

NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 9: Anne Zbitnew on Teaching with Games

In this episode, we talk to Anne Zbitnew, who teaches Photography and Visual Literacy at Humber, about using games as teaching tools.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast. My name is Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. NEXTcast is a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. Every episode we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation both inside and outside the classroom.

Nathan Whitlock: This episode we talk to Anne Zbitnew, who teaches photography in the Media Foundations program. We'll be talking to Anne about using games as a way of advancing learning in the classroom.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, Anne. I was wondering if you could tell me, right off the top, a little bit about what you do at Humber?

Anne Zbitnew: What I do at Humber. What don't I do at Humber? So what I do at Humber, I have been teaching at Humber since 1996 in the Journalism program, in the Photography program, in the Media Foundations program part-time, and I've been full-time through ... This is my third year. And I'm currently teaching in the Media Foundation program.

Anne Zbitnew: The two courses that I teach are Image Capture and Editing 1, which is a beginning photography course, and then there's some video editing as well. And then I teach in the second semester Visual Literacy.

Nathan Whitlock: And just in the interest of full disclosure, I'll say you are a colleague of mine in the Media Foundations program.

Anne Zbitnew: We are. Exactly.

Nathan Whitlock: What I wanted to talk to you about, of the many things you do at Humber, was this idea of playing games in classes, and having those games kind of secretly be learning games or advance learning, and reinforce some of the messages that you're ... some of thing things you're discussing in class. When did that idea first occur to you, this idea of playing games? Was that something you did right when you first started teaching, or did it come later?

Anne Zbitnew: So it's kind of recent, probably in the past three years. So the Visual Literacy class that I teach, I developed and wrote that course three years ago, and so that's the first year it started to be taught. And there's a lot of

theory. So first semester when I'm teaching photography, you know we talk about the camera, and then we go out and take pictures, and then we edit them, and then we do Photoshop. There's a lot of hands-on and a lot of, you can see it right away.

Nathan Whitlock: It's very concrete.

Anne Zbitnew: It's super concrete. And then in the end you got a picture and an assignment, and boom, you're done. But with Visual Literacy, so now we're learning not how to see, because we already know that, and we see on a daily basis. And I'm using "see," I'm not privileging the fact that everyone has sight, because not everyone does, but in Visual Literacy we also talk about taste, and touch, and all the other senses as well, but I'm going to say "see," because it's visual literacy.

Nathan Whitlock: Sure.

Anne Zbitnew: So we talk about the theories about why you have that message, why when you see a stop sign do you stop? What is telling you that? What does the color red mean? What do signs and symbols mean? So there's theory we need to know. And, like I tell the class at the first class, you know all this, but you just don't know that it's theory, and you don't know the words that we attach to it.

Anne Zbitnew: So I found when I started teaching theory, it was super boring, you know. And this is what this is, semiotics, and because of the learners, the Media Foundations students, and they've been first semester doing so much hands-on, all of a sudden it's like, oh, theory. They weren't taking notes. They weren't engaging. They would ask no questions, even though I'd throw a concept out, and it would be, "Okay, any questions?" Nothing.

Nathan Whitlock: Silence.

Anne Zbitnew: Yes. Just that awful silence that you hear. So I thought, okay, we needed to cover theory and talk about theory, but we need to make it fun, and we need to make it engaging. And it's almost like you're accidentally learning.

Anne Zbitnew: So then I thought, if we make it more game-like, this is where the learning is really gonna happen. So, in the first class, I start talking about identity and who you are, because the way you experience the world, but including looking at images, depends on where you're from, who you are, all those things that we connect with us as a person, because everyone in

that room is an expert in their own lives. They know themselves. Looking at an image, we're not all gonna see it the same way.

Anne Zbitnew: So I talk about identity. So as I started to talk about that, I start losing people left, right, and centre. And I'd bring up the concept of a social construct, and it was just, eyes would glaze over. So then we just started talking, "Okay, let's make a list of what you do every day. Tell me what you do. Wake up, you eat your cereal, you brush your teeth, you comb your hair, you get in line for the bus, you get on the bus." We made a big list and then talked about how everything on that list is constructed by society. You're doing it because society says so. It's like, "Oh, wow." So it starts to really sink in when you have never heard that term before. It can be a little bit, you know, "What does that mean, socially constructed?"

Anne Zbitnew: So then we talk about identity and who people are, and then I refer to their social geography, and I don't mean that literally where you were born, but what makes you *you*, as a person. So I do this exercise, we're gonna do now. So I'm gonna give you this-

Nathan Whitlock: Oh, we're actually gonna try one right now?

Anne Zbitnew: We're gonna try one.

Nathan Whitlock: Okay.

Anne Zbitnew: So here's a blank piece of paper-

Nathan Whitlock: You do realize this is a podcast, and no one will see-

Anne Zbitnew: What do you mean? Where's the camera? I know. I'll try to be ... we'll see if this will work in this way. So you have a blank piece of paper, so-

Nathan Whitlock: I can confirm to the listener that I am holding a blank piece of paper.

Anne Zbitnew: Sounds like paper. So the only thing ... You need to trust me, and you need to follow directions and not ask any questions.

