Artifice and Education: Re-mediating Curriculum

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One of the things that makes the Art Center at Central Technical Secondary School in Toronto, which hosted the Being on Time Exhibition, such a unique educational site is that its curriculum privileges the visual object and the practice of visual art as a mode of expression. Although in many public schools, children are encouraged to make pictures and to look at pictures, the visual object is not traditionally imagined by educators to be an adequate site of knowledge. More often than not, the visual text is understood in education as an addendum to written or verbal representation, an accessory to the documentation and record of the word.

While the curriculum in Ontario continues to privilege the written word as the superior expression of literacy and mode of production, a school-based exhibition like Being on Time allows students to see themselves and the world, and encounter ideas through the lenses of other media. The artists who participated in this exhibition created works that positioned Central Technical's students, who lived at school among the installations for over a month, not only as viewers and readers of art objects, but also as their subjects, whose own experience became mediated and represented in the unfolding of the exhibition. For example, students heard their nightmares and dreams recorded and replayed in Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak's "...bump in the night," wrote and read their affect and ideas onto Ho Tam's chalkboard panels, and saw their bodies mediated and distorted in the video footage of Kelly Mark's "Hiccup" and the funhouse mirrors installed by Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan.

Witnessing the unique experience of this school-based art exhibit around questions of time and technology has helped me to think about how the use of computer technology and other electronic media in the classroom might encourage educators to reconsider the work of visual objects in the production of knowledge and articulation of curriculum. Certainly, the significance of visual media and image-based communication in Canadian classrooms is increasing and our ideas about what constitutes an educational text are shifting. Over the last few months, while studying the use of digital technologies in public schools, I've come across several examples of the ways in which these technologies are proliferating the use of images in the classroom. Grade three students at a school in Brampton, Ontario regularly bring a digital camera on their fieldtrips and integrate the images they take into classroom work. Students in a grade

five class I visited recently spent a good portion of one afternoon working their way through a series of CD-ROMs that contained almost no written text, but a seemingly infinite number of visual montages. These visual objects and texts pose a series of challenges to educators who must integrate and evaluate them in the absence of curriculum guidelines that address the work of visual images in teaching and learning.

At the same time, our difficulty in grappling with these new visual objects points to a fundamental tension between techno-science and aesthetics in histories of representation and between techno-science and art in education. In their introduction to a collection of writings exploring the manner in which "visibilities" become characterized as science or art, Jones and Galison ask "is entering an artist's website an artistic or a technological experience" (1998, 1)? While exhibitions like Being on Time manage to hold-on to these tensions without settling the question, the work of education has not been as able to tolerate this.

Teachers are encouraged to understand the classroom use of representational technologies, such as digital cameras, scanners, and multimedia software, in primarily technical terms. Current curriculum practices and guidelines that address new media emphasize the technical skills acquired through their use and fail to address their aesthetic or epistemological dimensions. Even schools with a strong project-based focus on technology — which aims to integrate technology through classroom projects rather than as an isolated subject — develop curriculum guidelines and tools for assessment that reduce the use of imaging technologies to a list of technical skills. For example, a set of curriculum guidelines for "technology projects" developed in an Ontario school I visited describes a series of digital design experiences for students in the elementary grades. Its rubric for assessment, rather than emphasizing the complex aesthetic and epistemological work of designing a visual text, lists the technical skills that should be acquired by students, including "log on and off," "using mouse," "connect printer," "use tool bar buttons," etc.

That the elements of art and knowledge, and the questions of aesthetics and epistemology, tend to be overlooked when educators engage with and evaluate representational technologies is a result of two inter-related factors. First, technology is not situated as an object that exists across the disciplines and participates in the building of ideas in all domains. Rather, technology is positioned within the existing disciplinary binary between the sciences and the arts, where it is allied closely with science and thus in opposition to the arts and humanities. How often do we hear the phrase "science and technology"? Second, there is an overwhelming contemporary preoccupation with the importance of science and technology in public education and a simultaneous marginalization or devaluation of the

arts and humanities. Functionalist discourses in the arenas of politics and education assert that we must train our students to compete for jobs in a future sure to be dominated by techno-science.

These discourses help sustain a view of student experiences with imaging technologies that ignores the aesthetic or epistemological possibilities in these curricular objects and understands their significance as purely technical and skills-based. At the same time, when these new technologies are used to represent the world—perhaps via the world wide web or CD-ROM—their epistemological significance is limited to a sort of scientific empiricism that privileges immediacy and authenticity. Like its electronic and analog precursors, including television, film, and video, the world wide web and other digital multimedia are touted by educators and others as providing access to the "real world" for all students.

Last spring, I visited an elementary ESL classroom in Abbotsford, B.C. The teacher of this class, Emily, raved about what a difference having one computer in her classroom had made.[1] This one computer sat on her desk in the corner. Emily described how the class had used this computer, along with a digital camera, to create illustrations and booklets that could tell their own stories. With great enthusiasm, Emily also explained her discovery of the world wide web, and the way she was able to share it with her students during a recent unit of study on tornados. Whereas normally they would have simply read about the action of a tornado, Emily described how she and her entire class had huddled around the one computer in their classroom to look at an online video clip of a tornado in action. Emily was thrilled that she had been able to give her students access to what she described as the "real thing."

This conversation with Emily, and the kinds of school-based practices it represents, is especially interesting to me because of what it says about the use of the image or artifice in education as well as education's relationship to time. Emily's interpretation of the visual object she employs does not address its work as art or artifice. Instead, it is the image's immediacy she finds remarkable. Emily interprets the visual text as a more authentic representation of a tornado than a written text—this was a "real" tornado—and it was accessible to all of her students at the same time, immediately. Her description of the online video clip illustrates an irony articulated by Bolter and Grusin (1999) as the relationship between hypermediacy and immediacy.

