



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Posters as a Means of Learning and Communication in Internship Period

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a pedagogical experiment and a research project in which a large sample of ninth-graders (N=93) in the Finnish basic education were introduced to an optional, visual reporting method concerning their internship period (TET). The students were asked to take photos during the two weeks internship period of an interesting profession or work task, an interesting person doing his/her work, an interesting work process, or in general of the most interesting or impressive learning experiences. After the internship period the students composed a poster out of selected visual material and added a title plus some supporting text of their written memos. In the end, these posters were presented publicly on the school net and shared during the educational and vocational guidance lessons. As researchers, we were interested in how these students experienced this innovative, visual reporting method; for example, what were their ideas behind the selection of visual material and visual communication when making the posters. It showed that this alternative way of working led the pupils into a pedagogically valuable dialogue with pictures about the important aims of their learning process as a whole.

Key words: Media education, Posters, Visual media in learning.

Available Online: 30th October 2014

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1.0 Introduction

The production of visual material seems to be increasing. This also concerns people who otherwise are not 'artistic' and those who do not usually use visual means to express themselves. These people are now taking pictures and videos with their mobile phones and sending them to other people or putting them on the internet. The number of picture-based blogs such as Tumblr has vastly increased, not to mention the existence of Facebook. Taking a picture is often convenient; instead of making notes of a presentation on a whiteboard, you can simply take a picture of it.

From the 1990s onward, many researchers in the domain of visual culture have been discussing the pictorial turn in culture (Mitchell, 1994; Seppä, 2007; Kupiainen, 2007). The pictorial turn as a phenomenon, as part of the whole of visual culture, has raised questions among educators, as well. As Yamada-Rice concludes (2011) referring to e.g. Jewitt, 2002; Kress, 1997, 2003; Pink, 2001), "within the framework of education it has become widely accepted that because the advent of new technologies and media, communication and meaning-making skills are developing along multimodal paths from print into visual means." On one hand, this means discussions on rapidly growing possibilities of interaction in digital culture (Mäyrä, 2007), opening new forms of presenting knowledge and understanding in school context. Digital pictures are considered as one of the modern means of learning and communication. On the other hand, this change in culture requires new approaches in school pedagogy and curriculum, in order to construct conscious, intentional relationship with skills needed in culturally bound visual literacy (see e.g. Seppänen, 2001; Knif & Kairavuori, 2013).

On the whole, the changing nature of media literacy is under discussion. One perspective here is that of volitional media literacy (Kynäslahti et al., 2008). It emphasises a student's own active role and learner-created content (Struck et al., 2011). Another change is occurring in school. Bounds between a school and the surrounding community are more and more becoming permeable (as an example: 'OmniSchool', <http://www.kaikkialla.fi/information-in-english/>) and learning is shifting towards a mobile form.

Putting these developments together, we can ask the following question: How is students' production of visual material used in a schools everyday life? This was our question when we started the research, which is reported in this article.

2.0 Literature review

2.01 Internship period in the educational and vocational guidance

In order to familiarize pupils with working life, Finnish eighth and ninth graders have an internship period in their studies. According to the Finnish National Core Curriculum (2004, 258), "introduction-to-working-life periods are to be organised for the pupils as a basis for their educational and occupational choices, and to enhance their respect for work". During this internship period of the educational and vocational guidance they visit one or two workplaces for two weeks. They carry out different kinds of tasks depending of the interest of the employer, keeping in mind that the pupils are minors of 14 or 15 years old.

Afterwards in school, according to the curriculum (FNCC, 2004, 258), the purpose is to give pupils a chance to evaluate the information and experience they have acquired during the introduction-to-working-life period. Usually this happens in a written form, with a formula to fill made by a student counsellor. These reports are then discussed in the lessons of counselling. The problem is that pupils are not very keen on filling the formulas. They either do them poorly or never give them in at all. Accordingly, there are reasons to experiment the reporting with new kinds of forms. Could a visual form be one of these new forms?

We researchers had collaborated with people in a Japanese project in which posters were used as a means for a field report (<http://vanotica.net/helsinki/index.html>). Through a picture and a short text the students of social sciences carried out urban studies focussing on people of different professions in a certain small part, such as a short street, of a certain city. They also made a field trip to Finland to investigate the way of life of Finnish women and again used posters as a form of reporting the results. The way posters were used in reporting the internship periods was an application of the Japanese model. However, the starting point was not just to experiment using the model with younger students, but also to find the needs of study counsellors and the development of guidance. A great deal of the Finnish teenagers have a cell phone with a camera, so it is natural for them to take pictures in their everyday life for whatever purposes. So why not for educational purposes, too?

