The Efficacy of Working E-Portfolios to Assess Emergent and Digital Literacies Congruently in Social Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education instruction and assessment practices for emergent literacy were established in an era that prioritized standardization of knowledge based on age and stage of development. The evolution of 2.0 technologies has shifted culture within developed societies to prioritize digital literacy that is synonymous to political, social and economic capital. This article asserts two positions: the first is to shift the pedagogy of early childhood toward cultivating both emergent and digital literacies using traditional strategies in conjunction with technology. The second position is the efficacy of working e-portfolios to develop and assess multi-literacy. Fundamental attributes of working e-portfolios are outlined and applied to goals for multi-literacy in democratic early childhood classrooms. The three-pronged theoretical framework is the learner-centered approach espoused with Vygotsky’s social-constructivism, and Marie Clay’s theory of emergent literacy development in social contexts.

KEYWORDS

Assessment, Democracy, Digital-Literacy, Early Childhood Education, Emergent Literacy, Learner-Centered, Multi-Literacy, New Capitalism, Social-Constructivism, Working E-Portfolio

INTRODUCTION

At the root of every culture is a language that binds them. Literacy is a command of the language that signifies citizenship within a specific culture (Clay, 1991). Information and communication technology (ICT) is inherently woven into the fabric of modern day societies, has its own language, and an advantaged citizenry that the existing early childhood education (ECE) pedagogy does not reflect in literacy instruction (Cope & Kalantis, 2000). This paper presents two positions that support the cultivation of young children into this elite citizenry:

1. Learner-centered, socially-constructed approaches to teaching in home and school contexts are the optimal method to developing emergent and digital literacies (multi-literacies), congruently.
2. The working e-portfolio is an ideal multi-literacy assessment tool in a democratic early learning environment.

EMERGENT LITERACY AND DIGITAL LITERACY

Emergent literacy is the continuum of language development heavily influenced by social interactions in the home, community and school environments (Clay, 1991). Emergent literacy is comprised of a...
set of skills that a child builds upon to eventually read and write in their native language(s) (Tabors, Roach & Snow, 2001). Books and writing tools are typically used to express this type of literacy.

Digital Literacy is also a continuum of learning, creating and communicating heavily influenced by social interaction and exposure, but with technology as the mediating mode. This form of literacy encompasses individuals’ ability to manipulate and navigate a digital device to search, produce and communicate using keyboard strokes and touch on a screen (Cviko, McKenney & Voogt, 2012; Gee & Hayes, 2011).

Literacy was traditionally defined as reading and writing a human language, typically linear and print based (textualized), but the growing multi-literacies of the digital generation (de-textualized) are imposing a broader definition (Gee & Hayes, 2011). This paper posits digital literacy as integral to emergent literacy if provided in a learner-centered, socially constructed milieu. These literacies tethered are termed “multi-literacy,” and will be referred to as such throughout the remainder of this report.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social-constructivist theory in conjunction with the learner-centered approach are recognized in ECE as instrumental in developing emergent literacy, using traditional methods (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Gee, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). What have not been formally implemented in ECE curricula are the pragmatic applications of this approach using ICT to support digital literacy (Yelland, 2011). Concerned that new technological advances are not supported in theory or practiced over time, many educators believe innovation to be a threat to previously successful systems. Teachers are essentially missing the boat on the efficacy of technology to assist their instruction and assessment (Parette, Quesenburry & Blum, 2010). The pull of traditional instruction with the push of new technologies has created a chasm in ECE that has not been universally resolved. Simply adding technology to curricula is a superficial recognition of ICT’s relevance within the digital culture and undermines its full potential to enhance learning (Labbo, 2006; Masek, 2016b). Instead, an actual shift in ECE pedagogy that incorporates ICT must take place, manifested by teachers who develop a new perspective of its value based on pedagogical soundness of the platforms they use for various learning goals and objectives (Hemmeter, Maxwell, Ault & Schuster, 2001; Yelland, 2007).

The global reliance on ICT and the ubiquity of digital media is recognized in the early childhood education field as one of children’s lifeworlds from which learning is influenced and, to some degree, shaped (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Yelland, 2007). Jerome Bruner (according to Driscoll, 2000), renowned Constructivist theorist, asserted that “children, as they grow, must acquire the ways of representing the recurrent regularities in their environment” (p. 375). Digital media that surround children in its various forms has become part of the environment that children are now incorporating into their conventionalized perceptions, many starting at birth. Maintaining old pedagogies that were constructed for times before 2.0 technologies were prevalent will not only stifle children’s multi-literacy, but also impede on their opportunities to succeed in global economies. ECE professional organizations are recognizing that ICT can be beneficial in developing emerging literacy skills when appropriately and integrally incorporated into curricula (ISTE, 2011; Johansen, Bell & Daytner, 2008; NAEYC, 2012; Masek, 2013). What is lacking is a connection between established theoretical frameworks of early childhood education and assessment, and this relatively new mode of learning that requires digital literacy from children, teachers and parents (Gee & Hayes, 2011; Tabors, Snow & Dickinson, 2001).

This position paper presents two paradigms: First, the established social-constructivist theory of learning espoused with the learner-centered approach to teaching can be directly applied to digital and emergent literacies, combined. The use of benchmarks to assess progress in various domains have served as tools for collecting data to better align instruction and curricular aims for individual children in the past, but this system contradicts what experts are saying truly measures children’s multi-literacies today (Anderson, 1998; Gee & Hayes, 2011). Second, current research supports the use of
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