

Practical work in media education

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Practical Work in Media Education

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PRACTICAL WORK IN MEDIA
EDUCATION

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Practical work can play a significant role in media education. You can produce videos, radio broadcasts, articles, pictures, posters.... But merely producing something is not interesting in itself. More important is what you can learn from using the media. The aim of this paper is to focus on three rather different ways of looking at practical work in media education. Let us take a look at video/TV as one example of a popular medium in practical media education.

The first way of looking at practical work is represented by Masterman, who uses video to investigate the formal language of the medium in order to learn more about it.

The second way is represented by Ingemann, who uses video as a means of communication to gain insight into the whole of which a video production, for example, is a part.

The third way is represented by Drotner, who uses video as a catalyst in the producer's process of self-recognition. In all three cases we are dealing with practical work, but the insight, the knowledge, the experience which such practical work generates is quite different, even though the medium is the same. The way you approach practical work makes a difference in the process and the product.

1.

Len Masterman stresses that "practical work will be an important ... component ... in media education" (Masterman 1985:26). He recognizes, on the one hand, the importance of practical work, but points out at the same time that merely using the media and having pupils produce video, radio etc. is not very interesting in itself. Masterman does not believe that there is any direct connection between media production and cognition. There is no guarantee that any kind of cognition occurs except for the actors' insight into well-known genres and professional routines. He does not believe that this is the way to a critical investigation of the media. It can at most represent a kind of cultural reproduction of the most dominant practice. "Cultural reproduction is a poor aim for media education. It is uncritical; it enslaves rather than liberates; it freezes the impulses towards action and change; it produces deference and conformity." (Masterman 1985:27)

Masterman thinks that practical work is important, but in order to

maintain a critical perspective he believes that it must be reduced to simulations and deciphering exercises. But what does he mean by this?

Merisa - a photograph

Masterman provides us with an example of practical work: Imagine that some pupils are told to produce a book cover for a collection of poems written by 10-year-old Merisa Horsford. The pupils are given a contact print with 30 photographs from which to choose (Illustration 1 - see Masterman 1985:133).

They are to select one of the 30 photographs for the cover. Masterman finds that group discussions about these pictures raise important questions concerning the different expressions that can be created by the same person through the selection of different pictures; the power held by people who actually choose such pictures; the dominating visual stereotypes for blacks in England, and whether these should be accepted or challenged

Masterman introduces other similar exercises, like TV newscasts with different combinations of text and pictures. Fundamental to the practical work described by Masterman is the fact that the exercises are designed to illustrate and concretize specific concepts or theories. In the example with Merisa the notion of selection is made concrete. The choice of one single picture in relation to other possible pictures. In the exercise with the TV newscast there is focus on selection as a means showing the extent to which texts can anchor and interpret pictures.

Thus, practical work is valuable in that it is able to turn concepts and theories into flesh and blood. By manipulating the medium in various ways the pupils gain insight into the effects employed by the media and how the media manipulates reality and the pupils themselves in their role as receiver.

But Masterman's approach to practical work is not unproblematic. In fact, he reduces practical work to a tool for theoretical analysis. He is apparently not very interested in whether or not the pupils produce complete products. He is not particularly interested in whether the productions are taken seriously and are something special in their own right. Better practical exercises with TV newscasts than producing a real TV newscast yourself. Better practical exercises with a photograph than to use photographs as communication. In my opinion this view of practical work and its possibilities in media education is too narrow.

2.

The moment we view practical work as more than exercises, everything changes. The most important thing is to want to tell something concrete to somebody real. This comprises communication, where there is a sender, a medium - and a receiver. It is no longer enough just to stress the way in which something is expressed, you must also know how the receiver perceives and interprets picture and text.

Take the example of a group of students who are asked to produce an article with one photograph for a popular Danish magazine SAMVIRKE (a non-commercial magazine of 700,000 copies which reaches 3/4 of all Danish households). The article is about becoming burnt out. The kind of exhaustion experienced by many people whose job is to deal with problem-solving: doctors, social workers, police officers, teachers ..., because they are so occupied with taking care of their work and helping other people that they forget to take care of themselves. The model reader for the article is precisely the problem-solver who has not yet recognized the problem, but who knows it well.

