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Title: Playful Hands-on Crafting for Personal Growth and Communal Well-being

Year: 2017

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Kiviniemi, U. (2017). Playful Hands-on Crafting for Personal Growth and Communal Well-being. In R. Mateus-Berr, & L. Reitstätter (Eds.), *Art and Design Education in Times of Change : Conversations Across Cultures* (pp. 121-126). De Gruyter. Edition Angewandte. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110528329-020>

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PLAYFUL HANDS-ON CRAFTING FOR PERSONAL GROWTH AND COMMUNAL WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

Crafts education in Finland has recently been exposed to considerable challenges, on both the theoretical and practical levels. The emphasis is shifting to personal expression and communal arts and crafts practices are being adapted to solidify social and cultural participation. Learning research shows us how inner motivation and multilevel objectives in comfortable learning environments induce stable and generalizable learning results. In addition, collaborative ways of working make data processing more open and turn learning into a shared effort. On the other hand, playful learning and dramatic methods offer productive ways of examining life situations in an active and empathetic way. When using concrete materials in functional activities, deep learning is stimulated by offering experiential forums for learning. As well, an intentionally good-humored atmosphere facilitates success. Community art projects offer a platform for participants to generate well-being through art and craft activities combining personal expression with dialogue between actors. A person's activity cycles proceed spontaneously without questions of right and wrong, and in a dialogic and inclusive manner. The storyline of this presentation is about building up communal workshops designed under the pedagogical guidelines to be described and using hands-on activities involving materials. Specific effort was put on playful ideas and easy-going pursuits. Certain piloted hands-on workshops will be exhibited as case studies.

KEYWORDS

craft education, community art, playful learning, collaborative learning

Introduction

This article concentrates on participant-based, hands-on activities in communal crafting workshops. The storyline concerns building up communal workshops designed according to certain pedagogical guidelines of participant-based activities using concrete materials. These workshops were built up with the focus on both personal and communal orientation in conjunction with playful learning. The sophisticated equipment and specific materials were not particular prerequisites, and the most important aim was not to design and make completely finished, high-quality objects; rather, it was the idea itself. The piloted hands-on workshops were carried out within a teacher education program preparing the teachers for art education projects in schools. Too, these students were offered a possibility to personally experiment with learning crafting exercises that were not based on the traditional aims and standards of craft education, which used to underline the development of manual crafting skills so as to produce useful objects by hand, including the practice of diligent working skills and meticulous handwork.

Craft education

Craft education in Finland has recently undergone considerable challenges both theoretical and practical. The new national curriculum for elementary schools was introduced in the autumn of 2016 with the new subject called “crafts.” The new curriculum instructs schools to unite the former textile crafts and technical crafts and to begin a gender-free craft education. For teacher education this conceptual shift means new approaches in craft education.

Traditional reproductive and model-based making has stepped aside and the emphasis has now shifted to the entire making process. In making, the student is also seen as a designer, visualizing the look of the artifact, planning how to construct the object, and finally making it through recurring processes. The words materiality, embodiment and expression are reformatory concepts in school crafts. Craft education also highlights the importance of creativity and practical skills but with a new twist: pupil-oriented practices that allow students to take responsibility and to organize their work themselves. On the other hand, communal arts and crafts practices are seen as being practical for solidifying social and cultural participation.

Brain research (Huotilainen 2016) show us how touching and forming different materials cause good stimulation for the somatosensory areas of the brain. Stimulative pre- and sub-processing in brains even take place unconsciously. This has a large impact on learning, and at its best enables an embodied, active but peaceful flow state so that we can perform our best through crafting.

Playful learning

Playful learning and drama offer productive ways to examine real-life situations in an active and empathetic way. When using concrete materials and functional activities, deep learning is stimulated by offering experiential forums for learning. Furthermore, an intentionally good-humored atmosphere facilitates successful experiences. Playful learning also tends to focus on personal and communal growth.

Huizinga (1947) pointed out that children’s play is a free activity and thus independent of any obligation or concept of mission. Free play is fun, flexible and active, and these characteristics stand out when contrasted against guided play. Indirect learning is easily built in stories that are open to various interpretations and can thus create new meanings. (Alanen et al. 2009)

Studies show us that therapeutic humor parses the chaos of mind, because laughter promotes positive emotions, coping with stress and changing the way situations are interpreted. In educational workshops irony is deliberately avoided since it violates the person and the atmosphere. Mentors should understand how humor already exists in the group and use it. However, serious attitudes must be accepted and supported in a constructive way. (Martin 2007, 269-270, 369-370).

Community Art

History shows that art has been justified in its own right and was originally allowed for only the few. However, in the contemporary world, we have seen how art can serve personal wellbeing and even economic growth. By developing creativity, affirmative art education concentrates on the positive significance of art for the individual, the community and society. Strengthening the individual and collective are also important (Shiner 2001).

According to Bredin and Santoro-Brienza (2000), art has traditionally been a part of organized communities, adding meaning to their lives. Individuals made art because they wanted to leave something behind them. Art was the tie that bound community members together, and in particular, in connection with community rituals (also Huizinga 1947, 14).

Catterall (2011) tells us how long-term art education affects children’s perceptions of their originality and the life choices they make. His massive longitudinal study shows that art enthusiasts are employed more, vote more and are more active. Intense art involvement was also found to correlate strongly with higher academic achievement. Art education invites all and everyone to participate in the creative process. Art reception and making art enjoyably cultivate and develop individuals in ways that, apparently, purely cognitive theory does not.

