Chapter 1

Young Children and Narrative Meaning-Making to Promote Arts and Technology

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ABSTRACT

Around the world, many young children under five years of age engage with arts and technology in their home environments. Engagement with arts and technology becomes a form of sense making and communication for the young child. When children enter early childhood educational settings, the same access to digital technology may not be visible. A divide between home environments and school environments may exist, with different cultural norms. Leven and Arafeh (2002) describe this as digital-disconnect between home-school contexts. This chapter will explore the importance of narrative meaning-making to promote arts and technology communication by young children. Narrative interactions allow children’s voices to be at the centre of decisions by the educator regarding arts and technology engagement. By allowing children’s voices to be heard around their engagement of arts and technology, we can reflect on reducing the gap between home environments and school environments for learning.

INTRODUCTION

Within Australia, the focus of this chapter, there is limited understanding of how educators can support young children’s sense making and communication through arts and technology.

Given that currently 871,000 children attend early childhood services in Australia for an average of 26 hours a week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010) where maternal or family conversations may not always be possible, it is the role of the early childhood educator to know how to support and scaffold the communication of very young children.

In this chapter, it is acknowledged that the term ‘young children’ is used to refer to children aged birth to eight years (United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund [UNICEF], nd), however there is particular reference to children aged birth to five years. The arts are defined as dance, drama, media, music and visual arts (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority,
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2013). ‘Digital technologies’ includes multiple desktop and mobile technologies as well as digital toys (e.g. bee-bots) (O’Hara, 2011) and internet enabled technologies that operate as platforms for young children’s consumption of digital media and associated popular culture (Gutnick, Robb, Takeuchi, & Kotler, 2011).

Engagement with technology in early childhood education is an area filled with “few facts and many opinions” (Skeele & Stefankiewicz, 2002, p.80). While many argue that technology and computers do have a place in the hands of young children (Cordes & Miller, 2000), others also argue that those who do not embrace new media may be in danger of losing touch with the popular culture of young children (Yelland, Neal, & Dakich, 2008). Plowman, Stephen and McPake (2010) have found that the limitations on the technologies available in most preschool settings and their lack of use for authentic activities means that there are few opportunities for children to develop awareness of the different cultural and work-related uses of technology. They have also found that Preschool and primary school educators have limited knowledge of children’s home experiences with technology. The need to increase research into young children’s computer and technology use has been expressed by many researchers and practitioners.

Educators are more comfortable with the engagement of traditional arts in early childhood settings (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010), compared with technology. For example, educators may have painting activities, musical instruments and dress up areas to promote imaginary play. The arts disciplines therefore act as a form of cultural tools to enact communication between the child and educator. Few arts activities however involve digital technology. Similar ideas about providing cultural tools can also be applied to thinking about the engagement with technology.

This chapter will explore the ways in which young children engage with arts and technology in their daily lives through the use of narrative interaction. By providing a summary of the current literature, the chapter will position the importance of understanding socio-cultural theory in regards to particular cultural and social contexts. It is advocated that all children should be offered equal opportunities to progress, develop and engage actively with the arts and technology. Equal opportunity fosters positive attitudes and provides opportunity for creativity and imagination (Duffy, 1998; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010; Wright, 2011). Early childhood education thus presents both a unique opportunity and a unique challenge; a part of that challenge is to engage and support all who care for and educate young children in making the arts and technology an integrated and vital part of their earliest experiences.

EXPLORING SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY

There have been many social, economic and technological changes in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century across the world, resulting in a change of experiences for childhood. For children in developed countries, most children now experience a range of technologies and arts activities as part of their every day lives. Books, magazines, television programs, movies, museums, internet sites, food, computer games and collectables are all increasingly connected to children’s popular culture (Buckingham, 2000). Popular culture provides many children with a shared frame of reference that is drawn into play with reinvention of characters and plots (Jones Diaz, Beecher, & Arthur, 2007) and contributes to identity construction (Kenway & Bullen, 2001). This means before children even enter formal educational settings, their identity has been shaped by prior experiences with the culture in which they live.

These changes in the late twentieth century have also influenced the way children’s learning is viewed. In particular, contemporary perspectives