

Mediaesthetics as an Educational Tool in Creative Writing Course

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ABSTRACT

Mediaesthetic approach can be a very useful and successful tool for creative writing courses. This article introduces mediaesthetic components specific to a particular educational task but this approach can be applied to other courses as a universal principle. The case study, showed in this paper, is devoted to students' activity during an 18-weeks course of creative writing, in which mediaesthetic components were integrated. The investigation question was: How can mediaesthetic components influence the students' activity? The hypothesis ("the mediaesthetic component will increase students' involvement in the educational process and impact their success") was confirmed. The methods of integrating mediaesthetic components in the course logics are described and discussed (variable mediaesthetic objects as information, inspiration, provocation-generating tools and their advantages and limitations).

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → Media arts, Multi / mixed media creation; **Human-centered computing** → HCI theory, concepts and models; **Social and professional topics** → Student assessment

KEYWORDS

Mediaesthetics, human-computer interaction, educational computing, gratification and use theory.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Mediaesthetic components of communication and teaching on creative writing are combined in this investigation. The base of this combination is the nature of creativity requesting some impulses and inspiration, which are impossible to consider as sorts of tools or just didactic skills. This challenge can be overcome with the principle of mediaesthetic component of creative writing course in the computer-mediated educational environment. Thus, we have three fields designing this approach (computer-mediated education + creativity + mediaesthetics). The theoretical frame is the gratification and use theory (it helps to clarify the impact of mediaesthetic components on students' creativity and involvement in the educational process).

With respect to each field, we can emphasize some issues related to the topic of our paper. Computer technologies in education have a wide and deep investigation history. More broadly, this topic belongs to such fields as CHI (computer-human interactions), HCI (human-computer interaction), HCC (human-centered computing – see about “human turn” in this field [1]), all applied to the educational field. In terms of the type of contribution to this field [2], our paper is methodology-driven (using computer-mediated technologies for specific educational tasks as a method rather than as a tool, see also [3]). The field of creativity exploration can be divided into a psychological and culture-centered subfields, and we focused our attention on the latter [4]. As for mediaesthetics, one can see its theoretical and applied forms; we built our investigation on the applied aspect of this discipline.

2 WHY COMBINE MEDIAESTHETICS AND CREATIVE WRITING?

Lev Vygotsky called imagination and other forms of creative reflection “tools” [5]. We can expand this definition at to the mediaesthetic objects as some instruments capable of “switching on” imagination as an integrated mind tool [6]. It is an especially important instrument in the time of “language counter-turn”, where communication becomes multimedia-arranged. Text and writing practices meet these changes of the communication field. Not only handwriting has changed completely as a common practice (see about handwriting decline, [7]), but also text shares its domination in communication exchanges with images and other non-textual forms. There is nothing new in that attractive

images have been used in educational process. But in our particular case, there is a paradox in that we suggest there is an efficiency of non-textual instruments in teaching creative writing (creation of text). The reason for mediaesthetics' integration in this course is to ensure this task of "switching on" self-reflection rather than imagination, and to teaching students to feel their own "integrated instruments" that are helping them to be creative.

3 HOW TO COMBINE MEDIAESTHETICS AND CREATIVE WRITING?

Firstly, we must ask the following research question: How can mediaesthetic components help students' creativity in the writing process? We can predict that mediaesthetic components will increase students' involvement in their educational process and impact their success in creative writing course.

Generalizing the classical "creative tools" investigation ([8], related to "problem solving" field) one can see information, inspiration and provocation strategies for creative thinking. We decided to base our investigation on these three strategies, using mediaesthetic objects as embodiments of each strategy. Students were given the task not only to interpret these objects as a story but also to manage an introspection and to write a text about their own sensations and reactions about this or that task.

Thus, the general problem of the combination of mediaesthetic components and creative writing task was solved as it is shown in Fig. 1.

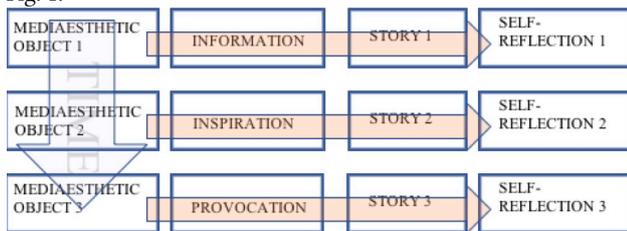


Figure 1: General matrix of the combination of mediaesthetic components and creative writing task

The quantity of mediaesthetic objects can vary; in our case, we used three different types of objects to reach our proposal. These types are characterized in the following paragraph.

