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Sheelagh Drudy

St Patrick's College, Maynooth

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Sheelagh Drudy, PhD., is a lecturer in the sociology of education in St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

Television and Schools

Diana Moses and Paul Croll. 1991. *School Television in Use*, London: John Libbey and Co. Ltd., ISBN: 0 86196 308 3, 89pp., stg£12.50.

Robin Moss, Christopher Jones and Barrie Gunter. 1991. *Television in Schools*, London: John Libbey and Co. Ltd., ISBN: 0 86196 314 8, 62pp., stg£14.50.

Sheelagh Drudy

These two monographs are part of a series of media studies published by John Libbey. The two volumes cover very similar ground insofar as they are based upon sample surveys of English school teachers. They examine the role of educational broadcasting in schools and the current uses by teachers of broadcast material, as well as their attitudes towards and perceptions of television as a medium in the classroom. The primary difference between the two volumes, apart from matters of detail, is one of emphasis. The research by Moses and Croll, originally commissioned from the Broadcasting Research Unit by the BBC and the ITVA considers the implications of the new National Curriculum for schools broadcasting. The monograph by Moss, Jones and Gunter arose as a response by the Independent Television Commission to new responsibilities under Section 34 of the 1990 Broadcasting Act to ensure the provision of schools programmes on Channels 3, 4 and 5. It is, accordingly, more oriented towards the future market for schools television. The two studies point to very positive attitudes to the use of television in schools among teachers and to already existing very high levels of usage.

In an Irish context, it may seem a somewhat academic exercise to give consideration to the issue of the use of television in schools since the untimely demise of Irish broadcasting for schools at the beginning of the 1980s. There is also the difficulty that we do not have up-to-date information on the availability in schools of TV sets, video-recorders and other equipment allied to support services for broadcasting. While it is not surprising that in the post-schools broadcasting era RTE (or the Department of Education) does not collate such information, the result is that we do not have a comparable data-base to the British system. There, the BBC conducts an annual census of equipment in its survey on listening and viewing (SLV). The SLV survey indicates a fairly generous supply of equipment in British schools. Primary schools have an average of 1.7 TV receivers, 1 video-recorder and 4 computers per school. Second level schools have an average of 7.7 TV receivers, 7.5 video-recorders and 36 computers per school. Obviously the numbers in some schools are greater. The survey records that, for example, some 3 per cent of primary schools had over 15 video-recorders and 13 per cent of secondary schools had over 15 TV receivers.

While it would be difficult to be definitive, as the last census of equipment, included in the report of the Educational Broadcasting Committee (1982), is now very out of date, my own experience of visits to schools in the Leinster area would suggest that few Irish schools could match these resources. Most schools do indeed have at least one TV receiver and video-recorder, as well as a number of computers and one or more overhead projectors. However, the practicalities of availing of these resources for lessons often mean that they are under-utilised. There would not be the same level of usage as in Britain where 58 per cent of teachers make use of television in their lessons at least one or twice a week (Moss, Jones and Gunter: 55). The sort of factors which inhibit usage in Irish schools (and indeed in British schools though to a much lesser extent – Moses and Croll: 47) are scarcity of equipment and the consequent difficulties of access to it, technical back-up problems, especially in the not too uncommon event of equipment

breakdown, and, by no means least, the sheer difficulty of transporting heavy equipment from one location to another – perhaps up and down steps – in the middle of a very busy teaching day. Irish teachers might be intrigued, and rather envious, to know that English second-level schools have audio-visual resources staff employed in the schools (Moses and Croll: 44–45) and that while few schools have 'ideal' conditions (a TV monitor in every classroom), some two-thirds of teachers interviewed felt they had adequate facilities for viewing programmes (Moses and Croll: 34).

This is not the place to discuss in detail the question of television as a teaching or learning medium. As is the case with the study of most aspects of the effects of television, results are somewhat mixed. However, it appears that the way in which television is approached and used is the critical factor (Salomon, 1979). Although there is little Irish research on this matter, a recent study of the use of television in the implementation of aspects of the junior cycle geography syllabus would tend to confirm this. Placing children in front of a television set is no substitute for good teaching. However, where good quality programming, relevant to the syllabus, is integrated into classroom teaching with good preparation and follow-up, then the outcome — in the form of gains in knowledge, attitudes and skills — is more enduring than either traditional 'chalk and talk' or 'television only' methods. The latter, perhaps unsurprisingly, is the least effective of all (Houlihan, 1991).

