

Spaces for learning –without a wagging finger: looking at learning-oriented programmes from a pedagogical perspective

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Spaces for learning – without a wagging finger

Looking at learning-oriented programmes from a pedagogical perspective

The article analyses which concepts of learning empower children and draws conclusions about the learning environments offered by international children's TV programmes.

We are always learning, wherever we go. Children are also constantly learning, and they learn every time they watch television, regardless of whether this is the intention of the television producers and whether this meets with the approval of parents and teachers.

As a learning environment, children's television is a world of its own; unlike school or kindergarten, television is almost always part of children's leisure time within the family, and is chosen by children themselves. The theoretical framework necessary for a deeper understanding of the situation must therefore – out of all the various theoretical approaches in pedagogy – be one which sheds light on the pathways to learning chosen by children themselves, and which focuses attention on the significance of these pathways for the development of identity.

Humanistic education with a constructivist orientation offers such an approach. It puts learners and their experiences and needs in the centre. The pedagogical aim is to strengthen the individual in his or her develop-

ment. The idea is that fear-free learning, acceptance, and attentiveness, along with engaging offers that foster autonomy, individual action and thought, will encourage children to develop their abilities and to extend the boundaries of their world.

Children's behaviour is subjectively meaningful, and this also applies to their likes and dislikes with regard to television. They need to be offered things which will reinforce them in positive feelings of self-worth, and which will help them to develop towards emancipation, and to successfully find their place in the world.

What concept of learning helps to empower children?

Learning is a process of appropriation

Children make the world their own through learning, every day and everywhere. There is no funnel through which knowledge can be poured into children. The child is not an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge by clever educational programmes. The process of learning will always be an activity which is initiated by the child and which can only be understood from the perspective of the learner.

Learning requires processes of appropriation in which the learning individual operates within the world around him/her, and acquaints him-/herself with this world step by step.

Information is absorbed from the environment, processed, and a small part of it is integrated into the individual's existing cognitive system. This is a constructive process in which new knowledge and theories are developed, tested, and rejected or confirmed against the background of previous experiences and patterns of processing. In the head of every learner, his or her own reality is individually (re)constructed (cf. Speck-Hamdan, 2005). Here learning does not mean absorbing facts in isolation; the emotions felt while learning are also remembered, as are, in general, the origins of the knowledge and the strategy used to appropriate it.

Reception studies based on a humanist school of thought also conceive of television reception as an active process of appropriation in which children take the material offered and create meaning for themselves, constructing their own knowledge of themselves, the world and how things fit together in it (cf. e.g. Buckingham, 2005, 2008; Bachmair et al., 1996; Livingston/Bovill, 1999).

Learning is always bound up in processes of identity formation

Learning is never just an absorption of information accompanied by emotions. It always involves integrating of something new into existing mental images of the world and oneself. Learning processes are always part of identity-building processes, and

thus follow fundamental tendencies in children's processes of self-development (cf. Schäfer, 2005). Openness towards the integration of the new will only be present if children feel safe and not threatened. If they can, children will only seek out learning environments and contents which are pleasant for them, and which they perceive as enjoyable.

This also applies to learning from television: learning is only possible if children

- can use the material offered for their processes of identity construction,
- can recognise themselves in it,
- feel that they are being taken seriously as individuals,
- feel that their self-image is not threatened.

Learning gains happen where there is free space

It is impossible to predict in detail or to completely control what an individual will gain, long-term, from a learning situation. It can be proven, however, that traditional concepts of learning involving punishment and reward do not achieve what they are intended to. Sticks and carrots, or lecturing and moralising, do not empower children. Nobody learns well with fear.

Humiliation can make learning difficult for children, or prevent it altogether. If something is learnt through humiliation, it will be associated with negative feelings, which children try to avoid by avoiding the negative learning situation (and the content associated with it) as far as possible. A loudly proclaimed moral exhortation does not change a person's inner attitude, however often it is repeated. Ethical behaviour comes about when an individual recognises and acknowledges for him- or herself that something is right and makes sense. Children learn when they are given the freedom to test and discover things for themselves. Thus it is not the external stimulus (e.g. the moral catchphrase of an adult) which

challenges the child to acquire new knowledge and new skills, and to gain new spaces and a stronger self-image; it is the situation (which can, for example, be an exciting story).

From an educational point of view, then, the professional course of action is for adults to give children access to attractive learning spaces, at the same time allowing them freedom for their own learning processes. It is important to prepare and pave the way for learning processes, but then to stand back and let children and their own processes of learning take centre stage. If children then develop further questions or look for new strategies to understand the world, this is the best time to offer them further information for their individual learning processes.