4 WHAT TYPES OF MEDIAESTHETIC OBJECTS WE CAN USE AND WHY?

Henri Zettl offered a classification of mediaesthetic objects based on the Russian theory of art and cinema in the beginning of 20th century (Wassily Kandinsky, Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eizenshtein): color and light as a primary aesthetic field, area and its forces as two-dimensional field, depth and volume as three-dimensional field, time and motion as four-dimensional field, sound as an extra part of this field (which makes it five-dimensional, as Herbert Zettl supposes [9]). For our research task, we used five-dimensional types of mediaesthetic objects where multi-dimensions dominated. Thus, we extended Zettl's approach to

mediaesthetics: any multi-dimensional mediaesthetic object can have a specific dominant element. In this case, one can consider 5D object as one-dimensional (where the dominant element plays the major role making a maximum aesthetic effect). We used in our sample the content-classification of mediaesthetic objects: provocative, informative and inspirational media objects. In fig. 2 one can see how the integration of media objects in the computer-mediated educational platform was managed.

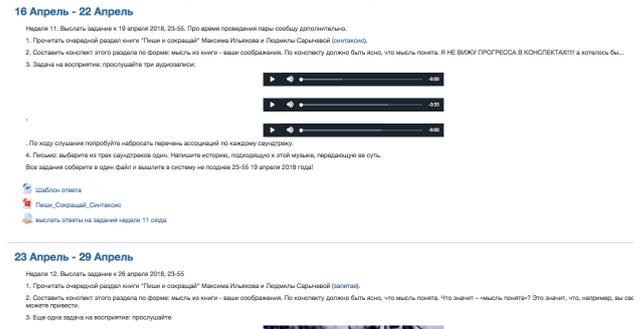


Figure 2: Course task fragment (with integrated soundtracks). The MOODLE system was used

In fig. 2, three soundtracks are shown. The task is: to listen, to write associations, to choose one of three soundtracks, to write the text related to these associations, to write "a diary" of self-reflections: Why did I choose this soundtrack for my writing? What can one say about what made me make this choice? Am I sensitive to the music as a tool for my imagination or does this limit my creativity?

This sample demonstrates the principle of the mediaesthetic elements integration in the creative writing course. The "self-reflecting" questionnaire block in the task shows the reasons of this integration: (1) to stimulate the sensual-emotional "inner tools" of students' creativity; (2) to help students realize their inner peculiarities, advantages and limitations; (3) possibly, to help them discover a way to conduct their creativity process [10], [11].

5 RESEARCH DESIGN, DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

This method has been offered to the 3d-year students group (20 years old, Journalism Studies, course of creative writing, Chelyabinsk State University, Russia). The general objective of this course is to provide to the students a space to study, to reflect and realize their own creativity writing skills (this is crucially important for professional journalism). This course was designed for 10 students (in fact, 11 students took part in this experimental program). The duration of this course was 18 weeks, with one 1,5 hr meeting a week. A set of short lectures was included (each seminar, 15 minutes), and then discussion around home tasks, managing by each student before the seminar. Home tasks were conducted via the University Moodle System (see Fig. 2). During the seminars, computer-mediated techniques were always used.

The types of challenges for students (according to the experimental question) are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Samples of mediaesthetic elements integrated in the course

Type of mediaesthetic component	Strategy	Link or QR-code	Type of analytic task	Choice
1D: Soundtracks	Information		Associative reactions and its analysis	7
	Inspiration			
	Provocation			
4D: Animation	Information	https://youtu.be/yItJEtSAHw 	Description of the different dimensions + decoding	3
5D: Clip	Inspiration	https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=7OwCCebCINI 	Description of the different dimensions + associative reactions	3
1D extended: Painting	Provocation		Decoding	4

In Table 1, we can see various types of tasks (during the course we also used other types, for example, as an illustrated text), the type of content strategy for each element (provocative, informative, inspirational), the type of exploring task, and also the choice of students (if this type of mind-challenge is compatible with students' "inner tools" of creativity, the "choice" column shows the quantity of students out 11 participants, many positions for the choice are given).

All students were encouraged to integrate the different types of activities (rational and intuitive, combination of "aesthetic judgement", rational explanations, self-reflecting practices).

Students' reactions at the mediaesthetic element (sample: painting, home task via Moodle, 7 out of 11) are given below. This example demonstrates how student reacted to the mediaesthetic elements (1D extended: Painting; students were not informed about the title of this painting – "La lutte de Jacob avec l'ange", 1960, and its author – the French expressionist painter Guy de Montlaur).

