

Edited by Katri Laiho

Layout by Mari Wuolio

Guide to the Magic Lamp method

AN INSPIRED APPROACH TO PRACTICAL DRAMATURGY IN FILMMAKING WORKSHOPS



Greetings for the reader

I started to develop the Magic Lamp method in the 1990's when I was working with children in school clubs. The children taught me how rewarding it is to get your work done and to see the result of the work right away. I realized that the children started seeing the filming process in a very theoretical way after a short period of filming, even though they did not go through any theoretical education. I realized that I myself was developing while I was working with children. I also realized that the technical mistakes made while going through the filming process did not take away one's pleasure of working, and that a film in a week keeps ones mind fresh!

I like to change my working methods constantly. I try new things, renew methods and create fun out of the work itself. The camera can be a mirror and it is ok to look straight into it. A story can be invented in five minutes or even three or in a minute. Tight schedules help us to make decisions. Study groups can have a competition: "How many locations or events can you come up with in two minutes?"

Films can be made with people of all ages and sizes. One of the most astonishing experiences I have had was to see disabled children showing enormous feeling of joy and satisfaction as they made films of their own.

I wish for happiness at work, creativity for the mind and for memorable filming experiences for the big and little filmmakers. You learn cinematographic thinking by making films, over and over again. I wish the camera was like a pencil!

Mäntyharju, April 25, 2005

[Kaija Juurikkala](#)

Film director, art pedagogue

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1. *Films are Life!*

This guide introduces the Magic Lamp film education method on a step-by-step basis. The method is very easy to learn, even though the people using the method would not have any previous experience in filmmaking. The method is used to create a short film in four hours. The emphasis of the method is on learning process that contains elements of enjoyment and realization, in contrast to the achieved technical level of the end product (i.e. the film). The films made according to the Magic Lamp method have been called croquis-films, because they usually end up like sketch drawings. Croquis-drawer examines his model through sketch drawings; croquis-film-maker examines the life through sketch films.

The Magic Lamp method was developed in The Nuku Film School in Oulu, Finland. The main architects of the method are director/film educator Kaija Juurikkala and film producer Outi Rousu. Aladdin's Lamp network of art centres for children was used to aid in the development process throughout the years 2003 to 2005.

According to Kaija Juurikkala, the most prominent problem when children are making films is the concept of dramaturgy. The story line is often too long and not clear enough. Another common problem has been that the film projects are rarely taken to the end. The emphasis of a children's film project often seems to lie on learning the technical details of the industry rather than concentrating on what the makers of the film are trying to say to the audience.



The first experimental filming sessions of children and the young people do not need to imitate the film production style of Hollywood. It is recommended to practice the filmmaking with a short film. The children will learn more about dramaturgy by making ten films that each last for five minutes, than if they made one longer film that lasted for fifty minutes. The duration of the film is not an issue. A single scene is often all that is needed to make a short film, one situation that evolves towards the end of the film offering a surprise to the viewer. Only a few minutes is needed for this to happen. In the advertisements for example, the story can be told in 30 seconds.

Many schools have found that the Magic Lamp method has been an inspiring and successful method for film education. Many teachers have taken the method as part of their curriculum and adapted the method to suit their needs. The method can be applied to all ages, not necessarily to children and youth. The method is recommended to be used especially when the filmmakers have no previous filming experience. By active participation the students will get a picture of the filmmaking process as a whole and they gain insight to the structures that influence in the background of media. Filmmaking fits well as content for media education.

THE METHOD IN A NUTSHELL

The Magic Lamp workshop begins with a session of improvisation exercises. The purpose of the exercises is to open the minds of the students for the task of scriptwriting. The script used in the workshop is a simple five-sentence story that is invented by the children. The actual script is not written. As the story exists only in short, spoken form, it is easier to find out whether it contains the required element of drama – a surprise for the viewer and to see whether the plot is interesting enough. After the script is decided upon, it is filmed in the same chronological order as it was told. After shooting the

film, it is ready for watching. The films made in the workshops do not go through the process of cutting. Finally, in the end of the workshop, there is a discussion about filmmaking and on the film the participants just made. Through out the process the focus is on the story and the audience.

