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Re-imagining media education: Exploring new strategies for elementary students' emotional and social engagement

My experiences as a media researcher and media-education practitioner in elementary classrooms have often left me, like other media educators, conflicted as to what I *want* to do, what I *should* do and what I can do within the education system. Sholle and Denski (1993) characterized the field of media education as lacking a coherent connection between theory, research and practice, a field where educators are often not trained in media education and media researchers are not trained in educational strategy, leading experts in each discipline to "live categorically distinct separate lives" (p. 298). These distinct lives do not often allow for extensive meetings, discussions or understandings of each other's roles, strategies or obstacles in the field. Although media education is valued by many media researchers, educators and parents and is even integrated into Language Arts in various provinces across Canada, it is often neglected or relegated to the margins of the curriculum, thereby simultaneously existing "everywhere and nowhere" (Buckingham and Domaille, 2003, pp. 5-6).

Although media education has been emphasized in Canadian school curricula since the 1990s,[1] insufficient teacher training has long plagued its dissemination in class-

rooms due to funding deficiencies and few accredited media-education-teacher-training institutions. As such, the chances that media-education professional-development will be relegated to summer institutes or short-term, professional-development courses increases. The resulting short and informal teacher-training courses will, I believe, facilitate the development of a curricula consisting of 'sound bites' designed to be easily digested and transmitted, but lacking connection to the real world-lives of children, and thereby may be dismissed as irrelevant by the students. As David Considine (2002) suggests, we need to 'engage, don't enrage' the students, thus an educational pedagogy which values students emotional engagement will enhance students' imaginative understanding of their mediated world and engage them in a dialogue regarding their opinions, understandings, preferences and questions about their media saturated environment.

I would like to see a change in the current trends of teaching media education, a move away from pre-packaged media-education programs, and toward a theory of dynamic practice. Cyndy Scheibe recently called media literacy a 'process' rather than a 'content area'; "an approach to teaching, a different way of teaching, rather than more 'stuff' to teach" (Lundstrum, 2007, p. 18). Engaging in this type of 'process-based' media education, where content and process are highly linked, can be encouraged using strategies based on children's own ways of imaginatively understanding the world around them, as theorized by Kieran Egan's Imaginative Education. Most crucially, Egan has suggested that this way of thinking about learning can be applied to classroom teaching in virtually any context due to its focus on strategies for developing curricula, rather than merely facts to be learned (Fettes, 2005).

Imaginative education

It is a little odd that the eight- to fifteen-year-old's enjoyment of books, TV shows, and films that deal with the exotic and the extreme has had so little impact on learning theories and curriculum planning (Egan, 1997, p. 85).

The fact that popular-electronic-media purveyors have been much more successful in understanding and capitalizing on

children's imaginations than school-curricula developers suggests that media education needs to be viewed through a broader educational theory: a theory which focuses on students' emotional and intellectual engagement (Egan, 1988, 1992, 1997, 2005). Egan does not, in any form, condone the duplication of the entertainment industry within the classroom. Rather, he suggests that educators must focus on the investigation and emphasis of "the dramatic core of any topic", seeking out "the most powerful underlying structural features of the content" and bringing these into the discussion of the classroom (Egan, 1988, p. 196). Drawing on many sources from the fields of philosophy, psychology and education, both conceptual and empirical, Egan argues that even young children learn through imaginative engagement with the complex, abstract, and unfamiliar, and that the nature of this engagement develops and changes as children pick up new ways of thinking, speaking and acting that are prevalent in their cultural environment. That is, this is an approach that attends closely to what children actually find most imaginatively engaging, analyses that engagement, derives principles from the analysis, and then seeks to apply those principles to everyday curriculum topics to engage children's imaginations in learning.

Imaginative Education is an approach that attends closely to what children actually find most imaginatively engaging, analyzes that engagement, derives principles from the analysis and then seeks to apply those principles to everyday curriculum topics.

A curriculum developed using Imaginative Education does not focus on a linear accumulation of facts or information, nor a specific set of thinking skills, rather, it focuses "on the elaboration of children's sense-making capacities" (Egan, 1988, p. 210). These 'sense-making capacities', also termed Cognitive Tools, are used to guide teachers in the construction of lessons and units. Cognitive tools are the set of skills that children acquire within their historical, social and cultural environment. These sets of tools help to shape their understanding of the world and, unlike a Piagetian model of childhood, Imaginative Education Cognitive Tools are cultural tools chil-

dren use in their imaginative engagement with the world; tools that change as children move from a pre-linguistic to a language-based understanding of the world (see Table 1).

