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Four Reasons why Edu-larp Works

The article considers four areas of didactic method, where edu-larp often deviates from the more traditional classroom practice of other teaching methods. The main emphasis is on the methods that are seen as inherent to the edu-larp method, but some methods which occur in other didactic styles will also be mentioned if they are especially relevant for the edu-larp experience.

Definition of terms and use

Edu-larp can be defined as any kind of pedagogical method that uses live action role-playing as a student activity directly connected to the pedagogical purpose of the teaching or therapy. The ideas of the method are based on the preconception that larping is a beneficial activity, from which both personal development and learning easily springs. The role of the teacher in edu-larping is to design the actual larp (possibly participating) in a way, so that participation in the larp furthers the intended learning and development as well as possible.

What does it take to be an edu-larp
Many different groups of people have used edu-larping for specific teaching purposes as well as for running whole projects aimed at certain target groups. These groups naturally have varying methods and aims, and the activities may look quite disparate. It would be a good idea to define what it takes to qualify as an edu-larp.

To recognize educational live action role-playing we will have to look for three aspects: Educational, live action and role-play:

In order for a larp to be *educational*, we would demand that the organizers of the activity have a plan for acquisition of knowledge or skills or correction of certain behaviours in the target group through the medium of the larp. So whilst the participants may feel like it is, the activity cannot be solely recreational. It is also important to notice that while larps organized among peers may have educational aspects, they cannot be seen as educational larps so long as other factors supersede the educational aspects such as artistic merit, showing off or generally just having a good time.

To be classified as *live action*, the human element must be significant. There must be interaction between people as seen in opposition to interaction between person and machine or singularly machine-modified interaction between people. This should be obvious, but is often overlooked outside the larp environment because of the many computer games that also use the term role-playing games.

Finally there must be a *role-playing* component – a narrative element, the assumption of roles by the participants and the general consensus about the rules of engagement which characterizes any game.

Edu-larps and entertainment

Whilst it is not a prerequisite for an edu-larp that it is perceived as fun by the participants, all the games on which this article is based have been designed with the aim of being entertaining for the participants. This may seem at odds with Henriksen who says: *It is tempting to facilitate participation by making the game fun, but that would be a bad idea, if role-play were to be acknowledged as an educational tool.*[1]

There are no significant signs in the games mentioned that entertainment value is inhibiting the learning gains of the students. Henriksen, however, uses the term fun in conjunction with the games being less challenging for the participants, and this would indeed be damaging.

Edu-larp at Østerskov Efterskole

The form of edu-larp referred to in this article has been used as the primary teaching method at Østerskov Efterskole in Denmark since the summer of

2006. This is possibly the only institution in the world, dedicated to using the method so thoroughly. All teaching is conducted through narrative structures in which the students take part, acting out their roles and performing in accordance with the rules of the game. In this way the whole academic range of the two final years of Danish primary school is covered. The school has shown good results both in academics and especially social skills.[2]

Disclaimer about talk about traditional teaching methods

In the following text, I will be making references to traditional teaching methods. This is not to say, that all or even the majority of teaching in ordinary schools is performed according to the mentioned methods. There are many schools and teachers who work hard to apply more modern teaching methods, but with classrooms and school buildings, work schedules and timetables being what they are, the educational environment supports a return to traditional methods whenever the energy level of teacher or students falls below the optimal level.

Distraction

Edu-larp works because it manages to distract the student from his daily life, thereby giving him a greater chance to concentrate on the subject at hand.

In education, just as in working life, people often find the task they are supposed to concentrate on less interesting or pressing than the ones presented by the rest of their existence. Thus extra-educational considerations often take precedence over school work – even in the actual teaching situation.

For teenagers, the impact of the outside world is even more daunting than for most other age groups. Their world is changing at a terrifying pace, and they are constantly busy positioning themselves in the social context of the classroom. A normal classroom environment may seem straightforward, recognisable and even peaceful to an outside observer, but for the students in the class, it is in reality an extreme social challenge. *What are the current alliances? What kinds of shoes are currently in,*

and which are out? Is anyone of the opposite sex interested in me? We all manoeuvre frantically on the social scene, but teenagers even more so, or they refrain at their own peril.