THE EDUCATIONAL GOALS OF THE WORKSHOP

The designed goal of the workshop is to give positive experience of the process of filmmaking as a whole to the participants of the workshop. By doing, the participants of the workshop learn working as members of a group and carrying responsibility, critical analysis of media in general and finally, they gain new ways for expressing their opinion and emotions. Some of the more specific skills taught in the workshop are storytelling, responsive acting and basics of filming and directing.

THE SIZE OF THE GROUP

The script writing that takes place in the workshops can be done in a group of 4 to 30 pupils. For example, in a school environment, the script workshop can be arranged to include pupils of a single class. For the filming this group is split in to smaller groups of four to eight pupils.

TEACHERS PREPARATIONS

The workshop does not require much preparation from the teacher. A room with a chair for every participant is recommended though. The chairs should be arranged in a semicircle formation. A chalkboard or a flip-board is good to have at hand and a camera plus required amount of videotape for each group of four to eight pupils. A specific room can be reserved for the filming. Usually the filming can take place in the schoolyard, in classrooms or in the corridors of the school building.

The filming done in the Magic Lamp workshops is done by a video camera. An ordinary consumer video camera suits the purpose well. A camera stand is not needed. The teacher should make sure that all the equipment is working, charge the camera batteries and make sure that there is enough video tape for each group, approximately 10 minutes of tape per group is enough. If the groups are filming simultaneously, every group should have their own camera and a tape. The Magic Lamp films are not edited nor do they require any lighting. For the premiere screening of the films a television or a video projector with camera inputs is required.



A PROPOSAL FOR LESSON STRUCTURE (4X45 MIN.)

The planning and the writing of the script 90 min:

45 min. Warm-up by improvisation exercises.

15 min. Creating the story in small groups.

30 min. Introducing, developing and deciding on the final versions of the stories. (During this phase the roles are divided between group members, the filming locations are set and other necessary pre-operational arrangements are made.)

Filming 90 min:

15 min. The class is guided in using the camera and the proper code of conduct when working as a member of a filming group. A meeting time is set.

50 min. The filming in small groups.

25 min. The class gathers for the premiere screening of the films and feedback.

2. Improvisation and scriptwriting

The purpose of the improvisation and scriptwriting phase of the Magic Lamp method is to ease the process of creating a story that contains drama-turgy. In the first stage of the workshop the pupils are guided through improvisation exercises that help them to open their minds for the creative task of writing the script, the improvisations are designed so that when the workshop is finished the pupils will have all the elements needed to write the script of the film they are about to create. Critical opinions are left behind; every idea is accepted as good. It is good to remind oneself that the opportunities offered by the imaginary world of fiction are limitless.

OPENING THE MIND THROUGH IMPROVISATION EXERCISES

The workshop begins with the teacher asking the pupils to list locations that come in to their mind. The locations can be real or imaginary (a school, a tunnel, an ear canal, the sun etc.). All the ideas are written down – 20 to 60 is a good total number of locations to start up with. The list is then read through once, so that every pupil selects a location from the list and says it aloud. There is no need for the pupil to explain why he or she chose the selected location. The teacher writes down a new list of the locations selected by the pupils so that they are visible for all. Chalkboard or a flipboard is very useful for this purpose. After the locations are listed in this fashion, the same method is repeated to create a list of events (a yawn, a tumble, a death of someone, succeeding etc).

At this stage, there are two lists on a board that is visible for the class (the locations and the events lists). The pupils are asked to perform improvised scenes in pairs or in small groups. The list items are used as building blocks for the improvisation. The role of the teacher is to select the pupils that perform and the list items they need to use in their improvised performance. An example of a combination of a location and an event could

be an ear canal and a tumble. The purpose of the improvisation is not to prepare the scene, but to look for genuine reactions. The teacher decides where the scene ends. The improvisation exercise is good to finish when it is at its creative peak or when it seems that the flow of new ideas has started to wane. The improvisation cannot fail. All contributions are welcome and will get applauded. A good way to change the course of action of an ongoing exercise is to ask for a new pupil to take part in it. For example after the tumble there might be a need for a doctor or a cotton bud in the ear canal. In the films everything is possible!

