Making Doll Films with Children

The theoretical approach

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Singing, playing music, and putting on theatre are not the only ways we have of expressing ourselves. Most children today have access to countless different electronic media, and by the time they are through with nursery school, they have already entered into a discourse about their encounters with and use of media like Gameboys, computers, and mobile phones. Not all children have direct access to these electronic toys, yet they learn about them nonetheless through stories from older siblings and other children in the nursery as well as through their parents' fascination with "new electronic toys." This has led to the integration of these media into child lore at an early stage, as evidenced by the many games concerning and toys imitating mobile phones, laptop computers, and so on.

A little anecdote may be illustrative here. One day, while I was in a shopping centre, I saw a desperate mother with her three- or four-year-old daughter. The young girl was stomping on the floor, and her screams echoed throughout the entire store:

> "I **want** a mobile phone! I **want** a mobile phone!"

Children interact with these new media both in their games and their requests for toys. Just like adults, children use these media in the construction of their identities, making it a matter of uncommon importance whether an individual prefers Nokia, Sony Ericsson, or iPhone. Nor can we neglect children's use of TV. Despite the ever-increasing number of accessible media, TV remains children's media of choice, regardless of age or sex. TV is the media with which children spend the most time, and over one-third of 5-7 year-olds have a TV in their bedrooms (Sørensen 2002).

As noted above, use of electronic media has become an integral part of child lore. But how should pedagogues approach this corner of youth culture, recognising the expansive use of new media?

In this article, I will offer a suggestion as to how pedagogues can actively involve themselves in children's fascination with these new media and how they can be worked into everyday pedagogy.

Nevertheless, most of the literature I have chosen to reference in this article is somewhat old, which might appear odd in the context of cutting-edge pedagogical practice. This is not because there is a lack of new literature on the subject or because I have not read the new literature. My decision stems from the fact that the selected books contain foundational knowledge that has retained its relevance and can still be used to understand and support the pedagogical field in this new

pedagogical context. Bertolt Brecht, the German author, best known for his work on the theory of "epic theatre" and his employment of "distancing effects" in theatre production, once wrote:

> *"A student said to Me-ti: What you're teaching isn't new. Ka-meh and Mi-en-leh have taught countless others the same thing. Me-ti answered: I teach it because it's old, which is to say, because it could be forgotten and viewed as only relevant for past ages. Isn't it new to a great many people?"* (Brecht 1986, 97)

Working with the Common Factor

One of the major buzzwords of Danish social pedagogy over the past number of years has been "working with the common factor."   This method is not usually used as it is described in pedagogical literature, and it is often taken simply as an explanation that pedagogues ought to work alongside a group of children. The common factor is a good and solid pedagogical tool that can also be used in work at nurseries.

Decision ➡ *Planning* ➡ *Execution* ➡ *Evaluation*

In spite of the need for pedagogical business plans, teaching plans, documentation, and a rational and effective pedagogy, I do not feel that nurseries benefit from making use of such a linear planning structure as the one above. While engaging in the creative process, for example, in producing doll films with children, it is necessary to simplify the method by breaking it up into phases that overlap and alternate with one another and are not overly strict about keeping to any particular order of operations. What I mean here is discussed in greater detail below.

Traditional pedagogy – what Paulo Freire called the "banking concept of education" in which the learning stance is that the adult possesses knowledge that must be transferred to or imposed upon the child – is still very widespread, not just in the education system but also among pedagogues in nurseries. Already in Ancient Greece, Socrates used dialogue as a pedagogical method, taking as a starting point that knowledge arrived at through dialogue "should always be understood as self-attained knowledge" (Mittelstraβ 1992, 40). Dialogue offers children the opportunity to test out their own opinions and develop their own knowledge. The common factor pedagogical method is an attempt to develop an updated pedagogy, one in which the axis is not just the child as a child but in

which the pedagogical activity itself takes central place, in other words, in which the interaction between the child and the adult is viewed as key. This is shown in the following illustration:[1]

