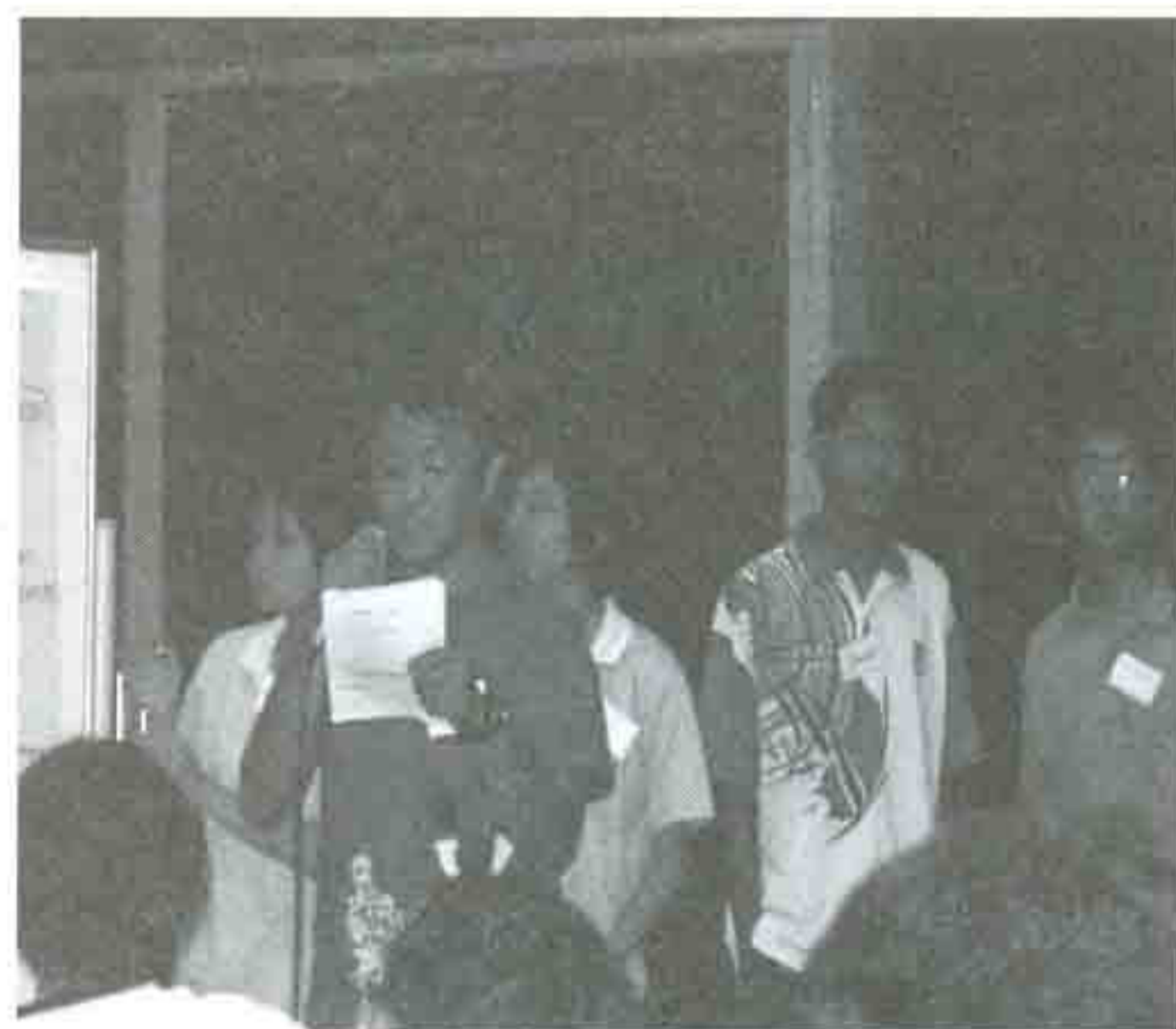


Photo 12 Students talking about their visual media constructions.

