

Collaborative narrative as linguistic artifact and cultural tool for meaning-making and learning

Elin Eriksen Ødegaard

PhD, Professor, Bergen University College

Niklas Pramling

PhD, Professor, Communication and Learning, Department of Education, University of Gothenburg

In this study, we present a socio-culturally informed conception of narrative as a cultural tool and more specifically as a linguistic artefact. From a larger set of empirical data from a preschool setting with children 1-5 years old, two examples have been chosen for further investigation on how this tool is put to use and negotiated between children and their preschool teacher. Collaborative narrative is a powerful cultural artefact since such practice brings up themes and subjects for elaborate talk and thereby supports children in participating in using language in particular speech genres. Furthermore, it is argued that studying narrative as a collaborative making and use of a cultural artefact can give new insights into children's and teachers' perspectives, respectively, and how these may or may not be coordinated. What is worth talking about from children's versus teachers' points of view, how meaning-making is negotiated and how this artefact brings about modes of speaking are intertextually linked to linguistic resources made available in the participants' culture. Such references and modes of speaking are dialogically distributed among participants. Some of the implications of this theoretical account for early childhood education are discussed.

Keywords: Co-narrative, collaborative narrative, artifact, learning, cultural tool, kindergarten, preschool.

Introduction

When children participate in narrative talk in an institutional setting, they engage in an important cultural mould for experiencing and learning, through which they make sense of the world around them. Such a participatory engagement will shape their learning of language, ways of talking and their appropriation of narrative as a speech genre. In children's familiarisation of this linguistic artefact, they also learn what kinds of topics have high respectively low value in their cultural communities. Narrative has been of interest to a variety of studies within different kinds of research traditions on children and discourse, such as studies of didactics and children's narrative learning and studies of a child perspective in ethnographic designs (Pramling & Ødegaard, 2011).

This article will foreground collaborative narrative as a cultural tool for meaning-making and learning in an attempt to conceptualise it as a crucial cultural artefact in institutional early childhood settings. This will be done by studying how collaborative narrative is established, used and negotiated. In this kind of early childhood education setting, there are certain distinguishing features. For example, children are brought together in a context where typically several children are present, and where teachers will try to include more than one child in an activity. Another feature of such a setting is that some teachers will have knowledge about narrative as a speech genre for meaning-making, identity and lan-

guage learning. Consequently they will try to bring about narrative ways of speaking in both planned activities such as circle time, book reading activities etc., in talking during everyday routines, as well as in less pedagogically planned activities, such as meeting the parents and children in the morning and afternoons. In the present article, qualitative data that comes from previous studies where children's narratives have been collected and provoked in ethnographic and participatory approaches will serve as examples.

The genre of narrative may be defined in increasingly detailed ways, but the basic constituents of this cultural artefact, as we will use the term in this text, is that it is an account of events that are related by time and human (or human-like) actions. This means that a narrative as a minimum requires, first, one (though typically several) actor(s), second, actions (events taking place), which as such, third, take time (i.e., are organised temporally). It is vital to a narrative how the events/actions are woven together (related). Knowledge about narrative genre will be evident, for example, in the teller using expressions such as '...and then...' or more developed ways of weaving the events into a story by saying '...since...', '...which resulted in...', or '...affected...'. In order to produce a coherent narrative, it is also common to refer to previous events. This article will show how children learn to narrate by participating in narrative collaboration. Using narrative as a linguistic tool with very young children will demand that the adults are the weavers, to continue our

metaphor. Children, when belonging to speech communities which allow and encourage their participation, will however contribute topics and themes, even from very young ages.

The empirical context of the present article is Norwegian. Norwegian society has largely been an egalitarian society, where child-centeredness has a long tradition. Such conditions have been considered beneficial in what has been understood as a Nordic holistic approach to early childhood education and care. In such cultural contexts, children, rich in initiatives for play and talk, are assumed to be allowed and to be able to influence the kindergarten program, as shown, for example, in Ødegaard (2007, 2012).

Everyday kindergarten practice in Norway will include both planned activities and less pedagogically planned time for activities of children's choice and spontaneity. In the planned activities, the teacher will direct the themes. It will often be verbal talk and bodily instructions or performance, sometimes including introducing visual or material artefacts. Children might be invited to explore or to perform accordingly. On the other hand, children can be seen as agents, contributing to the shaping of the curriculum by bringing in unplanned suggestions and utterances picked up elsewhere or by talking about themes of their own interest that has not been planned for by the teachers. In this manner, children are co-constructing not only the activities but also themselves as agents of meaning-making and learning. From a teacher perspective, it is often the pre-planned activities that are at the forefront of their attention when talking about the curriculum. However, if taking a holistic approach to early childhood education, what happens in less pedagogically planned activities such as outdoor play, mealtimes and other daily routines, also shapes the kindergarten curriculum. Hence, collaborative narratives can be planned for, stimulated in everyday situations, as well as occur spontaneously in settings where such speech genres are practiced and supported. In the next section, we will elaborate on narrative as a linguistic artefact for meaning-making and learning.