Eleven
barnet / den unge

Det fælles tredje
et virkelighedsudsnit

Læreren
pædagogen

Michael Husen writes about common factor pedagogy in a number of his books, describing the method as a pedagogical sequence in four phases, starting with a decision to act (Husen 1995). This decision is taken democratically, meaning, so far as we are concerned, that both the children and adults work together to decide not only to produce a doll film but also to use a particular story and particular techniques in the production. Planning follows the decision, and in this phase, children and adults mutually establish how best to undertake the decided-upon activity, find out which resources they can use, and schedule the various parts of the production process. This is followed by the execution of the activity, here meaning the filming and editing of the movie. During the execution phase, it is important that children and adults work together, making use of their various skills. Finally, it is vital that work with the common factor concludes with the product's evaluation. In the case of a doll film, this means that the movie has to be shown to someone. And not just because this person happened to drop by but because you have taken the conscious decision to arrange a showing, for example, a premiere screening including special invitations and the serving of refreshments.
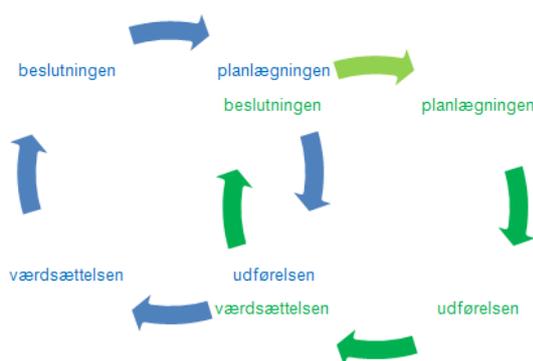
beslutningen   planlægningen

værdsættelsen   udførelsen
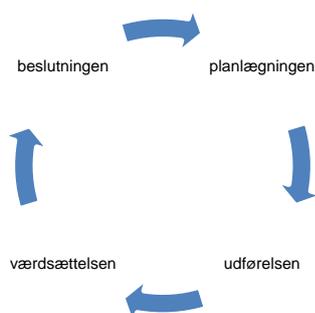
I feel that common factor pedagogy has a place in creative pedagogical activities like working with video in nurseries because I see the possibilities inherent in breaking down this method's often-linear representation. Viewed from a cyclical perspective, it is possible for multiple processes to operate

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[1] Freely-adapted from Lihme 1988, 126.

simultaneously, for new decisions to be made during the execution phase and for planning, execution, and evaluation to be sub-divided and undertaken over the course of the activity.

beslutningen   planlægningen
    beslutningen   planlægningen

værdsættelsen   udførelsen
    værdsættelsen   udførelsen

Children's Aesthetic Development

Even though the various theories of developmental psychology are no longer as popular in the teaching colleges as they once were, one can still note comparative childhood development in many different areas. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1971) describe children's drawing development in a work first published in 1947. This piece of research is extremely inspiring despite the fact that children today are exposed to far greater visual influence via TV, computer games, and advertisements in the public space. I know of no research that describes this development over time, but it would be interesting to make a comparative study of children's drawings today and in the past. As a starting point, we could expect that the increased visual influence has had an effect on children's visual comprehension and, presumably, on their drawings as well.

Lowenfeld and Brittain define aesthetics as an active process of recognition: There is a substitution process between a person and an object, a psychological construct that provides a stimulatingly harmonic experience (Lowenfeld and Brittain 1971, 275). Aesthetic development and creative development are two sides of the same coin, bundled up in the child's upbringing and all of the influences to which the child is exposed by his or her surroundings. It is this process that turns us into individuals, a process that more recent pedagogical and sociological literature calls "habitus" (Bourdieu 2005). Lowenfeld and Brittain view the development of aesthetic consciousness as a harmonic organisation of singularities that alter over the course of the aging process just as surely as do physical and other forms of development. This occurs alongside a gradual process of changing aesthetic norms.

> *"Our society has changed values about art. The social norms for god and evil are perhaps not so important, but something which can be a key factor for the development of the aesthetic mind on children, based on them self as individuals rather than on changeable aesthetical norms, which maybe not at all fit in the social norms in twenty years." Lowenfeld and Brittain 1971, 282*
>
> *(translated from English into Danish, and then from Danish into English)*

Children take an active role in learning when they interact with their surroundings. By touching and playing with the things they see, they influence their own development, including their closely-related conceptions of sense and realisation.

Experimenting with Narrative

One of the most significant aspects of making a doll film is creating a good story. The first time you make a movie, the fascination with the media may well overwhelm narrative content: The sight of a toy car driving itself across the table is enjoyable in itself. At least, it is enjoyable the first couple of times you watch it.

After a while though, it will become important to invest your films with narratives. One way of working with narrative composition is to use what Rodari (1987) calls "the fantastic binomial" as a point of departure. A "binomial" is a dichotomised sum, but Rodari discusses the concept of the binomial as the juxtaposition of opposites. Concepts always have opposites and cannot be thought about without reference to their opposites. For example, it is impossible to consider the concept of cold without also thinking about its opposite, warmth. For Rodari, opposites such as these are essential to the creation of a good story.