Egan discusses five kinds of understanding (which he calls Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, and Ironic) in *The Educated Mind* (1997). These kinds of understandings are also associated with frameworks to create and develop curriculum. Teachers associated with the Imaginative Education Research Group (IERG) have been using these frameworks to structure and organize the content of their lessons and have found that not only are the students more engaged with the content, but *they* are more engaged and enthusiastic about teaching their lessons.

A practicing Imaginative Education (IE) teacher recently claimed that prior to her understanding of IE she often played a 'hit and miss' game with her class and the curriculum content. Without the knowledge of why some lessons worked beautifully with some groups of students and miserably with others, she was often left in the dark as to what engaged the students and promoted their learning. Imaginative Education provided her with a framework for curriculum development and a set of common phrases and language to talk with other teachers or parents about not only successful techniques and strategies, but also the future aims and goals of education.

Egan suggests that using cognitive tools in the development of lessons can alter a teacher's understanding of education itself: "Seeing education as a process of maximizing our cognitive tool-kit, then, is to see it as a process of enlarging our understanding as far as possible given the tools our culture has developed" (http://ierg.net/about/cog_thoughts.html). While a teacher may have a box full of exciting 'tools' for classroom activities, these activities may not be associated with the tools the students have for understanding their world. Imaginative Education provides a basis for understanding the tools the students use in their daily lives and a means of using these tools within a classroom curriculum, thus bridging the engagement and intensity we often see on the playground or even in their media use with classroom curricula. Creating a 'sense of wonder' and 'mystery,' or incorporating a story into a lesson on fractions, for example, can make a tremendous difference in the way children learn and use this knowledge.

Table 1: Five Kinds of Understanding in Imaginative Education

Kinds of Understanding	*Somatic*	*Mythic*	*Romantic*	*Philosophic*	*Ironic*
Focus of the understanding	Pre-linguistic	Oral Language	Written Language	Theoretical use of Language	Reflexive use of Language
Cognitive Tools	Bodily senses	Story	Extremes and limits	Drive for generality	Limits of theory
	Emotional responses and attachment	Metaphor	Association with heroes	Processes	Reflexivity and identity
	Rhythm and musicality	Abstract binary opposite	Sense of wonder	Lure of certainty	Coalescence
	Gestures and communication	Forming images	Humanizing the meaning	General schemes and anomalies	Particularity
	Referencing and intentionality	Puzzle and mystery	Narrative understanding	Flexibility of theory	Radical epistemic doubt
	Humour	Joking	Hobbies and collecting	Search for authority and truth	
		Rhyme			

(Table in Stewart, K (2007), *A Brief Guide to Imaginative Media Education* adapted from Egan, K. (1997) The Educated Mind)

Somatic Understanding is associated with bodily sense. Egan (1997) suggests that “our body is the most fundamental mediating tool that shapes our understanding” (p. 5), and therefore teachers should become more aware that emotions, gestures, musicality, humour, and the way in which children relate to objects — sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell — all provide information for an understanding of the world around them.

Mythic Understanding is exemplified by the enrichment and expansion of oral language as well as an understanding that language is used to explore our thought, and expand our experience. Therefore, classroom content should take into con-

sideration linguistic tools such as metaphor, binary opposites and jokes as means of emotionally engaging the students in learning.

Romantic Understanding is exemplified by Cognitive Tools associated with the world of the written word and literacy. Egan suggests that content should be "constructed by seeing the object of study in the context of someone's or some people's thoughts, intentions, hopes and fears" (Egan, 1997, p. 93).

As children become teens they often focus on a systematic understanding of connections of ideas, theories and their experiences of the world. The **Philosophic Understanding** is exemplified by a need for generalization, a search for new organizing principals to make sense of the multitude of experiences in the adolescent's continually-expanding horizons.

Ironic Understanding is "a product of learning how to use languages' reflexiveness for complex communicational purposes"; to use the kinds of understanding together as a means of making sense and becoming aware that meaning has been constructed by us and does not exist 'out there' in some objective world.

Photo credit: Reprinted with permission from Feb. 28, 2007 *Burnaby NOW*, a CanWest MediaWorks Publication.

Stewart (right) and 'media detectives' engage in imaginative media education.

A new way of creating elementary media education lessons

As a media educator, I know from both an intuitive, as well as on a practical level, that talking to students about their media use, violence in the media, displacement of physical activity or consumer culture is not an easy task because of the highly personal and often self-identifying nature of media and media habits in our lives. As media culture becomes more intertwined with who we are (clothes, music tastes, access, food, etc.) teachers may often feel left in the dark, lacking both the language and skills to connect with the student, or faced with cynical looks if they attempt to share students' cultural tastes or norms. So where does that leave media education?

