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Preservice teaching practice in narrative environment

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Traditional teaching practice in Finland emphasizes learning of 'correct' teaching methods and linear didactic model. This paper presents an alternative model to traditional teaching practice, in which learning takes place in joint play-worlds of teacher education students and children. The main tasks of teacher education students are to elaborate narrative plot, organize concrete play-world environments, create the characters and embed children's learning assignments in the storyline. The implemented model of narrative practice revealed the merits of narrative learning environment in elementary grades to teacher education students.

Keywords: narrative learning, play-world, teaching practice, non-linear didactic model, reflection.

1. Introduction

Teaching practice of the Finnish teacher education system emphasizes lesson planning (the use of "correct" planning schemes), classroom management and organization of study work. The model delivered to the students still is based on Tyler's [18] linear didactic model. According to it planning proceeds from goals to materials, methods and evaluation of learning results.

The El'konin — Davydov system moved the emphasis to the learning activity of children. The teacher's primary task is to teach learning activity to the children. Learning activity aims at the mastery of theoretical generalizations of each school subject. How does the change of emphasis change teacher education and teaching practice? Davydov [2] suggested that a learning activity is the basic model for developing teacher's competences of developmental teaching. We argue that teachers' and students' positions cannot be the same and learning activity is not a sufficient model of teacher competences.

We have experimented with a new type of teaching practice based on the use of narrative learning environments since 2005. Teacher education students have selected some theme (in math, mother tongue, environmental studies etc.) and elaborated a narrative learning environment [3] or our play world |[6]. The guidance took place each second week in seminars where the students presented the progress of their project; the prob-lems and possible next steps.

Experimental teaching practice reported in this article was part of a two-year project in the city of Sotkamo in 2008—2010 called "Narrative learning environment in pre- and elementary school education". Several schools and day care units participated in the project, but in this article we focus on pre-service practice of eleven (8+3) students from the Kajaani Teacher Education Department at the end of autumn term 2010 and beginning of winter term 2011 in one village school (grades K — 6).

During the school year 2010—2011 the narrative learning environment was based on Somersalo's fairy tale "The Tale of Päivikki"[1]. Voluntary student teachers had to manage with non-linear learning processes, joint adult-child participation, children's creativity, and imagination. They ran a *narrative adventure* once a week for several weeks with the support of teachers and teacher training mentors. Important part of practice was weekly reflection sessions with all partners sharing their emotions and experiences of the adventure days.

2. Narrative teacher competences

Student teacher's professional competence is evaluated in training schools by testing their skills of constructing and realizing lesson plans according to the linear ideal model [18]. The emphasis of professional devel-

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[1] During the previous year the fairy tale "The Adventures of the Master Gnome" by the same author was set and dramatized with the same children.

opment is moved in our project from training of lesson planning skills and methods of teaching to the mastery of narrative rationality and interaction with children.

The linear model emphasizes three steps: central concepts of the school subject, teaching goals and methods (assignments) leading to the goals. Evaluation of learning results is not included into lesson planning, but four other elements are required from student teachers: other student's goals, teacher's goals, social forms and instructional materials. Advisor of each practice period accepts student teacher's written plan and observes how the plan was carried out during practice lessons. The lesson plan is called "concept-based lesson plan", but "concept" is defined rather as "the name of a phenomenon" than explanatory concept.

New challenges of professional development in narrative teaching are competences in constructing story lines and imaginative situations, creating and acting in role (teacher in role), dramatizing narrative events, introducing realistic learning problems embedded in story lines etc. [8].

Why are arduous narrative environments used in creating learning challenges for children? Our argument is that the route to analytic learning problems should go through narrative problem solving because: "Children do not apply adult logic in their problem solving, but it is rather based on emotional identification and becoming conscious of their own emotions. A problem to be solved is not external in the outside world, but children are inside the problem due to their imagination and fantasy. They live through the problem while solving it. This difference opens the possibility to carry out creative experiments in problem solving" [5, 36].