A sociocultural perspective on meaning-making and learning

In this article, collaborative narratives are explored as rich cultural artefacts emerging from collaborative activities. In such activities, participants' (i.e., children's and teachers') utterances and perspectives could be more or less coordinated. Still, in talking together in an institutional setting, the participants meet each other in a cultural moment and context (i.e., the activity is situated in time and space).

Taking a socio-cultural perspective on human learning, there are several distinguishing features of interest to the present discussion. We will use some of these notions in introducing a version of this perspective that we will then use to analyse and discuss empirical data

from preschool settings. The particular artefact we will focus our discussion on is narrative, or more specifically, collaborative narrative, what is sometimes referred to as co-narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001; Ødegaard, 2007).

One of the many important contributions by Vygotsky to educational psychology, as Daniels (2005) emphasizes, is that he introduced cultural tools in his account of human psychological functioning. What is referred to in socio-cultural theory as cultural tools include physical ones (e.g., a hammer, saw, calculator) as well as intellectual ones (e.g., speech, models). Physical tools are also referred to as artefacts. However, recognizing the difficulty of making such a distinction in many cases (for example, writing is an intellectual tool as well as a material one), we will use cultural tools and artefacts as synonymous concepts in this text. Artefacts are important to human meaning-making and learning for several reasons. First, they are important means through which we transmit insights over generations and therefore to the child's understanding, socialization, and enculturation. Second, cultural tools mediate the individual's (and the group's) engagement with the world and its phenomena. Our perception and experience are 'informed' or shaped by our cultural tools. We learn to experience and understand our world in terms of the tools of our culture (Luria, 1976). Third, cultural tools are the keys to the development of what Vygotsky (1987) referred to as 'higher mental functions', such as voluntary remembering and narrative. Tools that a culture values are institutionalized in educational settings, such as kindergarten/preschool and school. In these settings, the child will encounter and be supported in familiarizing him- or herself with such tools. In fact, this is one of the important functions of these societal institutions.

In the terms of Wertsch (1998), there is always an "irreducible tension between agent [e.g., a child] and cultural tool inherent in mediated action" (p. 131). This realization has several important consequences for our understanding of children's meaning-making and learning. This tension means that the tool or artefact cannot simply be internalized by the learner in ready-made form. Some 'moulding work' is required by the learner. This process of gradually taking over and being able to use a tool or artefact is referred to in socio-cultural theory as appropriation (Rogoff, 1995; Wertsch, 1998). That is, the learner has to shape the tool in use and learn to adapt how he or she uses the tool for various purposes (communicative, remembering etc.). Appropriating cultural tools is also an important feature of the child's cognitive shaping (socialization), including learning to communicate and remember what is culturally valued knowledge and insights. Still, since appropriation is not a passive internalization, the child may put the tool to unexpected and novel use. For educational purposes, this implies that it may be necessary to negotiate with the child how the tool should be used in the frame of current particular educational activity. Hence, two or more children who are introduced to a cultural tool such as the narrative format will not use this tool in identical

ways, telling the same story. Using tools is always a creative activity shaped by the child's perception of situational needs, expectations, personal experiences, interests etc. This also has an important methodological implication for research; we cannot simply map the tools of a setting, but must also study these in use (Wertsch, 1998). What cultural tools (artefacts) are children introduced to and supported in appropriating in early childhood education and how do they put these to use in carrying out various activities (playing, planning activities etc.), are important questions for practitioners working in, as well as for researchers studying, early childhood education settings. The present article aims at contributing to this important field of knowledge where the interests of educational practice and research converge.

Narrative as a cultural tool (linguistic artefact)

Etymologically, the term 'artefact' is from Latin: arte, from ars, meaning 'art' and factum from the verb facere, 'to make'. The concept can have several meanings. In this article it is synonymous with cultural tools and can be seen as objectifications of human needs and intentions as "already invested with cognitive and affective content" (Wartofsky, 1979, p. 205f., in Hedegaard, 2012, p. 9). This quote emphasizes that the content is, at least in part, already 'inscribed' in the design of the tool. This reasoning is similar to Bakhtin's notion of the word not belonging to a single person, but rather carrying with it the voices of earlier users. Per Linell uses Bakhtin's philosophy of language as a framework for understanding how individuals without verbal language communicate multimodally with implements such as a Bliss Board (a board where semiotic signs, the letters of the alphabet and numbers offer an alternative way for communication; where a selection for pointing is offered to a child without the need to use verbal language) (Linell, 2009). This goes beyond the idea that there is a dualism between verbal language and movement, signs and marking. This example emphasizes that it would be artificial and inappropriate to make a distinction between the physical, material artefacts on one side and artefacts as signs, language, models and narrative genres on the other, as we have already hinted at.

