

Maarit Jaakkola

Let the Camera Be Your Pen

The camera-pen learning approach fosters visual thinking in the classroom

The pedagogical approaches to video and film are typically based on elements of storytelling, with ideas related to the development of the narrative and dramaturgy. Finnish film and video pedagogues have now elaborated a pedagogical framework that distances itself from the traditional approaches of fiction film. Their work has resulted in a technique they call “camera-pen”, a way to think about and represent the moving image that is now applied in classrooms at Finnish schools.

No fiction films! No theatre plays transformed to the screen! Forget the character development!

The starting point for the pedagogical approach that goes with the name “camera-pen pedagogy” appears rather radical in today’s classrooms where the result of video shooting projects are very often fiction-film plays, news programmes, talk-shows and other genres adopted from the television and film industry.

– The idea of the pedagogical framework of the camera-pen is to do carefully planned exercises in which the learner is challenged to think, act and interact with a specific focus, using the camera solely as a tool. We think that the inherent characteristics of the camera naturally support the learner to sort out his or her ideas, says **Ismo Kiesiläinen**, a youth worker with over 10 years’ experience in media work with teens and pre-teens.

– The goal, and the starting point, of the camera-pen framework is, in other words, not to generate artistic or aesthetic pieces or



Pupils at Metsola primary school in Helsinki illustrate the English grammar. Which preposition is this?

“works” in the traditional sense, or to establish a project with distinct work roles.

Kiesiläinen believes that by stripping off the artistic aura from the video and by denying its artwork status, the threshold to work with the camera becomes lower.

– The goal is to produce ideas, thoughts and interactions, or to solve problems visually by taking notes, collecting evidence and making observations. Most products of such processes are clips of only a couple of tens of seconds. The clips are often not even saved to watch later, says Kiesiläinen.

Maarit Jaakkola, Editor for Nordicom Information.



Top left: Seventh-graders shoot calculating the area, talking prohibite. Right: The quickest way to show a video to the whole class is to place the mobile phone under the lens of the document camera. Bottom left: Is this a pleasant or an unpleasant place?

Long tradition of expression

Ismo Kiesiläinen has developed the theory and practice of camera-pen in the Finnish context together with other pioneering video pedagogues around the country: **Tommi Nevala**, an active film educator in Northern Finland, **Jukka Haveri**, who has collaborated with primary-school teachers in the Tampere region and **Pasi Ylirisku**, who has been working as a work-related supervisor in different organisations in the metropolitan area.

The term camera-pen is borrowed from the French avant-garde film director and critic **Alexandre Astruc** (1923–2016), who juxtaposed filmmakers with authors and their pens in his manifesto on *caméra-stylo* in 1948.¹

The metaphor of the camera-pen for cinema expressing ideas is definitely nothing new.

1. Astruc, Alexandre (1948). Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: la caméra-stylo. *Écran français*, 30 March 1948.

It is to be found in the thinking of almost all giants of the cinematic history, from **Jean-Luc Godard** to **Sergei Eisenstein**, or from **Robert Bresson** to **Peter Greenaway**. Neither is the tool new, invented 120 years ago in France by the **Lumières** brothers.

In the context of school pedagogy, the director is, however, typically seen as the major creative force. In addition, in today's audio-visual culture, saturated by moving images, using video is still up to the teacher.

– Video work has long been felt as too complicated and time-consuming at school. Camera-pen is the idea made simple: one lecture, one shoot and no editing. This is possible today as practically everyone has a video camera of their own in their mobile phone.

This year, Kiesiläinen wrote a practical guidebook for teachers discussing the foundations of the camera-pen in a concrete manner. The open online document, published

in Finnish, contains plenty of lesson plans, examples of exercises and gathers teachers' pedagogical experiences, such as "best practices" and guidelines proven to work in practice.