I have found that using an effective teaching strategy such as Imaginative Education has helped to create a curriculum which focuses not on condoning or condemning media use, but rather on the exploration of issues associated with media through a non-confrontational strategy. I sought, therefore, to examine how best to help elementary teachers integrate media education into their everyday practice. These pilot projects merged my world as an IERG associate and Education graduate student with an extensive media studies background with the worlds of two wonderfully energetic teachers in two very distinct school districts in British Columbia: Jude Comeau at Armstrong Elementary School in Burnaby and Laura Holmes-Saltzman at Tahayghen Elementary School in Masset, Haida Gwaii. I sought to provide teacher training by presenting examples of imaginatively-based, media-education lessons, and by supporting the teachers as they created space for the exploration of their students' media culture in classroom discussions.

Examples of lessons using cognitive tools for mythic understanding

Throughout the lessons we focused on the exploration of media environments rather than judging or condemning children's media and consumer tendencies. We sought to create awareness of media culture and to provide an open forum for the students to discuss the role that media play in their lives. Some of these tools are: story, puzzle and mystery, binary opposites, drama, jokes, rhyme and rhythm.

Story

How can we convey a sense of the educational adventure to children through our choice of curriculum content? What is the content of this adventure? It can be encapsulated in the great stories of the development of our civilization, of which the children are a part" (Egan, 1988, p. 195).

Narrative is a powerful cognitive tool for any educational experience and I have found using the idea of detectives, particularly *Media Detectives*, to be quite worthwhile in introducing media education to Grade 3 and 4 students. This is not to say that I have only adopted the theme of detectives, rather, I have used the narrative to help the students become detectives — to embody the characters rather than using a story of detectives as a hook. Herein lies the difference: we are not studying 'about' detectives; we are living the lives of detectives and all aspects of the unit embody this narrative.

Puzzle and Sense of Mystery

After completing every case study they were asked to share their experiences and acknowledge what skills they had accumulated (interviewing, observing, decoding…etc.). This created not only a rhythm in the lesson, but also helped the students link their learning to a 'whole story.' It helped to reduce the fragmentation often seen in media-education lessons which seek to teach students strategies of commercials, for example, without connecting these skills to a larger look at programming and the TV industry or even at media's influence on children's everyday choices and opinions.

Creating a sense of mystery by using knowledge and skills gained as element of a puzzle (pieces needed to understand a whole) not only kept the students on the edge of their seats, but created a wonderful opportunity for the teachers to also engage more emotionally and creatively with the content. The students solved weekly cases and in the process they learned to hone their observation skills by examining 'clues' found in media texts, images and advertising in their environments, they went 'undercover' to create their own ads, collected data through surveys, conducted interviews, and finally, analyzed the data to create a detective portfolio and report.

One case in particular had the students examine a series of codes in hopes of uncovering the secret messages behind them. The students' competence to recognize logos and ads became incredibly clear during our 'secret code' activity. Within minutes of distributing the 'secret codes' (the alphabet comprised logo letters from American brands; the 'O' in Oreo™, the 'T' from Tide™, etc.), the students not only recognized the stylized alphabet, but effortlessly acknowledged the brands associated with each font. This activity, like other cases, revealed 'hidden' knowledge that the students held whilst encouraging them to consider how they know this and how companies have been able to impact their memories so effectively. This led us to the deeper mystery involved in the subtlety and power of human perception, and consideration of why we can do this so amazingly well.

Binary opposites

Walk into any classroom and it is hard not to recognize the impact that consumer culture is having on children's social worlds. Characters from media culture litter children's possessions, from their running shoes to their school supplies, signifying who in the classroom is 'cool' and who isn't, who is 'in' and who is 'out' and who will be a friend or foe. This impact of branding was exemplified to the students when we asked them to seek out hidden clues. The students were asked to cover up all the logos on their clothing and shoes using sticky notes. The students were instantly struck by the number of sticky notes needed to complete this task. The discussions that followed exemplified the binary opposites of 'obnoxious' and 'sly' (or gross/subtle; overt/hidden), which we often see in advertising. The students further explored their own bodies and their classroom to seek out sly ads, such as those on the bottoms of their sneaker sole (which magically appear and follow them after walking through snow or water thus leaving a series of ads behind them) or the obnoxious ads like Gap shirts, which are bold and always 'looking for attention'.

Drama

Humanizing knowledge through a dramatic interpretation of an obnoxious ad — "hey I am here, check me out, don't look

away, look at ME !" — versus the sneaky, sly logo that hides or camouflages itself — "shhh.. you can't see me, but I am still advertising, ha ha I've tricked you, I am sly and sneaky like a fox" — not only emotionally engaged the students in the search and understanding of logo advertisements, but also provided a unique way to categorize and understand advertisements that may, in many instances, overwhelm our senses. The students not only adopted the language of obnoxious and sly, which was heard in various conversations for the rest of the year — "I saw the most obnoxious ad in my bedroom last night!" (Grade 3 boy) — but this strategy could be used to allow them to carefully construct their own language to describe specific advertisements they find.