Narrative as a linguistic artefact and its relationship to cultural aspects of learning and meaning-making have, over the years, been discussed in the educational field of early years settings. Both cultural psychology (Bruner, 1990; Bruner & Watson, 1983) and language learning in terms of literacy (Aukrust, 2006; McCabe & Peterson, 1991) are areas of knowledge that have emphasized narrative as an important tool. While cultural psychology encompasses meaning-making as identity, language learning focuses on narrative as a language genre preparing the child for reading and learning of complex texts in higher grades. Early literacy seems to be related to having more knowledge about the genre and text structure and the use of this knowledge when

reading (Aukrust, 2006). Both these traditions draw on Vygotsky, even if he, as pointed out by Wertsch, did not deal in any detailed way with narrative as such (Wertsch, 2000).

Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogism (Bakhtin, 1986), children's learning and narrative meaning-making are seen as tied to locally constructed patterns and discourses of everyday life as well as being historically shaped. Children make use of the linguistic artefacts made available to them in culturally shaped manners. John Dore uses the concept "reenvoicement" to conceptualize children picking up words, lines and sayings made available for them in everyday talk as imitations (Dore, 1989). This concept is used also to include imitation of bits of performances and music in the study of very young children's narrative meaning-making in kindergarten (Ødegaard, 2007). It is well documented that media productions targeting children give shape to children's creative meaning-making. Narrative is one genre among many in which children can engage in the use of cultural tools for (re)formulating and creating new meaning. As also pointed out by Castanheira et al. (2007), children's engagement in narratives is not about taking up a fixed identity in some absolute form, but one shaped by what they choose and resist, how they have interpreted potentials, in other words an on-going meaning-making process (see also Tiri Bergesen Schei's article about Knowledge Production and Discourses in kindergarten, in this special issue).

These processes are socio-culturally contextualised. To contextualise means to weave things together, for example, give form to the events of the story, to refer to other stories and texts (intertextuality). Collaboratively narrate, that is communicatively shape a linguistic artefact, implies such 'weaving work' and is thus an important feature both in the appropriation of this speech genre, the skill of narrating and using it as a cultural mould for meaning-making (Pramling & Ødegaard, 2011).

Illustrations

For illustrative purposes, two examples are chosen from a larger set of data consisting of 160 narratives that are told by children (aged 2–5) and their teachers, collected between 2003 and 2010. 142 narratives were transcribed from video recordings and 18 were written down by the participant researcher. The first example was written while the study was explorative, while the second was written in close collaboration with teachers working in their practice with further investigating and the developing a self-reflexive practice.

Example 1: Introducing and negotiating the topic of the narrative

The background (context) of the first illustration is that a group of nine children and their teachers had been on an excursion in the local neighbourhood of the kindergarten. The kindergarten is situated in a subur-

ban Norwegian area consisting of high and low rise housing, local schools, kindergartens, a church, a shopping centre, industry and a huge sports park connected to a wooded area with paths and green open spaces. Children attending this kindergarten would come from working and middle-class families, having Norwegian as well as other languages as their first language. The example is taken from a mealtime, a short time after arriving back at the kindergarten from the excursion. All nine children are sitting around a table. The narrative developed spontaneously, there was no task or spoken expectations of narrative conversation tied to the observation. There was, however, a culture for narrative practices in this group. After excursions, there would often be talk about events from the trip. It should also be noted that teachers in Norway are well aware of the ideologies in the Norwegian Framework plan where children's participation is emphasized. The narrative is a transcript from a videotape.

Teacher A: Amanda, would you tell us what we saw on the trip today? What did we see?

Amanda (2 years old) lifts her hands up to her head, waits a while and then she utters some sounds (hard to discern).

Teacher A: Raises eyebrows and puts her head on one side, but nods slowly.

Almost at once she said to another child, Alex: What did we see today, on the tour then?

Alex (2 years old) replies: Poo.

Teacher B: We saw poo, and then we saw the tractor.

Alex: Lots.

Teacher B: Lots.

Alex: Lots of big poo.