The fantastic binomial does not necessarily contain concrete opposites."The fabulously binomial has not at all this concrete contrast built-in. In a fabulously binomial the words should not be understood in their common meaning, but they will be released from the semantic field, they are connected to in the everyday language," Rodari writes (1987, 31 – translated from Italian into Swedish, from Swedish into Danish and from Danish into English). Words that do not have any immediate relationship with one another can interact in stories to create exciting narrative development. For example, when Rodari educated children in the art of making stories, he let two children write a word on opposite ends of a blackboard. In an environment like a nursery where the children cannot write, I either allow the children to make a drawing, tell me a word, or choose a toy from the nursery to act as a main character in the film.

One of the times I used this latter method in a nursery, the children came up with a cat and Spiderman. After having chosen one's figures, it is important for the sake of the narrative to find a connection between the two sides of the binomial. In this case, there is a wealth of possibilities. For example, Spiderman can have a pet cat, which is obviously not a set-up with massive dramatic potential but which can act as the foundation for a story concerning the friendship between and mutual experiences of two very different beings. Another link could be that the cat mistakes Spiderman for an edible spider, which offers dramatic opportunities right from the start.

By connecting these two concepts with a single word, it is possible to make sentences that suggest wildly different narrative lines. Think of the possible continuations of the following inspirations for stories: "Spiderman *with* the cat," Spiderman *against* the cat," "Spiderman *sees* the cat," Spiderman *is* the cat," "Spiderman *has* the cat," and so on.

Another means of coming up with the fantastic binomial is to let the children make up new words. One way of doing this is construct new words from parts of old words, an example pertaining to the above scenario being the creation of the words "catman" and "spidercat." These could easily become a pair of futuristic superheroes, but the two toys in question could also lead to the creation of a less obvious word like "spicat." The act of finding out what, precisely, a spicat is would provide rich opportunities for the children to use their fantasies. This could eventually lead to the children constructing a model spicat, which could, in turn, become a main character in their doll film.

> "If the children are stimulated to use their fantasy to find new words, they can use this ability in other areas, where there is need for creativity."
>
> (Rodari 1987, 177 - translated from Italian into Swedish, from Swedish into English)

Thoughts on Creativity

Vygotsky, the Russian behavioural psychologist, best known in Denmark for his theory on the zone of proximal development, wrote a book, entitled *Imagination and Creativity of the Adolescent*. In this text, he describes how children develop their fantasies and creativity.

Vygotsky distinguishes between two types of acts. One type is what he calls restorative, or reproductive, acts. These are acts that "reproduce or repeat already created patterns of actions (action patterns or revive trace of previous impressions" (Vygotsky 1995, 11 –translated from Russian into Danish and then from Danish into English). These patterns of action are internalised within the body, and we use this practical sense (Bourdieu 2005) to make decisions without having to think over

each act. Vygotsky calls the other type combinatory, or creative, acts,[2] and he mentions that psychology knows these as imagination or fantasy.

Creativity, which we can also call fantasy, is not merely incidental, not just a child of the aether. Fantasy is, basically, the ability to engage in creative activity across the cultural spectrum. The aim of this section is to discuss Vygotsky's theory of childhood development of fantasy and creativity. Vygotsky views human acts as either reproductive/repetitive or creative. Creative acts build upon the brain's combinatory abilities, and creativity functions to combine fragments of previous experiences. In other words, by combining the experienced, one produces something entirely new. This does not mean that fantasy consists of old thoughts, simply that these new, different thoughts are rooted in the detritus of the previously-thought thoughts, which are, themselves, thought about in terms of previous experience.

Vygotsky holds that a child's fantasy is worse than an adult's since he or she possesses lesser experiential knowledge. Nevertheless, as indicated in the below quotation, Vygotsky sees children's play as "*the most authentic and real creativity*" (translated from Russian into danish and then from Danish into English):

> "*The child who sits astride on a stick and imagine that he is riding on a horse, the girl playing with the doll imagine that she is the mother, the child who in the play turn into a robber, soldier and seaman – all this playing children are examples on the most authentic and real creativity.*"
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> *(Vygotsky 1995, 15 - translated from Russian into danish and then from Danish into English)*

When Vygotsky, in this example, speaks of the playing child as revealing "*the most authentic and real creativity*" he can be understood as saying that the child's thought processes have not yet been socialised, that it has not yet acquired the scholastic tendencies in which we are all immersed during out period of formal education (Bourdieu 1990). While speaking of the richer fantasy of adults, Vygotsky refers to artistic, scientific, and technical creativity, which he interprets as resulting from a combination of elements retrieved from previous encounters with reality and which "*which mere are distort or revising by our fantaci*" (Vygotsky 1995, 18 - - translated from Russian into danish and then from Danish into English). Vygotsky's pedagogical conclusion is that it is necessary to help children broaden their experiential knowledge, thereby facilitating enhanced creativity. This is to say that he

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[2] Vygotsky also calls the concept the business of actions.

has the same paradigmatic stance here as he does in his work on the zone of proximal development, which is linked to his understanding of education's role in promoting development (Vygotsky 1978, 89).

