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Children as creators, consumers and curators: media education, principles and entitlement for younger learners

Because this is a manifesto I don’t feel the need to provide the exact references but hopefully all credit is duly acknowledged below…

At the outset I would also like to say that any debate about media education quickly leads to a debate about the purpose and scope of education more widely and moves further out into technology, pedagogy, culture, politics, economics, sociology, the future of humankind and beyond. There are many eloquent examples all over the web and right here on the manifesto site. This one is mainly centred on classrooms, mainly on primary schools and is from an unreconstructed student-centred educator in England.

So here are 9 principles for that setting, beginning with the most obvious one:

1. Context and entitlement: let’s widen the conception of literacy in education

As is often pointed out, children and young people’s experience of lived culture is all consuming and it’s no longer tenable to restrict the educational experience to narrow versions of literacy and equally narrow versions of ICT. We need media education from the earliest years of schooling. We can begin, as the BFI and Mark Reid suggest, by “Reframing literacy” so that we think about the predominant modes of cultural production. And if we do that then let’s address how children can, for example, learn about time-based texts, how the modes of gesture, image, speech and music can be made to produce specific meanings in these forms, from the earliest years. In this, as we know from Jackie Marsh and others, we will be building on what they know from their consumption and re-appropriation of media from their early years in the play, their talk and, when they have the opportunity, their own media texts.

2. Let’s connect with learner lives and cultures

Another line of argument suggests we need media education because the skills and dispositions being developed by children and young people outside places of learning threaten to open up a chasm and fracture the relationship between home and school. Some argue the inevitability of this fracturing from a techno-centric perspective because technological advances are seen to be largely unaccounted for in school systems; children and young people use games and social media outside the classroom to do amazing things they could never do in school. These arguments contain elements of undeniable truth which nevertheless have a tendency to lead their advocates towards a techno-romanticism which stifles any genuine engagement with lived culture and ultimately with curriculum development. They only take you so far and so in the literature around ICT in Education we have thousands of studies that call out for more “curriculum integration” without any notion of how this might happen. Technological determinism leads us nowhere in the end; however, thinking and learning about the media that gets made and distributed on those
devices might. For a further discussion of this issue see David Buckingham’s Beyond Technology.

We need to connect with the lives of learners in a curriculum based around the “what” and the “how” of the media that we make, share, consume, interpret and exhibit in lived culture. The Alexander review of primary education lists report after report which connects the kind of resulting breadth of curriculum experience with higher achievement. And Ken Robinson reminds us in his presentations about essential connections with skills and dispositions (and lives) of learners now (and in a changing world).

3. Open up a dialogue with younger learners in shaping media education

Ask the learners themselves about school (as myself, Neil Selwyn and Sue Cranmer recently did in a research project) and you will find they are quite sanguine about the home and school, recognising that they are different social spaces. At the same time, they call for a freeing up of school structures to take account of their likes, preferences, skills and dispositions with gaming culture and social media. What we need is a curriculum that understands the agency of children and young people as a factor in their successful learning.

4. Open up a dialogue between teachers in different disciplines about existing media education practice where it is happening

In primary schools I would like to see some building on and recognition of the work of those teachers who ensure that some learning with and around media takes place. Sometimes these are teachers who may have experienced media as part of an ICT course, sometimes these are colleagues who create media activities with a literacy (re)frame or under the label of the creative arts and humanities. These are starting points for a nascent media education in primary schools, where literacy (in its widest possible sense) and ICT meet, where the “what” and the “how” are discussed and negotiated. Too often, unfortunately, these activities are seen as peripheral, after the serious curriculum business has happened (high stakes league table subjects in the old primary core). Instead, of course, they could be located at the heart of learning activity providing a “digital glue” to hold topics and subjects together with younger learners (see Tim Brook for what digital glue is!). In any case, we need to get some of these people together: ICT co-ordinators, Literacy co-ordinators, Creativity co-ordinators, subject area co-ordinators and at least start talking to compare, contrast, and plan and to develop what media educators love to call the critical, the cultural and the creative. Speaking of which...