Children need two types of adult support asymmetric (an adult takes responsibility, makes decisions, sets goals and tasks, provides models for children, helps and comforts, controls and evaluates children's behavior) and symmetric (adults and children are genuine equal partners) [13]. The problem is that continuous asymmetric interaction does not leave any space for the development of children's reflection. An adult is needed for launching children's reflection, but their asymmetric relation prevents its development. Reflection and development of critical thinking prosper in the company of peers or with equal adult partners.

Two different types of interaction between adults and children have consequences for understanding the concept of the zone of proximal development. Adult help from asymmetric position may prevent critical aspects of learning. In other words all adult help does not create the zone of proximal development. Zuckerman [20] has even proposed that the concept of the zone of proximal development should be revised because of adults' contradictory role in supporting child development.

3. Didactic principles of narrative teaching

Narrative teaching aims at creating a learning community instead of promoting learning of individual children, only. Creation of an imaginative situation invites all participants to enter the imaginative world and take a role. We have used the following principles in creating imaginative worlds in teaching

A) Selecting "eternal moral themes", which are presented to children through classic tales or stories revealing the theme indirectly "between the rows"

The themes are elaborated into joint fantasy of adults and children called play-world [10]. The teacher adds new dramatic elements and activities to the play-world and thus guides children's experimenting and learning different social and cultural aspects related to the themes. "Eternal moral themes" are studied in imaginative space as "real life" of imaginative characters, not children's.

The possibility to experiment with new types and forms of interaction is the starting point of organizing children's learning situation in imaginative reality. Optimal environment for experimenting is narrative environment. The content and narrative forms may vary, but the common denominator is a narrative plot with dramatic events. In several play-worlds children have been helpers of the characters of the story.

In the comparative study of two Narnia Play-worlds (based on the story of C.S. Lewis) carried out in the USA and Finland activities in narrative teaching were compared to the traditional instruction: "In the narrative environments of play-worlds the adults invite the children to participate and become emotionally involved, creating an urge to expand imaginative events. The traditional instructional guide on the C.S. Lewis website emphasizes language comprehension only using Narnia stories" [10].

B) Narrative teaching is oriented to learning, which aims at promoting child development

This means that children's learning results are just intermediate step in teacher's work. It is necessary to ask, which learning results have sustainable developmental consequences. We can talk in this connection about children's general abilities and potentials and aim at the need for the mastery based on theoretical generalizations.

C) Narrative teaching is a boundary activity. The boundary between two worlds (imaginary and real) is constantly crossed and explored

Boundary crossing is familiar to children from pretend role-play. The child is well aware about the real child behind role characters in play. In psychology it is a well-known fact that new abilities and skills first appear in play and later in other daily activities. Children's play activity changes substantially at the transition from role-play to rule-play.

Adult-child interaction in play world and real world differs. Lisina [12] asked for what does a child need from an adult at different age periods? An important question for us is what is the role of adults on both sides of the boundary? In narrative teaching an adult is a model of improvisation for children. Perhaps the biggest challenge at boundary crossing between worlds is the character of problems and their solution. In the imaginative play world problems obey narrative logic and are solved by a miracle, but the same problem moved to the real world is solved using logical-analytic methods.

Realistically, unemotional interaction is a new challenge of school. Children have to learn new interaction

skills and new relations to the peers. These new skills are taught to children in our earlier projects using the program developed by Zuckerman and Polivanova [20]. The reason for this approach is that at the beginning of school life children's sense creation is not yet effective enough on the basis of factual knowledge content and teacher instructions. Narrative approach helps to construct meaningful personal assignments and tasks of the whole group.

D) Thematic units and narrative events are presented to children revealing personal relations and sense-related "perezhivanie" of the teacher

Traditional didactics has emphasized factual knowledge and skills. Teacher's personal relation to life was not important. But if teaching aims at developmental changes in children a personal relation to phenomena is a central task. In narrative education a central goal is the change of consciousness.