In community art artistic acts are made by members of a community. Sometimes professional artists collaborate with people who may not otherwise normally engage in the arts. These collaborative projects are also suitable for school communities where they can enhance interaction and dialogue. According to Kaitavuori (2015), community-based art can be defined by the active participation of community members. In the case studies presented here, the participants are seen as active and autonomous beings who work together as co-creators in workshops where their activities are inclusive, social and communal.

Workshops

Three workshops designed according to the above mentioned guidelines will be described in this chapter, along with some photos. Each workshop’s structure stressed generic skills and personal learning using artistic methods. As Eisner (2002, 93-147) describes the pedagogical situation in art education, objectives are personal and the actual art-making is based on communal activities such as discussing, helping, learning by seeing, and appreciating the work of others. Materials are dealt with in a specific environment, the situation is mobile and the work is based on social activity. Also, personal expression and the ability to visualize are important. Participants also become free of the world of words and rational thought, and instead employ their emotions and feelings.

The “Meditative Wristband Workshop,” inspired by Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen (<http://www.complaintschoir.org/>), was designed to combine braiding techniques with self-awareness. On the internet one can order bracelets that encourage one to make positive changes in their life.

The idea of the workshop was to make a bracelet for oneself and adding a statement of a personal goal to it. In this way, one practices self-examination, increases self-awareness and gains self-empowerment in an enjoyable way. The practice of braiding is itself meditative. The techniques chosen can be crocheting, braiding, knotting or twisting; and all of it is done with tempting materials and colors. If it is not inconvenient or too personal, the self-development goals can be revealed and shared in the group. Some of the wristbands made in the workshops were: “Everyday art, just notice it !”; “Use Finnish!”; “Act differently!”; “Compliment someone everyday!”; “Take a new route to work!”; “Think outside the box!”; “Disrupt your routines!”; “Stop eating candy!”; “Talk less!”; “Don’t be late!”; and “Give positive feedback!”.



Figure 1. A braided wristband with the motto: “There is always another option!” Photograph: Ulla Kiviniemi.

The “Miracle Machine Workshop” was for designing and building prototypes of a miracle machine that could help newly qualified teachers in their work. Recently graduated teachers in Finland experience many challenges, including the threat of unemployment, uncertainty about their own professional knowledge and skills, inexperience, stress (including the ability to cope with everyday events), self-confidence, and the ability to influence their pupils’ learning (Tynjala et al. 2011). Soon-to-graduate student teachers were the participants of the workshop in an EU project. The groups were multicultural and their first task was to communicate the challenges of being newly qualified teachers in their respective countries. Then, they jointly designed and built a prototype of a “miracle machine” that could solve their problems. To enhance their imaginations some pictures were presented on the topic of the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic that has inspired generations of artists. (See the exhibition *The Kalevala in images: 160 years of Finnish art in-*

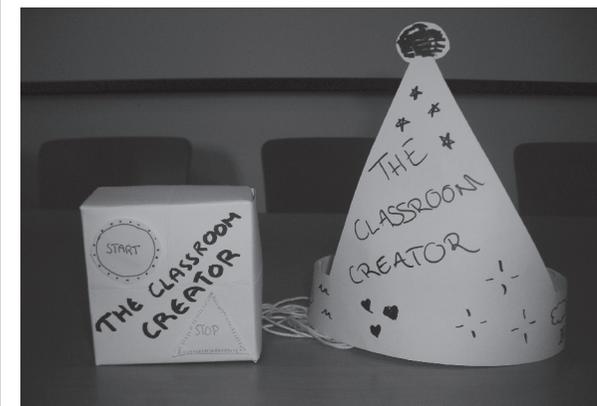


Figure 2. A miracle machine: “The Classroom Creator.” Photograph: Ulla Kiviniemi.

spired by the Kalevala in Ateneum Art Museum in 2016 (<http://www.ateneum.fi/nayttelyt-nyt/kalevala/?lang=en>). In the *Kalevala* there is the character Sampo, the Magical Artifact that brings good fortune to its holder. The equipment and materials used in the workshop were very simple and merely suggestive: tape, scissors, staplers, paperboard, markers, pens, yarns, and so on. At the end, each group introduced its machine to each other. The inventions were: the Classroom Creator; the Helmet for Peaceful Solutions; the Motivation Machine; the Magic Cloud; and the Communicative Digital Portfolio.

The idea of the “Thank You Medal Workshop,” inspired by Katariina Guthwert (http://www.katariinaguthwert.com/?page_id=65, last accessed November 17, 2016) was to construct a medal in celebration of oneself or another person for their everyday existence and just “being there.” The participants were asked to think of the person to be remembered and cherished, or praised and rewarded. A photo could be attached to a brooch that was decorated with a variety of available materials, including all kinds of bits and bobs as well as cast-off or recycled materials. Readymade badge bottoms could be used or any stiff material with safety pins. When attaching the parts, the hot glue gun proved swift and handy.



Figure 3. Thank-you-medals: Celebrating 1. Minna Canth (a Finnish writer and educator); 2. My family; 3. My Grandfather; 4. My friend who is going to get married. Photographs: Ulla Kiviniemi.

Conclusion

Playful learning offers productive ways of examining life situations in an empathetic way. Not only concrete materials, but functional and bodily activities too, serve to stimulate deep learning by offering experiential forums for learning. The workshops promoted dialogue between participants and enhanced collaborative ways of working. The atmosphere was intentionally good-humored and well-intentioned, as well as playful and artistic. Learning research shows us how inner motivation and multi-level objectives induce stable and generalizable learning results. In addition, collaborative work conducted in comfortable environments make data processing more open and turn learning into a shared effort. Community art projects offer a platform for participants to increase well-being through art and craft activities. Positive learning encourages human growth and is clearly supported by such activities.

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