

# Learning by Fiction

## **Theoretical perspectives on learning by participation in the fiction of a role-play.**

This paper attends the theoretical issues of learning by using the media of fiction based upon role play, focusing on how the facilitated event can help the participant in establishing new perspectives on a given object or phenomenon. The paper is motivated by the current, and most criticisable attempts of using role-play to meet the developmental and educational needs of the new economy.

The issues are attended in attempt to establish a theoretical foundation for the use of role-play in learning, focusing on the direction and validity

of the gain. Using the sociological-social psychology as framework for understanding our object perception, fiction is used for shaping the participants perception of an object or phenomenon, and thereby creating basis for the development of new perspectives. To test the established theoretical foundation, a role-play is designed for teaching business economics to high-school students (gymnasieelever), through which the theoretical understanding is assessed empirically.

Exploring the potential of the method for facilitating benefit, corresponding to a specific developmental need, and being valid to issues outside the fictional world, states a number of difficulties and dilemmas for effectively using the method as an educational tool. Of significant interest, is the dilemma in balancing the degree of interpretative freedom versus the desired direction of the developed perspectives. The understanding states an issue of similar significance by attending the issue of validity of the perspectives learned through fiction.

The purpose of this article is not to equip the reader with the tools to use larp as an educational tool; the purpose is rather to appoint the need for grounding the practice

### **The Author**

Thomas Duus Henriksen is 27 years old and lives in Copenhagen, Denmark.

He has an MA in psychology, cand. psych, majoring in I/O psychology, specialized in educational roleplay.

He is currently managing the larp company Situid, developing role play based material for the Ministry of Education. He has been larping 1992, organizing since 1997, and is currently an organizer of Knudepunkt.

theoretically. This article is a short summary of my above abstracted publication »Hvordan kan man lære gennem fiktion« (Henriksen, 2002). The original publication is in Danish.

### **The need for a theoretical foundation**

During the last years, the idea of combining role-play and learning has grown increasingly popular within a wide array of Danish institutions. Within the educational system, the combination has been discussed under the doctrine »Learning by playing« (den legende læring), and has been met with diverse, but mostly critical perspectives. Other institutions have opened their arms to the combination, seeing role-play as an opportunity to make learning a bit more fun, and in some cases even more effective.

The increasing popularity of a role play based method, increases the risk of letting success undermine the theoretical foundation of the method, and instead of basing arguments on a proper research, merely basing argument anecdotically. This risk calls for the practitioners to hold their horses for a while, taking time to ask themselves for their reasons to use role play as an educational tool, especially whether it is the proper mean to meet the participants' demand, or if the use merely is based upon the practitioners desire for the media itself. To allow both the practitioner and the participant to make the distinction, a solid, theoretical foundation is required.

### **A lesson from history**

The argument for a solid theoretical foundation for using role-play as an educational tool is strengthened by events occurring during the late 1970s and early 1980s. During that period, role-play was recognised as a powerful instrument, which could contribute to a learning process (Høyrup, 1975). Due to a then increasing popularity, the market for educational role-play was outgrowing the scientific exploration of the media. As the foundation grew ever more shallow, and the use of the method became increasingly based upon anecdotes about successes, a bright group of journalists took out the flawed results out of the closet, proving that most practitioners did not have the slightest clue of what they were doing (Haslebo & Nielsen, 1997). The result was fatal, and combined with the recession of the early 1980s, the market crashed, and remained in that position for the 20 years. Question is now, whether we decide to learn from history and ground our work sufficiently, instead of repeating the same old story in mere desire for the media.

Throughout the following pages, I will introduce my contribution to such theoretical foundation, based upon a sociological, social psychological perspective on using fiction as a developmental tool. The introduced perspective is thoroughly described in my MA publication (Henriksen, IP), through which I examine a role-play, designed as a supplement for teaching

business economy for high school students.

### **Forming to meet the demand**

The studied form of role-play neither fits nicely into the larp or the tabletop category, but is a hybrid between the two (see Molbech (2000)). This hybrid form is due to the external goal of the educational activity, forcing the form to adapt to the need. Role-play is therefore seen as

»a media, where a person, through immersion into a role and the world of this role, is given the opportunity to participate in and interact with the contents of this world, and its participants.« (Henriksen, 2002, p. 44).

