Finland

Narrative learning environments in play worlds

This project describes the use of narrative learning to develop motivation and personality, sense making, imagination and emotional involvement in children (aged 4 to 8). The method is applied in different mixed-age groups that can include preschool and school children and are accompanied by teams of classroom and kindergarten teachers. Play world and imaginative education are used to create "narrative imaginative environments" in the classroom or schoolyard. They are used in different variants for different age groups, and can be oriented on subject or personality development. Continuous plots can be used to connect different events and subject matters. There are several publications on this method.

Main focus of Innovation: LEARNERS, TEACHERS, CONTENT, RESOURCES, ORGANISATION

General Information

Name of the ILE: Narrative learning environments in play worlds

Location/Address: The city of Hyvinkää, Kajaani University training school

Website: http://www.kajaaninyliopistokeskus.oulu.fi/

ILE submitted by: A leader of this case

Rationale
Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21ˢᵗ century learning challenges?

Developing learning potential and motivation before school and in elementary grades is a crucial problem.

Narrative learning is a necessary and perhaps only effective mechanism of developing motivation and personality of children. Direct training and adoption of knowledge do not have the same effects. Sense making, imagination and emotional involvement are important factors in our learning environments combined with realistic problem solving. Strong cognitive emphasis in school learning separated from upbringing has begot difficulties of guiding classroom work and in some cases general alienation of children. Narrative approach combines experiential and cognitive aspects of learning.

Evidence
Is there any evidence or indications showing that this initiative achieves the outcomes that it is aiming at?

The aims emphasize the development of children as learners. Developmental trajectories from four to eight years are documented, individual and group changes are recorded. There is about 500 - 600 hours of digital video tapes about learning activities. Observational data indicates increased initiatives, togetherness and self-reflection among children. Testing program is going on in some sites. Some articles are published in English.

Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE
What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners' social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

The core aim is to support and form cultural development of children at transitions and create future learning potential. This aim is divided into specific objectives:

1. Discerning and crossing the border between real and imagined.
2. Taking responsibility for one's own and joint activity.
3. Awakening children's need and motivation for changing himself.
4. Forming a personal relation to phenomena and other persons.
5. Reflecting and sense-making as the core of learning.
6. Understanding the role of flexibility and multiple points of view in learning.

Learners
Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

There are several groups since 1996. Specially formed vertically integrated groups of 4 - 8 years in Hyvinkää city, 5 - 6 years old, 6-7 years old. At the moment there are two specific focus groups: 1 group 4-8 years and one 7-8 years olds group. A vertically integrated group has about 30 children; half school children and half preschool children (4-6 years). The present integrated classroom of 7-8 years has 19 children. Vertically integrated groups offer the possibility to eliminate two transitions: from day care to preschool and from preschool to school and learning potential of individual children can be cultivated during four years time in the same environment. Children move to traditional classroom work in the third grade. There is a parallel classroom carrying out the same play world program at the UCSD, California.

Facilitators
Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

In the groups of 4-8 years a team of three people has educational responsibility (classroom teacher, kindergarten teacher and nurse). At Kajaani campus 8 teacher education students carry out an experimental two year's study program, in which they plan, construct and stage the learning environment guided by university teachers.

Organization of the ILE
How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

Learning assignments and tasks are part of narrative imaginative environment. Assignments are embedded in the story line and usually children are asked to help the characters of the story. E.g. "The greedy king" from "Rumpeltiltskin" (teacher in role) entered the classroom and started to tell the tale. He complained that the queen does not spin gold any more, which he loves. Children revealed that she never did.
The king realized that she has been lying to him and asked children to solve the dilemma "what shall I do to the lying queen who is the mother of my daughter?" More ordinary school tasks were connected to the elimination of the spell of "Rumpeltiltskin", which turned the whole court of the king upside down. Children were asked to revert each room by solving a problem (a school task) connected with it. Experimental "developmental" curriculum guidelines are constructed (in Finnish) and a didactic handbook based on it was written in 2002. A further education program informing about the methods is constructed. The pedagogy integrates Vygotskian approach with play world and imaginative education pedagogy.

Learning Context
In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?

In narrative imaginative environments usually are constructed in the classroom or schoolyard. Transition rituals in moving to the fantasy world are used (e.g. a song, a rhyme). In the play world based on the tale "Rumpeltiltskin" children turned their jackets, walked and talked backwards at the entrance to the fantasy kingdom of "Surmundia". Play worlds are constructed in the classrooms using simple effects (music, textiles, cardboard). The main element is living characters of the frame story (teacher in role) or puppets presenting dramatic events of the story. By bringing the characters to the classroom an ordinary classroom is transformed to imaginative world or the classroom (or other rooms) is a staged scene for the story. E.g. a cardboard box (representing cupboard in the original story) fixed to door opening transformed the classroom to "Narnia". Community resources: The play world was based on the Finnish tale "Master Gnome". Children visited the city theatre where the tale was presented as children's play. At the end "The Master Gnome" addressed our children from the stage and handed them an encrypted task, solution of which took a whole month in the classroom.

History of ILE
Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

I have initiated new learning environments. The idea came from teachers' complaints that 0-grade pedagogy does not take into account real developmental needs of children. There are several changes and variants for different focus groups (between 4 and 12 years). There are two main types of environment combining imaginative and realistic learning elements: 1. subject oriented narrative learning environments (e.g. literacy and math) and 2. Personality development oriented narrative environments.

Funding of the ILE
How is it funded?

2007 - 2009 The Finnish Academy (research part)

Learning Outcomes
What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?

Personality development, reflection, learning potential, self-initiative, argumentation, joint problem solving.

Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE
Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)

Each narrative learning session is documented by video recording. Website does not present visual material, only general verbal descriptions. 500 - 600 hours of video material. Articles and chapters in English. Two books in preparation.

Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE

Our narrative learning environments usually go on for several months and the same plot connects different events and scenes. This continuity opens the possibility to combine different knowledge (subject matter) domains and activities in a "natural" way. Development of learning motivation requires long lasting systematic efforts and dynamic learning environments are essential.