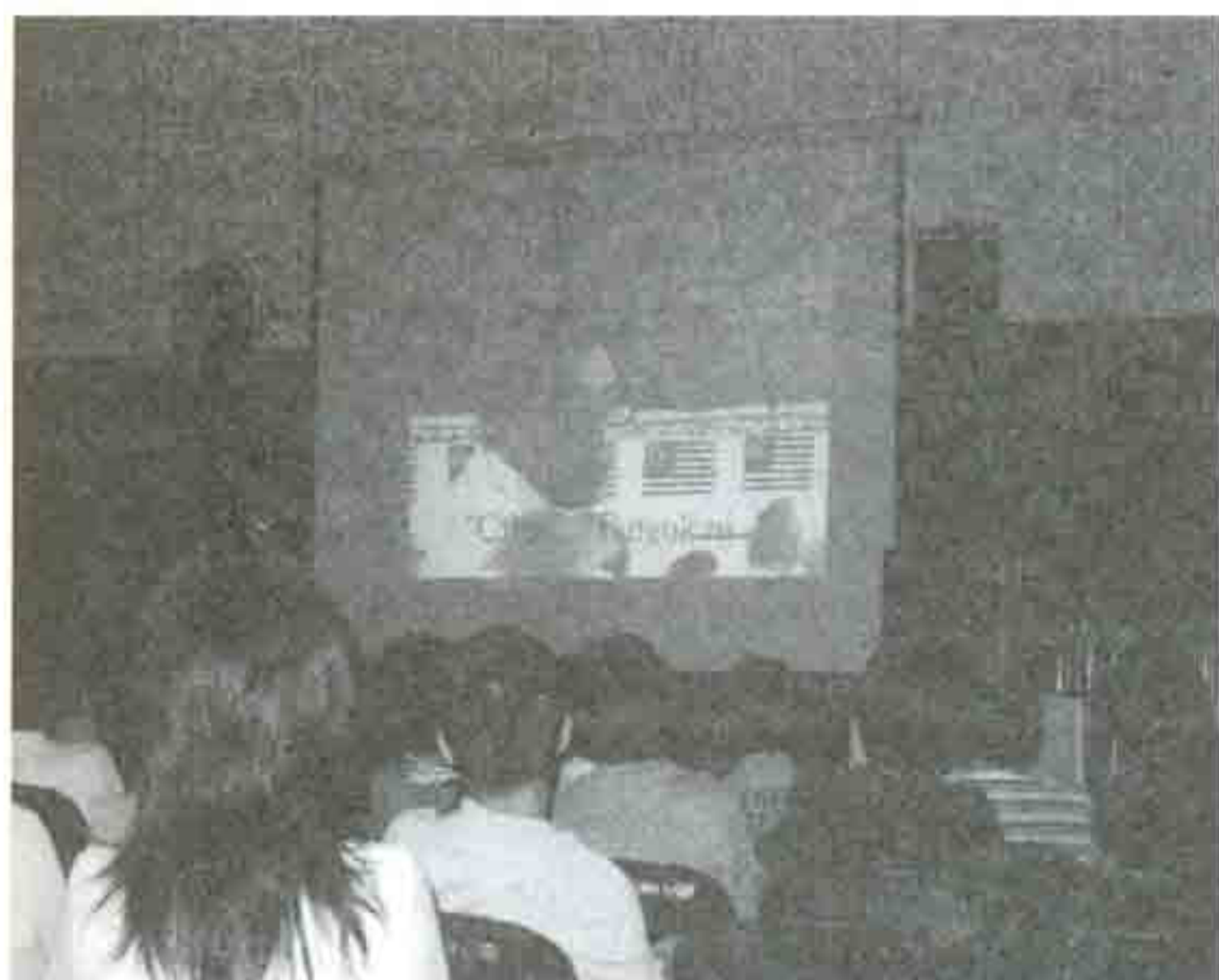


Photo 13 The visual productions of the groups are seen on the big screen.