- covering both tabletop and larping (see also Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2002) Using a broad definition of role play, sends attention to the situation created through the media, and thereby into the very heart of the social psychological topic; the meeting between the subject and the structure. This definition therefore allows for a psychological exploration of the media, and its effect on the subject.

### **Role-play from the psychologist's perspective**

Role-play is interesting from a psychological perspective, as it alters the way we interpret our perception, and thereby the way we perceive the world. According to the social constructivist thinking, our discursive understanding, a process that in a modern society, weights the discourse

increasingly heavier than the object itself, shapes our perception of the object (see Burr, 1995). Objects are given meaning through the stories that surrounds them.

In a modern society, most objects are perceived as symbols, and are therefore subject to interpretation. Our discourse supplies us with the hard knowledge, which is required for the given object to become meaningful (Thyssen, 1991). Our discourses are negotiated socially, and we have a tendency to socialise in systems of similar thought (Luhmann, 1984).

Seeing role-play from this perspective, the game acts as a discourse, which the participants use for understanding and interpreting the game. The game is actually an ongoing, hermeneutic analysis of a simple object, made interesting by the discourses, through which it is perceived.

Role-play becomes a system of common interpretation, in which the participants uses an invalidated discourse to build and interact within a shared fictional world. We use role-play to alter our perception of the world, in order to facilitate an experience, which would otherwise be out of reach. The role-play thereby gives us the opportunity to participate in situations, and under circumstances, which are not commonly available, i.e. playing a manager in Magasin's organisation. And this might turn out to have an educational benefit.

### **The element of fiction**

Participating in role play, the

participant voluntarily accepts using an invalidated and temporary discourse, knowingly creating a different interpretation of the perception, from what the participant would normally make of it (Henriksen, 2002, p. 29).

The fictional discourse is used to alter the role player's experience, so that we perceive the participant, but experience the role. In order to do this, we add certain aspects of reality while overlooking others. This primary and secondary fiction is a major key to understanding the confusion, role play based learning can cause.

### **Learning by role play**

The main concern for psychologists is how a phenomenon affects the mind, and how to safely alter its effect. The perceptive alteration, that role-play produces, is therefore interesting, as the facilitated experience might be able to set its mark, and produce a lasting development for the participant.

In the mind of a social constructivist, learning is all about finding more appropriate ways of perceiving object. Learning in correspondence to role-play must therefore be seen as

»The acquisition of perspectives, developing the subjects experience of an object, in a such degree that it qualifies the subject's ability to interact with the object« (Henriksen, 2002, p. 53).

The qualification must be orientated according to an external teleology; otherwise the effort becomes a waste

of time (Lave (1997), Rasmussen (1996)). The ultimate goal is to qualify the participant's ability to take part in its contemporary society, and without keeping this goal in mind, the effect often becomes more fictional than the role play itself. When working with fiction, it is important to relate the development to an external goal, not merely to the content of the fiction or role-play itself. Learning how to get along within the fictional world is useless, if the development cannot be transferred and effect the world surrounding the fiction.

If precautions are taken to compensate for the above, role-play can be used as an effective tool, as it enables the teacher to place the participant under circumstances, which are not normally available to the participant. It is important to bear in mind that this participation not necessarily creates, but can function as praxis of learning for the participants (se *ibid.*).

### **Two common misconceptions**

The educational role play is typically met by two common misconceptions; from the teacher, only seeing limitations part from a few opportunities, compared to the role player, who only sees opportunities, part from a few limitations in the use of role play as an educational tool.

The teacher's misconception is typically built upon the misunderstanding, that all role-play is based upon Tolkien's universe. As the teacher is bound by a demand for facilitating learning, concerning the

real world, corresponding to a specific topic or criteria, it may be hard to bridge the gap between the two.

The role player is aware of this misconception, but is flawed due to his or her desire for the media. Despite the role player's more qualified perspective on the role play, it seems to lack a critical sense, in order to validate the effect of the planned intervention. The role player does not look for limitations within his or her use of the media in the educational purpose, and therefore sees none.

