

# Building Agency Through Play-Based Collaborative Learning: A Primary Students' *Environment-as-Media* Inquiry

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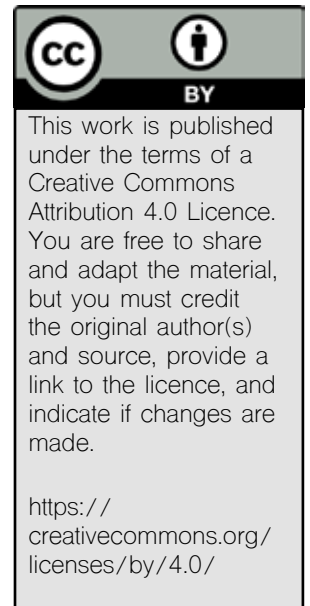
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## Abstract

This thought piece presents a strategy educators might employ to expand the definition of media beyond screen content/text to include holistic “environments”. The theoretical inspiration for this work comes from Marshall McLuhan’s notion of “figure and ground”. This is the spirit of “environment-as-media”, predicated on the notion that our everyday environments – in McLuhan’s terms, our “ground” – are largely invisible to us, and furthermore, are constructs with sociological and power implications for agency. The central question is, “how might understanding environment-as-media inspire play, and support children’s agency and sense of belonging?” Chelsea Attwell’s Community Walk project takes McLuhan’s lead in defining architecture, urban design, traffic signage – all human-made artefacts and environments – as media containing ideological and social messages, and then nudges children to question how this environment relates to and supports their agency and sense of belonging. The authors trace the project from the planning process and the walk through to the post-walk classroom, digital and “loose parts” process. The reflection is contextualized by the work of more contemporary theorists such as Margaret Mackey, Michael Gallagher, Kate Cowan and others on play, agency, and literacies. The project illustrates how a blend of traditional cultural studies and iconoclastic frameworks provides fertile ground for integrating playful “community-as-inquiry” and exercise of agency with environment-as-media exploration. As next steps, the authors propose applying the approach to virtual environments, as well as exploring Mackey’s “mapping and literacies” work, and situating Gallagher’s work on agency in McLuhan’s ideas.

**Keywords:** media literacy, inquiry, agency, McLuhan



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We acknowledge we are hosted on the lands of the Mississaugas of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Wendat. We also recognize the enduring presence of all First Nations, Métis and the Inuit peoples. (Toronto District School Board, n.d.).

## Media Literacy and the Role of Agency

Agency involves factors such as individual choice, autonomy, self-determination and creativity. It implies activity, but it also implies power – the power to produce an effect, to have influence, to make a difference. (Buckingham, 2017, p.12)

We Canadians are indebted to the UK theorists who forged the cultural studies foundations of media literacy education in the 1950-70s. Progressives such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and Stuart Hall utilized agency as the prime lens through which to examine culture and its artefacts: who holds power? who does not? how do we know? Though the “lens” metaphor implies a sort of refracted critical thinking about culture, it provided a means for learners to interrogate hegemonic systems that might otherwise be invisible.

Agency was a central focus in the 1986 genesis of Ontario's media literacy framework, patterned on that of the UK. But we added the concept that “content follows form”, Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan's theory that technologies give rise to new structures of feeling and thought, and new ways of perception. He believed that when citizens understood that “the medium is the message”, they were better able to navigate and withstand the storms of change.

## Environment as media: seeing the forest AND the trees

The bedrock of McLuhan's philosophy is actually “figure and ground”. Distracted by compelling, everyday phenomena (figure), blinded to the invisible, immersive environment (ground), we fail to see the whole infrastructure. He sometimes used “content” for “figure” and “environment”, or “medium”, for “ground” to describe the figure/ground relationship.

“The medium is the message” can therefore be understood as a reminder that a preoccupation with the uses and content of a technology distracts us from the real message – that the tools them-

selves (and their environments) shape us. They are the invisible ground. The “bedazzlement” of these communications technologies so distract us that we fail to perceive their impact on us. So when we fail to notice the smartphone’s societal effect because we see only a portal to our personal world, it is a figure/ground issue. For McLuhan, media literacy meant building agency by discerning the ground’s relationship to the figure. Seeing the forest AND the trees.