The Mechanism behind the Creative Fantasy

Creativity and the creative processes are not, as noted above, autochthonous. They are the result of a long-term process that starts in childhood when a child sees or hears something and adds these sensory events to his or her experiential knowledge. In a highly-involved process, the experiential element is then interpreted on the level of associations and dissociations, the latter of which can be understood as the breaking down of complex wholes into manageable fragments. Some of these fragments are retained and stored in the memory while others are quickly forgotten. This dissipation of the context between elements is followed by a process of transformation that consists of building up new associations. Vygotsky calls this process of transformation a garbling or distortion, and it results in the contextual trails of external impressions failing to enter our brains intact. These contextual trails become processes that impact one another, are altered, flourish, and at last wither, by which ontological movements the trails to the outside world are re-developed under the influence of internal factors.

Vygotsky describes the creative fantasy's mechanism as comprising of four parts. Besides the experiential process (which is described above), there are also the exaggerative, associative, and combinatory processes. Since impressions from reality are processed in the brain, precipitating garbling and distortion, they have major significance for the development of fantasy and exaggeration. We exaggerate because we want to view things on a greater plane and because we are interested in everything progressive and unusual. Simultaneously, this urge is united with a touch of pride that causes us to designate ourselves as special. Children clearly possess the exaggeration urge as well, as evidenced by how often the massive abstractions of "millions" and "billions" are invoked in their speech in reference to quantities and prices. Such exaggeration is not harmful; on the contrary, exaggeration is essential to both artistic and scientific thought. As Vygotsky writes, absent this urge, which sounds comic coming from the mouths of babes, humanity would be incapable of such pursuits as astronomy, geology, and physics.

The creative fantasy's third mechanism is associative, which can be understood as the ability to form mental connections between the dissociated and altered elements. Finally, we come to the last mechanism, the combinatory, which has the task of combining personal thought elements or images, thereby introducing them into a new system and creating a new, composite picture. This means that they develop a fantasy that, in the final analysis, facilitates a person's adaptation to his or her environment.

Creative work is always based on the incidence of nonalignment, whereupon a new need or desire arises. This need is not inherently creative, but it acts as a stimulus or driving force for creativity. One could say that needs and desires set the fantasy process in motion, sparking the reliving of the nerve impulses' contextual trails and providing fuel for fantasy.

Creativity does not consist of fantasy alone but also of an individual's technical capabilities. Enhanced familiarity with video technology, for example, means enhanced creative possibilities in connection with producing a doll film. Nonetheless, technical capabilities only provide enhanced possibilities for fantasy to unfold in the form of creativity. Experience is meaningful for the film's narrative content inasmuch as when children have gained experience constructing stories and translating these stories into film, they become more secure at working with the process and use less and less time on the initial, introductory exercises. As described in the above section on experimenting with narrative, exaggeration and association are excellent tools for constructing an exciting narrative. The combinatory process is also applicable for stitching together a story and ensuring that it possesses a narrative thread.

An individual's creative possibilities are also influenced by the traditions present in his or her environment. The association that exists between fantasy and creativity on the one hand and environment on the other explains the uneven distribution of innovators and creative individuals across the various social classes.

In this article, I have attempted to offer some concrete examples of how one can get started using new technology in everyday pedagogical work, thereby giving children the opportunity to express themselves via the production of doll films. I have also tried to present a number of pedagogical methods and theories that can act to strengthen and inspire creative pedagogical work as well as provide a basis for the development of new pedagogical methods in relation to work involving new electronic media. What is necessary is that one gets started with this work. You need not have complete knowledge of the technology in advance since, after all, the only means of becoming competent with these media is to use them. The children will be understanding and helpful, and they will have no expectations that adults are infallible, omniscient masters of new technology.

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Terms in Illustrations

Page 9	Page 3 and 4
Eleven = Student; **Barnet** = Child; **Den unge** = Youth; **Den fælles tredje** = The Common Factor; **Et Virkelighedsudsnit** = Snapshot of Reality; **Læren** = Teacher; **Pædagogen** = Pedagogue	**Beslutningen** - Decision **Planlægningen** - Planning **Udførelsen** - Execution **Værdsættelsen** - Valueing (Evaluation)