Most tasks and assignments in traditional school teaching are closed problems, which have only one correct answer. These problems are separated from real life and children's sense making. They are made significant artificially with teacher's didactic motivation, competition or evaluation. Such problems are hard to relate to each other and they have low developmental potential. Open problems on the contrary resemble the plot of folk tales. A person encounters obstacles preventing the attainment of goals. These obstacles are unclear at the first glance, but they are revealed gradually and the goal is attained.

E) Narrative teaching uses joint open problems and supports the development of initiatives and creativity of all children

Development of creativity and imagination presupposes psychologically secure atmosphere and possibility of testing one's ideas. The following three conditions are essential to psychological security:

• The child is accepted and his potential is recognized in spite of the present state.

• External evaluation is minimized and self-evaluation is supported.

• Sympathy, "perezhivanie" is expressed to the child, he and his point of view is accepted and understood.

The children should feel their life so secure that they dare to experiment with new experiences without offending the freedom of others [1].

In our experimental research on narrative teaching changes in learning processes were observed. The environment and tasks changed children's and also student learning. New competences were important in narrative practice.

4. Learning in narrative teaching practice

How should narrative teaching practice change student teachers' learning and develop their teacher competences? The El'konin — Davydov system of developmental education has emphasized the consciousness of learning as a key factor of learning activity. One of the indicators of consciousness is the ability of reflection.

Zuckerman has carried out longitudinal research on developmental education. She divided reflection into three domains:

To consider the goals, motives, methods, and means of one's own and other's actions and thought. This ability is sometimes called metacognition

To take the other people's point of view. To view things from other perspectives

To understand oneself. To study one's own strong points and limitations in order to excel or to accept one's shortcomings.

Introspection is one part of this human faculty; the power for self-changing and transcending one's limitations is another component of the ability in reflection [19, 10].

Reconstructing predefined knowledge of the textbooks is quite far from children's active need to make sense of the world and understand the meaning of phenomena. Traditional classroom interaction focuses on teachers' control of student performances. In narrative environments teacher's main task is to cooperate and to accept students' creative proposals; in other words teachers need to understand the key characters of improvisation. Sawyer [16] defined improvisation as:

1. Unpredictable outcome, rather than a scripted, known endpoint;

2. Moment-to-moment contingency: the next dialogue turn depends on the one just before;

3. Open to collaboration;

4. An oral performance, not a written product;

5. Embedded in the social context of the performance.

The student teachers are supported in their learning by teaching them an alternative planning and assessment model. In order to change the teacher-student interaction a model of assisted performance was introduced [17]. In the model the main task of the teacher is to assist children's learning instead of just controlling it. The bureaucratic model of supervision easily creates an obstacle for practical reform of teacher — student interaction: "The administrative/bureaucratic practice of assessing and directing is organically related to the classroom practice of assessing and directing the recitation script." [17, 26].

Narrative teacher — student interaction has an improvisational character as Sawyer [16] demonstrated in his analysis of play, but some in advance planning must be done. A serious problem in the traditional teaching practice is a short time span of teacher — student interaction: the plan covers as rule 1 or 2 lessons only. In narrative projects a plan covers usually a whole term (4—5 months). A longer period allows the definition of developmental goals, but all narrative activities have to be interlinked by a theme [1].

In planning of narrative environments and joint thematic activities (play-worlds) the emphasis is as much on the activity process as on learning results and development. The planning task is 'what we do together in narrative environment in order to reveal new aspects from the selected theme'. The evaluation is carried out

on the level of joint narrative activity and can be divided into four interconnected elements:

How was the theme understood and educational goals attained?

How did the activity make sense to participants?

What would be the next step of narrative activity?

What kind of children's self-initiated play originated from joint narrative activity?

The fourth evaluation question is closely connected to the third one because self-initiated play reveals the level of children's understanding. If we want to enhance their understanding of the theme we should pick up their play form reflection as the basis of next step of joint narrative activity. Van Oers and his research group [13] used a three-part evaluation idea, but their 'play-based learning' does not integrate adults to play as equal partners as we do. This is why the objects of evaluation are different in our approach. E.g. teacher's reflection and self-evaluation are added.

In our research group's experimental projects we have elaborated the planning model and the logbook suitable for each project. The planning of adventures has been carried out in two phases:

Story line events intertwined with learning problems and their dramatization using a special planning form.