### City as Classroom

A modest but timely 1977 publication by McLuhan and his son Eric, with educator Kathryn Hutchon, *City as Classroom*, advocated for student inquiry into the hegemonic, constructed environment/s that shape their daily lives – environments they take for granted, and do not necessarily think critically about:

...City as Classroom ... outlines methods for training perception through a series of exercises in properties of the media, with the goal of helping students to understand the socio-cultural context in which they live. The exercises encourage students to go out into the community and observe, listen, interview, research, ... (Kuskis, 2013, p. 2)

This is the spirit of an “environment-as-media” inquiry, predicated on the notion that our everyday environments - in McLuhan’s terms, our ground – are media spaces that contain social and ideological implications and are largely invisible to us. Kevin Lynch, a contemporary of McLuhan, similarly described the urban ground as a “legible” environment – “a city-scape that can be recognized, organized into a coherent pattern, imagined” (Mackey, 2010, p. 325). The space becomes “readable” only when its structure is revealed to the “reader”.

So, apart from a familiar cultural studies approach, McLuhan’s “fish out of water” stance underpins the Community Walk Project designed and realized by Chelsea Attwell in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. This Early Years inquiry incorporates a broad definition of “media” to include the material, immersive environment of buildings, streets and traffic signs, train stations, and urban design such as roads, sidewalks, and storefronts. The project takes McLuhan’s lead in defining all human-made environments as mediated worlds containing implicit ideological and social messages, and then nudges the children to question how such environments might relate to and support their agency and sense of belonging as future citizens in their community.

### The Community Walk: Building Agency, Identity, and Community through an Environment-as-Media Inquiry

It may be that pre-schools and daycares should be organizing more of those charming crocodile outings in which a string of

children holding hands moves into the environment, acquiring at least basic exposure to ideas of path, landmark, and edge. (Mackey, 2010, p. 338)

McLuhan & Hutchon-Kawaski (2020) call upon learners to get out of the classroom and into the community to do their learning – that resources are everywhere. Regular community walks are therefore an excellent complement to the “learning in the outdoors” component of the Kindergarten curriculum in which educators and children play, explore, and learn together away from the classroom.

And so our journey begins with a series of daily neighbourhood walks with children, planned by their educators over the 10 month school year. Embedded in the educator team’s planning is an implicit training in, and knowledge of, the Ontario Program’s (2016) emphasis on learning through exploration and play, and an “inquiry stance” that places students’ questions, ideas and observations at the centre of the learning experience. The team has designed the walk after purposeful reflection on previous community outings, such as the “buildings” walk, the train ride to the airport, and a staff and community walk that aimed to build connections and understand the lived realities of students and families. They have anticipated and deliberately planned for provocations that will inspire playful exploration of urban signs and symbols, providing opportunities for children to become “active explorers of their environments through child-initiated discovery . . . ; creators of new experiences; and participants in constructing their own knowledge” (Nolan et al., 2006 & Stevens et al., 2014, as cited in Nolan & Paatsch, 2018, p. 42).

Agency is thus developed naturally as children and educators work to co-construct learning, demonstrating that “what they think and how they act makes a difference” (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 111). Here, agency is framed as a capability to discern implicit power structures and offer a counter message through re-creation in post-walk production – thus aligning with Gallagher’s “inventive agencies” that “break established patterns, ... and reconfigure relations” (2019, p. 197), and Foucault’s framing not as a liberation from social restraint but as “an effect of the development of a type of selfhood that enables a person to understand themselves, and be understood by others, as capable of decisive action” (Gallagher, 2019, p. 191).

Prompted by the grounding question, “how might understanding environment-as-media inspire play and support children’s agency and sense of belonging?”, they explore together while ‘paying attention to the familiar’.

Inquiry springs from taking time to notice. Imagine 25-30 children 3 ½ to 5 years of age walking two-by-two on main streets and small side streets with iPads, chattering enthusiastically while capturing photos and short video clips. Sometimes there is a clipboard with a pencil,

so students might stop and write or draw what they notice, see, and wonder. Sometimes these stops are planned by the teachers, other times the children take the lead. Educators respond, challenge, or extend the learning when the children share what they are thinking and learning, creating layered experiences of collaborative inquiry and reflection, and cultivating a fluid and responsive relationship.

Margaret Mackey's work on spaces and literacy aligns here: "Places are situated on a web of historical and contemporary interconnection, and that interconnection usually entails a power dimension" (Hodges, 2010, p. 191 as cited in Mackey, 2011, p. 291). We anticipate a space for agency when conversations develop such as: "who else might use this public space?"; "what tells you this space is for kids or not for kids?"; and "who decides who can use it?".

The walk embeds a purposeful child-centred approach, grounded in a curriculum that acknowledges play as a legitimate aspect of the learning environment, and play-based learning understood as "mediated by and within the interactions between children (Rogers, 2010, p. 156 as cited in Nolan & Paatsch, 2018, p. 44).

