

Why edu-larp

I want to begin by zooming out for a short while. The world is a complex place, yet we live in a time of simplicity. Articles we share on Facebook provide simple explanations for complex phenomena. Pundits in the media provide simple analysis for complex world events. And our elected politicians promise simple solutions for complex challenges. I'm not alone in thinking this simplicity is one of the big problems of our time. I'll get back to this.

So. The question I've been asked to answer is "Why edu-larp?". And that's a simple question. But even the simplest of questions can be difficult to answer.

I often talk about edu-larps and why they can be a great tool for learning. There are tons of pedagogical theory to lean on and refer to. I can go to Jean Piaget and the cognitive perspective on learning – how mental representations of our world are formed through the processes of assimilation and accommodation. I can turn to Lev Vygotskij and the socio-cultural perspective on learning – how social roles and group expectations shape us. How receiving a new role can expand the proximal zone of development. I can visit Alfred Bandura and the social-cognitive perspective on learning. How self-efficacy – the importance of believing in yourself is linked to employing better meta-cognitive learning strategies. Or maybe even pull in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and the concept of flow. The mental state you glide into when the challenge level perfectly aligns with your skill level, and you lose yourself in the task you're working on. How similar this is to the roleplaying concept of immersion.

All these different perspectives give answers to the question why edu-larps can work. But "it just works" is a simple answer to the question "why edu-larp?". And it's not very enlightening.

The pedagogue Wolfgang Klafki worked within the field of didactics and wrote a lot about what in German is called *bildung*. In Norwegian, we say *dannelse*. There isn't really any good English word for *bildung* but it can be translated into something like self-cultivation.

Klafki separated it into material *bildung* and formal *bildung*. The material *bildung* is concrete, the things you need to know to fit into society, the formal *bildung* is about growing not just as a person, but into a person. The material *bildung* is about the contents of the knowledge one acquires, the formal *bildung* is about being able to acquire knowledge. Material *bildung* is about facts, formal *bildung* is about reflection. Klafki looked holistically on *bildung*. You can't have only one, you need both.

We live in a time where politicians are increasingly obsessed with measuring the quality of our education. The philosophy is that you can't improve anything if you can't measure it. And while the goal might be noble it ignores another truth about complex systems: You get what you measure.

The PISA-tests have turned into an important tool for politicians in most western countries. They focus on reading and writing, mathematics and the natural sciences. They measure the knowledge it is easiest to objectively compare across country borders. And they give the politicians simple answers: We are behind in mathematics. We are ahead in reading and writing. And these simple answers are followed by school policy. More hours of mathematics. More hours of languages. More hours of sciences. The aesthetic subjects are losing. Less arts. Less crafts. Less music.

The PISA-test does wonders for the material *bildung*, but the formal *bildung* gets left behind.

I want to make a slight detour and quote the American novelist David Foster Wallace here: There is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of.

We live our lives in the first person. To take the perspective of someone else can be immensely difficult. In psychology, there is a concept called the fundamental error of attribution. We tend to ignore situational circumstances when we judge other people's actions, and jump to conclusions about their personalities. At the same time, we make excuses for ourselves if we ever do the same thing. When it's ourselves the circumstances are almost impossible to ignore.

So to return to where we started:

The aesthetic subjects teach us both reflection and introspection. They teach us to see things from a different perspective. And when it comes to adapting new perspectives – larps and roleplays are immensely powerful.

Through roleplaying and larp we can literally put our students into someone else's shoes. We can give them roles that are very different from who they are, and we can put them into situations that are far away from their everyday lives.

It's great for learning empathy. To give hooks for all the facts they need to remember. To make school exciting.

But most of all I think it teaches them that sometimes the world looks very different for different people. That there are shades of grey. That things that at first seems simple in fact can be quite complex.

And while it might not be the capital A answer to the question why, it's AN answer. And I think that answer is good for the world we live in today.