Every student would need to participate at least in one improvisation, but it is preferred that everyone could take part in more than one. The meaning of the improvisation is to be funny, creative and curious. Not hard, awkward nor superficial.

If the acting doesn't seem to start running well, other improvisation exercises, for example the "What happened then?" -storytelling exercise, can be tried as well. The starting material for these exercises would be the lists that contain the locations and events mentioned above. These lists are used as a starting point for the story line that is developed. Each pupil will continue the story from where a previous one finished, adding a word or a sentence to the story as a whole. The teacher can help the pupil in turn by asking: "...and what happened then?"



DEVELOPING A STORY

After the improvisation exercise the minds of the pupils are on more creative level. The pupils are then divided into small groups of approximately 4-8 persons each. The small groups are given fifteen minutes to create a story on their own. These groups are same as the ones that carry out the filming later on. At this moment it is important to concentrate on developing a story together and not to concentrate on filmmaking. The story must be such that it can be

told with five sentences and there must be a twist in the plot, a turning point in the end of the story which surprises the viewers. The story can originate from the improvisation exercises or equally it can be any kind of a story that was invented on the spot. If the pupils have difficulties in starting the story, a good piece of advice is to tell them that it would help them if they would first decide on an original location and a setup. After the location and the setup are decided upon, the pupils can think of possible events that would change the situation that was in the beginning of the story. It is not advised to write the story on paper. Verbal story form helps the pupils in both remembering and visualizing the essential aspects of the story. Usually it's good to let the pupils come up with the story on their own. This way they can learn how to negotiate and how to agree upon common goals of the group.

For the stories, the flesh around the bones comes from minute details that are simple, realistic yet surprising. Simplicity is good. One should not try to avoid being too simplistic.

FINALIZING THE STORY

In this phase of the workshop, the small groups introduce their stories to the teacher and other pupils. If there is only one small group, the story is introduced to the teacher. Everyone gives comments; whether the story was interesting and concise. If the story feels long, it needs to be made simpler. If the story doesn't surprise the listeners, a more surprising turnaround event needs to be created. Usually good choice for an ending is the worst-case scenario or the most courageous, touching, shocking, surprising or the most funniest of possible events. This makes the event to stand out from the story. It is good for the pupils to recite their story in front of an audience. This helps them to understand whether the story works or not. Sometimes it is good to ask for a story to be told by each of the members of a group, each at a time. A story agreed upon might surprisingly develop into new directions when told by more than one person. In this phase it is important to find the



common guideline, a consensus within the group that will guide the group throughout the whole filmmaking process. The stories will work as scripts for the films that each separate small group will make. If a power struggle revolving around the story is developed between the pupils, it is good to look for new aspects to the story; there are plenty of ideas in the world to derive a story from.

In this phase the teacher can guide the pupils with questions in order for them to come up with a more concise story. The role of the teacher is to help the pupils realize the functionality of the story and to remind them of the existing viewer's point. It is good to remember that the viewer should not be underestimated by explaining too much, and that the viewer wishes to understand the film, not to get confused by it.

If, to the teacher's opinion, the subject of the story is morally questionable, it is his or her responsibility to ask from the pupils about the reasons for making it. Why do they think that the story in question is important and what do the pupils want to tell of life with the story. Could the same theme be handled in some other fashion? Good examples of suggestive questions include: "Why it is important that the film shows violence or blood?" "Could the message of the film be told in other ways?" or "Can you think of another way of saying this than by swearing?" In many cases though, a pupil has realized how silly he or she seem when they see themselves swearing on the widescreen. The role of the teacher is not to judge the stories but to encourage the pupils in finding the plot line, helping the pupils in getting their message through and to help them in finding a good ending for their story.

3. Arrangements

In the arrangement phase the teacher, together with the small groups, plans how to shoot a film on the basis of the previously created story. The location, actors, director, cameraperson and the set designer are decided upon. These individual responsibilities may be divided upon several pupils as well! The arrangements made in the Magic Lamp workshop are decided upon very swiftly, in just a few minutes. If a group is willing to do more thorough planning and the teacher feels there is enough time, it is always good to spend a little extra time on the arrangements.

SCHEDULE

It's possible to start shooting as soon as the script is decided upon. In that case the arrangements are left undone, and the filming process is based more on improvisation. It is good to reserve some time for set and costume design or lighting and sound design.