Though Cowan (2018) has legitimately characterized "learning through play" as an approach that can easily privilege adults' goals, our walk project anticipates this challenge, allowing the children to lead the exploration. The walk extends the classroom in its spirit of playful inquiry, but has shed its institutional connotations, purposefully reframed as a space where children can understand where and how they belong. Thus, children and educators become co-learners as they collaboratively observe, inquire, and document, and "city becomes classroom" as the learning extends from bricks-and-mortar into the boundless environment of the outdoor community.

## Signs and Maps

As media, urban environments are legible city-scapes "that can be recognized, organized into a coherent pattern, imagined" (Mackey, 2010). They tell their makers' stories through roads, buildings, signs, signposts, plaques, monuments, and such. As urban explorers, we carry "mental maps" of these paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks (Lynch, 1960), but our maps change through revisioning and our sense of place within the maps shifts. Mackey suggests that young children today have little "foot knowledge", and that there may be implications for "western children's inability to walk their own worlds – implications for their capacity to map and understand mapping... implications for their ability to measure a story world by the scale of their own little bodies" (2010, p. 338).

Our little storytellers, however, build agency and a sense of belonging as they critically "read", reconstruct, and re-contextualize their

own understandings of the signs and symbols of familiar spaces.

The children begin to build their city-scape narrative through playful inquiry. It is a rich site of investigation, heavily populated by artefacts, technology, edifices, and signs constructed by powerful others. Signs for vehicles and pedestrians are abundant, sparking the children's interest. They take keen notice, sharing a deep curiosity: STOP signs are red because that colour indicates danger, while yellow means caution. The children connect this to their personal experience of navigating traffic lights. They also notice that yellow and red are bright colours and stand out. They might notice a pedestrian crossing sign, a railroad crossing sign, or a stop sign, and immediately perceive the different appearances. Some signs are quite tall and not at their eye level; some signs contain only images; others have images and words.

As the walk progresses, the children begin to reveal a deeper awareness of signs as symbols containing implicit and explicit social messages, for example, that they contain not only shapes, colours, and images, but also value messages that might imply exclusion or inclusion of cultural and social groups of which they might be a member. As Mackey (2013) suggests, familiar elements in their environment – comfort zones – become unfamiliar or new when a new narrative emerges. What familiar signs now suggest new and provocative meanings?

We hear connections and inferences about power structures and messaging that affect their daily lives: “Is this message for me?” and “How do I fit in?” They wonder whether, if the signs were placed lower down, it might be easier for them and other small people to read – therefore making them more inclusive. They also comment that the signs should include both a picture and a word, making it easier for more people to read and identify them. At the railroad crossing the children suggest that instead of a horizontal line to show train tracks, the sign should include an actual train image, therefore making it more easily identifiable. All this illustrates a growing agency and awareness of the social and political relationships at play in the community environment-as-media.

The inquiry into signs suggests that children can intuitively anticipate key media literacy concepts: signs construct a reality for and about people through codes and conventions; form and content are closely related; and social and political messages circulate through media within their own deceptively ordinary urban neighbourhood.

The children apply their individual perspectives by eagerly documenting, snapping photos and recording short video clips. They are fascinated with the trains as they climb the large pedestrian bridge and watch them passing, of course waving at and cheering the conductors as they wave back, blowing the train horn. Smiles and laughter ensue.

At the train station, the group gathers commuter maps showing the train paths. Graphical maps not only provide rich learning opportunities to remember the walk and support classroom reading, but as media texts to support understanding of iconic and spatial representations and their cultural meanings. These texts also provide playful learning opportunities and easily integrate with photos and video clips.

When environment-as-media inquiry activates children's understanding of design and accessibility, they can negotiate their place within the community space - the "simultaneity of stories-so-far" (Massey, 2005, p. 59, as cited in Mackey, 2011, p. 291). This creates conditions for agency and inquiry about inclusion: "how does this relate to me?"; "how is power represented and used within my narrative?"

### Production is play. Play is agency.

Nolan and Paatsch (2018) characterize play as child-led exploration that facilitates the children's construction of their own knowledge. The Ontario Kindergarten Program suggests that "play and academic work are not distinct categories for young children rather they are inextricably linked for them" (2016, p.18). In other words, the play drives the learning. And because the classroom has been designed for free play already - well-managed, it ostensibly becomes a playground, a "meaning-making" space (Potter and Cowan, 2020) - the children's play here involves "making meaning" with the documented experience of artefacts, technology, edifices, and signs constructed and placed by others. The retrieval of these personal and social experiences becomes a vehicle for agency, and a sense of belonging to the explored environment.