Reflecting on narrative sessions after adventure day.

The student teachers met as a team for brainstorming the narrative content and learning problems before each adventure day (usually one day a week). The researcher and the class teacher(s) contributed to reflecting.

As a result of this experimental work we propose the following changes in learning interaction (Table 1).

T a b l e 1
Teacher competences in traditional and narrative learning interaction (after [9])

Features of meaningful interaction	Traditional learning interaction	Narrative learning interaction
Mode of conversation	Questioning skills (IRE-model)	Mutual dialogic skills
Directing attention	Attention arousing	Mutual atunement
Teacher's main activity	Control of children's performance	Acceptance of children's initiatives and ideas
Mode of participation	Participation by observing	Joint participation
Degrees of freedom in learning	Strict instructions limits degrees of freedom	Creative turns and new ideas are accepted (non-linear interaction)
Emotional involvement	"Objective knowledge"	"Perezhivanie", joint living through
Intentions	Teacher's goals dominate	Joint intentions and problems
Mode of tasks	Readymade tasks from textbooks, no cooperation	Open-ended tasks to be solved in cooperation, a child's self-formulated tasks

5. Pre service teaching practice in different environments

Teacher education students could choose in 2010—2011 between traditional and narrative teaching practice. The traditional practice emphasized lesson-planning starting from central concepts of the theme, goal setting, selection of methods and assignments. The student teachers of narrative practice (11 (8+3) voluntary students) participated in the collective adventure of 6—8 years old children in a village school. Their task was to gradually take responsibility to dramatize narrative events and intertwine children's learning tasks with the story line.

The main differences between traditional and narrative teaching model are indicated in the following table 2:

T a b l e 2
The main differences between traditional and narrative teaching model

COMPETENCE DOMAIN	LINEAR TEACHING MODEL	NARRATIVE TEACHING MODEL
Focus of planning	Central content and concepts	Joint activity promoting child development[2]
Goal definition	Clear and simple formulation of objectives	Intertwining of the story line and assignments
Mastery of knowledge	Ability to describe subject matter concepts using examples	Understanding children's Life-world
Mastery of didactic thinking	Tasks and exercises leading to the attainment of learning objectives	Creative abilities, improvisation and pretending

The emphasis is on the knowledge content and presentation competences in the linear teaching model. The narrative model underlines more children's involvement and teachers' abilities to organize pupils' experiences.

Reflection session of all participants took place after each adventure day in the narrative teaching practice. The following questions directed reflection to essential characteristics of narrative interaction:

1. Evaluation of activities and attainment of goals.

2. How did the story plot enrich children's imagination? Which events and role characters fascinated children especially?

3. Was the small group division successful? My observations.

4. What did I learn from my own role activity? Was it successful / challenging? Why? When documenting events, where did I focus my attention? Why?

5. Conclusions for the next adventure day: How should the plot continue? What kind of activities and tasks? How to divide children into subgroups? The role of characters?

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[2] The necessary changes in joint activity are evaluated on the basis of the success of the same activity during previous week. The aim is to move the boundaries of the ZPD stated during last week.

In the traditional classroom teaching practice reflection is limited to dialogue between the advisor and individual students. Traditional model focuses on the implementation of the lesson plan and the student's mastery of didactic principles (e.g. clarity of presentation, proceeding from simple to complicated etc.).

6. Student teachers' reflection on narrative environments

The first adventure was an introduction to narrative teaching for teacher education students. The student teachers participated in the planning of the second adventure and acted in roles during dramatizations. Reflection sessions took place after each adventure and the following themes were discussed most:

Emotional involvement ("perezhivanie", joint living through)
Children's emotional involvement was discussed during all reflection sessions. Tension of the story plot was a crucial aspect of narrative environment and dramatization made it tangible. Discussions about tension took place in the most reflection meetings. The students took up the problem what kind of psychological tools children need in order to feel safe.