Nathan Whitlock: Okay, I'm out.

Anne Zbitnew: Okay. You're out. No, that's what they all, like, when I first say, "Okay, the first instruction you need to do is close your eyes." I'm looking around the room, and they've got like one eye closed. It's like, I can see you. Close your eyes.

Nathan Whitlock: So, my first step-

Anne Zbitnew: Your first step, close your eyes.

Nathan Whitlock: Okay, I'm closing my eyes.

Anne Zbitnew: Okay. Then you're gonna pick up the piece of paper, and you're gonna fold it in half.

Nathan Whitlock: Alright.

Anne Zbitnew: And don't worry if it's even. Don't worry if the edges are sharp, that's okay. Then-

Nathan Whitlock: It's folded in half.

Anne Zbitnew: Excellent. It looks great. You keep your eyes shut-

Nathan Whitlock: Eyes closed? Okay.

Anne Zbitnew: Eyes still closed. So I'd like you to tear off the top right corner.

Nathan Whitlock: The top right corner.

Anne Zbitnew: Yes. Here, we got left and right, so. Well, see how it goes. Good. Okay. Fold it in half again.

Nathan Whitlock: Got it.

Anne Zbitnew: Keep your eyes closed.

Nathan Whitlock: Got it.

Anne Zbitnew: Tear off the bottom left corner.

Nathan Whitlock: Will this be a snowflake at the end of it?

Anne Zbitnew: Maybe.

Nathan Whitlock: Or a Christmas decoration.

Anne Zbitnew: Or a gingerbread man all attached holding hands. So then you're going to fold it in half one more time.

Nathan Whitlock: Got it. I'm doing it right now.

Anne Zbitnew: You are, looks good.

Nathan Whitlock: Listener at home.

Anne Zbitnew: Yeah, and then tear off the top left corner. It'll be a bit of a challenge now. It's thicker, but tear what you can.

Nathan Whitlock: I'm extraordinarily strong.

Anne Zbitnew: Yeah, I know you are. Look at that, amazing. Okay, so now you can open your eyes, and you can unfold your paper. And it is a beautiful snowflake, well kind of a snowflake. So what ... There's a big hole in the middle, and then it looks like you chewed the outside edge.

Nathan Whitlock: It does. Is this a sort of a Rorschach thing?

Anne Zbitnew: It is, and now I'm going to leave, because ... no. So what happens is, so everyone opens up their paper, and then, "Okay, everyone hold it up." And when people hold it up, they all look different. Because ... which is really interesting, so they go, "Hey, mine's got two holes, mine's ripped there, mine's folded this way."

Anne Zbitnew: So I say to everybody, "What happened? You all listened to the same directions, you all had your eyes closed. What happened?" And the answer is, we're all different people. And so even though we heard the same directions, you're folding it maybe lengthwise, I'm folding it the other way. You've torn a big piece off. Someone else tore a little piece off. You might not know your left from your right. So they all look different. So the point being, okay, here we are. We're all in the same room. We're doing the same class. You're different. You're all gonna see things differently.

Anne Zbitnew: So that, I find, it's a really fun way to start the class too, because they get to actually see what that means. So that's what I mean a little bit by playing a game, is to really engage in something literal that you can touch and feel but then look at, and it helps make you understand it a little bit more.

Nathan Whitlock: And it's almost a mnemonic device, whenever they come up against that, an abstract idea or when you refer to that again, they'll always connect this to, "Oh, the paper that looks different."

Anne Zbitnew: That's right. That's right. And we do, and in fact even ... so this is week 2, we did that last week in class. Today someone brought it up. We were looking at another image, and they said, "Well, I know why we all look at this differently, because we're different people." And it's like, "Yeah, you got it." It's so fun.

Anne Zbitnew: And then another exercise that we do, which I also really like a lot, is I give them all a notebook at the beginning of the semester, and ... "Open to a blank page, and draw a grid with 16 little squares in it." So you fill your page, and you draw four across, four down, 16 little squares. I have a list of things. And I tell them that, "You've got a pen. You're gonna draw in each little box. You have 30 seconds to draw what I say out loud, and when I say, 'Stop,' you're gonna stop, and we'll go on to the next one."

Anne Zbitnew: So I've got a list of 16 things, and it's things like ... "So you have 30 seconds to draw Harry Potter. You have 30 seconds to draw a nurse. You have 30 seconds to draw a farmer. You have 30 seconds to draw a hockey player." So we go through all 16, and it's so interesting, because they're quiet in the room. And they're just drawing away, and I ... "Full 30 seconds, keep adding detail until I say, 'Stop.'" Moving on to the next one. And then we group up, and they look at each other's. And it's pretty fun, and it's funny.

Anne Zbitnew: And often people will say, "Well, I'm not a very good drawer," but it's not about that. It's about sort of what did you put together. And inevitably, it's like, "Hey, I drew ... Mine looks like yours. My cat looks like the cat you drew." And so we start looking at that, and there's a couple that every time is really interesting. So often when I say, "Draw a nurse," I would say 95% draw a round head with long hair that curls at the bottom with a little boxy hat at the top with a cross on it. And so I say to them, "Has anybody ever been to a hospital in the last little while? Because nurses haven't dressed like this in 50 years." But they almost all draw it.