Upon the return, teachers collect the various digital photos and short video clips and upload the material in a digital album using Google Slides. They review the codes and conventions of photos with the children, keeping in mind compositional aspects of form and content. There is much excitement as the class community curates the photos and videos, re-experiencing memories and giggles from the day. They choose and place favorites in a collaborative slide deck, and by extension, renegotiate the meanings of the day's adventures. It is a delightful class community experience in which the children continue to lead the learning begun on the walk and share their experiences of daily life in their community.

(As a side note, the educators keep all photos for future reference - even the ones that do not make it into the slide deck, as it is always advantageous to reflect on photos that do not come out the way the photographer might expect - e.g., blurry, incorrect subjects. This provides opportunity to teach through and about media).

Kress and Cowan (2017) note that children are resourceful in that they express themselves with materials at their disposal. Here, crea-

tive provocations using “loose parts” play (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2014) offer a range of open-ended materials to manipulate and experiment with, expanding learning opportunities and activating agency. A child approaches a provocation and begins to manipulate the loose parts by carefully selecting different objects, using red objects repeatedly. They explain that they are constructing their own commuter map, illustrating their understanding of the codes and conventions of map colours and symbols (e.g., red indicates warning or danger). They connect different colour objects to denote the different train routes. Other children work collaboratively in a group of four to five with larger blocks to co-create their own sign to place at a railroad crossing as an improved replacement for the sign deemed inequitable during the walk. The children document their learning in their digital portfolios. (The children regularly photograph their work and capture a short voice recording automatically uploaded to individual digital portfolios. It is another opportunity to teach through and about media – allowing multiple entry points for engagement in the learning and documentation about the learning.)

Using the terms “reading” and “texts” broadly, we can apply Mackey’s perspective: “A text that is known to a child does not remain in its original state or even in a steady, stable form; instead, the child rewrites it. Texts become transformative stock to which young readers can return again and again as they figure out their own roles, words, actions, and critiques of their current situation” (Wolf and Heath, 1992, pp. 109–110, as cited in Mackey, 2011, p. 300). Loose parts play allows children to reify the political implications of artefacts such as signs and maps into a rough narrative. It also allows them to perform in role as authority figures invested with the duty to design and enforce powerful media messages in their own community. This is media-making with and about media.

The community walk fuels learning about environment-as-media. Children experience, inquire about, document, and curate images of an environment previously so familiar as to be invisible. Critical readings, playful documentation and curation recontextualize and facilitate a deeper literacy about the space when they re-enter: their “map” has changed, and their sense of place (belonging) has shifted (Mackey, 2010). The community walk has activated agency, and a re-negotiation of belonging and purpose. This is surely a powerful act of reading *environment-as-media*.

## Conclusion

The Community-as-Inquiry Walk fosters understanding of media’s social, political, and ideological implications by “realiz[ing] and leverage[ing] the existing media environment (and therefore allow[ing] students to realize and leverage existing media environments [themselves])” (Wesch, 2008, 23:00-24:23, as cited in McLuhan & Hutch-



on-Kawasaki, 2020, p. 6). This project inspires children to collectively inquire about their bricks-and-mortar surroundings: “Where do I fit in?” “Who made this?” “Is it for me?” “Can I change it?” “How?” Grounded by Early Years and media literacy pedagogy, the “community-as-media-environment” exploration deepens and reinforces an experiential knowledge of “media as habitat” – far beyond cereal box analysis.

This community walk is the beginning, not the end point, in their learning. As next steps, their new areas of exploration might include the larger role of families as connections to community, intentional orientation (directions and geographical mapping), and pursuit of the question, “whose voice is missing”?

Theorists such as Margaret Mackey, Michael Gallagher, and Kate Cowan have provided fresh context in the form of ideas about mapping, agency, and play in our reframing of the project for this article. In particular, Cowan’s challenge about learning through play as a potentially problematic adult agenda in practice is a provocative and rich opportunity for future exploration, as is her work with John Potter on virtual playgrounds. Similarly, Gallagher’s problematizing of agency as it applies to children is worth examining further.

As a final provocation, we would remind the reader that environments come in many forms. Invoking the work of Cowan and Potter on virtual playgrounds (2020), and leaving aside the predictable inquiry into audience and ideology, we could also inquire of virtual environments, “What is this made of?” “Who made this?” “Can I make it?” “How?” “Is it for me?” “Where do I fit in?” “Can I change it?” “How?” – questions that invite the student to think as McLuhan, who reminded us not to be blinded by content, but to pay attention to, and attain agency within, the whole environment. To see the forest *and* the trees.

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