

How to get a

**2:1** in

**Media,  
Communication  
+ Cultural  
Studies**



Noel Williams

# How to Get a 2:1 in Media, Communication and Cultural Studies



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NOEL WILLIAMS



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For Owen, and his 2:1 in Communications



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## PREFACE

It has always seemed to me that people studying media, communications and culture would benefit from a book that links the business of studying to the subjects being studied. After all, studying communications is also practising communications. So that's what I've attempted here, in an introductory way.

By outlining brief first steps towards a wide range of relevant topics, I hope I'll help many students find a way into the richness of these subjects. By attaching those topics to each other, wherever it makes sense, I hope students will gain a better sense of the intellectual interrelationships that weave around cultural and media debates. And by embedding the conceptual in detailed practical advice on communication and learning, I hope I have offered pointers which help prove some of the concepts. 'Prove', of course, has two meanings: to test the concept, and to show that the concept works. Both meanings apply.

One theme runs through the book: connection. The good student makes the links. The better student makes more and better links. Through the structure of the book as well as some of the ideas it advocates, I'm trying to encourage readers to look across subject boundaries and explore the connections between ideas. One such connection is of theory to practice. Another is between communicator as learner and communicator as professional. Others thread between many concepts in the sprawling disciplines of media, communications and cultural theory, and their contributing disciplines. Some links are historical, some are conceptual, some come from application, some from theorizing. My hope is that students reading this book are intrigued and energized by the possibilities of their subjects, so they'll find new connections.

That, I think, is the way to an upper second degree, and even a first-class degree: being able to see beyond what is said to what might also be said. Diligent application of my book's ideas, will go a long way. But the readers who can apply all the practical ideas, and use them to find a new road into their subjects, they are the ones who will get the most from their learning.

Noel Williams  
September 2003



# I

## What is the study of media, communications and culture?

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### **I . I How to do well in media, communications and culture**

Read widely. Think critically. Write appropriately. That's all you need to do to get your 2:1.

Of course, this begs a few questions, notably of the 'what?' and 'how?' kind. What do I read? How do I write? What should I be thinking critically about? How do I think critically?

Those are the sorts of questions I'm addressing in this book. No-one can give you the 'answers' in communication, media or cultural studies, because there are no fixed answers in the way that there are in maths, chemistry or French. But I can tell you where to look for your own answers, and how to recognize them when you've found them. I can't tell you how to know more, but I can tell you how to find the knowledge you need. And, whilst I can't guarantee to make you a better communicator, I can tell you what you should be doing, so you can tell for yourself where you're improving and where you need to improve.

Some academics will object to the title of this book. And I'm one of them. It seems to encourage what is called an 'instrumental' approach to study: getting students to do the minimum needed to get through their course, and that's all. If you're inclined to do this, you'll do it with or without my book.

But that isn't my aim at all. You can't create a 'crib' full of all the answers on media, communication and cultural studies (which I'll refer to as 'MCCS' from now on, to save time). You can use this book like a crib, and no doubt it will help some students get through their course with less work than they might otherwise have done. I'm not sure whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. But I do know that a good MCCS student has to do more than this. Getting a 2:1 is about more than knowing a few facts.

My book is about making you into a 2:1 student, not about tricks that make you seem like a 2:1 student when you're not really. From my point of view, this book

## 2 HOW TO GET A 2:1 IN MCCS

is about making better students, better learners and so better communicators. The title is just a way to sell the book.

In this chapter I will:

- tell you something about what media, communication and cultural studies consist of;
- outline what you need to learn in order to do well at those studies;
- describe the structure of the book, and how you should be able to use it to guide your learning.

### 1.2 What are you studying?

Communication is a process, carried out through different media, made meaningful by the cultural context in which it takes place. This means that the same activities can be looked at from three different perspectives. Each of these perspectives emphasizes part of the activity, giving us three different disciplines with overlapping concerns:

- communication studies, which tends to focus on the process of communication;
- media studies, which tends to focus on the media used for communication, especially the mass media;
- cultural studies, which tends to look at the whole social and cultural context in which meanings are made.