Although we were continually cognisant of the students' wealth of knowledge, our commercial-making lesson — which allowed the students to go 'undercover' and become 'part of the advertising industry' — really cemented the notion that children, indeed, carry a great deal of hidden knowledge and, as educators, we can effectively use this, along with their enthusiasm for media culture, in the development of students' skills in the classroom.

The 'commercial' activity pushed the boundaries of trust within the classroom. Rather than teaching the characteristics of commercials (characters, theme, brand representation, etc.), we asked the students to form groups, think of an object to advertise and develop an ad — that was it! There were no further instructions, no time limits, and no required number of lines per person: there was basically very little intervention by the researcher or the teacher. One week later I brought in a video camera and shot the commercials. We were amazed: the shy children shone, the active children shared the stage, debates were had, concessions made and respect was shown for peers. Most surprisingly, however, was how they were able to create commercials almost as though they were following a standardized, contemporary format. The commercials were concise and entertaining: they discussed price, included benefits and results of product use, the students added music, used costumes and developed characters — they had developed brilliant commercials all on their own. This 'commercial' lesson plan not only provided opportunities for the students to

explore elements of commercials, but once again illustrated to them, as well as to us, how incredibly powerful and influential media culture, and particularly marketing strategies, has been in their lives.

Jokes

Due to the 'low-budget' format of the commercials, the students became increasingly aware of the power of language to communicate abstract notions and ideas. They played with the language and used genres of speech such as sarcasm, jokes, melodies or jingles to create the world they sought for their audience. The students were keenly aware of the nuances the industry uses to target audiences (candy for kids using gross humour), but because of the way the lessons were created, they were also given the chance to play with the notion of absurdity (candy for seniors with no teeth) thus deepening both their engagement as well as their understanding of marketing strategies.

Rhythm

We find rhythm in our everyday lives: in the seasons, day cycles, and even heartbeat and breathing patterns within our bodies. Astute teachers often employ rhythms in the classroom, perhaps calling it 'routines' or 'strategic classroom management'. I became acutely aware of the importance of rhythm when transitioning from one activity to a next, when introducing new topics and when threading topics together into a larger context for the class or even for the child's own experiences.

I found that gathering the Detectives in a circle at the beginning of each lesson and giving them a secret message helped to transition them from their playful demeanor at recess into a curious Detective frame of mind. Within the circle the students were introduced to the mysteries of each case and asked to connect with their groups to solve the case. Even the transition from the circle to their seats took on a familiarity each day: "if your first name begins with an A you may return to your seat" or "if your name rhymes with a colour you can return to your seat," etc. Though the students were in Grades 3 and 4, this activity held their attention and provided a very smooth transition from one space and activity to

another as well as continued with the theme of exploring interesting ways of using and viewing language.

Conclusion

The results of this project suggested that imaginative-based-media-education is able both to engage elementary students in questioning the role media play in their lives and also provide teachers with the understanding and confidence to create and incorporate media-education into their own practice.

I believe Imaginative Education provides educators with an understanding of the tools that children use to understand their world, thus facilitating the development of flexible strategies for creating lessons which engage students independent of the dynamics in their classroom. This educational theory, which emphasizes both content and processes of delivering the content, reduces the fragmentation seen in many current media-education lessons and thus increases opportunities for elementary students to acknowledge and understand the role of media in their lives. This strategy differs greatly from previous media-education programs which sought to inoculate students against the vices of the media or assume that deconstruction alone may lead to critical thinking.

Not only can Imaginative Education strategies create a positive environment for students, but they can also create a stimulating teaching and learning environment for teachers. At present, teachers are often unsure of how to incorporate media education into the classroom without displacing other valued subjects like literacy and numeracy. They may also be hesitant to introduce topics that they themselves have not been taught. Providing teachers with the understanding of imaginative-based media education, I believe, will guide the teacher towards an integration of media education into the mandated curriculum in a creative and engaging way. From my own research I have not only been able to cover the mandated curriculum, but have also seen how an increase in the level of engagement has created an excitement for learning in all of the students, including struggling students whose skills and talents in imaginative understandings of the world are often undervalued.

Kym Stewart is a doctoral candidate in Education at Simon Fraser University. For an extensive look at the lessons created during these pilot projects please go to 'For teachers' on her website (www.kymstewart.com) or check out the Imaginative Education Research Group website (www.ierg.net).

ENDNOTE

[1] As early as 1966, however, the National Film Board of Canada created a Summer Institute for teachers to study film and TV in ways they could better get NFB films into the classroom. Budget constrains forced many of the project to fold and it wasn't until the 1990s that media education really found a stable existence in the Canadian curriculum.

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