Children's tolerance for tension was different. Some children actively avoided frightening role characters and places, but wanted to participate in the adventures. Some of them used the pearls or twilight veils they had used in the last year's adventures (psychological tool). Rapid transition to traditional classroom activity after the adventure was impossible. A classroom teacher wrote: "After the adventure we had to reflect events by discussing, drawing, writing, and making handicraft. The reflection part is important, children can tell us *about their feelings.*"

Student teachers were not always able to guess which events of the story line may provoke children's anxiety. For example they presupposed that eavesdropping the negotiation of the wizards might be frightening, but it was meeting with the Raven (student teacher in role). A dilemma was children's opposing reactions: the same events were too exciting for some and not interesting at all for some. It was decided that children could independently decide a safe distance to events and characters. Student teachers' surprise was expressed: "Amazing how small details can be frightening and create anxiety."

Children's (and students') emotional involvement separates the practice models from each other. The linear model does not include children's emotional involvement as a goal. Emotional involvement is a central goal in narrative practice. A student commented this: "We are now much closer to the children compared to traditional teaching.[3]"

Equal participation in narrative environment
It was very hard to plan an adventure day that leaves space for children's ideas and act on equal level with children, not even as a role character. A student teacher wrote: "Joint participation means that you have to participate genuinely and devoted without pretense! And you have to act at equal level with children." Student teachers noticed that on adventure day children carefully observe adults' actions and environments.

Despite the challenges, student teachers accepted creative turns and ideas and they found out the difference between linear and non-linear learning. They also discussed how to accept children's initiatives and ideas. But they were not able to participate in children's playing or plan play situations. A student wrote: "The most difficult thing was to understand why should they (*children*) do like that. Why we should go to the gym and **just** play?" The other continued: "Before we had problem solving tasks and now they go to the gym and **just stay**; no problem just a message. No tension!" The teacher commented the same situation: "The children were so involved in their play that they did not even notice the mermaid (student teacher in role)."

Afterwards we asked if student teachers felt themselves as equal play partners. They said that it was children's play. One student commented: "For sure we could have been equal partners if we had thrown ourselves a hundred percent!"

Type of learning tasks
One theme of discussions was whether tasks were too difficult for children. We realized that tasks were on children's level when teacher education students knew children better. They found out that leading problem solvers might be totally different children when tasks were intertwined with the plot compared to textbook tasks.

Another problem was if tasks should be open-ended. Student teachers soon realized that tasks are more challenging if they are open-ended and include some traps. Children suggested traps connected to the story plot like "extra piece of the map is warning us about the Shark" or "there is an image of the Mermaid". During the practice period children were given assignment to formulate tasks for the role characters. Student teachers noticed that these tasks were more demanding than those of the textbooks.

7. Self-evaluation of student teachers

7.1 What kind of a teacher am I?
Part of the student teacher's practice was a written self-evaluation report. The aim of the report was to get the student to analyze own learning process during the practice period. The main question was "what kind of a teacher am I at the moment?" More concrete self-evaluation questions in both practice models are: 1. How your teacher competences are developed from the previous practice, 2. In what you were successful? 3. What you

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[3] The necessary changes in joint activity are evaluated on the basis of the success of the same activity during previous week. The aim is to move the boundaries of the ZPD stated during last week.

need to make better? Self-evaluation of narrative practice included also questions about interaction with children, narrative character of practice and own learning process.

The focus of self-evaluation was to know how student teachers have developed their narrative competences and how they have understood the potential of teaching and learning using narratives. Teacher — child interaction radically changes in narrative teaching because narrative role interaction dominates. Learning becomes more meaningful in this environment.

7.2 Evaluation of personal learning and progress in narrative practice

Ten students evaluated the experience of their practice very positively and thought that they will use narrative learning environments in their future teaching profession. The difference between traditional teacher dominated instruction and narrative teaching was emphasized in the reports: "Narrative practice opened my eyes to see how teacher centered our school system is and how children are treated as a mass, which is pushed forward through the system" (Sari's report 27. 1. 2011).