It is good to consider the effect of daylight changes when shooting outside, other limitations in relation to the filming location (opening hours, noise made by students during a recess in a school etc.) and the pupils' own schedules and possible classes. Some arrangements can be done as homework as well.

THE FILMING LOCATION AND THE PERMISSION TO FILM

The most important thing about a filming location is that the space where the filming is taking place is easily accessible. For example the classroom can be altered to suit many needs. Some example locations that can be set in a classroom include a café in Paris (an impression achieved by reflecting a picture of the Eiffel tower on the background) or a church (created by drawing a cross on the chalkboard). If the location of the film is a more abstract place,

such as the ear canal, the filming location must be selected from somewhere more descriptive, or another solution might be to think of ways how to create an impression of the location with the use of props. Sometimes the decision on the filming location can be very hard to make, in such a case it is advised reconsider setting the story to another location. Could the story located in the ear canal take place in the school corridor? Sometimes a surprising change of location can bring an unexpected new life to a scene.

Once the filming location is selected, it is good to ask for permission from the owner of the place. It is ok to film on public places, such as schools and on the street, but it is always polite to let others know what business you are on. People to consider are, for example, the owner of the filming location, neighbors or people who work near or on the filming location. If there are some people that will be seen on the film clearly, they need to be asked for permission to be shown on a film. If the filming involves dangerous substances or if the process is thought of creating a disturbance, the authorities should be informed as well.

THE SET, WARDROBE AND MAKEUP

In the first Magic Lamp films it is recommended that the set decoration, props and costume design is carried out in a very light manner. The small groups should think of what is really necessary for creating an impression they wish to make. How does the school canteen worker's outfit differ from the outfit of that of a waiter's? Is there a need for a special mask? Are bruises or a punk rocker look required? Even during the filming one can create more props. Everything that happens to be on the filming location can be used. Someone once found false teeth on the grass; a quick decision was made to use them in the film!



THE FILM CREW

Filmmaking is teamwork. If the work has not been properly divided among the participants, chaos will definitely take over the set. Each pupil should have their own field of responsibility, but pupils can also change responsibilities between them. The most important decision to make is to appoint one of the pupils as the director, and as many of the pupils as needed as actors. The director makes decisions for the train to keep running, not because he or she is more important person than the other members of the group. The cameraperson can act as the director. In this case he or she is the one calling out the director's commands. It is good to change the pupil who uses the camera, so that more than one of the pupils has a chance to try filming.

If there are not enough character roles for all who are willing to act, the group can invent small side-plots that introduce new characters and support the main story line. Reactions of the characters are more interesting to the audience than the actual events. A good way of keeping a film interesting is to depict the different reactions of all involved characters. A bypassing side character that is amused or alarmed by an event is a good add-on to a scene. If one of the group members doesn't want to act or film, he or she can be assigned as the stage or costume designer or the responsibility of writing the title text and the end titles for the film.



4. Silence – camera – action!

In the Magic Lamp workshops, the shooting of a film is always started from the shooting of the title text. This can be done, for example, by writing the title of the film on a sheet of paper and the paper is filmed for approximately five seconds.

A scene changes when there is a change of time or place in the film. In the films made with the Magic Lamp method, it is common to have approximately one to five scenes. The films are shot in chronological order one shot at a time.

Improvisation helps the actor to concentrate on the interaction with others. This is achieved by omitting difficult memorizing of text from the workflow. The cameraperson is also improvising; the aim of the cameraperson is to capture essential interaction between the actors. In the end it is good to remember that there are numerous ways of making a good film, one should not stick to a single process guideline.

REHEARSING AND SHOOTING

The teacher gives a brief introduction for the pupils on how to use the camera. It is good to go through at least how the camera is switched on and off, how to insert a tape to the camera, where to start and stop the recording, how to rewind the tape and where the zoom controls of the camera are. The use of the camera stand is not advised, because it slows the filming process and makes working on the set more complicated. The camera stand can easily have an effect on the actors so that they start acting for the camera, not for each other. It is also easier for the cameraperson to react on improvised situations when the camera is hand held when compared to a camera on a stand.