On top of the normal social positioning, experiences from other parts of the student's life may also interfere. This is seen most clearly with victims of bullying and children with severe social problems, who cannot concentrate in class because their own personal hell claims their full attention, but also in less serious cases as looking out the window at the weather or view, or being preoccupied with the sms-conversation that class so abruptly cut off, or worst of all wondering about past and present love conundrums.

Since these are the conditions in which teaching has to function, it is not surprising that many teaching activities are undertaken with a sizeable proportion of the students secretly or even openly preoccupied with something else, and many teachers find themselves in a situation, where they are administering a system of formal control procedures rather than inspiring and aiding the learning process.

Edu-larping offers a dimension to teaching that in many cases allows it to offer a distraction from the intrusions of daily life on teaching. All in all, one could say that daily life distracts from schoolwork, but edu-larp distracts from daily life.

Freedom through costume

The use of costumes in edu-larp is a very visible way of offering such distraction. When teacher and students have an understanding about using costumes as extensively as possible in class, an important measuring tool for the social hierarchy in the classroom is taken away. Students will not have to worry about whether their clothes are in fashion or not – because they are *not*. Students who still insist on adhering to fashion will find that the social pressure they try to expose their peers to now puts them at odds with the primary class activities, while students who do not have a high fashion sense are at equal footing with other students in putting together a costume.

If students and teacher wear comparable costumes in an edu-larp, it can also distract from the fact that students and teachers are culturally disparate and will usually not hang out with each other. This costume based equality

even extends into breaks, thus easing up the mode of communication between the two groups.

Costumes also offer new ways that students can show that they subscribe to the learning project on hand; simply by donning one or more articles of costume. This will be discussed further in an upcoming article.

Freedom through role

Giving every student a specific role to perform also helps to distract from the everyday communication patterns of the class. If these patterns are usually strained or destructive, this is of course a great gain; if they are constructive or amiable, it will not be felt as a change.

In the edu-larp, the student dons a role within the story, and that role defines the student's goals and preferences, allies and enemies, as well as possibilities for taking action. During the edu-larp, the student enters class with a much clearer feeling of purpose and of relating to other classmates.[3] It would be wrong to claim that you can just cast students who do not usually get along with each other in the roles of allies and thereby improve their relationship. It is however possible to cast students in such a way, that they have to communicate with other students in ways that the ordinary social structures would not otherwise have allowed. Furthermore, edu-larp may form and constrain the ways in which students interact and communicate in order to avoid specific work patterns that would usually dominate the class.

Edu-larp is a game, and every game has rules. Since larping is a social game, most of these rules actually have to do with the interaction between individuals.

In a normal social context, you cannot as a teacher get away with repeating the rules every day for how students should interact with each other – the students who need the most to hear the lecture will have stopped listening after very few days if they ever paid attention. But in a larp situation, the rules change every time you enter a new game (or even more often), the rules are always new, and everybody needs to understand the rules in order to be successful, so there is no loss of face for the teacher in reiterating the rules to the students nor for the student in paying attention.

Immersion to concentration

In addition to the physical and social abilities to distract from everyday life and thus improving the ability of the student to concentrate on the education, there is also a psychological angle which can be achieved if the edu-larp manages to be as engaging as larpers usually expect the larps, they participate in for entertainment, to be.

In much larping, it is seen as a merit to be able to immerse oneself in the character. For the hard core immersionists this means striving towards losing the self and becoming the role you play. This can hardly be said to be a possibility for an average student in an ordinary edu-larp, but every step towards immersion will take the student just as much away from the worries and tribulations of daily life. In a well designed edu-larp where learning is an integral part of participation, immersion therefore becomes a means for greater concentration on the subject matter.

Motivation

Edu-larp works because it places the students in situations where the motivation for doing schoolwork is very clear and understandable.

There is general agreement that motivation is the driving force of learning.[4] One can distinguish between internal motivation, where the learning process is driven by the urge of the learner for acquiring the relevant skills and knowledge and external motivation, where outside factors urge the student to work with the subject matter and so learn. It is commonly agreed that internal motivation is far superior to external motivation in driving the learning process. Unfortunately, it is also much harder to assert influence on the internal motivation of a student.