For learning through television, this means giving children spaces for imaginative projection and empathy, but letting them construct their own position. Thus it is not the message delivered on the surface which is valuable, but the space which children are given to further their own self-development.

Connecting points and learning pathways: every person learns differently

Based on their previous learning experiences, different children have developed preferred pathways for making the world their own. 7 learning types which can also be identified in relation to learning through television are (cf. Reich/Speck-Hamdan/Götz, 2009):

1. **Numbers and facts:** some learners love numbers and facts, and are amazed and fascinated by them. They repeatedly and willingly focus their perceptions on concrete data.
2. **Context through narrative:** some children learn particularly well when the content is presented within a narrative. Stories give these learners something to relate to, cognitively and imaginatively (and also emotionally), thus ensuring their continued interest.

3. **Logical problems:** some children are particularly willing to enter into sustained engagement with a subject if they are stimulated by contradictions or paradoxes. Puzzles and intellectual challenges attract their attention, and curiosity drives them to investigate how the logical contradiction can be explained and resolved.

4. **Existential questions:** some children are best able to engage with topics if these appeal to their emotions and are linked with existential questions, sympathy and the quest for justice. As long as they are not overdone and not used in a moralising way, social and existential issues can lead to a high level of engagement with learning opportunities.

5. **Aesthetic approach:** some children learn particularly well with their senses; they are particularly aware of appearance, sound, rhythm, colours, design, pattern, and pace. The aesthetic design of an educational item allows them – in the sense of the Greek word *aísthēsis* – perception – to access the content through their senses.

6. **Relational approach:** for some learners, the most suitable way to engage with a topic is by way of the personal problems and feelings of others. A presentation of facts can gain dramatic depth, for example, if children identify with the topic on a relational level.

7. **Action-oriented approach:** for some children, access to a topic is mainly action-oriented rather than intellectual. For them, trying out and doing are the best way of engaging with and learning things.

People have often discovered 1 or 2 of these pathways for themselves through their previous learning experiences. In order to give as many children as possible access to the content, the view within the psychology of learning is that learners should never be offered only one pathway. Instead, multi-modal approaches for different learner types are considered the best way to create attractive learning spaces.

Girls learn differently, so do boys

Children grow up into a culture in which people already have certain meanings and are divided into categories: girl – boy, native – foreign, old – young, or rich – poor. Children generally grow up within these categories and engage with them: what does it mean to be a girl or boy, a native or an immigrant? Stereotypes about these categories shape their self-image and also their learning pathways into the world. Gender-specific processes of socialisation tend to encourage girls, for example, towards self-reflection, communication, and seeing-oneself-in-relation-to-others. Thus many girls are, gender-typically, more at home in communicative, reflective learning environments which demand relationship-oriented integration and adaptation. For boys, on the other hand, action-oriented approaches and hierarchies are fostered; they thus tend to cope better in more rational learning environments, and many are more comfortable using the facts-and-numbers route as a way of relating to content. As with the category “gender”, tendencies towards particular learning pathways can be found in relation to the categories of “milieu” or “cultural background”, not least because particular modes of appropriation are also fostered within the family. The task of professional educationalists is first to utilise this as knowledge about what particular groups may relate to or be sensitive to, but then to deliberately balance and expand it. Only educational theories based on diversity can embrace the potential of today’s children (cf. Prengel, 2006).

On the basis of current knowledge about how children learn sustainably, how they construct images of themselves and the world, and reach moral judgements, many new educational methods have now emerged. It has become clear that methods and attitudes towards children which were taken for granted by earlier generations of adults do not lead to the desired goal.

Commands and obedience, fear and beatings, pressure and humiliation, lecturing and rebuke create more problems, rather than motivating children to set off on the challenging path of learning with interest and enjoyment. Current educational theory must be based on the latest state of knowledge, and it must recognise current problem areas and offer children learning environments which enable them to acquire skills and build up a solid knowledge base. If (and only if) we have faith that children will learn, out of interest and in their own free time, then television can enrich the learning of today’s children on their pathway through life. Without enthusiastic, autonomous learning by children, without a positive learning situation and without a high level of motivation on the part of the children in relation to the topic, every education-oriented programme is pointless – however positively it is judged by adults.

Looking from an educational point of view: the learning environments offered by children’s television

How can this educational perspective help to assess children’s TV programmes? What does it mean if a children’s programme is “learning-oriented”, and what is “educationally valuable”?

The authors of this article met in a workshop to discuss programmes from the pool “Quality in Children’s TV Worldwide” (2011/2012). This catalogue of the PRIX JEUNESSE Foundation contains 345 programmes from 70 countries, submitted by quality-oriented broadcasters and production companies as their best productions from the last 2 years.

