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**SOCIAL SEMIOTICS AND ART
EDUCATION IN A BLENDED
LEARNING SPACE**

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Social Semiotics and Art Education in a Blended Learning Space

Abstract

This visual essay is a documentation of research in an art-based learning project generated by researcher-teacher collaboration in primary education. The project's educational stance was informed by multimodal learning theory and the art-based approach was formed by the possibilities and challenges of *one-to-one computing*¹ in school.

The aim of the essay is to articulate understanding on how *blended learning knowledge*² is implemented when developing *multi-literacy learning*³. Furthermore the essay discusses how blended learning knowledge forms critical thinking on art pedagogy in primary education practice.

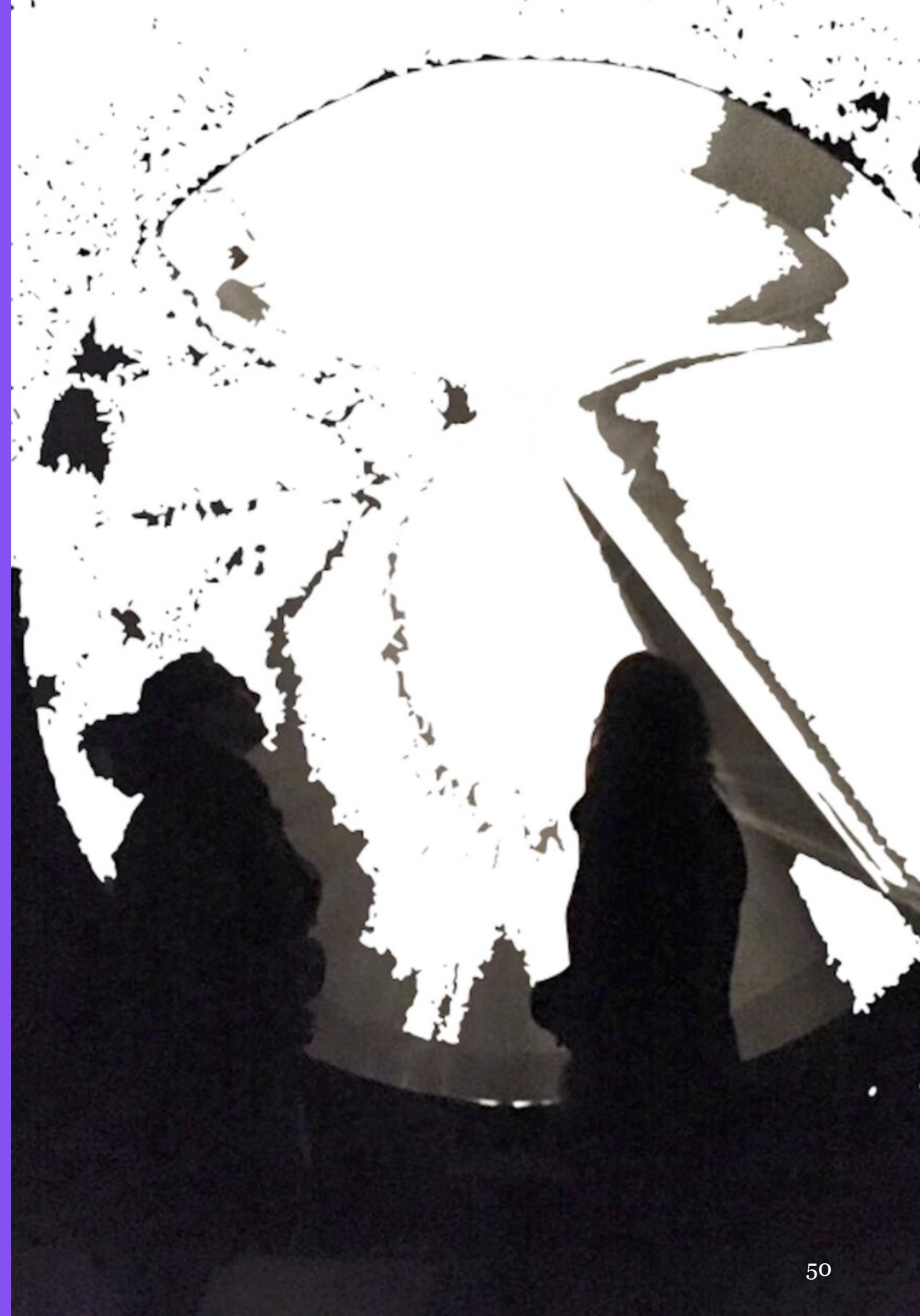
Keywords: Computing, Multimodality, Social Semiotics, Art-based learning, Blended learning, Identity Construction, Meaning making as learning.