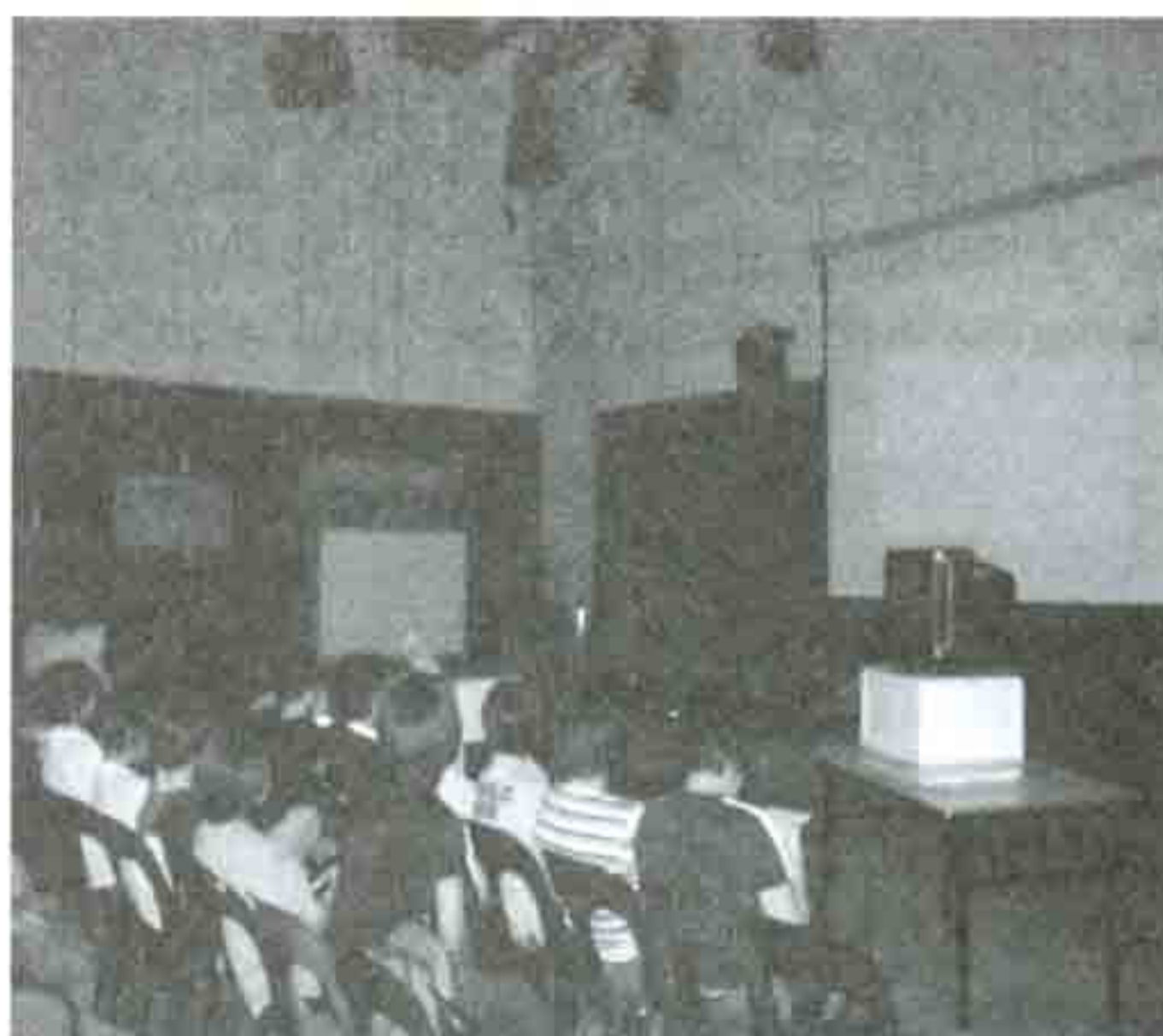


Photo 14 Students putting their practical work to critical scrutiny.

Appropriating Critical Literacy in Media Making

The impact of the media is considerably underestimated in the daily lives of young people. It is encountered in many ways – they watch a variety of visuals, they listen to music, they read magazines on television programmes and personalities while television advertising permeates their thoughts and provides ideas, norms, values, role models, life-style images and icons of personality. Media stories engage young people in practices that enable them to participate in public discussions and decisions on the construction of pleasures, meanings, identities and social realities around them.

The study of literacy cannot be detached from learning about life – it is linked to engaging learning as part of social practice. Investigating media as part of critical literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing, critical thinking and numeracy (Baynham 1995; Fairclough 1992; Masterman 1985). Appropriating critical literacy to media-making experiences in this project

did not only equip learners with skills and competence, but also engaged learning as part of social practice and as an area for questioning media and their representations that are taken as obvious arrangements of things. The development of critical literacy did not only relate to the learning of the techniques of production and the vocabulary of the media but also the process which helped students to understand much more fully than before the nature of their own experiences as users of media.

The final part of the practical work required the learners to put the practical work project to critical scrutiny by linking their works to core concepts and issues raised in critical media literacy. The group discussions with the project participants focused on key aspects of media literacy, namely the cultural environment of the media, media languages, media production, representations of the media and the publics of reception. The project participants recognised that the media form a core component of contemporary cultural environments and that the socialization of young people is influenced by several forces like family, religious institutions, school and the media. The students were also aware of media languages centering on aspects like functions and purposes of certain camera angles, images, texts, gestures, codes, sounds and music that construct understanding and impact upon their messages.