The students do not have to choose from a series of predetermined pictures. They are to visualize the theme of the article themselves. How can you transpose abstract concepts into a concrete picture that represents something? The first idea the students came up with as a visualization was a photograph. The picture shows an office setting where we are looking over the shoulders of a man in a striped shirt standing at a counter. Further back in the room there is a woman sitting with her back to the man. On the counter there is a sign "Expedition hours 10:00 - 12:00".

The students were fully convinced that the photograph illustrated burnout. It showed one of the situations that could characterize problem-solvers, for example the everyday work situation of the social worker. But the reaction they got from their receiver group was completely different. The photograph was associated with condescending officials, authority, rejection. Their intention with the photograph was to create an understanding of the problem-solver's situation, but the reader perceived the picture as a negative expression with rejection as the theme.

They learned a lot from their first visualization. The picture they needed had to focus more on people than on depicting settings. The picture

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF



Isolation is one of the sure signs of burnout.
Learn to take care of yourself.

they needed had to be more open and to make it possible for the caption to interpret their theme and to make this the reader's interpretation. Yes, a caption was necessary because the picture has so many possible interpretations.

They learned that the photograph they took was a break in the moment and that the polysemy of the picture is the result of the gulf between the moment it is taken and the moment it is observed (Berger 1982:89). Their knowledge of the moment the picture was taken, where they had experienced the room they had been in, the people at work there, smells, sounds ..., all this had come into the picture for them. Their story was much more than what the picture could show. But the moment that is photographed can only have meaning in as much as the viewer can read something more permanent into it that transcends the picture itself. In order for a photograph to be meaningful the viewer lends it a past and a future. This is what the professional photographer can do. He attempts to choose a moment that will make the viewer lend it an appropriate past and future.

And it was on this point that the group had not been successful. The past and the future offered by their photograph was not the story the group wanted the viewer to get hold of.

With this experience behind them, the group undertook a new visualization (Illustration 2). It is a close-up of a woman with her head resting on a table. We lend the picture a past and a future. We don't know the woman, but we recognize the situation from our own lives. It is tiredness, lack of energy. We know - or think we know - what has taken place before and what will come afterwards. But this knowledge is more intuitive and emotionally rooted than intellectual and conscious. But it is also a more open picture. We can read so much into the picture from our own lives. We are not allowed to do this. The picture is controlled and interpreted by a caption: "Isolation is one of the sure signs of burnout. Learn to take care of yourself."

Illustration 2: The final visualization of the illustration for the article "Take care of yourself". The caption reads: "Isolation is one of the sure signs of burnout. Learn to take care of yourself."