The actors, cameraperson and the director do a rehearsal take before the actual filming. It is good to define the beginning and the end of the scene at this stage. It is also recommended to shoot as much as possible on one take.

The audience should be clear on the location from the start of the film if the location plays an important role in understanding the story. The location can be shown naturally by a panorama view or by a small unmistakable detail or even with sound. For example the sentence “Tickets please!” reveals that the location is a train even though the filming has been done in a classroom.

The plot line of the script must be followed throughout the filming. The original structure of the story should not be altered during filming; new ideas can be added to the plot line though. As soon as the rehearsal seems to be working, the group should proceed to shooting the film. Too much rehearsal can destroy the atmosphere of the group and there is a real danger of making the actors act in a mechanical manner.

If a scene fails, the tape is wound back to the beginning of the scene and a new take is shot on top of the failed one. Surprises on the set should be added to the story line. If ideas that spring up during the filming process are accepted without too much consideration on whether they fit in or not, the atmosphere on the set will remain good. Mistakes are allowed. Elimination of mistakes is not a requirement for a good film!

The end titles are shot in the last phase of the filming process. They are done in similar fashion as the film’s main title text. All of the names of the film crew and the year the film was made should be shown in the end titles.



The Magic Lamp method does not include a postproduction phase. The films are cut on the set with the video recorder. This applies to music and sound effects as well. The rhythm of the filming session is set by the director using the director's instructions. Rehearsing the use of director's instructions is recommended. Director's instructions are easy to get familiar with, children adapt to the director's instructions quickly.

EXAMPLE OF THE DIRECTOR'S INSTRUCTIONS

When rehearsing the director instructs the crew by saying: **"Silence - rehearsal"** and when there is silence, he or she goes on with the instruction: **"Action"**. After the rehearsal of a scene is finished, the director always instructs the crew by saying **"Thank you!"** This sign tells the crew that the rehearsal is finished.

When the rehearsal has been done and the crew is ready to shoot the film, the director's instructions are: **"Silence - camera"**, and when there is silence, he or she goes on by saying: **"Action"**. The last instruction tells the cameraperson to start recording with the camera and the actors to start playing their part. When the actors have played the scene, the director instructs the crew again by saying **"Thank you!"** It might be a good idea to agree that the cameraperson is the one responsible for saying thank you after her or she has stopped the camera; this way the instruction doesn't get recorded by the camera's microphone. The actors keep acting as long as they hear the instruction to stop!

TIPS FOR FILMING

The cameraperson should stay close to the actors, this way the sound and the emotions expressed by the actors are captured well by the camera. The use of zoom is not recommended. The cameraperson can move back and forth instead. When building a picture it is good to remember the effect of depth of the picture. For example, the scene looks better if the distance of

the actors from the camera varies a little instead of actors standing side by side in front of the camera.

TIPS FOR DIRECTING THE ACTOR

The film tells a story about life - this is a rule not an exception. The challenge of making the film look lively can be achieved by asking the actors to do things for each other instead of just doing something. If the actor's movement looks slow in the camera, he or she is not asked to move faster because it looks better, but instead he or she is asked to hurry in order to meet with another actor.

Verbs are good for directing an actor. If the director is not satisfied with the actors work, he or she should rethink his or her instructions. The director should change the verb used as instruction to see whether the actor can understand the director's idea better.

A good way to prepare oneself for directing actors is to go through the story in one's mind and think of possible verbs that might be useful in instructing the actors in advance.

The director should not plan how the actor will move. Acting can be done in various different ways and no actor wishes to be a robot that is controlled by the director. Actors are humans who feel and have a desire for things.

Working as a member of a group requires listening. The director should have his or her ears and eyes open for the natural strengths of the actors. It is also important to thank the actors and other crewmembers for the effort they put in the process.



5. The World premiere and feedback analysis

One of the best aspects of the Magic Lamp method is the fact that the film is ready for viewing as soon as the shooting of the film is done. It is an exciting experience to see oneself and one's friends on the TV-screen for the first time. The film should be viewed at least twice. It is good to discuss about the filming process and about the final product with the pupils after the screening.

What was the best and worst part of the process?

What was the most difficult task?

Was the plot line portrayed clearly enough in the film?

