

Almost like us – getting familiar with another historical period in a pre-school group

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Abstract

This study reports on pre-school age children becoming familiar with their hometown's cultural history through children's literature, personal stories, and craft products. The aim of this study is to discuss the educational value of arts-based activities and authentic learning environments from the perspective of visualizing children's experiences. In the learning process, children create stories and craft products based on a picture book of a home museum in their town and the experience of visiting the museum. The research is in line with the curriculum of Finnish pre-schools (valid from 2016), according to which children should be offered opportunities to empathize with their immediate environment using a variety of arts-based methods as support. The theoretical framework of this study is based on Kolb's model of experiential learning, different approaches of arts-based learning and the theory of situated learning by Lave and Wenger. The data consist of children's oral follow-up stories and craft products. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which is a valid replicable method for making specific inferences from text to other states or properties of a source. It appears that different learning environments and arts-based, experiential activities contribute to learning in a child-centered way and may visualize children's thoughts and experiences, for the teacher, for the children themselves, and for other learners. The different stages of the experiential learning process proved to be beneficial to each other: The materials the children produced during the experiment could be used to activate educational discussions in pre-schools and make them more child-centered. In addition, the literature element and the authentic experience gave the children ideas for their own products.

Keywords: craft education, cultural education, experiential learning, literature education, pre-school education.

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1. Introduction

This study reports on pre-school age children telling stories and creating craft products in a museum environment in their hometown. The aim of this study is to test experiential learning and arts-based activities in Finnish pre-school education and the influence of a cultural-historical environment on arts-based learning.

In Finland, nearly all six year olds receive pre-school education organized by their local municipality. The curriculum of pre-school education is based on integrative teaching and on key content areas, not school subjects. In Finland, pre-school is a part of early childhood education and is viewed in a holistic manner. This means, that care, education and teaching are interrelated and based on interaction. In pre-school education the learning takes place in child initiated activities and through playing, moving, studying and exploring the different areas of art. The Finnish approach to early childhood education especially stresses arts-related forms of learning, since arts-based learning is known to strengthen the welfare of children and increase their opportunities to participate (FBNE, 2014). In addition, high quality arts-based education has positive effects on children's well-being, self-esteem and identity development (Bamford 2009, 139–140).

As theoretical premises for this study we chose to utilize the theory of experiential learning and the methods of storytelling and holistic craft. Experiential learning is likely to occur when children are required to engage in an activity, and employ their creativity and problem-solving skills, such as occurs when they tell a follow-up story or create a craft product. The learning in experiential learning takes place by reflecting on the experiences that have occurred in reality (Kolb, 1984). In order to enhance children's experiences and to integrate the learning with cultural heritage education, we conducted the research in a local historic house museum environment. Museums can offer inspiring learning environments for experiential and informal learning (Vartiainen, 2014; Henderson & Atencio, 2007).

When attempting to help children learn from experience, educators often use a combination of arts-based activities like drama, sculpting, role-play, arts and crafts, stories and metaphors in their teaching. They encourage learners to express their thoughts and ideas related to their experiences (Beard & Wilson, 2006). Furthermore, arts-based learning gives children a wider variety of ways to describe their learning and helps the educator to plan their teaching more effective and child centered (Kendrick & McKay, 2004). Previous studies show that the effectiveness of arts-based learning is grounded on it allowing children to implement different skills and their own ideas. It is therefore particularly beneficial to children who become frustrated with traditional school tasks. Arts-based methods make learning more meaningful, since children seem to learn best when they can use all their senses, their feelings and their whole body in learning (O'Toole, 2009).

The research question in this study is:

-How do the experiences aroused from the cultural-historical environment appear in preschoolers' arts-based activities?

1.1. *Learning is experiential and situated*

Pre-school-aged children learn about the world around them best through what they experience, not through what they are told. An effective learning environment invites and sustains active investigation and provides materials that can be used in multiple ways and at different levels of learning. An authentic learning environment contains diverse materials and enriches children's opportunities to feel, smell, see, hear, and taste, and offers the ideal conditions for effective learning (Wilson, 2012). Experiencing something means connecting the actions to thoughts. This means that the link between experience and learning is strong (Beard & Wilson, 2006).

Some researchers even state that learning can only occur if the learner engages with the learning through experiences (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993). All learning experiences are personal and unique to the individual, because each experience is influenced by the previous life experiences of the learner. Even if a group of learners receive the same stimuli, they will not necessarily respond to them in the same way (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Kolb, 1984). During experiential learning, the insight gained through the conscious or unconscious understanding of personal or observed experiences builds upon the learner's past experience or knowledge. Experiential learning enables the learner, through an active sense-making process, to engage with inner world of one's own and the outer world of the environment (Beard & Wilson, 2006).