– In many cases, young people say that they have no idea where to start and it is difficult to encourage them to create something that draws on their own lives. When shooting a video is defined as discovering something that is already there and film is transformed from an object of learning into a tool for collaborative learning, young people are more likely to get engaged, believes Kiesiläinen.

Practice-based theory

"Oh, that's why you're so good at this!"

The outburst came from a workshop participant, a teacher who had asked Ismo Kiesiläinen at which university he was doing a PhD on the camera-pen pedagogy – and having heard that Kiesiläinen was, in fact, no academic at all.

Originally, camera-pen was the topic of Kiesiläinen's final thesis, *Video camera at schoolwork: How could the camera be as the pen?* (2006) for a degree programme in radio and television journalism at the University College Stadia in Helsinki. After several years of experience in media education, not least as a producer and supervisor in journalism classes for young people run by the Youth Department of the City of Helsinki, he was offered a leave of absence to run workshops in film education for teachers within continuing education.

It was in a lively collaboration with primary school teachers, in projects financed by the National Board of Education and the City of Helsinki, that the theory started to gain traction and grow into something bigger.

Between 2015 and 2017, Kiesiläinen toured at 52 schools and introduced about 3,000 primary and upper secondary school teachers to the technique.

– Teachers who have taken this approach to the classroom report that, against all odds, the method has helped pupils concentrate and collaborate, which supports the ideas of the national curriculum in all aspects.



TUUKKA TUOMASJUKKA

The pedagogue Ismo Kiesiläinen is inspired by his early years as a pupil in Célestin Freinet's pedagogy.

The technique has also been applied to organisations beyond the world of formal education, as it is suitable for work communities.

YouTube and innovations

Today, according to Ismo Kiesiläinen, the most innovative edge of visual experimentation is most likely to be found on YouTube and in vlogs.

– Fiction film is bound to the conventions of expression and conditions of production and marketing. In vlogging culture, video is used more freely as a tool for expression, mixing different genres in order to produce new genres. For example, **Natalie Tran** publishes videos with a creative mix of monologues, dialogue, observations, drama, sketches and other cinematic means of expression. Vlogging is, in fact, the camera-pen in practice!

Now, even if anyone can film a train arriving at a station with much better quality than the Lumières brothers had at their disposal, video culture has never become part of mainstream youth culture like amateur theatre, dance, music, graffiti and sports have; rather,

it has remained an activity carried out by limited groups of devoted amateurs.

– Now, vlogging has the possibility to finally make this breakthrough, assesses Kiesiläinen.

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Read more online (in Finnish):

Kiesiläinen, Ismo (2017). *Kamerakynän pedagogiik-*

ka: opettajan käsikirja. [The pedagogy of the camera-pen: A teacher's guide.] ISBN 978-952-93-9099-1.



Available at [http://www.mystinen-portaali.com/mediakasvatus/kamerakynan_pedagogiikka_-_opettajan_kasikirja_\(2017\)_web.pdf](http://www.mystinen-portaali.com/mediakasvatus/kamerakynan_pedagogiikka_-_opettajan_kasikirja_(2017)_web.pdf).

Short link: <https://urly.fi/QsG>.

Principles of the Camera-Pen Approach



The camera in the classroom is available for:

- ... exploring and structuring the world.
- ... organising language (ideas, concepts, phenomena).
- ... producing and sharing knowledge about the world.
- ... expressing and interacting.
- ... documenting and reflecting upon learning.



Learning through camera work

Shooting videos supports learning in various ways – camera work:

- ... concretises, visualizes and puts thoughts into action.
- ... gives observations structure and meaning.
- ... directs attention.

- ... supports meta-cognitive skills.
- ... develops and encourages interaction with others.
- ... strengthens ownership.
- ... produces emotions that contribute to learning.



A recipe for a good camera-pen exercise

1. The assignment is easy to understand but the problem is not too easy to solve.
2. The assignment evokes thoughts.
3. Everyone can succeed.
4. The exercise has a clear goal and target.
5. The exercise serves a purpose.
6. The timeframe is limited.