Teacher B: Yes, I think it was the horse, which had walked there and made poo.

Amanda: Horse poo.

Teacher A: The horse had made poo.

Alex: I want more juice.

Teacher B pours: You were very thirsty.

Teacher A: And then we saw a lot of leaves, many kind of leaves (pointing to the ones they have brought to a table close by).

Amanda: Nods.

In this example, teacher A takes the initiative to talk. She addresses one particular child, Amanda. Her choice could be random, or her reason could be that Amanda seldom talks. By addressing her, she facilitates the inclusion of more children in the activity and the elaboration of the event. Her question is open, "what did we see?" During a trip many things happen, in a variety of locations, so by asking such an open question she opens the floor, on this occasion, to Amanda to decide what to talk about. Amanda answers this invitation by lifting her hands up to her head and utters some sounds. The teacher continues the interaction by raising her eyebrows and putting her head on one side, showing her attention by nodding slowly. The researcher could not understand Amanda's utterance in spite of studying the video clip several times. This might indicate that the teacher could not discern it either. Instead she turns her

attention to another child, Alex, repeating her initial question. Alex replies: "Poo". Teacher B continues the conversation by repeating and thus confirming, "We saw poo". She then immediately suggests a new event: "we saw the tractor". This might indicate that she did not find it appropriate to talk about poo at the table. She does not explicitly say so; neither does she cut him off. Instead she suggests another more appropriate topic for developing the collaborative narrative. Alex continues. He extends the narrative by saying: "Lots". He might be referring to the poo again, meaning that he could remember lots of poo. Teacher B now seems to accept the children's choice of topic for the conversation. She confirms this event and Alex extends the narrative even further by stating: "Lots of big poo". The subtle re-directional talk of the teacher did not lead to the children changing their attention.

Teacher B takes up Alex's suggestion by further expanding the narrative: "Yes, I think it was the horse, which had walked there and made poo". Amanda also confirms this event "Horse poo" and then Teacher A also confirms "The horse had made poo". Teacher A suggests a new topic; "we saw a lot of leaves, many kinds of leaves" and she points to the leaves that they have collected and brought back for studying. By introducing a new topic, she negotiates what is worth talking about. Her teacher agenda comes forward. In spite of her open initiating question, that leaves the floor open for children's perspectives and experiences, she reveals a teacher agenda in this last topic suggested.

We can see that two teachers and two children participate in the collaboration and negotiation of the shaping of a narrative against the background of a recent event the group had experienced together. The everyday context shapes the condition for collaborative talking; a process of spontaneous collaborative remembering and meaning-making. We can see that Alex was quite persistent in bringing up the horse poo, while teacher B suggests an additional event, remembering the tractor. However, the children do not redirect their focus of attention along this alternative narrative line. Consequently, teacher B instead follows up and confirms Alex's contribution. Amanda participates by re-voicing (Dore 1989), that is, by repeating Alex's suggestion. In what could seem like a process open for children's suggestions of what is worth talking about, teacher A reveals that she has an agenda of learning a specific topic; the variations of leaves found on their excursion. Both horse poo and leaves belong to the knowledge of nature and as a topic had the potential of elaborations, however not developed.

Example 2: Reconnecting through artefact to previous experiences and further collaborative elaboration

The background (context) of the next example is that a group of teachers were later challenged to work on co-narrative as an artefact for extended collaborative dialogue, as an attempt to establish extended dialogues making meaning of shared experiences. Photos were used as an additional artefact; a trigger to elicit collaborative con-

versations. The teachers had taken photos that constituted a collection from kindergarten excursions of what the children had spontaneously been giving attention to while walking around in the local neighbourhood. Since horse poo was a theme worth talking about, as established in the first example (above), a photo of horse poo was also included in the following activity used as the next example, from a situation where teacher C is working with this task. In a setting where children could choose activities, teacher C sat down at the table with a collection of photos. Julie approaches teacher C and was asked to have a look at the photos. Julie sits down beside her and they study the photos together.

Julie (3 years old) sees the photo of horse poo and starts talking: Oh, I have been riding.

Teacher C: Oh, have you?

Julie: Yes, they can trot.

Teacher C: Oh yes they can, how was it for you to trot then?

Julie: Horsepower into the body.

Teacher C: Oh, then it certainly went quickly. Have you seen the horse poo then?

Julie: Into the pee and out in the bum. Teacher D passes the table and connects: I remember my mother, she ran out with the shovel and picked up horse poo and arranged them round the rose bushes.

Teacher C: Yes, I also remember such events from my childhood. It was a good idea. Turning to Julie again: I guess the horse had to eat a little first?