2.02 Digital poster making as a pedagogical choice in reporting of internship period

Posters are combinations of visual and verbal communication. The special nature of pictures as a form of meaning construction and presentation in learning and communication has been at the heart of visual arts as a school subject for over a hundred years in the Finnish basic education. Powerful pictures, for example as illustrative tools, have been of general interest in school learning throughout the history of education as well. In addition, the modern emphasis on a hands-on-approach in media education, students producing material – learner-created content, receives support from the Finnish arts education, which has a long tradition of the learner as being active, one who constructs a personal and shared understanding of learning objects by doing experiments and producing various self-produced presentations with personal aims. (e.g. Kairavuori & Sintonen, 2012) Therefore, what needs to be reconsidered here is neither the alternative to pictorial means in education, nor the emphasis on the active learner, but the potential which combining them in an updated form may bring in this particular pedagogical context.

Using digital photography in poster making has certain strengths as a pedagogical choice. As an alternative way of reporting, the process of shooting itself activates pupils already during the internship period, not only when the whole visit is over. One starts to think about what to shoot, about what is relevant to report by taking pictures. This pedagogical viewpoint, searching for the crucial things in an on-going learning process, is supported by using cameras that youngsters are familiar with in their everyday life and which they feel are easy enough to use in various situations. In this sense, mobile digital technology is supporting validity in this learning process.

In our case, the pupils themselves chose what to shoot and what was important and interesting to document during the visit to working life. Pedagogically, this is a creative problem solving process where the person has to decide and act according to one's own aims and strategies in relationship to aims and terms drawn up at school. Thus, the active choice of relevant shooting objects is already focusing on the heart of the whole learning task. Interestingly, this point comes close to the idea of a *student's pedagogical thinking*, which Kansanen and Byman for the first time described in 2008 as a situation in which a student has become acquainted with the aims and goals of the curriculum, has accepted them and acts according to them (Kansanen & Byman, 2008). Brophy has presented similar ideas in the terms of motivation to learn which refers to students engaging purposefully in curriculum activities by adopting their goals (Brophy, 2008, p. 133). The key aspect concerning all contemplations of pedagogical thinking is the realization of its existence solely within the particular context of the curriculum.

The media educational interpretation of the concept continues the discussion Byman and Kansanen started and adds the use of media (and information and communication technology) to the definition. When students act according to the aims and goals of the curriculum, they use media because they assume that it will help them achieve learning (Mylläri et al., 2011). Therefore, the question arises of whether the use of media is perceived as meaningful by the students when certain content is taught and studied in a particular formal setting of institutional education. It is also possible that this kind of

use is familiar to the students, perhaps being something they do every day. In our project this concerned a visual way to approach the learning tasks, which pupils should fulfil during their internship period.

3.0 Data and methods

The aim of the study was to investigate a visual alternative as a means for pupils to report their experiences and learning outcomes of the internship period of educational and vocational guidance. The approach was learner-centred: It was of interest to find what kind of items the pupils focused on, by using one or a few pictures, when reporting the most essential experiences in the internship workplaces. We wanted to find out how this pilot for the visual reporting method worked as a means of learning, and how the pupils experienced it; for example, what were their ideas behind the shooting and selecting of visual material when making the posters.

The project was carried out in a school, which was located in an urban metropolitan area in Southern Finland. In the neighbourhood of the school there is a great variety of workplaces. The idea of the project and the way it was to be carried out were introduced to the ninth grade students in October 2012 (N=93). The students were asked to take photos during the two weeks internship period of an interesting profession or work task, an interesting person doing his/her work, an interesting work process, or in general, of the most interesting or impressive learning experiences. The internship periods took place in November 2012. After the internship period the students composed a poster out of selected visual material and added a title plus some supporting text of their written memos.