Situated learning also appears in learning by doing and experiential learning, which is generally considered the most effective way to learn (Lombardy, 2007). Situated learning has made a significant impact on educational thinking and is based on the work of Vygotsky and Dewey (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated learning aims to bridge formal classroom learning and authentic environments (Herrington & Oliver, 1995). In Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situatedness, learning takes place in the same context in which it is applied; meaning all learning, cognition, and knowledge are situated. Instead of knowledge being conveyed in a classroom and thus out of context, children should acquire knowledge in authentic contexts. Moreover, social interaction and collaboration are essential (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning outside of the physical school environment offers opportunities to enrich learning and expand the physical context for learning. Situated learning is a way to integrate classrooms with their surroundings and provide experiential learning (Liljeström, Enkenberg, & Pöllänen, 2012).

1.2. Personal story endings

Telling their own stories is important for children and for those close to them. The United Nations' declaration of Rights of the Child (1959) emphasizes children's right to participate. When children are telling stories themselves, they can be heard the way they want to be heard (Riihelä, 2001). Through children's stories we can deduce information about the children's culture and make the children's thinking visible to children themselves and to others (www.childrenaretelling.fi). Stories are considered a natural way for people to express their ideas and many of the features of the stories are the same regardless of the era or culture (Kajannes, 2000, 56). Children like listening to, watching and reading stories written by others. In addition, they are keen on telling, drawing, and performing their own self-narrated stories, and for many children producing different stories is almost the only way to deal with and describe their own thoughts and world view (Authors, 2015a). The concept of a story has expanded due to the development of information technology and literacy. For instance, mobile technology allows children to create their personal stories more easily and to more efficiently share them with others.

The follow-up story method involves inventing a personal continuation of a fragment of a fictional story. The aim is to write, tell, draw, or act out a story that stylistically and substantively complies with the original story and tries to correspond to the author's understanding of how the original story proceeds (Aebli, 1991). In contrast to diaries and reading logs, follow-up stories are fictitious and usually narrative texts, and include both the author's deliberately and unconsciously selected elements, while other thinking-aloud tasks are more consciously produced (Author, 2010). Previous studies show that children like inventing personal endings to stories, because the original story provides them with material and the content is more important than the language. In addition, children like comparing and hearing/reading each other's stories. It also seems that follow-up stories bring competitive elements to writing, which boys in particular enjoy (Author, 2010). Using the follow-up story technique makes it easier for educators to stimulate the children to contribute to discussions, since the educators can ask questions about the details and solutions the children have made in their follow-up stories. Follow-up stories also enable the educator to comprehend each child's individual

interpretation and for the children to enhance their own and their classmates' interpretations (Authors, 2015a).

1.3. The holistic craft process

Crafts as an arts-based activity develops the craft makers' creativity and problem-solving skills and offers them an opportunity to test their ideas and see them realized (Authors, 2015). In the material making process, the hands and the mind are engaged simultaneously. Making crafts offers a child an opportunity to become acquainted with different materials and tools and provides the basis for the understanding of our material world (Lepistö & Lindfors, 2015). Making something by hand also brings the joy of creating something new (Yliverronen, 2014).

The holistic craft process includes developing ideas, designing, implementing design, and assessing the artifact and the whole process (Pöllänen, 2011; Rönkkö, 2011). Early in the craft process, the maker looks for stimuli and experiences to incorporate into the craft product. Sometimes brainstorming ideas needs to be supported by tangible or simulated experiences (Pöllänen, 2009). The ideas resulting from brainstorming will provide the craft maker with the cues to commence designing the craft product (Authors, 2015). The design stage distinguishes the holistic craft from the ordinary craft (Pöllänen, 2011; Rönkkö 2011).

The motivation for designing should be connected to something of interest in the children's world view so they are excited by the experience. The relevance of the design tasks has an important impact on children's desire to design things and to realize the designs (Hope, 2009; Authors, 2015). Children of various ages should get the opportunity to try different design tasks which let them practice the holistic craft process (Pöllänen 2011). However, teachers do not have enough information about children's design skills (Authors, 2016).

In the production phase, the craft maker implements the design. In doing so, the child needs information about craft techniques and materials (Hope, 2009). The last phase of the holistic craft process is the assessment. The aim of the assessment phase is to evaluate and reflect on the whole process from brainstorming to visual and technological designing and production, and the final product (Kojonkoski-Rännäli, 1995). Having the opportunity to tell others about the craft product and get positive feedback and encouragement are important parts of the reflection phase in craft teaching (Pöllänen, 2011).