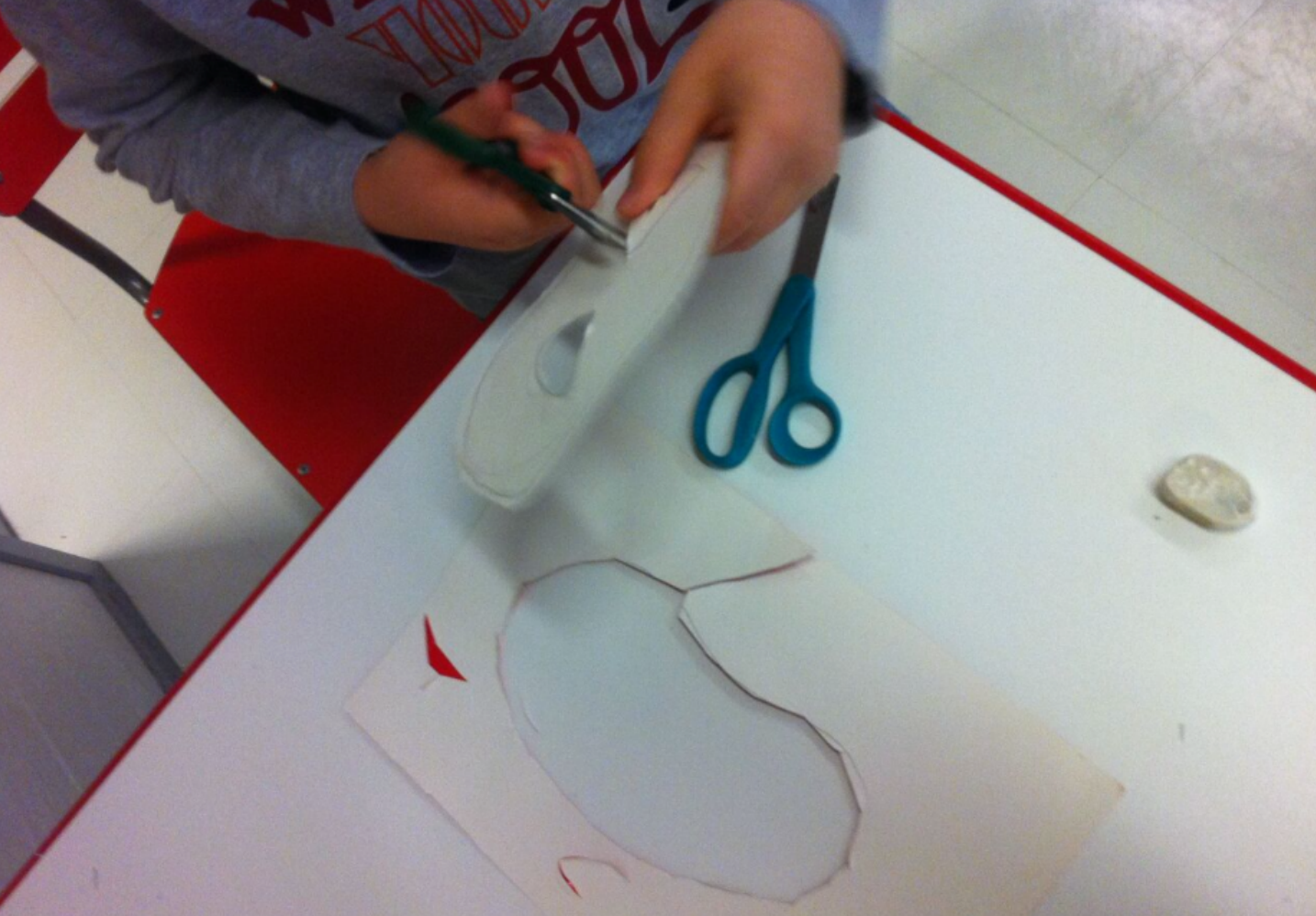
Introduction

This research takes its stance in *Deweyan pragmatism*⁴ in the sense that the art—based experiences in the project are interpreted as knowledge production on learning. The experiences are reflected to humanism as philosophy and to the agency of future teaching in multimodal blended learning environments. The empirical material is collected through a combination of visual documentation and participatory action research (PAR)⁵ in school. The alphabetic text in the visual essay is generated from a collaborative development and research process between a researcher, a teacher and pupils in a first grade class. The semiotic resources used in the retelling of the experience are in the study understood as central aspects of multimodal learning practice.

The study derives from a project carried out in the research program *Didactic dimensions of digital learning* (dididi.fi) at the *Faculty of pedagogy and welfare studies* at Åbo Akademi University in Vaasa, Finland in 2014. The study was realized in a first grade school class. The class is situated in a teacher practice school that is connected to the teacher education program at the university. The duration of the on-site project with pupils was ten lessons.

To involve oneself in a research project through PAR is about communicating knowledge on that both the process and the outcome of research can benefit school practice. When starting up the project with blended learning knowledge in one-to-one computing practice the introducing planning and collaborative dialogue between the teacher (Rimpilä) and the participating researcher (Kaihovirta) was the first phase of conceptualization in PAR research. We started communicating the researcher intervention with paying joint attention to the meaning that the *words design, art as experience, communication and multimodal learning* created for us in the education setting. Our focus on the words was not only a way to understand words; it was a way to enter the project with shared interest in what the words as stakeholders mean when transferred to teaching practice. Elaborating the words was also a way to create confidence in collaboration, since the words functioned as signals for joint understanding in the flow of realizing the project. One important reflection on the project was to create understanding for a dynamic dialogue over time instead of thinking of it as a static image of reality and experiences at one point of time. The notion of stretched joint experiences is important here because the teacher and I were interested in exploration of the learning potential in long-term art-based processes.





Opening words

The task that the pupils were offered was “to create oneself” by exploring the fictional phenomena *superhero*. It is here noteworthy that from a multimodal learning perspective it was not the creation of the superhero itself that was the aim of the task; the superhero was used as a semiotic resource for art-based learning experiences on identity construction.