So these three disciplines necessarily overlap, which is why this book is relevant to students of all three. Much of the same knowledge is needed by students in all three areas; many of the same concerns arise and the same skills are needed.

But all three disciplines also have their own histories and politics and strive for their own identities. People only ever study communication or culture in a particular context. This context might be very specific and applied, focused perhaps on a specific set of problems in a particular area: business communications would be an example of this. Businesses have a limited set of difficulties, a restricted set of issues in their organizational context – and study of the relevant communications processes can help address these issues. Business communication offers a very clear applied context in which particular processes can be examined. So any course which concerns itself with business communication tends to look at particular processes, especially with a view to improving practice – processes like group communication, report writing, interpersonal communication and oral presentation. (For an example, see Hartley and Bruckmann 2002.)

A rather different context would be to explore the whole nature of meaning-making in human activity, looking perhaps at myth-making, language systems, the social construction of meaning or cultural change over time. In this much grander conception of communication issues, people are less concerned with the application of knowledge to practice, or with particular processes, solutions or skills. Instead they are interested in global aspects of human meaning-making. Here the

behaviour of an individual or small group in a concrete situation is of little relevance: what we are interested in is social processes, the nature of culture, the interactions of people in the mass.

Because the media studied in media studies courses tend to be the mass media (television, film, radio, newspapers), media students tend to look at the social and cultural end of communication. Because the processes examined in communication studies tends to be those of particular people in particular concrete situations, communication students tend to look at the personal and psychological end of communication. But there is ultimately no separation of communication studies, media studies and cultural studies; and areas such as sociology and discourse analysis, which have both social and applied dimensions, can equally be found in courses of all three kinds.

So, in this book, it's not part of my purpose to try to tease these three disciplines apart. I'm coming from a communications perspective, so I tend to see media studies and cultural studies as centrally concerned with human communication. But another writer will point out that media are essential to communication, and argue that the study of communications is centrally about the media used. And a third writer will say, of course, communication is a process and it takes place through media, but that it is the history, social context and whole cultural code which determines what is possible with such a medium, what 'counts' as communication, and so how meaning is made.

Any course in one of these areas will have a particular flavour, a particular feel to it which results from the way it deals with some of these tensions. It may, for example, offer you learning which is more 'media-oriented' or 'culturally-oriented' than 'communications-oriented'. Or it may offer you a suite of choices, perhaps through optional units, that allows you to construct in some way the kind of course you would prefer to see. You might be looking for a strongly intellectual review of the range of current thinking on society and culture, in the same way that you might be interested in philosophy or politics. At the other extreme you might be interested in developing a set of skills which you feel will help you in the real world of effective communication and jobs – interviewing, writing, communications technology. Or, of course, you might want a combination of these which lets you look at particular areas you are interested in, such as language, or, perhaps, non-verbal communication or the history of print.

There are so many areas that you might find in your course that no one book can cover them all. But that's not what this book aims to do. Instead I'll offer you two things:

- key skills and knowledge that you will almost certainly need, no matter what flavour or choices your course offers;
- more general skills, sources and strategies that enable you to develop yourself in those areas I have not room to address in detail.

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### I.3 Multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity

MCCS is multidisciplinary. That is to say, none of the three main areas has its own, clearly defined discipline of study, unlike mathematics, say, or history, which have reasonably clear boundaries and a long tradition of studying phenomena in particular ways.

But the approaches used by MCCS come from many different disciplines, and the traditions of study in each of these areas can be traced back only a few decades (mainly to the 1970s). In a very simplified way, you can say that several disciplines existed more or less independently until the 1970s, but at about this time researchers and teachers saw that there were as many links between these disciplines as there were differences between them, especially where the focus was on the things people do with information. Elements of disciplines such as sociology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, linguistics, information science and anthropology were brought together to illuminate the way people communicate and the cultures they create. (Chapter 5 will help you understand some of the many different disciplines that interrelate in this way.)