5. Restore some balance between creative and critical perspectives

Whilst the creative dimension is sometimes well developed in some activities and has been written about extensively (see Avril Loveless for an ICT perspective on this), the critical dimension is underdeveloped. Certainly, as far as moving image work goes, the sense in which the specific properties and possibilities of a time-based text require understanding and experience of a
range of forms to develop this critical capacity (see Cary Bazalgette’s work). Watching and making and learning to critique to improve and refine and understand is important. Once media texts are made, children know that they will be seen and judged. How will they respond and how do they critique others? How do take account of what viewers say? How do you filter and find the most useful things that are said and written? Can you find a genuine community of practice amongst the diatribes that clog up YouTube comment spaces for example?

6. Build an understanding of culture and empathy into a new media education

Culture – in the sense of seeing how cultures represent and are represented – is of huge importance. When we allow sweeping and un-evidenced generalisation to dictate patterns of debate and policy we are in trouble (as we can see at the moment in England). I’m thinking here of arguments made lazily and equally in the press and in various forums which announce: “all children do this” “all children watch that” “all children play computer games”. How about some respect for the complexity of economic and social life as well as cultural difference? I’m sure this could be layered into a new media education. One way would be to talk to learners about these issues.

7. Enough of media “projects”; it’s time to embed media education in regular recursive practice across the curriculum

Many media texts do get produced as a reward, or off-timetable activity or as part of a “project” which never gets revisited. In an animation research project, which worked differently, Cary Bazalgette, Becky Parry and I have seen evidence of the benefits of repeated experiences across a year; the recursive nature of the practice has benefits for learning about time-based texts and the writing of poetry at the same time (see. amongst others, the fabulous work of Joy Simpson and her network of schools in Devon). Each medium retains its distinctive features but supports the other. So, as part of their entitlement, I would expect to see a curriculum structure which was broad enough to encompass film, animation, games and social media on a range of platforms alongside learning from and with older forms of expression. How will we know where to set our expectations of engagement and production? We can look for projects which genuinely connect teaching, learning and research in the field. We can hopefully learn a lot from David Buckingham, Andrew Burn, Becky Parry and Mandy Powell’s ESRC study of media literacy and progression in the next few years.

8. Talking about safety is learning about safety

To some, the location of activity by younger learners in lived culture is problematic on the grounds of safety. As the social media habits develop earlier, media corporations are having to raise their game to provide safe new online playgrounds for the young proto-consumers (Moshi Monsters and so on). New opportunities for access and expression also carry risk and this is best addressed and brought into the open. Spaces in which children can openly discuss their concerns and learn for themselves how to manage risk
will potentially have the greatest effect. Sometimes, as noted above, the learner voice is the last to be heard. So, why not talk about it?

9. Curatorship is a new literacy practice; think about how we can develop media education which recognises this.

I would like to propose a fourth C word to sit alongside Creative, Cultural and Critical and that is Curatorship. It was a useful metaphor for processes I uncovered in my PhD study around children’s video production. One set of characteristics of new media is the way in which artefacts, social arrangements and the practices which grow up around them are altered (see Anna Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone). Certainly in regard to organisation and exhibition, children are growing up in a world in which the media that they collect and make can be organized, displayed and re-presented time and again in ways which were not possible before. Some of this will reflect their changing and multiple identities and affiliations as they grow but it is a qualitatively different experience to anything previously possible. It’s a new form of cultural production which is pitched partway between making and sharing, creating temporary collections for specific purposes and then dismantling them again.

I am not simply talking about archiving, though this is a subset of the skills which go into the new curatorship. Neither is this simply about arranging and presenting the texts in a pleasing way. Fundamentally, it is about knowing how the reflexive project of the self with its anchored and transient identities gets made and unmade over time in the various spaces online and how we live with this and function in new media (See Guy Merchant’s work on identity in new media and Giddens on reflexivity).

Samuel Johnson wrote that the “two offices of memory are collection and distribution”. Tweeting, Facebook and Blogging may be the current but ephemeral matches for these “offices” of centuries ago. But certainly we can now expand the first term to include “shared” and add “exhibition” to complete an encapsulation of a genuinely new experience. Let’s also imagine the use of the term “offices” has a vague match with “purpose or function” all of which might be caught by “aspects”, throw in media education and try this: “The three aspects of shared memory in new media are collection, distribution and exhibition.” And these are perhaps best in a new literacy practice of “curatorship”. We need a media education that recognises this is a new social and cultural practice.