The first finding is that there are many different approaches to supporting children’s learning with children’s programmes. Overall, the programmes show a wide spectrum of educational concepts of learning;

different learning spaces are set up and very different communicative strategies are tried out. The dominant formats for learning are knowledge-centred programmes in which content is strategically pre-structured and presented in a didactic manner. Adults recognise and accept such programmes very quickly as educational programmes for children. In some other formats, the knowledge to be imparted is integrated into fictional stories or content is presented in game shows or team games. The children and adolescents are challenged with problems which they have to solve by acquiring knowledge. A further format is documentaries presenting strategically incorporated information. Out of this wide range of formats, a few programmes were selected for further analysis and interpreted from a professional/educational perspective with regard to successful elements and potential for improvement.

1. Best Practice: successful learning spaces in children’s TV programmes worldwide

Independent of genre or format, the pool “Quality in Children’s TV Worldwide” (2011/2012) contains some extremely positive efforts to promote self-directed, motivating learning opportunities for young television viewers.

Knowledge-oriented programmes on relevant themes

The programme *Du bist kein Werwolf* (“You’re not a werewolf”, WDR, Germany) gives information on somewhat taboo topics relating to puberty and physical development. In one episode, boys’ physical attributes are discussed, focussing on the foreskin of the penis, and viewers are shown how to keep the genitals clean. A humorously re-enacted scene deals with the topic of tattoos. 2 presenters, a man and a youthful-looking woman, guide viewers humorously through the items and explain various matters without moralising.

Screenshot from *My autism and me* © CBBC

Ill. 1: In *My autism and me* Rosie tells about her life with autism and her perception

Screenshot from *Growing Sprouts* © KRO

Ill. 2: Aesthetic approach: In *Growing Sprouts* Gabriela proves to be a competent gardener

The programme is a classical knowledge programme which brings up a topic significant for pre-teens. The information is precise, with a clear structure and various aspects viewers can relate to. A potentially embarrassing topic is dealt with lightly and humorously, and presented with great openness. Items such as that on the appearance of the foreskin emphasise the individual differences between people, and the discussion of tattoos shows how important it is to find one's own way, in consultation with one's social environment. A successful example which follows many of the principles of high-quality knowledge programmes (cf. Reich/Speck-Hamdan/Götz, 2009).

Children explain what is important to them

My autism and me (CBBC, UK) offers a sensitive, surprising, and authentic portrayal of Rosie, a self-confident, eloquent girl who lives with autism (ill. 1). In successive interview segments she explains from her own perspective what autism means and what forms it can take. The programme leads the viewer, via Rosie's subjective point of view, into the lives of children diagnosed with autism. At the end Rosie tells why she has participated in this film, while scenes from the making of the film are shown. Her final statement is: "Living with autism can be hard sometimes, but it makes me who I am. Autism makes me different, but also unique and special."

The protagonist tells of her own experience with autism and comes across as highly competent. She is depicted as independent in her perceptions, actions, and reflections. Viewers experience the narrator's perspective on her own self-image, and her encounters with others, and are given a range of information about life with this "disability", its possible forms, and what this means for everyday life. This affects viewers emotionally and creates possible points of identification on a relational level. The images are bold and palpable, and the self-confidence, strength and coherence of the young protagonist, who deals very convincingly with herself and her "otherness", are touching. The portrayal also gives viewers something to relate to aesthetically, and, while nothing is embellished, this depiction of the everyday life of various children with autism shows more than just suffering. Moreover, the insertion of numbers and facts, and the contextualisation of individual lives in a wider political context, create learning opportunities for knowledge-oriented learning. The programme also helps to develop children's media literacy by making the production process visible at the end. The programme characterises itself as manufactured, and as having one main actor: Rosie. A successful example of a case-oriented, person-centred approach to a significant topic which is otherwise seldom given the attention it deserves.

A preschooler's learning project at the centre of the action

In the programme *Growing Sprouts* (KRO, Netherlands, ill. 2) Gabriela pushes a wheelbarrow full of gardening tools to the vegetable patch. Accompanied by her mother, she rakes the ground and carefully plants the seedlings. "I did a good job there", she observes. The growth of the plants is symbolised with 2-dimensional, child-friendly animation, and finally children's voices call out the name of the plant that has grown up: "Brussels sprouts". In the course of the programme Gabriela increasingly proves to be a competent gardener, who succeeds in conveying the fascination of growth in the garden.