Julie: Yes, grass.

Teacher C: Yes, horses eat grass and I know that they like water. And do you know what; I once read in a book that horses can go for a long time without drinking any water.

Julie: Do you remember the horse smile?

Teacher C: Yes, when we went to the woods! Yes, I remember it very well, it was funny. Then we laughed.

Julie: Yes, I can name many domestic animals, wild animals and sea animals.

Teacher C: Yes. You could name were many different animals. The horse then, what kind of animal is it?

Julie: Domestic animal.

By including a photo of horse poo, an artefact is provided for attending to what the children had been interested and engaged in on a previous occasion. Hence, the physical artefact in a sense structures her awareness and remembering. The child, Julie, picks out this particular photo and starts talking about a theme connected to it, horses. The child is able to give relevant and comprehensible contributions to an evolving narrative through relating to and recounting her experience of riding. She also knows that they can trot. While the brief conversation between the two teachers, on using horse poo for nurturing plants, does not evidently, in the data, make sense to, or interest, the child, she knows that horses must eat in order to poo and that they eat grass. In this

way, the conversation between the child and the teacher(s) and the artefact of the photo triggers and supports her sharing her experiences and showing some of her knowledge of horses. Building on the children's interest and engaging in conversations, co-narrating, about these is important not only for the child's sense-making but also for socialising children into becoming agents in their own learning, that is, meta-communicating that their experiences are worth the attention of others and sharing.

Conclusions

This article has thematised children learning to narrate through participating in narrative collaboration in kindergarten communities where teachers support, encourage and elicit collaborative narratives. Using narrative as a linguistic tool with very young children will demand that the adults are 'the weavers'. Teacher practice that opens for children's participation will allow children to set the agenda for what they consider worth talking about. To learn and make meaning will always imply the use of cultural tools, if taking a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). Using of a tool implies a long familiarisation process, as our examples from a Norwegian kindergarten context have shown. The issue of what a collaborative story should be about comes up for negotiation between children and teachers. On the one hand, teachers subsequently follow the children's attention in further providing for the development of their telling and meaning-making. On the other hand, they have their own agenda connected to learning goals that are revealed, but come up in somewhat subtle ways. While not developed far in these two brief examples, it can be seen how engaging in a collaborative story based on what the children have paid attention to during an excursion provides a platform for not only supporting their remembering and meaning-making of what they experience but also for introducing topics in the field of knowledge of nature (basic science). The further development of such skills on narrative grounds as well as where a narrative genre comes into conflict with a more scientific genre, what Bruner (1990) refers to as paradigmatic, is important to pursue in further research on children and collaborative narrative.

Teachers' skills and professional development put demands on their developing collaborative narratives with very young children. They will appropriate and use tools more or less knowledgeably for different purposes in various practices. What communicative practices learners gain access to and are invited to take part in will be pivotal for the competences they develop. The present article has addressed children's appropriation of a widespread and powerful cultural tool, the narrative genre and its use in a kindergarten setting.

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Совместно конструируемый нарратив как языковой артефакт и культурное орудие обучения и смыслопорождения

Элин Эриксон Одегор

доктор философии (PhD), профессор Бергенского университетского колледжа

Никлас Прамлинг

доктор философии (PhD), профессор факультета образования Гётеборгского университета

В данном исследовании мы предлагаем социокультурную концепцию нарратива как культурного орудия или языкового артефакта. Из всего объема эмпирических данных, полученных нами в условиях дошкольного учреждения на выборке детей в возрасте от 1 до 5 лет, мы отобрали два примера для более детального исследования того, как это орудие вводится в использование и обсуждается детьми и их учителем. Совместное конструирование нарратива — мощный культурный артефакт, поскольку подобная практика позволяет привлечь детей к детальному обсуждению разных вопросов и тем, поддерживая их таким образом в использовании языка в определенных речевых жанрах. Кроме того, утверждается, что исследование нарратива как коллективного конструирования культурного артефакта и его последующего использования позволяет по-новому взглянуть на то, как ситуации воспринимаются детьми и учителями и насколько их восприятия согласуются и согласуются ли вообще. О чем стоит говорить с точки зрения учителей и с точки зрения детей, как договариваться о смыслах и каким образом артефакт приносит определенные способы говорения — всё это интертекстуально связано с языковыми ресурсами, доступными в культуре участников обсуждения и распространяющимися посредством диалога. В статье также обсуждаются некоторые следствия данной теоретической концепции, касающиеся дошкольного образования.

Ключевые слова: совместный нарратив, артефакт, обучение, культурное орудие, детский сад, дошкольный период.