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Television ... as a tool of learning

Examples from the Finnish broadcaster YLE

Finland's educational excellence is not only born out by the high results of its pupils, as seen in the PISA study, but also by its interesting programmes for schools. Natural phenomena, history, modern art and social learning all have their special appeal: in fact, television for schools is anything but dull.

Mummy, let's do that nice thing again."
"What thing?"
"That we're cameras."

In the evening, I watch a nature programme with my 8- and 12-year-old children and start the game we often play. The picture glides along the surface of the river and we hear music and the commentator's voice talking about the animals of the river delta.

"In this picture, the camera has had to be fastened to the point of the boat and the sound of the outboard engine can really be heard ..."

The boys join in the game enthusiastically and try to guess what position the cameraman must have been in when he was filming the monkey. Through play, we are able for a moment to view the programme in a new way. The tale could not be told unless the camera had been on the spot, like our gaze, unless precisely those pictures had been combined, unless the sounds had created just this mood for the pictures, and so on.

Now and then, play of the kind described above has its place at home. Yet, most frequently, the tale of a television programme or film justifiably

carries us along with it and only at the end do we consider what it has given each of us. As a school television producer, I also have to think about these things for my work – especially now that my job is to produce with a working group the script for a multi-episode series of programmes on media skills – and the target group comprises not only children but also educators (parents and teachers). With all of us – both adults and children – media literacy develops best when we follow the media together and discuss the content and production methods of media programmes, learning from each other. At school, the adult steering the discussion about media is a teacher. For more than forty years now, School Television has existed for the Finnish teacher. Teachers that use School Television in their teaching are always promoting the goals of media education even while using the programmes in many different ways and for numerous purposes. Television as a medium can combine things in a new way – thereby making even difficult concepts understandable – or providing space for new insights. The joy

of such insights should remain with the viewer, i.e., the school pupil. The experiences provided by School Television programmes are goal oriented. They are designed to activate the pupil – to get him or her to show an interest, to think, to discuss, to look for information, to investigate or to act.

... as an illustrator of natural phenomena

This is how Risto Salovaara, producer of nature programmes at School Television, describes his own field of work:

"Each teacher knows that the best way to learn things is to experience them firsthand, but this is not always possible. Fewer and fewer are able, during the school day or year, to leave the class and slip off into the terrain or to acquaint themselves with foreign cultures. That is where television's potential and power comes into its own: live images, appropriate graphics and animation can be used to animate teaching, to concretise teaching work themes that are difficult, even impossible, and to produce experiences. Typical programmes of this kind have included YLE's own *Archipelago* and the co-productions *Blue Planet* and *Home Planet Earth*. How else can one reach the bottom of the Baltic Sea or hear the sounds of the universe during a lesson?"

Everything that is presented in foreign-nature documentaries with breathtaking pictures and effects is not usually possible in domestic productions, and is not necessary, either.



Photograph: Seppo Sarkkinen

School Television's open story: **Lonely Valdemar**



Photograph: Jyrki Valkama

Nowhere at home – The story of a child evacuee

School Television programming needs basic material on, say, the domestic fly, rather than the rare hummingbird of the rain forests. There is no point in taking coals to Newcastle; there are enough potential subjects in Finland. We are also seeking to implement this idea in the semi-interactive nature magazine *Nature Niche* that is running at present. Teachers and pupils have been able, beforehand, to say what they would like the magazine to examine, e. g., cows or the Ice Age, and its interactivity works through the questions answered by the presenter both afterwards, on the internet, and during the programme.

... as a means of entry to the world of art

Two Visits to Kiasma is a fine example of users' wishes being taken into consideration. The idea for the programmes originated with some teachers and pupils from the North of Finland who wanted to acquaint themselves with our national art treasures, located too far away in the South of the country where a visit is not always possible. In the programmes, the children have adventures in the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki and are encouraged to think about the essence of art while also viewing international works of modern art. Yet, even a simple programme calls for a lot of background work in order for it to function.

As a producer I watched visits to the museum by different parties of children over several weeks and observed their behaviour and interest. This is how I came to choose the works of art that have been included in the programme. Then I went off to the schools for some test-shoots. I showed the children various pictures of works of art and asked them to imagine themselves in the museum and to say what they saw in the pictures. The pictures were not the ones that they would be seeing in the museum. On the basis of this prior knowledge, I selected children for the programme who had contrasting personalities and were able to give reasons for their opinions. During filming, I was particularly interested in the children's spontaneous reactions to the work of art. It was important for them not to have seen it prior to the filming. Knowledge of the various trends and "isms" is not detrimental, but one can survive without it, as children as interpreters of art once again demonstrate. We adults have a lot to learn from them: modern art calls for the ability and the courage to look with an open mind.