Working for exams, curriculum or the sake of the teacher

Very often we end up using the crudest methods of external motivation, referring to exams and the curriculum as objective reasons for learning something; asserting control and measuring out rewards and

punishment; or appealing to the good will of the student asking him or her to do it for the sake of the teacher, the parents or just plainly his future self. Whereas these methods have some success in forcing the student to work, they cannot force the student to be interested in the subject matter and the problems presented and thus fail to transcend to internal motivation.

Character motivation

Edu-larping sets up a artificial internal and external motivation through the student's assumption of a role.

By giving the student a role, the teacher can place him in a narrative situation, where the character of the student has an internal motivation for acquiring a skill, which the student himself could never be persuaded to have. So if the edu-larp manages to engage the student – that is, the student finds motivation for participating in the edu-larp - new priorities and goals can be transferred from the character to that student through the participation in the larp, for the duration of the larp.

It can be very hard to explain to a whole class of students with different interests and agendas, why some piece of abstract learning is relevant to them. It is much easier to create a character to whom it is relevant. As an example, most 15 year olds have no use for nuclear theory, but secret agents in the later part of World War 2 will memorize it gleefully.

Narrative motivation

A well made larp is like a good book. You cannot wait to see what is on the next page – you cannot wait to participate in the next scene in the larp, you want to drive the action on. When the larp succeeds, the participants want to be active in it – they want to be in the scenes, and they are involved and attentive. When this is achieved with an edu-larp, the activities of the students take them through the learning subjects of the larp. If it is just a presentation of some information, they will generally be much more attentive than in an ordinary educational communication situation, but when the subject matter becomes part of what they need, in order to act in the narrative setting, they are strongly motivated to learn it well and use it to the best of their ability.

Meta narrative motivation

Sometimes the learning objectives are not containable within the actual narration. In such cases meta narrative motivation can be used. Expressed more precisely, it could be called narratively derived motivation for meta narrative activities. The students are asked to participate in activities linked to the learning objectives, and their performance in these activities are directly linked to some part of the edu-larp. For instance, on an edu-larp space journey, the navigation computer jams, just as the space ship is on collision course with an asteroid, and has to be reconfigured through the solving of vast amounts of relatively simple arithmetic, so each student has to solve and hand in several pages of arithmetic. The motivation of the role-playing students for not hitting the asteroid and suffering damage to their space ship is quite real, and is transferred to the less realistic activity of doing arithmetic problems on paper.

Meta narrative motivation can inspire students to participate actively in larp preparations – including acquiring knowledge and skills that they know they are going to need in the upcoming larp. It also motivates students to take part in evaluations and post-larping activities as long as they know that it will benefit their experiences in the long run because evaluation results are worked into upcoming activities.

Meta narrative motivation is also very strong in the instances, where tests and exercises are used as an engine within the game.

This can be done as a crucial point method as in the Norwegian edu-larp system *Lærelyst* from *A-play*.[5] The class plays a table-top-style larp with the teacher as game master. The play proceeds until a certain point when the students are presented with a test, which is an actual school task. Play cannot proceed until everybody has fulfilled the task, and extra experience points are awarded for pupils who work above and beyond what can normally be expected of them, independently of their relative academic abilities.

Another method is used at Østerskov Efterskole in situations, where different kinds of conflicts and fluctuations have to be simulated. In this method, the activities of the students (arithmetic problem solving, grammatical construction or quizzes) are linked to activities in the narrative. In a field battle each student is responsible for a unit at the board, moving,

attacking and defending through problem solving. In a Wall Street Stock Market simulation, the students must hand in solved quizzes for each company they want to influence on the stock market. Correct answers raise the stock value, mistakes cost points.

In both instances, it is abundantly clear from the empirical evidence that the students are strongly motivated and wanting to do well – especially when they are given assignments that fit their varying levels of competence.

Activity

Edu-larp works because it activates students in a school setting at an unusually high level.