What should be changed in the film?

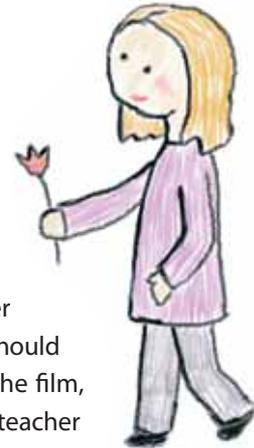
What did the pupils feel they learned about filming process?

What would the pupils like to learn about the filming process?

What kind of a film would the pupils want to do next?

What was the message or the lesson of the film?

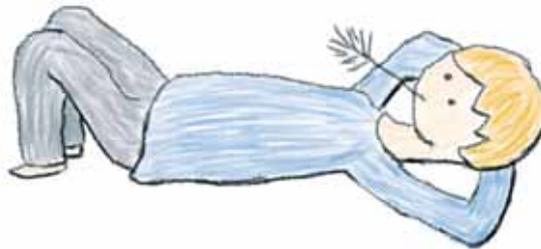
The films can be screened as part of school celebrations and the parents of the pupils are more than eager to see the films made by their children. If the films are shown outside school for example on a film festival, all parties, or the parents of under aged parties, that took part in the process of making the film should be asked for a written letter of consent. If there is music on the film, even if the music is played on the background of the film, the teacher should take care of the copyright related payments as required.



6. Magic Lamp method applications

Once the first experiments on film making have been made, it is good to apply the film project in traditional teaching subjects as well. For example props might be built during art classes and wardrobe can be designed during the crafts classes. Music classes can be used for sound design and IT-class can be used for designing the graphic outlook of the film. Camera can also be used for presentations. For example the history class subjects can easily be adapted as films. Mathematical problems can also be solved through the means of film. A learning journal can be done through a film diary, or one can do a documentary film of one's daily activities. The sky is not the limit!

The method has been used for creating an animated film as well. The script of the animation is written through an improvisation workshop. This leaves plenty of time for rehearsing the difficult techniques involved in the making of an animated film, while including script writing in the process.



A list of the phases of the Magic Lamp method

1. OPENING THE MIND

- Brainstorming workshop during which critic is not given
- Locations and events are invented, written down and memorized

2. IMPROVISING ON THE MATERIAL

- Quick improvisations executed in pairs or in small groups. These improvisations base on the selected locations and events written down previously

3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE STORY

- The small groups go through the story they selected and create a five-sentence plot line

4. FINAL FORM OF THE STORY

- Groups tell their story to the other pupils. If there is need for further development of the story, it is changed

5. PRACTICAL PREPARATIONS

- The set location, props and wardrobe are decided upon
- The assignment of roles
- Getting familiar with the camera

6. FILMING

- The scenes are shot in chronological order, one scene at a time
- Improvisation is used as a means to create more detail on the story

7. WATCHING THE FILMS

- All of the films are watched together
- Discussion regarding the films and the process

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This guide is a sequential introduction to the Magic Lamp film education method. The method can be used in schools in other education than film education as well. The method is easy to get familiar with even for people with no previous experience in filmmaking.

The guide is part of Katri Laiho's "Elämäni paras päivä koulussa" -post graduate thesis. The contribution of Kaija Juurikkala and the staff of The Nuku Film School (The Youth and Culture Centre of Oulu, Finland), especially that of Antti Haaranen, was essential in producing the guide as it is.

English translation of this guide was executed as a part of ARX Arts Centre's Digital Arts Education – a way towards creative eLearning –project, which was funded by the European Commission.

"The Magic Lamp method is suitable for the needs of special education. The method is very flexible and easily adjustable to the different skill level of the pupils. 'Try out and be surprised' has been our slogan. Every pupil that has taken part in the activities has surprised himself or herself, improvisation works well with pupils with learning difficulties. Going through the scenes by acting teaches complex dramaturgical aspects of filmmaking. The enthusiasm of the pupils has been huge. We have made ten short films by using the Magic Lamp method, plus over twenty animations. The production is up and running as we speak!"

Marita Määttä

Pedagogue, Leinonpuisto School, Oulu, Finland.



eLearning