(1) Name: Alexander.

Interpretation: In the picture, I see a battle between two images. One image is associated with darkness, despair and cruelty, the other one with strength, confidence and a will for life. Their strengths are equal, that is why this battle will never stop. Creative writing's draft: Since ancient times, when there was no time nor space, there was only darkness. Darkness, born of chaos. From this chaos, a little light was born. It was growing at a tremendous speed, and one day it became so big that it began to displace the darkness. The battle was so long and strong that a great explosion occurred, from which life appeared. Self-reflection: It is easy way for me to understand what the painter drew. But I do not feel any inspiration from this work. Probably because I am a painter also.

(2) Name: Angelina.

Interpretation: Bright, colorful; very expressive colors. It seems that in the night a war rages between water, fire and the sun. And they are depicted as entities. The night is already quite deep, and the battle is in full swing. Around the light-source pieces of the body of entities are torn. On the left, a red tail has been ripped off, on the right, a yellow hand (paw?) is falling. Water is lucky in this battle. It would only be interesting to know what caused such an enraged struggle.

Creative writing's draft: If one looks at the picture from a different angle, one can see flowering tulips, poppies and cornflowers. Early morning, before the sun rises and the flowers are beginning to wake up. It is very reminiscent of today's weather. As if these symbols of spring made their way through layers of mud.

Self-reflection:

It is an important way to refresh my mind, my inner vision. You see something absolutely vague, uncertain. And suddenly you can see the sense, the plot. But in my opinion, it illustrates an activity of mind, I need to reflect longer on how to use this tool.

(3) Name: Valeria.

Interpretation: I spent a very long time looking at it and saw a bird flying away from a burning house. How can I see what I see: everything that is red and bright yellow in the picture are tongues of flame. Dark blue (I intentionally do not write 'black' because in nature there is no primordially black color, it is always different halftones and shades) is a ruined house, with rotten boards and floors, from which only ruins now remain. Blue is the water that was used to fight against fire. Finally, the lightly yellow smear in the middle of the picture is a bird, it spreads its wings and flies from the past to the future.

Creative writing's draft: The little bird returned home from the warm places. It found that its house (where it usually makes its nest) has been burnt. But the little bird did not grieve a long time: it decided that this was its chance to start life from scratch, in a

new way. And like a phoenix, it rose from the ashes and made a new nest, even better than the previous one, met new friends, and settled in a big house with a fire place

Self-reflection: It was very long and sometimes boring: I tried to generate the story from the invisible plot. I realized that I have some difficulties with my freedom of mind, my imagination depends on obvious, even banal stimuli. I need to develop this freedom of thinking and imagination.

(4) Name: Regina.

Interpretation: In the picture I see fire, water, earth. It seems that they are one. My eyes fall on the red, then on the black, then on the yellow, and blue. When I have been looked at the picture for a long time, my eyes immediately become sick, I want to switch off the screen. Everything begins to merge and swim around. Very bright and strong colors.

Creative writing's draft: The artist was asked to draw a painting with 4 sets of colors. He chose red, black, blue and yellow. The artist decided to paint something very complex, strong, bright and memorable. He drew strokes in different directions, adding contrast. The picture was created for a long time. The artist put his philosophy in the masterpiece, but each person sees the picture in a different way.

Self-reflection: It was useful for me: a good challenge to my rationalism. I needed something concrete, figurative. And I had to add this certainty to my interpretation. I was able to "catch" the moment of my reflection when I started to augment this image by my imagination.

(5) Name: Alina.

Interpretation: In the bottom left corner, I saw a face in a mask, it screaming something. On the right, there are two faces with long noses, open mouths. I can also see a red dragon or a dinosaur standing on its hind legs. He defends himself against a black monster with blue eyes. He spews a flame on a red dinosaur. Creative writing's draft: According to a legend, the dragon who lived in the volcano for thousands of years, will wake up when a large monstrous, black-yellow flame erupts, enters the territory to destroy people, the settlement and the main temple. On the most important holiday of the year, during the celebration, a monster comes to seize the territory. A man from the stage screams: "The monster is coming!" All run randomly, they call for help, cries and lamentations are heard by the Guard of the World, a dragon. He bravely stands on his hind legs to protect people from the erupting flame.

Self-reflection:

Difficult to say how it works. I just tried to find a little sense there, and the creation of story was not very long. I do not think I can improve my skills through this sort of work.

(6) Name: Ljudmila.

