Reality by Design

The Rhetoric and Technology of Authenticity in Education

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CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction

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AS HUMAN MATERIAL and symbolic artifice become ever more clever and pervasive, the real takes on greater and greater importance, yet seems ever more elusive. We live increasingly in an environment built not only of concrete cities, but of symbolic realms, electronic environments, and novel social relations. People living in hunter–gatherer societies tend to know what is real for them, and do not lose their ways trying to find worlds of personal meaning in a confusing and alienating world; perhaps even more fundamentally, children grow up with clear imperatives and motives within an identifiable set of adult practices. They do not need to ask what is real. But as the products of human cleverness proliferate, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify which artfully constructed alternative offers something that seems real to us, and it becomes increasingly difficult for youth to pursue wholeheartedly the wisdom, practices, and arts the previous generations offer them.

The issue of the real is more than a philosophic, moral, or existential question that may occupy the intellectual leisure of those who find themselves at personal sixes and sevens. Because of the peculiarities of human psychology, the real is a matter of motivation, participation, and organization of cognition and behavior. That is, people are more engaged (and thus learn more) the more real and meaningful they find tasks. What people find real and engaging, nonetheless, may be of the greatest human artifice. Some people find crafting sailboats, or acting in costume upon a stage, or documenting literary history, or working on string theory far more real than gathering berries. Modern society's concern for authenticity, honest expression of feelings, following one's heart and conscience, and similar motives attests to the difficulties and importance we attach to locating what we find personally real.

If the sense of the real is so important, especially in a world that seems to offer so much variety, then the learning, attention, and development of children are closely tied to what they find (or can be convinced is) real and engaging, even if at certain moments play is what strikes them as most real. The progressive reforms of twentieth-century education have at their heart, as Joseph Petraglia

documents in *Reality by Design,* this recognition of the importance of a sense of reality or authenticity—culminating in the current educational movement called constructivism, in which each student constructs his or her own knowledge of the world. Petraglia places this historical development in education side by side with developments in psychology that have led to the current concern for situated cognition—an approach that again emphasizes the individual's perception of and responsiveness to the immediate ambient world and motivating activities that seem personally real. Petraglia then examines how these lines of thinking come together and are operationalized in the new field of educational technology, which designs learning environments. Educational technologies offer the promise of realistic, motivated learning matched to the needs, desires, and learning styles of individual students—situating them in personalized interactive environments within which they can construct their own knowledge.

However, Petraglia points out, constructivism and situated cognition have a hidden kicker. In pointing toward the importance of the individual's sense of reality, they destabilize the very notion of a consistent and knowable reality—as has been elaborated in the social constructionist movement. If realities are constructed through individual activity and perception, then realities are multiple, and we cannot rely on any reality we offer students to be authentic prior to their engagement with it. How can we determine what realities would engage each student? Even more confusingly, how could what we know as reality be of interest or use to students' constructions of their realities? Alternatively, how might we convince students that the realities we have to offer have any real or authentic value to them?

Petraglia finds the way out of our dilemma in the key term *persuasion.* People find some environments and tasks persuasive, and thus authentic, engaging, and motivated. Other environments and tasks leave them cold and appear to be artifice. In addressing educational situations and in designing electronic educational environments, we need to start thinking rhetorically—not about what is real in an absolute sense, but about what may appear as real and motivating to the students. To help us on this path, Petraglia describes some examples of educational tools he and others have created. But even more, he has created intellectual tools to help us determine how to realize educational realities in a world of increasing artifice, a world where we make our own realities.