The production process involved the appreciation that all media texts are consciously manufactured. For example, when the student groups delved into camera work, they did not only learn the techniques of good filming, but that recorded images brought about different responses. They engaged in conversations about the emotional impact of the images, aesthetical elements, messages and varied meanings of school cultures that they were constructing in their production projects. At the video editing stage, the students learnt how shots captured in the filming could be manipulated to produce different connotations and effects. Access and participation were important issues for the students as they had to deliberate on the ideas and voices that would be presented in their projects and those that would be excluded.

The notion of representation is one of the core principles of media literacy. The media do not offer us a transparent window of the world, but a mediated version of the world. The production projects exposed the processes of selecting and combining incidents as well as making events in the school

setting, and creating characters and stories. The students noted that the depiction of reality or truth was a difficult task. They could easily construct warped meanings by distorting the sequences of the shots that were taken in production. More crucially, the project participants learnt the differences between reality and acting, and how elements like music, dialogues and special effects could impinge upon audiences' emotional reaction in the scenes that were constructed. Studying media representation inevitably raises difficult questions about ideologies and values. The student *groups* were encouraged to reflect the choices, judgements and the different criteria that were used to produce their stories.

The reception of the public was an important aspect that the student groups had to take on board as they examined targeting particular audiences, namely secondary school communities. It was important for the project participants to understand how audiences in their school settings interpreted their stories and how they gained pleasures and dissatisfaction in viewing their media productions. All these elements of the production process raised serious issues about professional practices in questioning who makes the media texts, the different stages of the production, the involvement of different people at each stage, and how they work together to tell logical and coherent stories. If young people are to understand media texts as social constructions, this approach will obviously be helpful as it will not only sensitise young people to numerous issues, but also give them hands-on experience and useful insights into their own construction process.

Conclusion

Malaysia in the past decade has experienced a flooding of old and new media in the form of radio and television sets, satellite channels, electronic games, computers with CD-ROM and Internet as well as mobile phones. The media are, without any doubt, a highly significant part of contemporary young people's lives. Young people use media because they find them fun, exciting and imaginative. They experience learning through the media. Young people are often fascinated by soap operas, sports, reality shows as these programmes offer them thrilling encounters and understanding of the social, cultural and moral facets of the adult world. The complexities surrounding media audiences,

media texts and media institutions demand media researchers, educationalists and practitioners to interrogate teaching and working knowledge in this arena (Hallován and Jones 1987).

Media literacy in the past has been predominantly conceptualized narrowly, in protectionist terms, teaching children to critique popular culture and recognize the merits of high culture, therefore inoculating them against presumed media harms. In recent years, the debate on traditional and new media has shifted to frame literacy in terms of its enabling and empowering capacity (Livingstone 2002) The notion of literacy, grounded on critical and creative abilities opens up more exciting dimensions of making sense of media (Potter 2005).

There are many viable frameworks for effective interventions in developing media studies. In this paper, we have presented one such possibility in advancing critical literacy. The project, on the whole, launched numerous pathways that offered distinctive ways of making sense of practical media work in a critical way. The framework adopted in this project developed a more specific form of competence, which is closely linked to critical literacy. It centres on the belief that practical work in media making can encourage students to make critical readings of texts, to develop critical responses and ultimately to display critical autonomy (Masterman 1985) in their engagements with practical media making. Practical work seen in this vein, supports, reflects and promotes the broader project of critical literacy (Frau-Meigs 2006). 'Reading' and 'writing' media help young people to develop critical understanding and active participation. They enable young people to interpret and make informed judgements as consumers of media and to become producers of media. Media literacy in this sense contributes to the growth of young people's critical and creative capacities.

The relevance of teaching and learning critical media literacy in today's rapidly changing world has become acutely critical. As the current dominant and mainstream media continue to find ways of producing texts and cultural experiences that invade the private and public domains of the everyday lives of young people, it is increasingly important to engage young people in reading critically and in making media productively. The complexities emerging in the cultural environment of the media, media production, media languages, representations in the media and media audiences suggest a range of research and teaching possibilities. Although in this paper, we have deliberated a critical

theory perspective for exploring such possibilities, it is also acknowledged that there are many other viable frameworks. What is crucial is a concerted effort by media scholars, community groups and teachers alike to understand how reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking and producing media are attendant processes in the larger social, cultural and political milieu that make up critical media literacy.

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