

Richards, Chris (2011)  
*Young People, Popular Culture and Education*  
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The present government has developed an analysis of what is wrong with education in the UK and what needs to be done about it. The problem is the lack of academic rigour, the restoration of which, Michael Gove insists, will be achieved by reforming the curriculum so that its focus is on canonical texts, the inculcation of standards of correctness in grammar and punctuation, and the re-telling of 'our island story' (Gove 2010). Salient in this discourse is the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' subjects, with the implication that a return to rigour would achieve two desirable (and, so the argument goes, linked) outcomes: economic prosperity and social mobility.

This is the wider context for the publication of *Informed Choices*, the guide to A-level courses issued recently by the Russell Group of twenty leading UK universities, which David Willetts, minister for universities and science, described as 'a welcome step towards levelling the playing field for prospective students' (Willetts 2011). While acknowledging that there are different opinions on the question, *Informed Choices* presents a simple binary opposition:

In general, subjects referred to as being 'hard' are more traditional and theoretical subjects, for example: English, History, Physics and Chemistry.

...

'Soft' subjects are usually subjects with a vocational or practical bias, for example: Media Studies, Art and Design, Photography and Business Studies (Russell Group 2011: 22-23).

So, there you have it. English is traditional and theoretical (and thus intellectually demanding); Media Studies, on the other hand, has none of these attributes, perhaps because it has a 'practical bias.'

Government ministers and the authors of *Informed Choices* would be well advised to study Chris Richards' new book, though I doubt that they would be terribly sympathetic readers of it. Richards presents a history that is both a great deal more plausible and infinitely more interesting than their dabbling in disciplinary mythologies. It is both the history of the project of cultural studies and an autobiographical account of a lifetime's involvement in worthwhile educational activity. Central to Richards' argument is that insufficient attention, even within the field of education studies, has been paid to the cultures of children and young people. It is an argument grounded in Raymond Williams' (1953) model of culture as a 'whole way of life', modified by de Certeau's (1984) emphasis on culture as agentive practices. From this perspective, young people appear not as consumers of particular brands of disciplinary product (the Willetts model) but as already culturally productive, as active participants in the construction of knowledge.

Richards' argument is a vital one for all those with an interest in education. It asserts the importance of the work done under the banner of Cultural Studies and Women's Studies, on the grounds that work in these fields has not always been neatly assimilable within education's traditional foundation disciplines (philosophy, history, sociology and psychology); more than this, though, these fields pose challenges to traditional hierarchies of knowledge and traditional assumptions about who is, and is not, knowledgeable.

Richards reminds us of the debates in the late 1960s and early 1970s about the place of the university. These debates, rendered more immediate by quotation from contemporary documents such as those produced at Sussex by the Radical Faculty Action Group, are further enlivened by Richards' presence, as a young graduate student, in the story that he tells. That period, when students systematically interrogated the institutional structures of the university, not only in the organisation of the curriculum and the forms of assessment but also in its relationship to the wider community, opened up questions of what counted as knowledge and of whose knowledge counted. If it all seems hopelessly distant from today's experience of higher education, Richards makes the point that the development of interdisciplinary approaches and the engagement with students 'likely to be excluded from traditional subjects, or in whose life projects study of such subjects could not be easily justified' (p. 32) have characterised work in some universities (though not, generally speaking, those within the Russell Group) in the intervening decades.

The second, larger section of the book is structured around the modules that Richards taught as part of the Education Studies degree on which he worked, at the University of North London in the 1990s. What gives these chapters greater depth is their historical layeredness, as he draws on his own writing about and experiences of teaching younger students. Thus, in the chapter on Media Studies, Richards presents a critical commentary on his own earlier self, the self who wrote in 1982 a piece for *Teaching London Kids* about the classroom analysis of newspaper coverage of the Falklands/Malvinas War. There's an admirable honesty about his account of moving from a practice 'imagined as an intervention by teachers to liberate students from their subjection to the myths of the dominant ideology disseminated by the media' (p. 62) towards forms of practice that made space for students' enjoyment and creativity.

The same chapter provides detailed analyses of two short films, made by school students in the early 1980s. The detailed description here is sensitive to the complexity of the serious playfulness that characterises students' involvement in such projects. Richards is alert to the danger of reading the first film, *At the Club* (1982), as a transparent window onto the texture of adolescent lives. There is, of course, representational work going on, but the students are far from naive: they use the resources available to them to play with different versions of themselves, to play with the conventions of the form in which they are working and to play with (and transgress) the conventions of schooling within which their film-making is situated. Richards also makes the

point that there are significant differences between the tradition that is embodied in such work and the approach to media education in the United States, where:

The cultural complexity of media texts, and of young people's engagement with them, tends to be displaced in favour of accounts of the media as monolithic and corporate industries ...' (Richards 2011: 74).

Subsequent chapters, on 'race' and representation, on children and television, on young adult fiction and on popular music, are similarly insightful, nuanced and closely argued. Together, these chapters give a sense of the intellectual scope of Cultural Studies, a sense of the possibility of rich and meaningful engagement with young people's cultural activity. It is a field that resists the neat polarities of theory and practice, let alone the reductive labels of 'hard' and 'soft' disciplinarity.

At times, there is a slightly elegiac tone about the book. This may be an effect of its autobiographical strain, a reflection of the book's retrospective take on debates that have informed Richards' professional life. To an extent, too, what is represented here can feel impossibly remote, a world away from the current obsession with 'floor standards' and functional skills, the imposition of exorbitant student fees and the privatisation of our universities. Perhaps, though, the book was sent to the publishers a little too early. The student protests against government policy, the demonstrations and the occupations, have once again opened up the space in which questions are being asked, and asked with renewed urgency, not just about access but about the status of elite inscriptions of culture and knowledge, of value and power.

## References

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