The notion of blended learning knowledge and social semiotics as a space for communication brought a profound change to our approach to the classroom practice and we made effort in generating teaching with mindful affordances. The one-to-one computing space generated a possibility to create settings for learning in images, in video, in writing and in speech. Although the situation could be understood as a complex learning situation it actually was articulated as an experience of having a wide repertoire of possibilities and challenges. This can be compared to the notion that contemporary learning has to include understanding of using several mindsets at the same time, instead of thinking of using several mindsets placed in a linear order. When learning processes are about meaning making⁶, everybody have to put strong effort in communication. We experienced that the concept of multimodal literacy changed the potentials for our thinking of the effects of art-based learning. Instead of using the habit of a expressionism teaching tradition, where pupils are encouraged to work with identity construction focusing on inner agency (individual competence) we turned interest to

identity construction in art-based learning as a joint experience and shared agency (communicative competence). The words and theories elaborated by the teacher and me transformed into embodied knowledge and teaching practice.



Researcher-Teacher Reflection Dialogue

Initially in the project the pupils started with articulating their ideas on superhero identities. The rich scale of affordances (resources for communication) automatically opened a gateway to an unlimited world of fantasy. During the creation process the pupils showed interest in to articulate words, both in speech and written language in parallel with visual communication. They enjoyed the use of digital devices since they (aesthetically) thought the words (names, expressions and characteristics) turned out to look more “cartoonish” together with their pictures with this tool. The multimodal way of working supported the pupils to develop their multimodal literacy repertoire. Of course it was also rewarding for the pupils during the process that we were two adults with great knowledge of popular culture available. Each pupil received qualitative attention on their creative processes. This increased the pupils’ confidence and competence using various mediations when creating the superheroes. During the process it was not only adult-pupil relations that were rewarding. Since we during the lessons were able to communicate “on demand” and on several levels thanks to the one-to-one digital tools, the atmosphere generated vivid discussions. The topics discussed were for example how superheroes express their feelings. It was easy to negotiate different opinions, to experiment, for example correct and change ideas visualized. The pupils also played with selfies (where the pupils photographed themselves when imitating superhero identities, emotions and bodily expressions). It was