The methods were participant observation and interviewing. We were present in the computer room when the students worked with their posters for the first time. We discussed with them about their ideas of how to proceed with the process and what pictures they would choose for the posters, and we also helped with some technical problems. Observation gave information about the structure and themes of the coming interviews. It was also easier to discuss about selecting pictures and the making of the poster when we ourselves had seen the process. Ten students were interviewed closely after their internship period. The interviews were recorded. One of us also made notes during the interviews just in case that the recording would fail or that the students' answers would be inaudible. We also discussed with the two counsellors, but we did not record these discussions, and they were not interviewed.

The pupils' interviews were transcribed into a written form and analysed qualitatively by applying the main principles of data based content analysis. First, all the data was read through several times as a whole. Following this, researchers arranged the data into different sub-themes that had been expressed. On that basis, in order to make the expressed experiences of the alternative reporting method into more compact form, the data was arranged into the following main themes: 1) the process of poster making, 2) the poster making as an alternative to pupils and 3) the poster making as a learning process for pupils.

4.0 Results

4.01 The process of poster making

In order to be able to use and communicate with posters later in school, pupils had to think of how to obtain good pictures for the reporting purpose. Here, our pupils ended up using visual means intentionally in meaning construction and communication. This means, for example, the careful cropping of essential contents in the viewfinder, the size of pictures (from close-up to overview), sharpening area, angle of view and the lightning in a particular situation. In addition, the possibility of instant inspection of digital results (and to delete/re-shoot pictures) gave the learner a second

opportunity to evaluate and guide the on-going learning process in dialogical relationship to his/her aims.

The pedagogical dialogue with pictures continued in the classroom after the internship period. The pictures served as memos and documentation, as well as raw materials for constructing a new, larger understanding of the experience as a whole through which to communicate. In this phase, our pupils were asked to select one key picture as a starting point for their posters. They were allowed to add other pictures and a limited amount of textual material (e.g. keywords, title, short descriptions). Again, the learner had to re-value and re-organize the personal learning experience, which was now possible to do together with the other pupils and the student counsellor. In this editing phase, pupils could re-crop or change the size or the place of the picture. Furthermore, pupils could organize and compose the selected pictures according to their own ideas; for example, by emphasising the role of the most important issues by using a bigger picture size. It was also possible to use other effects (colour and light adjustments, textual elements, artistic effects) in the expression of ideas. Altogether, the editing phase can be considered as a third possibility for evaluating in which the pupils might construct and validate visually their arguments in learning and communication in relationship to their plans. The fourth possibility for evaluative dialogue came in the sharing phase, when the posters were published on the school internet and were discussed as presentations in the educational and vocational guidance lessons.

4.02 Poster making as an alternative to pupils

Portable devices are an essential part of the life of young people. According to a 2010 investigation, 92% of Finnish 11-18 year olds used mobile phones daily. Increasingly, mobile phones include a camera. Using a mobile phone and taking pictures with it are a natural part of many students' everyday life. This was obvious also in our data:

I've had a camera in my phone since the third grade. So I take photos with it, and since I got my digital camera I have taken quite a lot of pictures and videos.

I take pictures daily.

I like to take pictures.

It is pedagogically meaningful to make benefit of the habits of young people when using media and technology in school education. Documenting the internship period picturing was a new way to illustrate to other people what the students had experienced and learned about the workplace. Although new, it was a very natural way to do it, a choice representing pupils' everyday habits. Some of the students told in the interviews that they have a systems camera. Indeed, some of them used their 'real' cameras in documenting instead of using a mobile phone's camera.

Another commonly expressed reason to choose this alternative way of reporting turned out to be that some of them favoured to work in visual ways, as is stated in the following:

I chose it because I like it [working in visual ways], writing is not my favourite way of working.

...you can see your own viewpoint there [in the picture] and in this [my] case you couldn't have done it by writing as interestingly.

These descriptions behind the choice lead us to consider giving alternatives as pedagogically fruitful, because pupils seem to have consciously considered themselves as learners when choosing the form of reporting. They felt like they were responsible conductors of their learning process, which highlights our approach as learner-centered.

The traditional way to report the internship period was to complete a formula. The formula was created by the office of educational affairs of the city and it was somewhat modified by the counsellors of the

school. It guided the students to pay attention to certain topics such as the name of the working place, duration of the visit, and what kind of education is needed for certain observed occupations. Accordingly, what a pupil should observe was suggested by the counsellors of the school. However, one pupil appreciated that:

I didn't have to search for information and make questions [that counsellors had required].