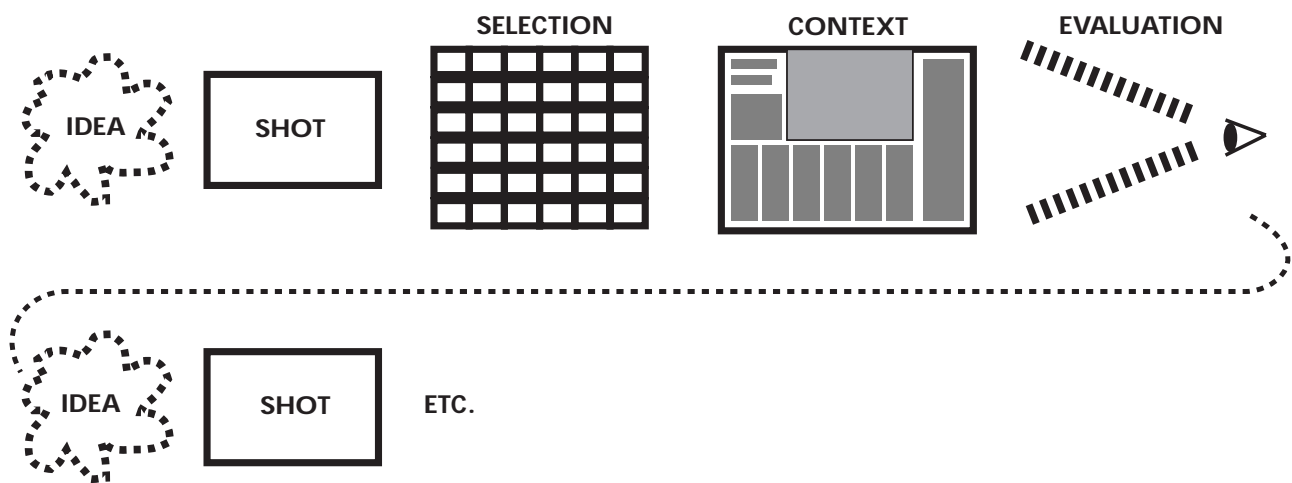


Figure 1: The complete process of visualization: Idea, shot, selection, context, evaluation, idea, shot ...

The picture becomes isolation as a result of the caption. We place emphasis on the fact that the woman is alone and out of contact with other people. We place emphasis on the fact that she looks "burnt out". That she is run down, despairing, disheartened. The picture by itself cannot tell us this, but the text and picture in combination can. The picture lends authenticity and reliability, the words give meaning to the picture.

The Process

Communication is a process. It is an endeavor that is creative, theoretically and practically productive. It is a process that has a beginning and an end. It starts with an idea and ends with a media product and an understanding of the processes that have led to the product. On closer look it is a progression that looks like this, if we take the visual side by itself: Idea-shot-selection-context-evaluation, and which can repeat itself Idea-shot-selection-context-evaluation.

Idea: From the theme a number of visual ideas are generated, and one of these is selected and described with respect to content. Here we draw on the visual experiences found within the group, and these are supplemented with an active search for pictures and ideas in magazines, photographic archives etc.

Shot: A number of pictures are taken based on the concrete idea. We are able to discover that reality provides a number of possibilities different from the ones we first imagined, and we should be open to this.

Selection: From the contact prints several possibilities are selected for enlargement. What actually covers the idea? Where have we succeeded in giving the receiver the possibility of lending the picture a past and a future?

Context: The most central context is the caption and the title. How are they to be formed so they support the picture in the best possible way and facilitate concretization of the theme? How does the text select and interpret the picture?

Evaluation: An evaluation can take place within the group, but the group is

generally too involved to be able to discover itself how picture and text are perceived. Therefore it can be necessary to include several concrete members of the target group in the evaluation. Here it is important to realize that it is very unpleasant to be criticized and to discover how mistakenly picture and text can be perceived in relation to what was intended.

This process can be repeated until the concrete visualization has been made to agree with the intended goal. This progression is merely a concrete variation of the normal notion of the progression of creative processes: preparatory phase, incubation phase, illumination phase and verification phase. It can look very rational in the concrete case. This is true only because we try to bring out the rational and conscious aspects. But the truly creative process also draws on experiences, symbols and pictures which are hidden to the active producer.

The subconscious must be allowed to work undisturbed by the censorship normally exercised by consciousness with its rules for what you usually do, what you can do, the norms you should comply with etc. The Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman is to the point in his description of this process, which takes place while he is looking out of the window: "I make all my decisions by intuition. I cast a spear out into the dark. That is intuition. Afterwards I have to send an army out into the dark after the spear. That is intellect." In the concrete process we can place emphasis on the rational side of things, but we can also try to put the subconscious and intuitive processes into words. We can be satisfied with producing effective communication. But we can also try to gain insight into the subconscious processes.

Communication

When we are dealing with communication there is much more at stake than in the kinds of exercises suggested as practical work by Masterman. We are forced to acquire knowledge and experience in both conscious and subconscious ways. There are at least three areas about which we gain knowledge and experience:

- medium
- the world
- I

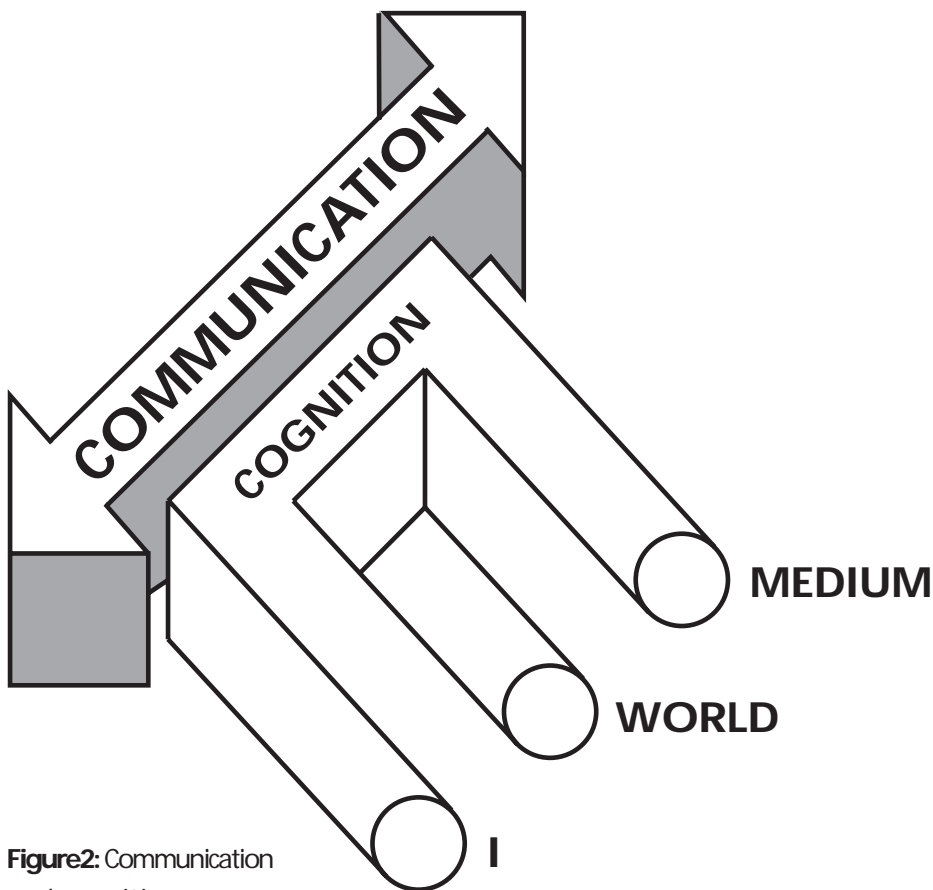


Figure2: Communication and cognition: Medium, world, I.

Medium: We can acquire theoretical and analytical insight into how the concrete medium is used; both by the viewer and by the producer. For example, how are words, pictures and layout used in an article? This requires knowledge of the format employed by the concrete magazine. It requires knowledge of what the photograph is and how it can be used in a concrete speech act. It requires knowledge of the interplay between picture and words. But the theoretical and analytical aspects must be supplemented with knowledge from experience, which is acquired through concrete use of the medium. When you create concrete pictures that are to visualize a specific theme you have the feel your way towards providing an adequate visual expression of the theme. There are no easy shortcuts, and here theories and concepts are not particularly useful as guidelines. They are, however, well-suited as tools for analysis and for understanding the final product.

Knowledge from experience is thus an extension of Masterman's notion of knowledge. When he finds that media productions often reproduce the most dominant practice, he is at the core of the problem. Namely that we all have an excellent understanding when it comes to criticizing the media, but when we need to transfer our intellectual knowledge to practical media production we end up with the most idiotic and stereotype solutions. In order to avoid this we need not refrain from producing, but instead try to develop our very limited knowledge from experience through recurrent and lasting media production. Exercises are not the way, but instead producing

more - and more binding productions. To produce with communication as the goal. We want to tell something to someone.

The World: In order to communicate something to someone there must be a decision as to what we want to communicate. It has to be about something. This means we have to gather knowledge from a great many sources. Books, encyclopaedias, brochures, newspapers, magazines etc. But it also means going out into the world and talking to real people in order to get more information, concrete stories and personal opinions. This can be from experts, participants with personal experiences, observers who have witnessed events.

The knowledge we are looking for about the subject in the world around us is more than just naked facts. We can seek out people and contexts and acquire knowledge and insight that isn't intellectual, but rather emotional and sensual.