2. Methods

2.1. The case study

The current research is based upon a case study, which aims to clarify a certain present event or operation in a certain environment, and to use diverse acquired data in different ways. Case studies are beneficial for clarifying the significant structures of the individual actors in which factors cannot be controlled, or where it is impossible to arrange an experimental examination of the relevant causal relationships (Yin, 1994). The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (see, Krippendorff, 2004). Qualitative content analysis is an empirical, methodological, controlled analysis of various kinds of communication, following the rules of content analysis and detailed models. Qualitative content analysis does not require exact quantification (Mayring, 2000). Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as a replicable and valid method for making specific inferences from text to other states or properties of its source. The aim of content analysis in this study was to examine the arts-based activities of pre-school children from the perspective of experiences and environment.

The research material was collected during four days in a historic house museum environment with 16 pre-school children in the spring of 2014. The empirical data comprise the material from the learning process; that is, children's oral follow-up stories (collected by the children dictating them), drawings based on these stories, craft designs, craft products, and video recordings of the activities in the museum and the school. The research data are supported by semi-structured interviews collected on tablet computers (in this case iPads). The aim of this material was to make the children's experiences visible to others.

2.2. The progress of the learning process

The learning process started with a visit to a historic house museum called Kirsti in the children's hometown. During the visit, the preschoolers were first allowed to explore the museum environment without supervision and this was followed by a guided tour to the historic house museum and its environments. The tour was followed by a discussion. After this discussion, the children were instructed to find a post card hidden in the yard by the researchers. The post card was from a girl called Kirsti stating that there was a story of her life in the house, but that the ending of the story had disappeared. Kirsti asked the children to listen to the beginning of her story and to invent an ending for it (meaning dictating the follow-up story). Kirsti's story was based on a fictional picture book written about the home museum by Annastiina Mäkitalo. The picture book *Kirsti of old Rauma* (2012) tells a story of a girl called Kirsti, who lived in a house, now known as the historic house museum Kirsti, in the early 1900s. *Kirsti of old Rauma* is a fictional story, but includes real information about the house, the artifacts in it, and the events of the time. After dictating the personal story ending the preschoolers were asked to illustrate the story.

The learning process continued with the holistic craft process. The starting point of the craft process was a discussion of the porcelain dogs of the historic house museum. Porcelain dogs are common souvenirs of seamen and they were often placed at window boards telling whether the sailor was at home or at sea. After the discussion, each child started designing a soft toy character called Longing Larry, which would reflect someone longing for home. The learning process continued in the school environment for the next two days that were dedicated to produce the craft product by felting. After felting the children embroidered or needle felted the details for their soft toys. When the children were satisfied with the character, they described it using the iPad application BookCreator. The final phase of the learning process began with reading the follow-up stories and discussing them. After this discussion, Mäkitalo's picture book was read to the end and the author's solution was compared to that of the children. The children were also asked to introduce their soft toys and to explain what they meant to them. The learning process ended with a teacher-led reflective discussion, and a period set aside to play with the soft toys.

3. Results

3.1. Children's personal story endings

The follow-up stories offer the educator a perspective on children's experiences and thoughts. The usefulness of follow-up stories is partly based on the fact that interpreting fiction is based on the interpreters' previous experiences, and as the follow-up story visualizes the interpreter's interpretation of fiction it may also reveal something about the experiences of the interpreter (Rosenblatt, 1978). The follow-up stories can relate to children's literacy skills, values and attitudes, knowledge, and the ability to empathize (Author, 2010).

In this study, all the children were able to produce a follow-up story with Kirsti as the main character, and to invent a logical ending to the original story. The follow-up stories featured material from the museum environment, from the picture book read during the visit, and from the children's own life experience. This indicates that follow-up stories can be used as a tool to convey children's thoughts and experiences.

The children wrote the personal story endings (follow-up stories) based on a fragment of a story of a sailor's family by Mäkitalo. The main character of the story was the same age as the children and the reading of the picture book was interrupted at a point where the main character and her mother were worried about the father who had been at sea for longer than expected, and about the economic situation of the family in the absence of the father's wages. Kirsti was worried that she might be forced to sell the lace flowers she had made. Belle's follow-up story serves as an excellent example of children's thought processes:

She didn't want to sell them [the lace flowers], and she went out. Kirsti was nervous and cried. Then she went back inside. She made more lace flowers and noticed that all the flowers had disappeared, and then she found them in the well. She made lace flowers more and more and more. Then the dogs began to bark, and Dad came home. Dad no longer went to sea, ever, without taking the whole family along. Then, the whole family went to sea, and then they came back. Then they lived happily ever after. The end. (Belle 6th May 2014)

The personal story endings show that the children could identify with the events described in the picture book and empathize with its characters. This is seen in the way they ended the stories: most had happy endings and featured the father returning to the family home. In most cases, the father even decided never to leave again or to take the family with him on the next journey. It seems that the fact that the main character was at the same age as the children created intense experiences and they clearly used their experiences of happiness and family life. It seemed that the thought of missing the father created the most powerful experience for the children. This experience was given more resonance by the visit to the house the imaginary family had lived in.