also easy for the pupils to erase pictures that they did not think were artistic enough from their individual pad. When showing the pupils photos on a big screen the pupils articulated empathy on each other's body language when various fictional emotions connected to the superhero characters were mediated. The pupils also created logotypes and symbols for their super-heroes. In this process the teacher and I conducted the creation process as a playful semiotic thinking and analysis process.

Development of new teacher knowledge and competence

To generate this kind of collaborative projects is a way of learning where everybody involved gain from the practice on their level. It is not only art as learning practice, but also art as participation practice. This practice is partly implicit and not articulated in the everyday practice, but as soon as you take in research in the project it is possible to understand a more abstract framework for the practice. This way of working also fuels the motivation for more collaborative researcher–teacher

development work. One of the most tempting new theoretical ideas in the situation was the idea of conceptualizing the understanding of the coherence between art-based learning and one-to-one computing. The pupils discovered that there are similarities between these two areas. This came up in the pupils learning experiences on mistakes. The discussion revealed thoughts on that in visual art practice very often mistakes can lead to new ways of thinking. Kind of same experience is happening when working with digital devices. It is easy to recreate work that earlier only where recognized as mistakes. The pupils communicated that with digital devices they can correct mistakes easily and take on new strength in their ideas. From the pupils perspective this differed from work with tools as paper and scissors, because making mistakes with papers and scissors they had to start all over again with a creation process.

Another form of development was the teacher's notion that digital devices do not replace teacher knowledge. The teacher realized through the various forms of collaboration and by paying attention to the multimodal resources as blended learning that replacing some of teacher work with digital devices (for example when it comes to mediating information) is not a professional failure. The project created for the teacher a motivation to deeply develop her teacher professional identity, not only on the level of problem solving teaching situations, but on the level of critical thinking of her practice.



Closing words

Finally, as a researcher my experience of the project is that knowledge is the result of inquiry, a problem-solving process by means of which we move from doubt to belief. Inquiry, however, cannot proceed effectively unless we experiment—that is, manipulate or change reality in certain ways. Since knowledge thus grows through our attempts to push the world around (and see what happens as a result), it follows that knowers as such must be agents for shared communication in future educational teaching and research practice in art education.

The Essay Images are documentation from blended learning practice. Vasa övningsskola. Åbo Akademi University, 2014. All rights reserved Hannah Kaihovirta.

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NOTES

1. One-to-one computing offers the benefits of equal access to digital devices in school. In 2014 when the research project was realized, Finland prepared educational policies for digital equality in school. This can be contrasted with the accurate situation in 2016 when “bring your own device” still is the practice in school where the majority of teachers and pupils use their personal devices in school practice.
2. Blended learning is formal education in which pupils learn at least in part through instruction and production via digital and online media. Still attending a traditional school structure, face-to-face classroom teaching is combined with digital device learning activities.
3. Multi modal literacy practice can be understood as a set of social practices. We bring to literacy events social models, concepts and social semiotics regarding to the nature of the event. The multimodal literacy understanding is the interpretations that make communication functioning and give it meaning (cf. Jewitt, 2011, Street & Al, 2011).
4. Deweyan pragmatism is here approached as a paradigm that offers theories for understanding the form and role of experience as knowledge (cf. Dewey, 1916, 1934, 1998).
5. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is practitioner-researcher joint research. Recognizable for the research method is four phases; the first phase is collaborative project or intervention planning, the second is collaborative realization of the project, the third is reflection in dialogue and the last is collaborative development of new knowledge and new competence (cf. Brindley & Crocco, 2009).
6. Compare with the understanding that a theory actually is a very pragmatic approach to practice. When one uses theories for conceptualization of practice it is a way of making practice possible to articulate in another way than expected (cf. Selander & Kress, 2010).