In the British situation, where school television is in widespread use across the primary and the second-level curriculum, it is evident that teachers consider it to be 'central and important' (Moses and Croll: 85). The most widespread influence on the curriculum is in 'supporting', 'extending' and 'reinforcing' what is being taught and in providing a 'substitute for direct experience' rather than determining the curriculum in any significant way. Some teachers claimed that they had been encouraged to adopt new strategies as a result of television broadcasts. In fact, over half of the secondary teachers interviewed who used school television said that it had expanded the range of teaching approaches which they thought were appropriate to their subjects (Moses and Croll: 86). In a period of very profound change in Irish education, in which new subject areas and approaches are being introduced into the curriculum and in which changes in pedagogies and in teacher attitudes are required, perhaps we should look much more seriously at educational television as a mechanism for supporting such changes and in the delivery of inservice education for teachers.

There are some warning notes arising from the findings. In the primary school most of the schools broadcast programmes are watched live (Moses and Croll: 38). This, of course, means that teachers have not previewed the programmes. It also means that teachers cannot stop the programmes at points which they might wish to emphasise. From an effective teaching point of view, there are many who would suggest that good preparation on the part of the teacher, and of the class, is the key to successful use of television as a medium in the classroom. However, it is pointed out that live viewing does not mean that the teacher is unprepared as they do make extensive use of programme notes, to which they attach a high degree of importance (Moses and Croll: 38-40; Moss, Jones and Gunter: 18).

There appears also to be a certain amount of profligacy with what, in effect, is a very expensive resource (e.g. the BBC alone spends stg£10 million annually on schools broadcasting). The VCR is used in English primary schools but mainly to record programmes going out live for later use with a parallel class. Only about one in eight programmes are kept and thus could be regarded as becoming a regular resource for the classroom (Moses and Croll: 39). Although perhaps a greater proportion of broadcast output could be conserved as a resource in schools, clearly English schools have built up considerable amounts of recorded material over the years. However, over one third of secondary teachers and two-thirds of primary teachers reported that there was no systematic cataloguing in their school (Moss, Jones and Gunter: 38).

Such apparent disorganization is perhaps the result of an *embarras de richesses*. It does suggest, though, that if Ireland were to re-establish a television service for schools it could produce a good quality service at a far more economical cost. A good example of this is the *Stay Safe* programme developed jointly by the Departments of Education and Health. This programme was developed to address the problem of child sexual abuse in particular, although some other safety issues are addressed. This was recently piloted in primary schools in Wicklow and Dublin and is now in use in the Leinster area. A feature of this programme is the accompanying resource packs as well as teacher inservice and meetings for parents.

Inservice education for teachers would appear to be an essential part of the effective usage of television in schools. This would also be the case if television were to be used as a support service in the implementation of new elements in the curriculum, such as technology (see remarks in Moses and Croll: 87 on teachers' desire for support in science and technology). Perhaps it is now the time, in the light of curricular changes at all levels of the school system and with the advent of distance education at third level, to take a new look at television services for schools. One of the first steps might involve research such as that in the two volumes reviewed here in order to clearly establish the extent and type of equipment in the system and existing usage of both video programmes and broadcast materials from the British channels. Videos, produced both in Ireland and elsewhere, are available in various subject areas. There is also no doubt that some Irish schools do use British broadcast material. The problem is that we do not know the extent of the usage, nor whether use is made of programme notes and other ancillary material, nor has there been any detailed evaluation of the suitability of these programmes for the children and curricula in the Republic.

Nevertheless, it is timely that RTE, in liaison with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), plan to transmit in Autumn 1992 a small number of programmes on the use of television as a medium in the classroom and also to re-transmit a selection of British schools programmes deemed appropriate to the new Junior Certificate (personal communication from RTE). As an interim measure, in the absence of home-produced programmes for schools, it will be welcomed by many teachers. It is to be hoped that it will be a prelude to a fuller development of the educational service, at a time when there is a greater need than ever for a support service for teachers.

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