The most commonly mentioned details from the museum environment were the exterior well, porcelain dogs, tenants, the old currency, and domestic animals. Most of these details were both visible in the environment and mentioned by the museum guide. According to the follow-up stories the most powerful experience in the museum was connected to the well in the yard. This is probably due to the stories the guide told about the well: it had been used as a refrigerator and someone had once fallen into it. Furthermore, the children were allowed to peek from the well hatch to the bottom of the well. The well was both exciting and a little scary for the children. Maxwell's follow-up story is a typical example of the stories concentrating on the well:

The porcelain dogs suddenly became ill and the children were scared. Kirsti's mother came and helped them and gave medicine to the dogs. The dogs didn't want any. It was winter time. The dogs went outside and fell into the well. At the time there was no water in the well. Kirsti dropped a basket to the bottom of the well. The dogs went to it and Kirsti pulled it up. The end. (Maxwell 6th May 2014)

One aspect of follow-up stories is the references to the children's own lives and the present time. This is also obvious in the follow-up stories captured in the current study. Children referred to toys and characters in television programs and their own experiences of life were connected to the experience of the museum visit. These details may offer the educator an opportunity to compare past times and the present and to initiate discussion around such comparisons.

3.2. Children's craft products

The starting point for the design and production of a craft product was the porcelain dogs exhibited in the historic house museum. The craft products show that the children clearly understood the significance of the porcelain dogs in the past as a souvenir and as a symbol for sailor's family when

they are longing for their loved ones at sea. For example Tony made a cat as a soft toy, because he is longing for his cat when he is at mother's house. His parents are divorced and his beloved cat is living with his dad. He regards the soft toy cat as real and nominates it as the cat at his father's home.

He is just a normal cat. Its name is Willy. It is for real; it is not just a toy.... I play with him. It is funny when he bites me and licks my head. He observes things from the window. (Tony 9th May 2014)

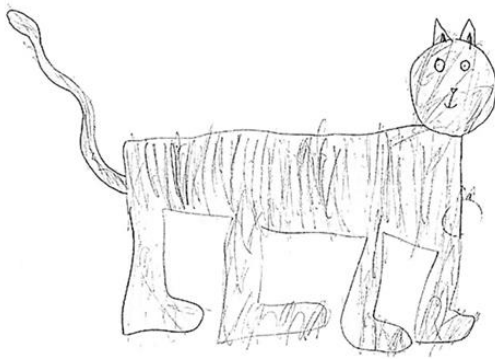


Figure 1. Tony's design and craft product

As the example shows children's soft toys were tangible for them. They were personalized according to children's views and experiences and represent children's thinking. All the children added their own ideas to the sketches and designs. They included in their designs their experiences in the museum, the events in the book and follow-up stories, and their own world.

In this context, children got ideas from the cultural-historic environment and processed the experiences from museum environment into the craft product. It is important to see that children were able to express their feelings, for example longing, in designing and implementing the design of a soft toy into artefact. Craft process includes craft-expression when the craft process contains the maker's own experiences, images, cherishing memories and emotions. Furthermore, the craft process is a part of building the maker's identity and the craft expression refers to the maker's personal commitment to the process (Rönkkö, 2011). It is significant to see that also small children are capable of this kind of a creative process.

4. Conclusions and discussion

According to the reflective discussions and individual interviews, children found the visit to the home museum amusing, useful, and educational. It also seems that children enjoy comparing, producing, and presenting items that connect shared and personal material. They enjoyed getting to know a new environment by exploring, listening, playing, and doing. The visit to the museum environment was intensified by appealing to all senses and learning styles with two different arts-based activities. Those activities were literature based oral follow-up stories and soft toys produced using craft techniques.

Promoting children's participation in learning means increasing the child-centeredness and well-being of children in education (Kinos, Kinos & Niemelä, 2011). Shier's (2001) model of enhancing children's participation offers five levels: 1. Children are listened to 2. Children are supported in expressing their views, 3. Children's views are taken into account, 4. Children are involved in the decision making process and 5. Children share power and responsibility in decision making. The arts-

based activities presented in this article support attaining the first two levels and offer the opportunity for the teacher to reach as far as level 5.

It seems that literature and the museum environment gave the children ideas for their personal story endings and craft products. The arts-based activities offered the children tools to express their thoughts and experiences as well as serving as examples of activities based on the experiential learning that prompts creativity. The results of the case study suggest that arts-based activities could be used to enhance children's levels of participation, since through stories and craft products the teacher can get some idea of children's thoughts during the learning process. In that way, such activities can help the teacher to stimulate children to recall and relate their experiences that arose during the learning processes (Authors, 2015b). In addition, arts-based activities could prove a valuable asset to the teacher when planning or evaluating learning processes, and as such could contribute to making learning more effective and meaningful for children.

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