In order to communicate successfully we need to know something about those to whom we direct our communication. We can find out things in handbooks, opinion polls But this abstract knowledge must be supplemented with penetrating interviews of selected members of the target group. These interviews are necessary for establishing a model reader. Here again abstract knowledge is extended by means of concrete knowledge about persons, contexts, opinions and convictions in relation to the medium and the subject.

I: To communicate is not an abstract relation between a subject, a medium and a target group. We also learn something about ourselves when we set out to communicate a subject. We participate as a member of a group which has reached agreement on contents, important points, choices, presentation, target group Thus we need to learn to argue our points, make decisions that are binding, keep deadlines, criticize, investigate We have to learn to relate to people who are different from ourselves when we seek information on the subject and the target group. On the very concrete level we have to discover that it can be very difficult to take pictures of people and situations. We will discover that it is very difficult for us to get close to people, we have to experience the fact that there are ethical problems involved when you are standing there with your camera wanting to take pictures of people in distress. It becomes a personal, concrete and pressing problem to depict or

exhibit people in distress, the moment you stand there with the camera in your hand. It is easier to do it theoretically and at a distance from the concrete situation.

This form of knowledge is to a great extent knowledge from experience. We already have some knowledge, but it is extended and altered in the process which involves creating a media product.

Experimental knowledge

But how can we then increase our knowledge? The Danish psychologist Janni Nielsen distinguishes between three different means of cognition, namely:

- The sensorimotor means of cognition
- The emotive means of cognition
- The symbolic means of cognition

The sensorimotor means of cognition forms the basis. "It is through the individual's practical experience with reality, by struggling with the world around him, that this qualification is developed" (Nielsen 1989?:28). She stresses the fact that this means of cognition is not given any great recognition in our culture, in spite of its being the basis for and the most significant factor in the development of cognition throughout the rest of our lives. And the same is true for the emotive means of cognition, which has its basis in human interaction. It is based on the necessary emotional relationships which are established with other people and developed through such relationships. These two means of cognition taken together comprise knowledge from experience. The symbolic means of cognition can be transformed through language, pictures, colors, music, shapes etc. These numerous means of linguistic expression are significant tools in the development of cognition. Janni Nielsen stresses the fact that these three means of cognition must be conceived as a whole. "The development of and the multiple interaction between them is the basis for the development of human cognition" (Nielsen 19???:29).

Now I will return to Masterman. The way I read him, he is concerned with the critical-analytical approach to media pedagogy. When he wants to include practical work in media pedagogy he is only concerned with using the practical work to concretize and exemplify the theories, concepts and analyses that the instructor has found central to begin with. It is a matter of being able to defend yourself against manipulation and fascination.

Masterman only places emphasis on a symbolic means of cognition, leaving the sensorimotor and emotive means of cognition invisible.

I have another way of looking at things. Fascination is the starting point. Together with a notion of man that expresses confidence that the pupils will use and interpret the media from the point of view of their own situation. The media provide us with raw material, and the pupils put it to active use.

I have tried to show that by working practically with the media and by producing complete media products with communication as their goal you can make use of body, senses, feelings and language. Knowledge from experience can be turned into knowledge formulated linguistically. And it is precisely with respect to this point that the media pedagogical perspective must be kept distinct from that of the media professional. But before silent knowledge can become visible it must first be made into knowledge by way of our own creative and productive processes.

3.

But there are other creative and productive processes that do not have communication as their goal - but rather self-expression. To create your own world. Here we are not dealing with transmitting something to someone.

The Danish media researcher Kirsten Drotner followed a group of young boys and girls age 14-17 while they were making a video. "The common appeal of the girl-meets-boy theme highlights how selfdefined video production is cultural production in the specific sense of aesthetic production: it makes visible pertinent problems and hidden desires by giving them concrete aesthetic form. The aesthetic process is contradictory because the feelings involved are contradictory. Developing one's sexuality is naturally seminal to adolescence. Sexual experimentation is a source of profound pleasure. But the deep emotions involved are also threatening because they may be felt to overwhelm an unstable identity. Making video opened a safe space in which the participants could act out, test, and negotiate these contradictory experiences. It was safe because it was fictional, it was not "about" the participants, and it was negotiable because its creative energy was pleasure: the group made video to have fun, not to have their problems solved."