For a student this is both good news and bad news. It's bad news because it means, in principle, that you need to understand at least the basics of several different disciplines in order to understand the breadth of your own subject. It also means that the potential field of study is immense, because the boundaries between, say, sociology relevant to cultural studies and sociology not relevant to cultural studies cannot easily be drawn. In fact one of the things that continually exercises the intellects of many academics in these disciplines is the attempt to draw these boundaries.

Debates about the distinction between cultural studies and communication studies, or the proper province of media studies, or the relevance of cognitive psychology to mass culture, are generally interesting, and can often lead the reader into new, even exciting areas. However, ultimately such debates do not mean very much, because the boundaries of these studies are pragmatically defined in two ways:

- *By what needs studying.* Often MCCS is responsive to current issues in contemporary life. If MCCS has a value to society in general, then that will largely be in helping us understand the way we live now, how we can improve understanding of the cultures we interact with and the communicative webs we find ourselves in. So the three studies within MCCS almost always have a contemporary edge. They look at contemporary issues, such as the latest moral panic, the impact of innovative information technology, the wider cultural significance of a music sub-culture, or the ways news reporting on the latest war has been constructed.
- *By what people actually research.* This, of course, is something of a circular definition: the object of study of MCCS research is what MCCS researchers choose to research. You might object that, in principle, this would allow academic MCCS researchers to examine anything they liked, anything at all. And you would be right: academics jealously guard the rights of academic freedom, which include the right to nominate anything as worthy of academic investigation.

To prevent pointless research, academia is threaded with various mechanisms for testing and assuring quality. I might be allowed, in principle, to research anything I feel like, but the outputs of that research will be judged in many different ways. Was it published? Was it well received by others in the community? Was the world changed? Do people now understand the phenomenon better? Have other people taken up the issues as something worth pursuing? Will research funders offer money on the work to help it develop and grow? All of these tests, and others, make sure that if someone does engage in a stupid or irrelevant piece of research, they are unlikely to continue in it.

In other words the academic community as a whole, and that includes you as a student, test the value of every individual's work. Although there are a few particular individuals who have a major impact on MCCA research, it is generally not individuals but the whole community who determine what is worth researching and what ideas are worth developing and perpetuating. If no-one thinks it was worth doing; if no-one can understand it; if no-one can apply it to the real world; if no-one will publish it – then the area sinks without trace.

Students may have a relatively small voice in such matters, but they do have a voice. One of your responsibilities, in developing your academic skills, is to do as good a job as you can of evaluating the work put in front of you: whether it's in a book, in a classroom, on the web or in a conference presentation [2.3]. By evaluating, that is, judging the value of all the research and ideas put in front of you, you contribute to collective opinions about the worthiness, or relevance, or appropriateness of that work in general. If students don't sign up for my course on Psychic Communication with Plants, I won't be allowed to teach it any more. If more students want to attend my workshop on New Trends in Interactive Web Design than can fit in the classroom, the chances are that I'll run it twice. If students voluntarily come along to our conference on the History of Radio Advertising, we might think about a class or a publication on the subject. And so on.

So, for a good student, multidisciplinary has an up-side too. It means you, like everyone else in the field, are an arbiter of the value of particular approaches, particular studies, particular purposes and particular research. There are no limits to what MCCA could study, or to how those studies could be pursued, so the boundaries are set by what people in the field collectively judge to be worthwhile. Part of the trick of being a good MCCA student is to establish criteria for judging what is 'worthwhile', and applying those judgements to the information and activities that come your way.

Through this book I aim to build your power to make such judgements.

A final up-side to the multidisciplinary nature of MCCA for a student is that it can allow you to go in almost any direction you wish. Of course, within the course you're studying there will be limits: the tutors will not have expertise in everything, the library only stocks books in a finite set of areas. So you may find that an occasional interest is too specialist to be pursued. But if you look for interests that connect with what is said in class you should find many things that feel motivating, are relevant to your world, and yet still can be examined within your MCCA perspective.

