Children’s agency in digital storytelling: The role of material environments

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This paper examines children’s agency in digital storytelling (DST) in kindergarten. The DST process entails interaction between children, adults, and various non-human participants. The latter consist of digital devices and applications used as storytelling tools, non-digital artifacts utilised as props and support materials, and spaces in which the activity takes place. All participants, both human and non-human, jointly contribute to children’s agency (cf. Paju, 2013).

Children’s understanding of different affordances offered by digital media has been previously studied e.g. in the context of digital animation (Marsh, 2006). Moreover, it has been found that certain affordances in tablet devices (touch screen, portability, and the use of pictorial modes within applications) may support children’s agency (Petersen, 2015). Overall, agency and children’s possibilities for action in the kindergarten environment are shaped by the objects around them and the way in which the spaces are organised (Paju, 2013). The increasing presence of digital tools – and the ways in which their affordances are utilised – adds an interesting dimension.

In this presentation, we will examine what kind of elements of the DST process contribute to children’s agency. We are interested in the affordances offered by the digital tools as well as non-digital materials, the use and ownership of spaces, and the interaction between the participants involved in the storytelling.

Between 2017 and 2018, two cycles of DST projects have been implemented in four Finnish kindergartens as part of a European Erasmus+ project. Our data, collected during both cycles, consists of 1) children’s digital stories, 2) kindergarten teachers’ documentation of the DST activities, and 3) teachers’ and children’s interviews. Our analysis focuses on the digital and non-digital tools and materials used in the stories, the children’s and adults’ roles in the DST processes, the spaces in which the stories were created, and the children’s experience of their agency in the process.

Based on our preliminary observations, digital tools and spaces affect especially the collaborative aspects of the DST process. Moreover, there are differences in the extent to which specific digital tools and their accessibility lend themselves to children’s proactive and independent use.

Keywords: agency, digital storytelling, kindergarten, digital technologies