The wishes of teachers have served as the impulse for many ideas for series of programmes broadcast on School Television: they need help with, for example, teaching cartoons (*Introduction to the Cartoon*), how to read pictures (*Picture on the Screen and Picture in the Mind*), horror and science-fiction culture (*On the Edge of the Odd*) and now, most recently, media skills. In many of our programmes, schoolchildren and their opinions and views take centre stage, often placed alongside adult experts as equals to assess and analyse the subject in question. For example, in *Picture on the Screen and Picture in the Mind*, schoolchildren analyse the same art, news and advertising images as the experts. The purpose is to avoid over-processed fare, which would not be swallowed even by

adults, not to mention demanding and smart schoolchildren. In the field of different arts in particular, one is often faced by questions for which no "correct" answer exists. Yet it is useful for each of us to learn to understand opinions that differ from our own and, of course, to express views of our own.

The purpose of art and media education programmes is to be instruments for striving towards a good life, self-knowledge, the discovery and strengthening of one's own personality. They ought to develop the ability to examine and analyse art, to enjoy it, and encourage and inspire people to create it themselves. The objective of learning is to combine observations and mental images into artistic expression. Self-expression is achieved both by analysing existing art and by making it oneself. The circle is thus complete (cf. Risto Salovaara's diagram of natural sciences programmes).

... brings history closer

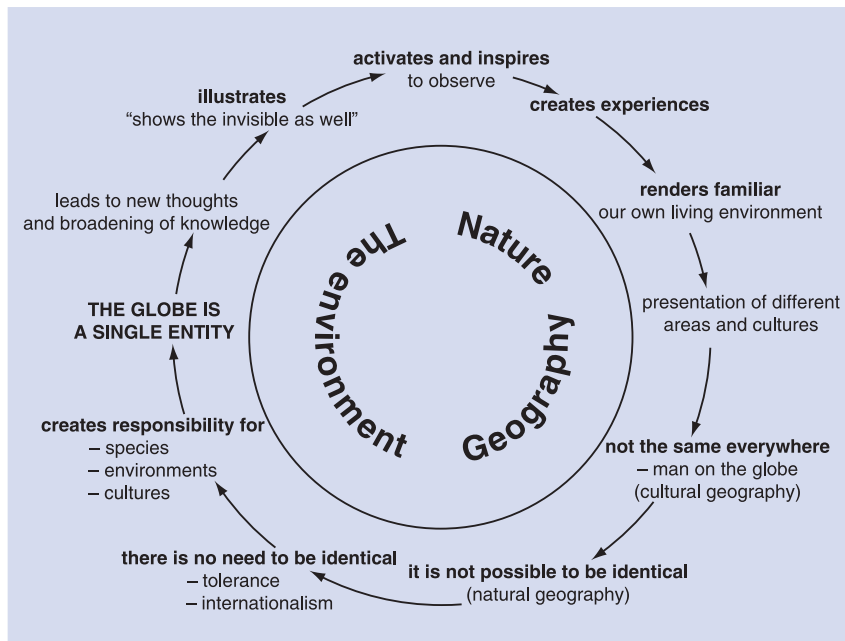
The versatile use of drama in School Television programmes has solid roots. The most recent work by pro-



Photograph: Eeva Vierros

Two visits to Kiasma

The objectives of natural history programmes on School Television in Finland



ducer Kirsti Tulonen, who was for a long time responsible for primary education on School Television, is the period drama *The Story of a Child Evacuee*. It won an award in the Golden Chest drama competition and is based on the use of archive material. The characters in the play have been “implanted” in the studio in authentic Second World War settings using chroma-key-technology. The story is about the refugee experiences of a Finnish family during the Second World War. The little girl Kerttu is first torn, with her mother, away from her home district in Karelia and is then forced to go with her younger brother, without their mother, to Sweden, from where she is again sent back to Finland several years later. This is what Kirsti Tulonen herself has to say about her work:

“Finnish children have, in their own lives, to take a stance on war refugees who have arrived from elsewhere. The purpose of this programme is to arouse feelings of empathy and understanding towards today’s war refugees by directing the children’s thoughts to a time when their own forefathers had to experience the fate of being war refugees. The story is narrated in the style of the period that it depicts. It is thus consciously very different from the

prevailing fast-paced programme output that seeks to entertain. As I was writing the story, I thought about the modern viewer’s ability to identify with the characters in the tale: has the tale been told at too slow a pace? Does it contain too many alien elements? Is Kerttu’s fate touching?”

The programmes were broadcast close to Finnish Independence Day, when teachers could use them as material for considering war-time events. Both the general public and schools sent in more letters of thanks, drawings and comments than usual. It appears that this play has the capacity to captivate viewers of many ages. One 12-year-old boy described his feelings evoked by a viewing that took place in class: “I cried so much that my sleeves could barely cope with it.”

At present, Kirsti Tulonen is directing and scripting a period play designed for use in teaching history to 13- and 14-year-olds, made with the same television technology. It is about Finland during the Second World War as lived and experienced by young people of the same age as its viewer target group. In Finland, the emphasis in history teaching in schools is increas-

ingly on the microhistorical viewpoint, and so the plays focus on the everyday wartime experiences of young people.