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Some theorists prefer to see the three overlapping areas of ‘communication’, ‘media’ and ‘cultural studies’ as one single, interdisciplinary study uniting all three. As you work through this book, you’ll find your view of these three areas is a bit like approaching a crossroads in the centre of a busy city: all roads lead to the same point and connect with each other, but your view of the city and the crossroads itself depends on the road you are taking. A truly interdisciplinary approach to these three areas would not make a distinction between them, and it would see all the relevant theoretical perspectives as capable of integration. Such connectivity would be especially important in terms of the object of study.

However, as you will also see, the many different disciplines and theoretical perspectives that might come together to give a study of ‘cultural communication’ often do not readily reinforce each other. Sometimes this is for purely historical reasons, but sometimes it is due to more fundamental problems. There is, for example, a big divide between largely ‘scientific’ or ‘positivist’ approaches to studying MCCS, and those which take a more cultural perspective. It is not just a matter of emphasis; it can be a fundamental disagreement about the nature of the enterprise, about the worthwhile elements in the object of study.

To put this in an extreme way, a scientific approach may seek to uncover the underlying systematic structure of meaning in language, attempt to describe all its rules, and aim to be in a position to measure effective use of those rules (although no real approach has ever claimed to do this). At the opposite extreme, however, cultural theorists might say that every communication is different, because of the particular unique context in which it occurs, the special relations it holds to all other related communications, and the variation and ambiguity that may be involved.

The first group would suggest that the second group are not really ‘studying’ anything: they are simply restating or translating one text (that being analysed) into a different text (the analyst’s description) and nothing is being learned or gained: it’s ‘pseudo-science’; it’s ‘subjective nonsense’. The second group would say that the first is being misled if it believes there can be any objectivity or certainty in studying media, communications and culture; that they only appear to be able to make systematic statements by ignoring critical components of the communication, and that the statements they make are simply artefacts derived from taking a distorted view of what is really going on. These two groups are never going to be happy sitting in the same room.

But you, as a student, have to live with both of them, and all sorts of shades in between. Being a good student means being able to weave your way through these dilemmas and, effectively, deciding for yourself what works best and what doesn’t. Chapters 4 and 5, covering many concepts and contributing thinkers in MCCS, lay out the ground you have to navigate.

### 1.4 What can your course give you?

This question can be approached in three ways: by looking at what it ‘should give’, ‘could give’ and ‘must give’. But expecting the course to give you things lets you off

the hook. Your learning is your responsibility, as well as your university's. So let's turn these three on their heads, and examine what you should try to get from your course.

#### **I .4.1 Approach 1: what *should* you get from the course?**

Any university degree is, pretty obviously, an opportunity to learn. But the learning it offers is not merely facts, information and skills. It aims to develop you as a human being, so that your understanding of the world and of other people, and the way you interact with it and them, is deeper, better, more insightful and more beneficial to everyone concerned. It is about *understanding*: understanding key aspects of the human condition, understanding how you communicate with others, and how culture constrains and enables everything you do. A student with a 2:1 degree should find that out of this understanding comes a wide knowledge of human affairs which can be effectively applied in many contexts, but which can also enrich your experience of many aspects of your future life.

So this suggests that the good student should take on, with serious intent, every aspect of the course, every requirement and every criterion, to ensure that maximum learning takes place, and that understanding is as wide and as rich as the course can offer him or her.

#### **I .4.2 Approach 2: what *could* you get from the course?**

Essentially Approach 1 is a passive approach to your course. If it is well designed and the tutors have got it right, the student does his or her best to make sure that all the relevant tasks are performed as thoroughly and meaningfully as possible. Students adopting Approach 1 do everything required, and do it faithfully and responsibly, to the best of their abilities.

However, Approach 2 suggests a more proactive, or interactive relationship with the course. As well as just accepting everything that is offered, and carrying out all tasks seriously and as closely as possible to the stated requirements, the student also aims to develop beyond what the course lays out in its specification. The good student does not merely want to achieve the best results and the richest experiences of what the course offers, he or she also wants to push the boundaries a little, to go beyond what is being offered, to explore new areas, test new ideas, challenge some of the established views, experiment with different approaches, find creative solutions, and look for new routes through the material.