The programme shows how Brussels sprouts are planted, tended, and harvested, without resorting to a single word of explanation. It simply shows what Gabriela is doing, and her actions, against a backdrop of vivid images of the garden, evoke the fascination of gardening. The camera follows the child's self-initiated and action-focused learning project. An adult support person is present, but stays in the background; on screen this accompanying role is symbolised by a camera shot which deliberately "cuts off" her head. The act of planting is clearly depicted as a physical action involving some exertion. The garden itself is represented in aesthetic images, animals and plants show a secluded, self-contained, almost romantic space in which the protagonist acts. The duration of the

Screenshots from *Fun with Japanese* © NHK

Ill. 3 and 4: Aesthetic approach: rhymes are repeated in different ways in *Fun with Japanese*, e.g. with a boy opening a rice pot with dancing children (left) or traditional Japanese dancers (right)

growth is represented by a child-friendly, imaginative animation. The necessary effort involved in such a project is shown, but the child's happiness and quiet concentration mean that this has positive connotations: it is enjoyable work. The high aesthetic quality of the pictures and the sophisticated sound design make the images almost tangible. With the images of the Brussels sprouts growing on the bush, and of the girl biting with relish into the vegetable she has planted and harvested herself, this item offers a plausible new approach to healthy eating – without any wagging finger. A successful example of the empowerment of children.

Making content poetically and aesthetically accessible

In the programme *Fun with Japanese* (NHK, Japan), classical Japanese children's rhymes are sung, danced, and staged in a wide variety of ways (ill. 3 and 4). For example, a child of 4 years opens a rice pot in which dancing children, looking like little gnomes, say the rhyme whenever the lid is opened.

Rhymes and sayings are typically part of childhood, but in this item the poetic is evoked in a manner which does not at first seem especially child-friendly: rhymes as part of traditional heritage. A range of variations and symbolisations are used to make the content and poetic aspects of a classical children's rhyme accessible. New images keep appearing, creating a vis-

ual space around the children's rhyme, offering new and surprising points of view, fostering attentiveness, and encouraging pleasure in linguistic play. Playful aesthetic approaches are created, allowing traditional children's culture to have positive connotations in a modern interpretation. Integrating the traditional rhyme into little narratives allows it to be linked with everyday contexts.

JoNaLu (ZDF, Germany): The 2 mice Naja and Jo and their little friend the beetle Ludwig (3-D animated figures) want to have a picnic. Their expedition takes them out of the house and over the lake; they get caught in a storm and encounter the (Russian-speaking) mole, who shows them the way to the strawberry field. Recurring songs with simple, matching actions are incorporated into the story; the main characters use these songs to motivate themselves, to bolster their courage, or just for fun. They use another rhyme to remember right and left.

The programme primarily tells a story which preschoolers can relate to, one which is meant to encourage the children in front of the screen to participate with their bodies and all their senses. Linguistic exercises in German, for children from immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds, are incorporated into the dancing and music, the excitement and humour. The programme uses tried and tested Total Physical Response methods, linking movement and words to

consolidate the words in the brain on multiple levels (cf. Kirch 2006, Holler in this issue). These learning moments are smoothly integrated into the course of the story. The media text is designed in such a way that it invites interaction, yet viewers are not obtrusively pressured to participate; instead they are playfully enticed to stand up and get involved. There is no pause after the invitation – the children can participate or not. In any case, the mice and the beetle are having a great time and are not afraid to show it. If children do remain passively seated in front of the television, there is no awkward void, or interruption of the narrative flow, and no finger-wagging lecture. Viewers are offered something to relate to, with various aesthetic elements being integrated into the narrative. The design of the animal figures and the way they address the viewers in front of the screen, along with the friendly interactions, encourage an active approach; the exciting moments in the story offer existential issues to relate to. A programme which is very attractive for children and educationally valuable.

Alongside these examples, in which modern approaches to learning are implemented with great success, there are also examples of programmes which – considered from a professional/educational point of view – show potential for improvement.

2. Where is there potential for improvement?

The experience of rupture: the educational content is presented obtrusively and is unpleasantly obvious

A typical impression in a series of learning-oriented programmes for children is a didactic “experience of rupture” which becomes noticeable in the course of the programme. At the beginning the children are motivated with exciting stories, so that they will learn the information presented to them in the second part of the programme. Often this beginning of the story shows child-friendly characters operating in everyday situations. The form of the text encourages emotional involvement, viewers are invited to identify with the characters. Then the programme suddenly changes its “receptive space”: the story is lost, and rational forms of knowledge displace the identificatory space. The focus is no longer on following and entering into a story, but on the systematic transmission of educational content. The perspective shifts to a different set of actors, and the children’s potential for agency is lost to a higher “educational authority” (adults, experts, encyclopaedia). The narrative becomes the (sweet) packaging for the (bitter) educational content. The dialogue becomes a monologue. The programme “switches” into learning mode, which is in some cases didactic or highly fact-oriented.