Interpretation: First impression: a dragon. Or a man-snake. Or a dog with a sharp nose. Some kind of animal. Creepy. A Hunter, because of his long strokes: one can never paint "a poodle" or "a kitten" in so strong and aggressive manner (as they are certainly not zombies and are not trying to enslave the world).

Creative writing's draft: In elementary school, I had a very cool drawing teacher. During one of her courses, we and her drew a

fire: red, orange, yellow – and many more colors. And at the end of our lesson, we "poured water" over the painting, as Alla Iosifovna <the teacher> said. We just covered all these bright

colors with blue paint. I did not understand why: everyone had tried so hard to draw this beautiful fire. And I liked my drawing. But I had to "pour water". I got upset and, as soon as I got my best mark, I crumpled the sheet and threw it away. My hands became dirty and black – because of the dried gouache.

Self-reflection: I have realized that my way method of perception was to search for figures:

Probably, it means that my way of towards creativity is through pure realism, I need the images, understandable figures. What was strange – I have tried to find "hidden images" on this painting, but I felt sadness and remembered unpleasant moments. And my story was sad and desperate. Probably, my sensations are stronger than I thought, I need to find a way to conduct them.

(7) Name: Maria.

Interpretation:

Where the ragged fields of dawn are plowed by the horsemen of centuries,

I ordered a crow to fly and said in passing to the sky: "Do me a favor, heaven. Die!"

Later I got a better idea –

always looking for bigger laughs –

I smashed the matchbox race of men and started reading poetry.

Planet Earth was an easy

fit in the dark curve

of a madman's mitt. Follow me now! What's there to be afraid of? This is Velimir Khlebnikov's poem, "War in a Mousetrap". This is what I felt regarding this painting: war, dryness, fire, sweeping movements, slaps. I have a feeling that this picture gives me a slap in the face.

Creative writing's draft: It was one of the hottest nights of July, the forest burned for the third day. No one knew about the fire: the nearest settlements were too far away. Deers, elks, bears, wolves. Rabbit holes, anthills, owls' nests. Bitter, dry, black air ate away the animals' larynx, the fire jumped on their wool from the foliage. The old trees were burning away, behind them were the shade-loving herbs: the trees no longer protected them. The forest burned alive. No one knew about the fire. It was one of the hottest nights of July.

Self-reflection: I had so strong emotions regarding the painting. Introspecting, I could say that, as for me, this is a sort of discovery – I can feel my imagination's activity, and it was a good example of my "inner tools" work.

What we can conclude from this material:

(1) Students can catch the sense of mediaesthetic objects (even in this sample: they examined the computer-mediated reproduction of this painting, looked for what the latter lacked in terms of art impact, such as real size, 3-dimensional surface, i. e. thickness of paint etc.). Even with no information on the title of this abstract painting, they felt the idea of the image (a clash, a battle), and some answers (Maria, Angelina) are quite close to the

artist's plot, one answer exactly describes the sense of painting (Alexander).

All other students felt the energy and conflict of this mediaesthetic object.

(2) This way of "awakenings" the "inner tool" of the students' creativity needs to be explored as a pedagogic instrument. One can see that most of students tried "to illustrate" the sense of painting in their stories. And only one student (Ljudmila) used her impressions as a stimulus to the related story, which was inspired looking at this painting.

(3) The self-reflections of students show that they can catch their "creative mood" (according to the gratification and use theory), and this exercise is useful for their individual development. On the other hand, one can see that this way of stimulation meets the resistance of students, and students need to get accustomed to provocative mediaesthetic objects.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this extended abstract, we tried to show how mediaesthetics can be applied as an educational tool for the stimulation of students' creative activity. We found that students can train their skills of developing by their creativity by using different variants of mediaesthetic objects as sources of fresh information, inspiration or provocation. These three strategies provide some different pedagogic effects, depending on each individual students' personality. Using a number of mediaesthetic objects in our course (such as illustrated texts, comics, longreads, soundtracks, animations, videos, clips, reproduction of paintings etc.), we help students to discover their own "inner tools". The identification of the strategy of each object (information, inspiration or provocation) is also a trained skill which is crucially important in the creative activity of future journalists, or other specialists, who will work in the communicative field. Human- centric computing is a useful approach to the training of this skill, and in our case

study we explored the possibility to apply arts as a mediaesthetic objects.

The result of this work is positive (all 11 students confirmed at the end of this course its usefulness). But some limitations can be find: the high level of dependence on students' individualities can bring many difficulties in class-room activities; and the lack of didactically strict algorithms for this work. Further research needs to be done to improve the positive effect of using mediaesthetic objects as an educational tool.

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