#### **I .4.3 Approach 3: what *must* you get from the course?**

This is the instrumental question, asked by students who simply want to pass, to get their degree and get on with their lives. By working out what you must learn, the skills you have to show and the knowledge you have to have, you can carve a path through your degree which aims at satisfying examiners, without worrying too much about what the actual value of that learning is.

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This book is not really intended for students who take Approach 3. For a start, they are unlikely to be interested in getting the best possible degree: they simply want to get a degree of some kind, so they are unlikely to read the book. It has not been written to enable a student to take the easiest road to satisfying assessment criteria, although parts of it could probably be used in this way, as it gives many checklists and guidelines which, if applied mechanically, ought to lead to reasonable results. However, I've written it for students adopting one of the first two approaches: who desire to get the best educational experience they can, or to give the best educational performance they can.

Both Approaches 1 and 2, if followed seriously, are likely to lead to a 2:1 qualification. Approach 1 is simplest, because it accepts that everything the course says is the case, and simply aims through application and intelligence to deliver the best responses in each case. It requires hard work, but it may not throw up many difficulties beyond the detailed ones of how and when to do things.

Approach 2 is harder, and more risky, because the student is implicitly challenging some aspects of the course: 'Surely it can be more than this? Why isn't that topic in the course? Isn't there some way that multimedia technologies and content analysis can be combined?' The student is looking for creative approaches to work, exploring the edges of the conventional course.

Sometimes this more adventurous approach can create problems, such as:

- irritating or upsetting tutors by apparently being critical of their teaching;
- getting distracted by irrelevant ideas;
- being seduced by apparently creative novelty which is actually nonsensical.

So students who use this sort of approach typically get more variable marks: sometimes the risks pay off and they get first-class marks; sometimes they fall foul of their own cleverness, and end up with a poor mark. Overall, the variation tends to cancel out, so that a high 2:2 or a good 2:1 tends to be the result. And, of course, the student who gets it consistently right may well end up with a first.

Only you can decide whether hard work and application are enough, or whether a little creative risk should be attempted with the aim of getting a fuller challenge from your course, and possibly boosting your marks as a result. Tutors like to see creativity, such as attempts to bring unusual approaches to bear, or to explore an innovative solution to a problem, or practical work which does not simply follow the mainstream. But tutors also have to assess work against clear marking schemes, and if your work goes too far from the requirements laid down, it may be so 'off the wall' that reasonable marks can't be had. For these reasons, it is perhaps best to combine Approaches 1 and 2: follow the rules, apply yourself diligently, carry out each task thoroughly on every occasion, but keep your eye open for the creative moment, when the small risk that might pay off. Don't hang everything in one assignment or course unit on a single novel approach, but look for small ways that you can explore creative, slightly novel, elements in your work.

You will find some examples of these kinds of creative approaches in Chapter 6.

## I.5 Communication skills

MCCS courses are somewhat unusual in that the topics you can learn about may also be the means you use to express that learning. You might, for example, write an essay about writing, or design a multimedia application on communications technology. You might take part in a group presentation on giving a talk, or find yourself analysing texts about text analysis.

This means that much of the time the subjects you are learning about may also help you be a better student: learning about the psychology of information processing might help you understand and improve your own information processing. So there is a special ‘meta-skill’ that it’s useful for MCCS students to acquire – the skill of recognizing when something you are learning about may help you in the practise of your course.

Students sometimes tend to compartmentalize their learning. They may separate what they think their tutors want them to know from the real world they are learning in. For example, you may think that ‘persuasive communication’ is a topic you would learn about, and perhaps write an essay on, and maybe put into practise in a practical assignment such as designing an advertizement. But anything you learn on that topic might also be useful to you if you have to convince an Examinations Board to approve your dissertation proposal, or give a presentation to get you elected as student representative, or develop an argument in an essay for which you have little supporting evidence.