Traditional classroom activity levels

Activity is the mother of learning. A learner who is reduced to inactivity has very little chance to create an understanding and ensure remembering the subject matter being taught. For this reason, a large part of didactic methods are aimed at making the student work actively with the subject matter.

Nevertheless, many teaching situations still centre on the teacher or the book. It is fairly obvious why this situation occurs since these two stand out as the primary repositories of knowledge in the teaching environment, but it reduces the learner to a listener and/or a reader, both of which are fairly passive roles. Additionally, it postulates in the nature of the physical situation that the learners are not able to produce the knowledge – only receive it. Any attempt to increase activity into teaching situations of the above type will inevitably seem as chaotic and a threat to the safe transference of knowledge from repository to vessel.

Teacher roles in edu-larp

In an edu-larp, the teacher is acting as a game director or playing a role. In either situation, the relationship between student and teacher is regulated by the larp relationship.

The relation between student and teacher when one is player and the other director in a larp is both unequal and authoritative, not totally unlike the

one described above. There is, however, one important difference. The difference is in the nature of the contract that exists between director and player compared to the one between teacher and student.

The relationship between director and player is defined first of all by rules (the rules concerned with the running of the game) which do not solely constrict the activities of the student but also allow the student certain freedoms of action. A teacher acting as a director cannot interfere with the actions of a student without breaking the narrative frame of the story, solely because the actions of the students are not conforming to the ones expected or hoped for by the teacher – the interference has to be grounded in narrative modifications or game mechanics. The teacher/director has to conform to the frame of the narration and accept if the student tries out the boundaries of this frame, or even opts to fail within the context of the story.

Secondly, when the teacher/director acts within the story, he is supposed to do so as a service to the story, leading the actions of the different players towards the conclusion of the story since everybody wants an interesting conclusion to the story if not a happy one. This means that the teacher's excuse for wielding authority is not based on his authority as a teacher or on his guardianship over the student, but on his responsibility to service the story of the game.

Whilst a teacher in a classroom may easily spend more than half of a lesson talking, even the most intervening director in a larp will find it extremely hard to reach 50 percent talking time in table top situations and 25 percent in costume larps. Of course a game master will often find himself talking to participants of the larp all the time, but since he will be talking to different players, he will only take up a fraction of their individual time.

If the teacher interacts with the students through playing a role in the edu-larp, it is even more difficult to dominate the activity and thereby reduce the student's activity level through teacher effort. A teacher performing his job through playing a role in the edu-larp gives up even more authority with regards to interfering in student activities and dominating talking time. The teacher/player however is able to interact with the student in ways that no ordinary classroom setting allows.

Student activity levels

In order to participate in the edu-larp, the student has to have a relatively high activity level, and with the teacher out of the way for much of the time, the student is able to take charge and construct their own knowledge.

The larp comprises several factors that call for a high level of activity. Most notably are competitiveness, strong group structure and narrative. This means that a student only has to want to win, want to be popular in his group or want to experience the story in order to feel the urge for active participation; but very often all three factors will urge the student to activity in some measure.

Postulating the student as an expert

One method in edu-larp which very often prompts a high level of student activity and responsibility is placing a group of students in the postulated role of being experts. Students can be dubbed – hospital staff, bards, navigators, CSI or any other specialized title. The mere naming of the group will force the members of the group to learn more about the job they are performing in order to do it as realistically as possible, especially if they also have to speak and perform in accordance with their status in the framework of the game.

Power

Edu-larp works because it empowers the student, allowing him to make decisions and living with them.

Socialisation and teacher control

In much classroom teaching, students are given very little access to making choices and even less to living with the consequences of them. Very often, the first years of school are spent socializing the children in order to make them accept a school environment where everything is decided and run by the teacher. Not until this situation is achieved and secured, does the teaching open up for more student-based decision making – and even then teachers will traditionally be quick to interfere if a group of students are not moving in an acceptable direction with their work.

Decisions and living with them

In an edu-larp, the student is given the freedom to act within the limits of the character. This means that the way in which the character is constructed defines the limits within which the students are empowered. The teacher may interact and restrict the student as a teacher, if the student does not conform to the template of the character, and he can interact with the student inside the game as a director or with the student's character through his teacher role, which is usually of a superior rank, status or social standing compared to that of the student. But insofar as the student is true to his or her character – sanctioning is minimal.