Many student teachers wrote about the importance of working as a team. The planning of an adventure day was teamwork for them and reflection sessions afterwards were important learning opportunities. A student wrote: "For me the most fruitful learning was when we went through by stages of an adventure or a lesson. Afterwards when you have time to think you see better what could be done differently. The atmosphere was easy going and you dare to experiment because always help is available. Nobody was afraid of telling one's opinion. The practice was a very fine experience, which I would at no price give away" (Anna's report 14.01. 2011).

Narrative, nonlinear model of teaching was a new challenge for the students. The difficulty was explained in one report: "Perhaps the greatest difficulty in planning adventures was preparing assignments. It was difficult to withdraw from traditional textbook style tasks, which have only one correct answer. Our first tasks were quite traditional, but later we blended "bluffing tasks" with them. The most successful adventure tasks were those, which children prepared for the role characters. Children revealed in these tasks the limits of their understanding and made really challenging tasks" (Mary's report 25.01. 2011).

7.3 Evaluation of narrative environments

Student teachers noticed the transition from material centered teaching to child-centered approach. They called the atmosphere more free and creative. Instead of mechanical execution of textbook tasks experiencing and living through narrative environments and events were central. A student described the difference: "Children do not aim at the same objectives all at the same time, but every child proceeds in his or her own space and way. The child can test his limits and courage in a relatively safe environment and separate imagined world from real one. A challenge of

moral thinking is the relativity of good and bad in a long adventure where they can change places. Lively discussion among children sort out what is right, what is approved, and what is wrong" (Monica's report 29.01. 2011).

It was easy to see how different the learning situation was in narrative environments. Children's tension, expectations, eagerness and energy was visible. Children's roles change in narrative environment compared to traditional lessons: "A quiet pupil may suddenly be a leader in narrative environment. Cognitive objectives are not limiting the pupils and even special children can enjoy success in narrative situations" (Emily's report 28.01. 2011)

7.4 Evaluation of interaction in narrative environment

The student teachers reported about changes in interaction with children. The first observation was that the teacher's authority position is eliminated from narrative role relation: "It was a pleasure to notice how children entered into adventure and adopted a different attitude to the role character than to me. When I played the role of the wizard they related to me with reservation and wondered if I can be trusted on or not. In general interaction between pupils increased and they looked for answers and experimented with alternatives together more than during traditional lessons" (Emily's report 28.01. 2011).

8. Conclusions

Teaching practice has historical roots according to which basic competences are first adopted from explanations of experts and adopted skills are trained in classroom practice [8]. Narrative teaching replaces linear model of teaching with a nonlinear model. The boundary between conceptual learning and application of learning results during teaching practice is eliminated. Narrative learning environment radically changes relationships, learning processes, motivation and emotional involvement of student teachers and children. Many teacher education students saw the difference of different models and presumed that they will apply narrative model in their future profession.

Most of the student teachers understood the potential of the new approach. They saw how children are given an opportunity to succeed in learning without discrimination. Teacher education students were able to compare children's learning in narrative and traditional classroom environments. They were surprised by differences in children's participation. In narrative environment most active children retired in traditional classroom setting.

Narrative teaching practice was an impressive learning experience for teacher education students. The linear didactic model does not leave space to experimentation and living through the problems. Narrative teaching holds great promise for the future when the Finnish school system has to become more child-centered and focus to developing learning motivation.

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Педагогическая практика студентов в начальной школе: обучение в нарративной среде

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Традиционно будущих учителей в Финляндии учат «правильным» методам преподавания и ступенчатой дидактической модели обучения детей. В настоящей статье представлена альтернативная система, в рамках которой обучение происходит в совместных игровых мирах студентов-педагогов и детей. Главной задачей студентов в этом случае становится разработка нарративного сюжета, организация конкретных игровых сред, выдумывание героев и способов встраивания учебных заданий в сюжетную линию истории. Отмечается, что студенты, принимавшие участие в реализации данной нарративной модели обучения на практике, смогли увидеть преимущества нарративной обучающей среды в начальной школе.

Ключевые слова: нарративное обучение, игровой мир, педагогическая практика, нелинейная дидактическая модель, рефлексия.