There is a common misunderstanding among larpers that you learn a lot, merely by participating in a larp. It is true, that participating in a larp holds a great potential for exploring self and social relations, but thinking that participating automatically evolves the participant, is naive. The fact that the larp holds the potential does not necessarily mean that the participant will benefit, and this is important to be aware of.

## Pros and cons

### The methodical disadvantages

There are 4 major points in the critique of using role-play as an educational tool; reliability, validity, the ability to use role-play, and the fictional element of the method.

Reliability here refers to the differences in the individual benefit from participating. It is hard to make all roles equally relevant for the topic, and nearly impossible to grant all players the same perceptual input, and the method is awful for delivering

hard knowledge.

Validity is closely related to the element of fiction. As the role-play takes place in a fictional world (Henriksen, 2002), the benefit is related to the fiction, and therefore not necessarily valid, or transferable, to the outside world.

The ability to use role-play is scarce, especially among teachers, making it hard to role-play a broad impact.

The element of fiction is the major concern, as it deliberately separates the experience from that of the real world, and is actively encouraging the participants to interpret their perception (see also Andreassen (other where in this publication)). It is difficult to give the player interpretative degrees of freedom, and at the same time orienting the benefit towards a predetermined goal.

### The methodical advantages

Despite the massive disadvantages, role-play holds a great potential as an educational tool. Its major advantage lies in its ability to place the participants in situations, helping them to develop an implicit understanding of situations, training social skills, and to help bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Though the method holds the potential, the potential is not unleashed unless the role-play contains something for the participant to learn, a payload, corresponding to the external teleos or goal. Unless this payload is present, and made available to the participant, the great potential will remain potential.

### A final recommendation

Throughout the above pages, I have stressed the need for a theoretical grounding of the role-play, used for educational purposes. My point is to stress, that the mere participation in a larp not necessarily causes a benefit, neither are we guaranteed that a potential benefit corresponds to the goal of the learning session, but also to say, that it can be done.

Role-play is currently unexplored within the educational field, and we cannot take an automatic effect for granted – if we do, it is most likely that we merely reproduce those inappropriate circumstances of the late 1970s. The practitioner must be able to re-evaluate his or her own desire for the media, before legitimating own practice as beneficial.

### Literature

Burr, V. (1995): »An Introduction to Social Constructionism«, Routledge, London

Hakkarainen, H. & Stenros, J. (2002): »The Meilahti School. Thoughts on Role-Playing«, print, rev. b – 240702, Suomi-Finland <http://personal.inet.fi/koti/henri.hakkarainen/meilahti/> (22. september 2002)

Haslebo, G. & Nielsen, K. (1998): »Erhvervspsykologi – metoder til fælles bevægelse«, Dansk Psykologisk Forlag, Kbh.

Henriksen, T. (2000): »Læring i den simulerede praksis«, Institut for psykologi, Kbh. Universitet, DK <http://www.rolfo.dk/opgaver/duus-lidsp.pdf>

(26. september 2002)

Henriksen, T. (2002) »Hvordan kan man lære gennem fiktion? - teoretiske perspektiver på læring gennem deltagelse i rollespilsformidlet fiktion.«, IN PRESS, Kbh.

Høytrup, S. (1975): »Laboratorie og sensitivitetstræning«, Gyldendal. Kbh.

Molbech, H.C. (2001):

»Rolle-spilsmediets virkemidler«, Informationsvidenskab, Aarhus Universitet <http://www.rolfo.dk/opgaver/hc-rollespilsmediet.pdf> (26. september 2002)

Lave, J. (1997) »Learning, apprenticeship, social practice«, I Nordisk Pedagogik, vol. 3.97

Luhmann, N. (1984) »Soziale Systeme«, på dansk ved Cederstrøm, J.,

Mortensen, N. og Rasmussen, J. Hans Reitzel, 2000

Rasmussen, J. (1996) »Socialisering og læring i det reflektive moderne«, Unge Pædagoger, Kbh.

Ryan, M.-L. (1991) » Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory«, Bloomington, Indiana University Press

Thyssen, O. (1991) »Penge, Magt og Kærlighed. Teorien om symbolsk generaliserede medier hos Parsons, Luhmann og Habermas«, Rosinante, København