

reflections

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MESSY, MOBILE MAKING: CONSIDERING CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR EARLY LEARNERS

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Parents, caregivers and educators often face difficult choices as they navigate through discussions about technology in an early years setting.

Entrusted with the care and developmental support of some of our littlest learners, exciting opportunities to develop so-called 21st Century skills may sit alongside concerns about an unfamiliar classroom landscape that includes new tools. To ensure conversations go beyond debates about 'screen time', it is important to affirm that any approach for technology integration in early years education should focus on 'how' we engage children in meaningful learning experiences, and the ways in which technology can support that vision.

It is important to affirm up front that 'a device' cannot take the place of a wonderful teacher, a kind friend or that feeling of wet sand between your toes. Technology does not replace developmental play. Engaging in meaningful collaborations and communities, and exploring hands-on, messy and tactile materials should be at the core of early learning experiences for children.

While there are many digital tools that can be used in the development of literacy and numeracy skills, my 'inner art teacher' is most interested in those that purposefully connect children with their own precious and innate creativity.

Connecting with Creativity

When children, of all ages, are encouraged to think and act creatively, they are often open to new ideas, more willing to accept challenges and may readily embark on a process of 'finding out for themselves'. There are also strong links to collaboration and problem solving skills, as well as increased ownership over their own learning.

While it should go without saying that all children are inherently creative, the challenge for educators often lies in protecting, nurturing and nourishing this very natural attribute. I often refer teachers in schools to some of the practical and effective approaches that early learning contexts leverage in support of this goal, including:

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- Asking open-ended questions such as ‘How could you...’, ‘What if...’, and ‘What might come next?’
- Delivering timely, constructive feedback that reflects on and rewards creative approaches.
- Incorporating opportunities for experimentation and hands-on exploration of materials during problem solving.
- Valuing and facilitating collaboration.
- Creating an environment where challenges can be openly discussed and failure is positioned as a step towards learning and success.
- Engaging with explicit strategies that make the creative process visible, develop an ability and confidence to engage with new ideas.

These examples are certainly not situated in any subject-specific pedagogical approaches, and represent elements of best practice across year levels and diverse contexts.

Importantly, in considering these simple and valuable practices and pedagogies we may also find some useful guidelines for best practice in technology integration.

Mobile Devices for Teaching and Learning

Although tablet devices were generally designed for an adult consumer, the rapid appropriation of devices such

as iPads to support teaching and learning in diverse classroom contexts has been in response to long battery-life, durable construction, affordable price-points and simplicity of use. “Tablets, smartphones, and mobile apps have become too ubiquitous, and too useful to ignore.” (Johnson et al., 2013, p. 16).

While many apps do provide children with some engaging and exciting interfaces, providing the potential for transformative use of iPads in an early learning context, they may be difficult to find on the App Store. Many developers selling in the ‘Education’ category have not designed their product with collaboration and creativity in mind.

So where do you start? The answer must be, with the learner.

In constructing opportunities for learning, educators work with the individual needs, interests and goals of the young person in their care. Decisions about technology integration should fit into that paradigm. Going further, substituting a tool or task for a digital alternative may have no impact on learning. Best practice with technology allows children to engage in new or redesigned learning experiences that were previously difficult or inconceivable (Puentedura, 2009).

It is my belief that considering learner access to the camera is of critical importance in this discussion.



The connected camera drives the production of original content

The untethered nature of the iPad connects children and educators with creative tools that allow children to become 'active creators', rather than consumers, of content. Exploring their surrounds through the lens provides children with new ways of seeing their environment and interacting with their world.

Increasingly, even very young children have access to iPads and smart phones in their homes. And, although they may have access to a range of media for creativity, by the time they hit upper primary school age it's almost certainly a personal mobile device that is their most utilised tool in this regard. This places increased importance on early development of control over photographic processes, and an understanding of visual language and photographic communication is advantageous.

In the early years, children can use the camera to record, respond and reflect on their own unique point of view, a powerful starting point for conversation, critical thinking, art-making and image construction.

While photography is often the entry point for creativity on mobile devices, purposeful app selection and responsive lesson design can effectively link tactile materials and hands-on processes together with digital tools to produce rich learning experiences. By combining traditional techniques with digital mediums, children can develop a rich 'creative tool-box' and a flexible, experimental and mixed-media approach that aligns with the needs of the 21st Century learner.

While this may take a variety of forms in response to a variety of contexts and learning objectives, as an example, a child may be encouraged to search the playground for objects beginning with a letter of the alphabet. Photographing this object using the iPad camera, and then recording a sentence using the letter with a tool in another app is a seamless workflow. Working with assistance, a class might develop a digital book of these alphabet investigations to be used at reading time, and this can be shared with parents, caregivers and other educators.

Mobile devices such as the iPad are powerful tools for early years education when integration strategies and pedagogical approaches are centered on 'how' we

engage children in learning, and the ways in which technology can support that vision.

TOP TECHNOLOGY TIPS FOR EDUCATORS, CAREGIVERS AND PARENTS

1. Using technology can be a wonderfully collaborative experience – seek out opportunities to play and learn together.
2. Ask children to teach you what they know rather than accepting a 'digital divide' between you.
3. Support children in choosing apps that allow them to 'make and create'. Think about exploring animations, drawings, songs etc. rather than games, and look for those apps that provide a unique creative experience each time they are used.

Great apps and ideas to get you started...

BOOK CREATOR

Produce digital books with images, sound and text.

Think collaborative class books, collections of images, and student storytelling in response to photographs.

FACES I MAKE

Create digital collage with pictures of all kinds of objects.

Think faces made with a montage of favourite foods, collections of objects in a single colour or creatures created with household tools.

CHATTERKID

Draw a line on any photo and make an inanimate object talk!

Think about snapping shots of a tooth brush or a piece of fruit to create a talking object as part of a social story, etc.

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- Puentedura, R. (2009) *As We May Teach: Educational Technology, From Theory Into Practice*. Available at www.hippasus.com/rrpweblog/rubenrp@hippasus.com

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