Good students recognize the value of what they learn in enabling them to learn better, and do not compartmentalize their learning. They see the connections between things, within and across the different parts of their course; they apply theories to their practice; and they use aspects of their practice as examples in their accounts of theory.

Apart from this ‘meta-skill’, of recognizing communications information that can be useful to you in practice, what are the key skills a MCCS student might require? Pretty obviously these skills fall into two groups – skills needed as a student, and skills needed as a communicator. The first group is often referred to as ‘study skills’, and the second as ‘communication skills’.

I think ‘study skills’ is something of a misnomer. It suggests, on the one hand, that there are some skills which are only used when studying, and, on the other hand, that being a good student is just about being able to study. In fact, the skills needed to be a good student can apply in many contexts apart from studying. And you may well be able to study effectively, yet still have some difficulties as a student. So we might be better off regarding these as ‘learning skills’ rather than ‘study skills’ – ways of being a better learner, no matter what the context you have to learn in. These are the subject of Chapter 2.

Your view of communication skills will depend on your view of MCCS. But, clearly, some people can talk better, write better, interact more effectively or be more persuasive, and these skills are important not only when you leave university, but also throughout your academic career. So, from the word go, you need to hone your voice and be heard. Chapter 3 examines communication skills.

## 1.6 Using this book

The multidisciplinary nature of MCCS makes my job difficult, as this book needs to be relevant to a wide range of different students. If this was a much bigger book, it might have been possible to address all the needs of everybody who might be studying MCCS. But if it was a much bigger book it would probably be too expensive for most people who might want to use it.

So the way I've designed it is largely as a series of short sections, each addressing a particular topic or area. Generally, you should pick and choose only the sections that apply to you. Although you will find that almost everything in the book connects to your study in some sense, some parts of it will be more important than others, because of the particular way you are studying, or the particular topics you are exploring.

Different students also have different approaches to learning, so I designed this book to be used in any or all of four ways. My four uses are as follows:

- *Structured learning.* Start from the list of Contents and read a chapter or a section as particular needs arise. For example, if you have just begun your course, you are unlikely to want to read the section on dissertations, but you might want to read all of Chapter 2 'What makes a good learner?'
- *Reference.* Use this book like a dictionary, encyclopedia or bibliography, starting from Chapter 7. Chapter 7 is a trouble-shooting guide. It is an index to all the main topics in the book, a glossary of many important concepts, and also a list of possible problems and questions you might have, for which it offers advice, references to relevant sections of the text, and references to other helpful sources.
- *Browsing.* Use the book a bit like a website, jumping from topic to topic and section to section as you discover subtopics that interest you. You will see that, throughout the book, all the main sections are numbered with a chapter number followed by a section number, like this: 1.6. Cross-references between sections of the book are shown in square brackets like this: [1.6], enabling you to move backwards and forwards through it, taking excursions into topics along the way as you need them.
- *A logical read.* Read it from cover to cover, like most other books, learning as you go. You might perhaps skip-read the whole book early in your course, to develop a good idea of what it covers, then re-read the relevant chapters later, when you need specific support.

You can, of course, read different parts of the book in different ways. My suggestion for how to start is to read Chapters 3 and 4, which give you key guidance on how you can be effective as a learner, and how to develop your skills as a communicator, and then use the rest of the book as reference when you need it.

You may be able to think of other uses for my book. However, I'd probably prefer not to know about them!

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**HELPFUL TEXTS RELATED TO CHAPTER 1**

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The following books will get you a long way into the fundamental issues of studying MCCA:

- Corner, John and Hawthorn, Jeremy (eds) (1989) *Communication Studies: an Introductory Reader*
- Durham, Meenakshi Gigi and Kellner, Douglas M. (eds) (2001) *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*
- Fiske, John (1990) *Introduction to Communication Studies*
- O'Sullivan, Tim, Hartley, John, Saunders, Danny, Montgomery, Martin and Fiske, John (1994) *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*
- Rosengren, K.E. (1999) *Communication: an Introduction*
- Storey, John (1997) *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*