Bolter and Grusin suggest that our thinking about media is bound by a double logic they call "remediation" in which "our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 5). They argue that this logic shapes our perception of highly medi-

ated representations as more immediate or somehow closer to the "real thing." For example, viewers seem to experience websites that imitate the feel of a live television broadcast as offering more immediate access to "real world" events, even though the content is in fact doubly mediated. Such "real world" media, like the world wide web and even television, are commonly employed in the classroom and differ from the media on display during the Being on Time exhibit in their "attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation." Unlike visual art that implicates the viewer in a relationship with the medium as much as the object, educational media "seek to put the viewer in the same space as the object viewed" (Ibid., 11).

For Emily, the classroom experience of the video clip was immediate, both in terms of its authenticity and its temporality, despite the fact that it was mediated both through video and the digital environment of the website. Her enthusiasm for this perceived immediacy is symptomatic of larger political concerns in education that learning be relevant and immediately testable, and this interpretation of the visual text reflects the common understanding that knowledge comprises a series of objects to be acquired as quickly as possible in successive order. Bruno Latour describes this relation to knowledge and time as quintessentially modern. "The moderns have a particular propensity for understanding time that passes as if it were really abolishing the past behind it," he writes. "[They] sense time as an irreversible arrow, as capitalization, as progress" (Latour 1991, 68-69). This relation to time produces an understanding of education as progressive 'betterment' and a fetish for the immediate moment as a pinnacle of experience (epitomized by the widely used colloquialism 'real time,' which is used to describe computer-mediated experiences that occur simultaneously in the 'real' world, unhampered by time delay, and thus are seemingly unmediated).

Emily's response to the visual object of the video clip can be seen as a product of this functionalist and empiricist approach to media and its failure to consider the educational image as a contingent and subjective representation or artifice. Rather than addressing its work as art or artifice, it is the image's immediacy that Emily finds remarkable. She interprets the visual text as a more authentic representation of a tornado than a written text—this was a 'real' tornado—and it was accessible to all of her students at the same time, immediately. What would it mean to read the videotext of the tornado as artifice? What would it mean to see the visual object of the tornado as hyper-mediated, rather than immediate?

Some theorists have argued that in trying to account for the kinds of technologically mediated visual texts that teachers are using, we should

modify our language in a way that de-emphasizes the visual object as an art object or artistic representation. Instead they suggest that these visual texts only be understood in terms of communication media or representational technology. While it is imperative that our consideration of the work of images extend beyond the traditional domain of the arts, particularly insofar as this would problematize and enrich our understandings of scientific representation, I would also like to suggest that it may precisely be a renewed emphasis on art and the image as artifice that will invigorate our theories of learning across disciplines in the context of visual media.

Whereas an interpretation of the video clip shown in Emily's classroom as the "real thing" positioned her students as observers, an understanding of the visual text as artifice locates the learner/viewer in an interpretive relation. The artifice or art object, by its very nature, requires the work of interpretation, and like the contemporary art on exhibit at Being on Time, may even incorporate this interpretive work as fundamental to the art object itself. The artifice implicates the conditions of its own articulation and thus demands that we not only see it, but also make meaning of it. By centering interpretation as a mode of learning with the visual text, students are encouraged to question the confluence of reality and immediacy. For instance, in giving up the dream of reality, students may ask, to what does this image refer? How was this image produced? How does this image position me as a learner?

To repose the curricular relation, between students and texts, as productive and interpretive, is to destabilize knowledge. Rather than privileging the object of knowledge—in this case, the idea of the tornado—this interpretive relation refigures what happens in-between the subject and object, in mediation, in what Latour (1991) calls the "Middle Kingdom," and in what curriculum theorists like Madeleine Grumet (1995) describe as the curricular conversation. This practice or art of knowing is what Suzanne de Castell (2000) describes as an "art of passage," rather than an "art of classification." Addressing a similar method of knowing, Elspeth Probyn argues that "truly interdisciplinary work changes the object, it changes the point of departure so that instead of 'founding' the object, we follow it: [the object] 'is experienced' only in an activity of production... its constitutive movement is that of a cutting across" (Probyn 1995, 7).

This interpretive relation and its 'sideways' and non-teleological movement, which does not normalize any one way of knowing the text or object, suggests not only a new relationship to knowledge, but also a new way of thinking about the passage of time—the time of looking and the time of learning—that is not necessarily the same as time passing. Latour argues that "when we abandon the modern world, we do not fall upon

someone or something, we do not land on an essence, but on a process, on a movement, a passage —literally a pass, in the sense of this term as used in ball games" (Latour 1991, 129). Subjects and objects, students and texts are constituted in this activity of mediation, this passage of time, this movement of becoming.

The use of visual texts and objects in public school classrooms demands that we begin to theorize about the relationship between looking and learning. When understood as hermeneutic and as art object, new media and visual texts pose a significant challenge to traditional theories of learning because, in privileging the work of interpretation, the artifice makes epistemological demands on the learner. In trying to make meaning from the video clip of the tornado, the students in Emily's class must also re-imagine themselves in relation to the text and the world. To consider an education that values the productive work of the artifice in addition to a search for authenticity poses an opportunity to re-assert the ways in which looking at art can help us see the world. This is the lesson that an exhibit like Being On Time offers education, and the challenge a re-invigoration of the arts offers curriculum. An education that not only includes the study of art but engages with art as a method privileges the time of becoming over the immediate moment, and thus also makes room for what our students may make for themselves. Perhaps instead of locating the viewer in a fixed relation to knowledge, the use of new media in the classroom can act as a pedagogical invitation through which the viewer will form relations to knowledge even they themselves cannot yet imagine.

Notes

1. I am using a pseudonym here in order to protect the identity of the teacher.

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