The choice of a visual way of working can refer to a 'pictorial turn' in educational settings as well. As everyday 'users' of pictures in communication, these youngsters linked their choice of reporting to the special nature of pictures in meaning construction, as the followings shows:

I have been drawing since I was a kid and I have started to think that in this way you can tell about things, you can write of course, too, but with images you can tell differently, on many levels.

I could not have made this by words as well as with images, I don't know, maybe one picture tells more than, if not a thousand, but a hundred words.

I personally think that visual reporting tells more than written... I wonder would we have read those long written reports to each other. But these posters are displayed and shared publicly, so others get information in this way...

4.03 Poster making as a learning process for pupils

In the poster version of reporting the task of finding interesting and essential topics was left up to the students. Before the students went to workplaces the researchers visited a lesson, one for each of the student groups, during which we informed the students about our project and gave some instructions of taking pictures. However, our instructions were of a rather general level. It was pupils themselves who decided how to approach the task. Later, we asked the pupils how they proceeded in the process when they went to a workplace, and got informed of personal, flexible solutions. For example:

[I took pictures] in a way that the picture shows the jobs what we did there, it shows the working process...

Originally, I planned to take pictures in the laboratory but it turned out to be difficult because of too personal information shown in those pictures, so I did not take photos there,... I just tried to catch the atmosphere of the place in the pictures...

It was as if a pupil was like an ethnographic researcher going into a new environment, looking around for a while, and then deciding what is worth noticing, investigating, and documenting. Furthermore, the pupils seemed to become conscious of the power of a picture as a means of exploration, as well as a way to describe and explain things as they wanted. This understanding is present in pupils' descriptions of their actions in the shooting and editing phases:

[when shooting] I thought about how far I was from the subject so that it can be seen well in the picture.

I tried to capture as diverse a picture of it [the internship workplace] as possible.

We cropped the pictures, and made some of them smaller in the side of the poster... so that they [pictures] show all that was essential, and if there was something useless [in the picture] it was cropped out.

I had four pictures selected... two of them represent the atmosphere [of the workplace/chapel] and then I have two which are linked to the work of the cantor... [I tried] to catch the atmosphere of the work [in the poster presentation].

It is shown that this alternative way of working led the pupils into a dialogue with pictures and about the important aims of their learning process as a whole, which is a pedagogically valuable result. Here, the pupils seem to have acted according to the aims and goals of the curriculum, and they used visual media because they assumed that it helps them achieve learning.

5.0 Conclusion and discussion

Our study described a new pedagogical experiment in one Finnish basic school and a research project in which the ninth-graders were introduced to an innovative, optional, visual reporting method concerning their internship period (TET). This experimental project was developed in collaboration with the local school counsellors and we together searched new solutions for their teaching practice. Accordingly, the project was successful and the results encourage continuing poster making as an educational means in student counselling and in other school subjects, too. This alternative way of working led the pupils into a pedagogically valuable dialogue with pictures about the important aims of their learning process as a whole.

However, there are some practical matters that must be discussed. First, what do schools and teachers think about the use of different kinds of devices such as mobile phones in school and in lessons. This debate is currently going on in Finland, and there are different ways how schools treat this question. Our guess is that the majority of schools take a rather negative stand on the use of mobile devices in lessons, and even their mere presence in the classroom. Discussions in media, however, suggest that attitudes are turning in a more positive direction. Another problem, which may be even be more severe, is ethical considerations. The Finnish comprehensive school is free for students and their parents. All the means that are required for studying are provided by the school. It follows that if mobile phones with cameras in them are used in education, then every pupil should be able to use one. Although most of the pupils have a camera mobile phone, not all of them have one. Accordingly, in the name of equality, a school should provide cameras. This is an economic question and administrative decision makers are not at all enthusiastic about the idea. Naturally, ethical considerations are involved also when taking pictures of persons working or at places of work. Here in this project, the students were guided to ask the people with which they interacted during the internship period if taking pictures and showing them to others at school would be all right.

Another thing under discussion in Finland is the changing nature of school. One aspect in this change is the relationship between students' life in school and outside of school. These two dimensions in young people's lives could be more merged than they traditionally have been. In this article we have discussed students' pedagogical thinking. It includes the idea that the ways how students, for example, seek for information and how they process it are taken into account and are applied to school work. If a visual approach, such as taking pictures with one's own camera, is something that comes naturally to students, then why not use it in school.

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