Scriptwriter-director Kirsti Tulonen considers the problems of her unfinished work:

“Combining fact and fiction always causes a draught. One or the other suffers. I have wanted to incorporate into the play as many fact-based elements as possible – to tell ‘everything’ about war-time life, but because it is a tale about young people growing up, there has also got to be room in the story for the private feelings of the characters and for the dramaturgical development of situations. Even though the play examines difficult wartime feelings, I also try to fit in elements of humour.

My simple learning theory is: What a person laughs and cries at, he/she remembers. The credibility of the facts and the credibility of the story are equally important. I am not yet certain whether I shall succeed with this task or whether I am making stiff utility drama, from which the forefinger of the teacher regrettably sticks out.

I am coming to the conclusion that I will emphasise the dramaturgical elements of the tale. This is because comprehensive and pedagogically planned internet pages are being produced to support the programmes, where people in schools will find the factual materials which they need.”

... as a tool of interactive drama

An example of a different kind of use of drama in our programming is from a few years back, when School Television launched a writing campaign called *Open Story* on the theme of tolerance – people’s visible and invisible diversity and variety. Schoolchildren were invited to write a story about the lives of 7- to 12-year-olds. Entries could also be sent in anonymously – giving just the age and sex of the writer. The tale was meant to end without a conclusion. Our goal was to make the tales into a series of short inter-

active television films. We experimented with a two-phase interactive method: the schoolchildren were first allowed to suggest a story without an ending and then to propose an ending to the story.

The story jury included experts from the field: authors of young people's literature, scriptwriters, educators and programme makers, and also a child psychiatrist. Five stories without an ending, written by girls and boys, were chosen to breathe life into the television film format. They examine themes such as loneliness, intoxicants, bullying, friendship, the anxiety borne out of pressures to succeed, eating disorders, individual responsibility and racism. The dramatisation of the television version has sought to respect the mood and details created by the writer.

Only a few of the stories featured an adult who is there to defend and help the child – rather the contrary. It feels as if children try to cope on their own or among themselves in their own world. The theme that unites the tales could be summarised in a question that concerns young people: Will I find a friend who accepts me just as I am?

The oppressive mood of the original stories troubled me as a director and planner of this series, as we waited for the children's outcomes for the tales. We considered what we would do if the majority of the school children considered that the main characters should be left as victims of their sad situations, without any hope. This is not what happened, though. Sad and oppressive endings, suicidal for example, were in the minority and seemed to fascinate the older writers more. The younger writers were keen to mould the main characters into heroes that discovered their own courage and fared well. It appears that children and young people still – thankfully – long for a happy ending. An amazing total of 3,000 suggestions for endings to the stories came in, which is a considerable number

in a country as small as Finland. Half of those 3,000 suggestions came for the first story, *Lonely Valdemar*, which is a tale about 10-year-old Valdemar, who is struggling against loneliness and is teased for being plump. The original, basic open *Lonely Valdemar* story is probably a true story by an anonymous 12-year-old boy. To protect his identity, the story was transferred to another part of Finland and put in another Finnish dialect. Three of the suggested endings were chosen for each basic story. In other words, 15 of the suggested outcomes were made for the series with the same actors and original scenes. The stories were then shown so that the original unresolved tale was shown first and then the endings A, B and C in succession – all the work of different writers.

One teacher pointed out:

“Your idea about children's stories turned into fiction on television and that way public is valuable from the teacher's standpoint. Only real personal participation in the solutions involved in the process can bring a more permanent change to personal attitudes or introduce a new viewpoint into one's own system of values.”

Several schoolchildren and young people reacted in this way:

“We are proud to have the opportunity to see our stories on television – to have our voices heard. We want more *Open Stories* and we want them to last longer.”

The basic idea behind the *Open Story* campaign was to provide schoolchildren with an opportunity to tell each other about difficult everyday situations and issues. The objective was to support the debate in schools and elsewhere in Finnish society on matters that are important to children and young people on their own terms. The campaign also sought to get them to pause to consider problematic situations from someone else's standpoint, and to stimulate thinking about issues of right and wrong in their own lives.

... as part of school routine

The aim is for School Television to be planned so that the message is directed via precisely the media where it is most effective. Production of television programmes naturally involves the use of its own strengths of audio-visual expression. Television can be used by teachers to link illustrative, topical, and emotional elements into their teaching, that reflect and clarify the signals of a rapidly changing world, and support the main outlines of the school's curriculum. Combined with internet pages, publications and, in future, digital interactive applications, they form multimedia packages supporting teaching and enable the various aspects of the learning process to be taken into account. This activity is based on the fact that learning something new always involves rational, emotional and functional levels.

Finnish School Television produces programmes for a broad age range and on highly varied subjects (current affairs programmes, nature programmes, documentaries, plays, art programmes, magazines etc.). Thus, it is inappropriate to look for a specific educational programme format. We broadcast our programmes on a general public channel, which means that our educational programmes also have to be suitable for the general profile of programming for the whole family. Educational programmes stand out from general programming mainly in that their planning work is always based on strong functionality. Each programme has to be able to retain its place in the busy school schedule. ■

Revised by Shakuntala Banaji

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