(Drotner 1989:211) Drotner found that as long as both seriousness and

fun were involved in the same process the group was able to overcome all their frustrations over having to drop some of their fantastic ideas, over having to wait, or having to drop a scene because it rained. They were very unwilling to write manuscripts because they thought this was extremely boring and because it resembled their regular school work. It was no fun to write manuscripts, but they found seriousness and fun in making up scenes and working them out during the filming process. Drotner points out that they carried possible manuscripts around in their heads which included an intuitive knowledge of camera angles, lighting and music. "Brought up in a world saturated with visual media, they know about them without realizing it, so to speak." (Drotner 1989:213)

Their visual competence was also demonstrated for Drotner when Paul and his friend were testing the white balance on the camera one night. They "acted out" TV commercials. While Paul was combing his hair, with a big smile on his face, the cameraman came in imitating the intonation of a commercial: "And here we see Model '87 with the diffuse look in his eyes. He naturally uses the deodorant ... Williams." Both of them laugh. Just like small children in their roll-playing, the boys alternated elegantly between different levels of reality. Their mutual understanding of the commercial codes made it easy to improvise and parody them. This little scene demonstrates a common pattern of action. "It reveals an opposition between the boy's need for approval through commercial integration and their mastery of commercial cliches shown by their commercial experimentation: in that opposition lies the source of their laughter." (Drotner 1989:212) While many media critics and well-meaning adults think of commercials as stereotype junk, these adolescents find that they contain an unlimited reservoir of emblems that stimulate their imagination and create a collective framework for interpretation. "The cliches become pieces in the construction of a variety of narrative jigsaw puzzles." (Drotner 1989:213).

It is this subconscious visual competence that makes it possible for them to visualize their fears, worries, dreams and desires. Not by sitting and describing and discussing them, but by making pictures and tales derived from these feelings. This is everyday aesthetics as a special way of perceiving the world and understanding yourself. The aesthetic production is an experience using all of our senses and involving more than can be put into words and more than rational knowledge. But this doesn't make it any less important than learning in the everyday sense.

Drotner believes that aesthetic production in general and visual production in particular should be entertained for their own sake and on their merits as a widening of our ordinary experiences and sensibilities. It is the aesthetic negotiation that makes the process unique. For seriousness and fun to be present in the process, the participants must control the production themselves. Drotner stresses the fact that producing video does not take place for pedagogical reasons, because the young video-makers do not necessarily become more critical viewers. Nor for social reasons, because none of her young people were kept off the streets or away from TV. And not for artistic reasons, because her young people liked the aesthetic process but were not interested in the product. Theories on everyday aesthetics insist on playfulness and pleasure as ends in themselves, and Drotner believes that they are basically critical theories. They are based on an often unconscious ideal of a holistic personality, and they are directly or indirectly a criticism of the priority given to abstract rationality and the linearity of language over other modes of perception. "This critique makes them essential in clearing the ground for an analytical understanding of visual pleasure that is nurtured by non-verbal and semi-conscious sensations. Visual pleasure is, indeed, more than meets the eye." (Drotner 1989:219).

Three perspectives on practical work

Masterman's perspective on practical work is to use exercises to concretize theories and concepts in order to give the pupils a critical attitude towards the media and their use. Here focus is on the media.

Ingemann's perspective on practical work is to produce complete products with communication as the goal. The intention is to give the students an understanding of the entire communication process so they can communicate a content to a specific target group. Here focus is on the target group.

Drotner's perspective is that the visual practice is a part of everyday aesthetics and that seriousness and fun are goals in themselves. Here focus is on the producers.

Drotner & Ingemann agree that knowledge from experience is central as a basis for media production and to the insight acquired as the result of the process. Thus, they can be seen as critics of the more rational and intellectual form of practical work advocated by Masterman.

The discussion of these three different positions can illuminate more precisely what we can achieve by practical use of the media in media education. None of the three can be said to be "better" than the others, but reflections of this type are necessary every time we use the media productively. It is necessary to be precise as to the values underlying practical work and the cognitive processes we want to stimulate as instructors.

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