

The *epics* of immersive media based learning



To be able to offer the young people immersive learning experiences, the learning space must take on epic dimensions, we say.

What does that mean?

When something takes on epic dimensions it means that the activity or event is played out on a dramatic scene, including different phases, conflicts, missions, interaction with different players and persons, and that it has epic structure: setting out from a shortage, a shortcoming or an important problem, travelling through different stages of elaboration and ending in some kind conclusion, synthesis or new equilibrium, this ending being perfect or imperfect, perhaps leading to a new drama with epic dimensions...

This is also the famous and almost eternal model of true story-telling.

True story-telling and epic learning need to include some basic characteristics, such as:

- › A shortage, a problem, a dilemma, or a conflict
- › Time and space to work in depths on this opening situation
- › Several phases and progression towards solutions
- › Interaction with different players and persons and functions
- › A drama which is of personal interest to the players involved
- › A drama that calls for *need to find out* and *desire to progress*
- › A situation that after the working-through can lead to a new situation, a new level or a new challenge

Some will recognize in these criteria the models of not only narrative, but also for instance “life” itself and even computer games!

But what has all this got to do with learning?

Everything.

Traditional classroom teaching in its different versions, including a little group work from time to time, does not include an epic dimension. The many years in school might be presented in epic form, but not the learning itself.

Traditional teaching is basically academic, meaning learning by working with theory and knowledge and texts.

Academic theory and narrative are mutual exclusive!

Academic theory is abstract, based on the logic of language and thinking, whereas narratives link closely to life, persons, drives and desires - and drama.

The Computer Clubhouse learning principles is a powerful example of epic learning.

The creative use of media all along the epic learning process offers a strong story-telling dimension: you use different media and expression forms, not only to work with knowledge and information or content, but to tell the story of the learning drama itself, including the story of yourself.

This strongly supports the dramatic and creative dimension of learning.

This means that there are always two intertwined dimensions at stake in the media based learning process: working with the mission, the topic, the problem, the content; and the drama taking place inside and around this work process: the scene itself.

The media tools address both dimensions: the content work and the story-telling. What kind of story-telling or drama or epics around the learning process are we talking about?

Let's list some of the most important epic elements in media based learning that makes this kind of learning *totally different* from traditional classroom teaching:

- › The learning is embedded in and driven by a mission that the participants are deeply personally involved in
- › The mission must include some kind of content, social and real complexity, but need to be within reach
- › To work with the mission you need to go through different phases to build up solutions, and you need to design these phases
- › The work process must include a need to interact with different players on the scene (in the community), also deeply interested in the mission
- › You cannot accomplish the mission alone! You need support from your team, mentors and often from professionals
- › You need to tell the story about your work process all along, and you need to do it with the most useful and expressive media tools, and you need to design how to tell the different parts of the story and how to make the story meaningful to other people
- › You need to produce an ending to the drama: knowledge, products, services, networks, whatever, end you need to design those endings

The criteria for the young learners' immersive learning experience is that they feel deeply engaged and even lost in a longer work process that demands their full attention, their resources and their skills; and that they, looking back, feel that this learning process was like a journey, a film or a theater play. Only when looking back, they can see the full contours of the drama, in which they were deeply immersed.

Probably they would say, when looking back: *I didn't know I was learning!!*

In the classroom they never questioned that they were "trying to learn". Now they didn't notice it at all. Why? Because this time, they were really learning...

If we assume a pragmatic standpoint for a moment, what does this mean in everyday media labs?

We need to ensure lab processes of a certain *length*. Epic learning needs a certain amount of time to be played out. So does true learning. Small projects for a few hours or days will not be sufficient.

We also need to ensure strong *missions*. If the missions are not strong, relevant and do not trigger the participants, the missions are not powerful enough.

We need to give *space*: to allow different things and actions in physical and mental space to let the drama play out. This includes available media tools.

We need to *interact* with other people than in the traditional classroom. We need to put new people, resources and players on the scene.

We need good *mentors*. Not media experts, but mentors capable of setting the scene, supporting the different stages and interaction, and silently, discretely, like an invisible hand, pushing the young teams towards solutions or elements of solutions.

The strong mentor knows how to balance frustration and success among the youth teams. Too little frustration makes them lazy, too much frustration make them give up. Too much success, and too early, makes them lazy again, too little success discourage them.

Perhaps this is the true art of being a media lab mentor - and it is not about knowledge, but experience and... art!

If we take a closer look at the things we have been talking about in this section, we notice a very strong and always underestimated link and dependence between *learning and narrative*.

Most learning theories never understood this. They never understood the link between life, people, emotions and... learning.

Therefore narratives and other art forms are more interesting as reflections of learning than science.

Not because the learning content, the mission, is about art or literature, but because deep learning must take on the *forms* of narrative and drama to be deep learning.

We should definitely invite many more learning professionals to study good learning in the light of narrative and drama.

Some people have precisely been doing that: the people who are promoting computer game design as a most interesting and powerful model for... deep learning.

In other sections of this paper we refer extensively to some of these efforts.

In fact, good computer games are organized exactly like the media lab learning processes described above: mission, frustration/success, personal involvement, levels, collaboration and interaction with friends and enemies, challenges within reach, clear goals, etc.

Therefore good computer games are a very powerful inspirational source to immersive learning processes:

1. As model for the organization of the learning itself
2. As content (learning games)
3. As work process: design of games

But how can we be surprised?

Computer games are situated precisely at the intersection point of

NARRATIVE
LEARNING
and
MEDIA