While this educational content need not be a disruptive element in all programmes for children – it can even increase viewing enjoyment and the fantasy of agency –, it probably tends to be an unpleasant experience, especially if the story is not completed, and the protagonists fade into the background just as the children are getting to like them.

It is easy to understand what television professionals are thinking here; the idea of giving the “bitter pill”, the dry, boring content, an attractive

covering (candy coating and shiny paper) has a long pedagogical tradition. It recalls the song from Disney’s *Mary Poppins*, “A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down”, which in this case refers to cod-liver oil on a spoonful of white sugar after a walk in the rain. But what might perhaps work in other contexts runs the risk, in television, of making children lose their motivation and turn away from the programme. And as we know today, an unpleasant tasting spoonful of cod-liver oil is not necessary in a healthy diet, nor is sugar particularly good for one’s health.

From the perspective of humanistic education we have to ask: are children really being taken seriously here as self-determined learners? Why should educational content be so boring that it has to be sweetened with things that have nothing to do with it at all? Have we tried hard enough to make the content itself really interesting for children, or do we mistrust our own concept and believe that we need packaging which will motivate viewers? One possible working hypothesis for knowledge programmes is that attractive elements for children to relate to and attractive forms of presentation can be found for nearly any subject – in the content itself.

Belittling and humiliating experiences

Some programmes – usually in the opening scenes – depict ignorance or errors on the part of children or characters representing children. The children are portrayed as deficient and the programme claims to be liberating them from this disadvantaged situation by providing knowledge. An example:

Children sit in a circle, playing with toy dogs, with each child calling the dog by its correct breed name. The main character, however, does not know the name of his toy. A knowledge gap which elicits horror and social exclusion – something has to be done, only a child who can name the dog’s breed can join in the game. Everyone looks at the ignorant hero and his

nameless toy and gasp in horror. This is the beginning of a (learning) journey on which the child seeks the name of the dinosaur.

Or:

The teacher figure sets a problem and a small animal (representing a child) cannot solve it. Everyone turns around in horror and makes fun of him. This is the beginning of a knowledge programme.

A further example:

A small animal (representing a child) practises karate, kicking a refuse container with great enthusiasm. A bigger animal comes and tells him that he is not allowed to do this, because refuse containers have a special purpose. The little animal then obligingly asks why refuse containers are important, leading into a segment about recycling.

These are just small scenes, which have no point other than to motivate the actual knowledge programme that follows. The children’s world, their interests and feelings are only a hook on which to hang a knowledge programme which takes the world of children less seriously than adults’ ideas about learning. From the perspective of the children watching the programme, who have engaged emotionally with the characters representing children, they are, as it were, belittled and humiliated along with the protagonist. If they have used one of the other characters as an identificatory figure, then they can escape this trap – but at the expense of others, and with the knowledge that such situations represent a potential crisis. Both responses are associated with the fear of shame and degradation, and are undesirable. It has now been well proven in the fields of education and psychology that reprimands, humiliation, and degradation make content-related learning more difficult. Indeed they often make it virtually impossible, since the individual, after such a hurt, has to expend all his/her energy processing this emotional experience and preserving his/her identity. There is a danger that the



Ill. 5: Quality children's TV should make it possible for children to discover their own world

negative feelings will be linked with the learning experience and also with the content. A sustainable learning process needs to be based on esteem, acknowledgement, and a tolerant attitude towards mistakes.

Conclusion: working professionally for children means seeing one- self as a constant learner

The aim of children's programmes, particularly when they conceive themselves as high-quality, learning-oriented programmes, must be to stimulate children in their process of self-development, and to encourage a joyful approach to knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge. This means representing, highlighting, and instigating learning spaces which can be pre-structured, but must not try to homogenise children or to impose any one message as having sole validity. It means offering various elements for viewers to relate to, since every child is different. But it also means having faith in children.

If children are given the space to learn, they will use it to expand their own horizons and to learn responsible behaviour towards themselves and others. Quality in children's television

thus means wanting to give children something; and yet it is more valuable and has a more lasting impact if we make it possible for children to discover their own world. For this they need skills, key competences, and above all spaces for learning. Having faith in children's ability to learn also means not entertaining them in childish ways,

but allowing serious spaces for learning, and opening up a pathway into the world which is taken seriously by children and adults. Humour, curiosity, excitement and identification are the keys to success here; lecturing, humiliation, preaching and pressure are not. ■

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