Nathan Whitlock: Sure.

Anne Zbitnew: And then they're laughing, and it's like, so where did that come from? Where did you get that? Where did you grab that memory? And we talk about, part of it is the panic that you've got 30 seconds, so you go to your ... if you had a little memory bank of index cards of images, you go to your nurse file, and the first one that comes up is the one you draw, because you don't have enough time to imagine what a nurse looks like. So you grab that one. So how come we all drew these images that don't exist as what we imagine nurses anymore?

Anne Zbitnew: And we talk about the fact that it's almost imprinted on you when you're a kid, and you see a T.V. show, or you watch an old vintage show, or you know, lots of different ways you're gonna see this kind of nurse character. That becomes the one. And when they draw farmers, it's generally this person with overalls holding a pitchfork. It's like, really? That's your farmer? And then another one, oh a clown. So there's a big round nose, and there's this big hair on the side. They're often scary-looking though, as well.

Anne Zbitnew: So that's really interesting, because we are very different people, yet how come we're drawing this nurse in this way? So then we start talking about stereotype. Because what you're also doing when you're drawing your very first index card of memory is it's a stereotype. It's the one that we can identify. You know, for example, gendering a nurse as someone who presents as female with long hair. I don't know the exact statistics, but let's say 30% of nurses don't identify as female, but we still draw that.

Anne Zbitnew: So that brings us to a conversation about stereotype. Instead of a PowerPoint slide that says, "This is stereotype. This is bad."

Nathan Whitlock: Right, right.

Anne Zbitnew: This way, you just go, "Whoa." And then it's like, "Don't feel bad that you drew a nurse that way." But just be mindful that when you look at images, when you think of images, when you talk about images, don't stop at the first one. Try to keep going, because it's ... we all, I do that. "Oh, here it is. This is the one." But we can go much beyond that.

Anne Zbitnew: So that whole little game brings up some pretty heavy stuff. Stereotype's a hard thing I find to teach and to talk about, because I always worry that I'm going to talk about stereotype in a stereotypical way, or I'm gonna stereotype someone. I find it really difficult to talk about, but this way, it's just presented in a way that's also kind of fun.

Anne Zbitnew: So we do lots of those exercises in Visual Literacy as we move through the course, because it's theory, but it's not theory. It's theory in a way that is fun and approachable and engages discussion.

Nathan Whitlock: It's an interesting game too, you know, the idea of presenting this idea about stereotypes but removing the sort of moral side of it for a moment and the judgment of it, and just saying, "Look, this is just objectively how they get created in your mind. You're not necessarily a bad person because of this." So it makes it much easier for that lesson to be

absorbed, because you don't get defensive about it. And say, "Well, what are you saying about me?"

Anne Zbitnew: Yeah, no, for sure.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. "You're judging me for being judgmental." It's like, "No. It's ... your brain works." So those are a couple of your favourite games, but I always sort of think, when I think about using games in class, and I try to do a little bit of that myself, you're dealing with students who are sometimes prematurely jaded, as all 18 to 19-year olds are, as were at 18 and 19 years old. So do you sometimes encounter a bit of resistance to that idea that, we're going to kind of play this out?

Anne Zbitnew: Sometimes. Sometimes people don't want to do it for lots of reasons, or, "I don't draw," or "I don't know," or "I don't know the answer." But I do find, because they really are a little bit unexpected, so I start with saying, "Okay, we're gonna talk about theory. Take out your notebooks. You're gonna be taking notes." And it's like ... and then, when you introduce something like this, it's almost relief, like, "Oh, I don't have to write down big words or understand this quite yet. I can just play with this a little bit." I find people get tremendously engaged.

Nathan Whitlock: And I imagine doing all that just has the effect of kind of lowering defenses a little bit. And making people a little more open to everything you have to say, not just what you're trying to give them in this one lesson or this one game. It makes them relax a little bit. Is that your experience?

Anne Zbitnew: Oh, absolutely. Oh, they're super ... yes, totally. And so then I can start talking about the Gestalt theory of visual literacy and the principles behind-

Nathan Whitlock: Now the fun is over.

Anne Zbitnew: Proximity and closure. But it's okay, because they know that they're gonna be okay. And that's pretty fun, actually, to know that they're gonna be okay.

Nathan Whitlock: Well thank you very much, Anne. This was fantastic. And I was wondering, may I keep my torn-up piece of paper?

Anne Zbitnew: You can keep that. Yeah, you should frame it.

Nathan Whitlock: Great. Thanks very much.

Anne Zbitnew: You're welcome.

Nathan Whitlock: NEXTcast is produced by Humber Press and the Creative Productions team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning at Humber College. Special thanks to Puneet Wagh, Santino Pannozzo, Allison LaSorda, Darren Richards, and Eileen DeCourcy.

Nathan Whitlock: To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast, or to let us know what you think, email Humberpress, all one word, @humber.ca. That's Humberpress@humber.ca.

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Nathan Whitlock: Thanks for listening. See you next time. That's not a pun.