Spatial decisions

Students will usually be able to move around freely within the game area. This means that they make their own spatial decisions. Do we want to work in a secluded area or right in the core of the action? Do we want to decorate our working area, so it feels more *in game*? The spatial decisions often show the dedication of the students in a very physical manner. Some students will choose a far away location because they don't want to participate too actively in the more school-like activities. Instead of changing into a control mode, however, the teacher will have to use the internal evaluation of success in the larp, to show the students that their effort is not adequate and so allow them to face the consequences of their actions.

In a game, the students have to write elaborate petitions to the court of Louis XIV in order to receive royal favours, such as being allowed to trade with the Americas, or gaining monopoly of some trade. A group which spent its' preparation time interacting with the other groups and ignoring the teacher's/royal envoy's call for petition writs, later found itself producing clogs and baking bread in the town, while everybody else was trading with exotic places, building ships for the navy or making investments and bribing notaries to obtain titles of nobility.

Making a wrong decision and subsequently failing is also being empowered and facilitates learning something, compared to being forced to succeed, but not really learning anything.

Narrative decisions

During the edu-larp, the student will make a series of in-game decisions. These are typically simple functionalities of playing a character in a larp, and only a few of them have a learning purpose designed by the teachers. But even the normal larp decisions are empowering to the student because they place him in an environment, where the things he chooses to do matter.

Being allowed power over his own decisions within the story makes the student feel that he is taken seriously by the educational system. If the content of the activities he is taking part in feels relevant, he will also take them seriously as well as his own actions within the system.

Even within the full larp setting, the teacher is still able to influence the student and his choices, but unlike in a normal teaching environment, the teacher will have to accept, if the student refuses to comply and chooses to face the in game consequences of his actions instead.

Decisions on contents – more than you can do

A simple larp is a boring larp. Larps are complicated structures with an ultimately infinite number of interactions between the participants. No one sees all, hears all or understands all that any one larp contains. Edu-larps are also like that. The students interact with and consequently create an unlimited number of interactions with each other – all relevant to the edu-larp at some level.

Usually, the number of relevant school tasks built into the larp will also be too great to be mastered by any one student. Thus the student has to perform some school tasks because of their central position in the larp, choose others in order to excel or gain advantages, but also choose to ignore other tasks or delegate them to co-players.

This means that the student manoeuvres in a universe that is open for investigation, rather than a closed box which could feel confining the moment all aspects of it have been investigated. For the very competent student, of course, it will be possible, but challenging to get to every level and aspect of the larp. For the academically challenged student there is a possibility to acquaint oneself with the different aspects of learning connected to the

edu-larp, but concentrate on only a few which it will be possible to finish and hence feel a measure of success.

It is up to the student how he or she wishes to try to perform. The very competent student may choose to underachieve in some situations and will often use these situations to explore other aspects that he may not be so competent in – social skills for instance. The academically challenged student will sometimes attack problems far beyond his normal reach and realize that he was able to do just a bit more than he would have heretofore expected.

General observations

Using larp as an educational tool has been shown to work well in many instances. To the outside observer this may seem counter intuitive, since the scene is very chaotic and seemingly unstructured[6] and students often claim to have had great fun but have learnt nothing.[7] I have argued that four strengths of edu-larping, distraction from everyday life, motivational strength, heightened activity level of the students and student empowerment help make edu-larp work as an educational method. And having witnessed the appalling lack of student involvement in much traditional teaching[8], I put forward the assumption that there must be an improvement. It has been indicated in one study[9], that much less is lost in chaos, confusion and the right of the student to make bad choices than what is lost through inflexibility and student boredom in traditional teaching, but further studies would strengthen the claim.

Malik Hyltoft has been co-principal of *Østerskov Efterskole* and is a founding member of the *Education Larper's International Network* (ELIN). Apart from that he has been role-playing since the start of the 80s and is one of the *founding fathers* of the Danish larp scene.

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