

Matilda Mettälä & Rolf Viberg

Trusting the flow of experiences

GENERATING NEW KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE ARTS

This article examines a practical case from a documented workshop which we facilitated at the Museum of Public Art in Lund for Paradigm Brand Consultancy. The central purpose was to get a better understanding of the individual's as well as the group's creating process with the aim to engage in dialogue about their future. The workshop was planned and conducted from an artistic lens which seeks to capture lived experiences. The participants were engaged in activities which involved observation, play, and reflection, through creative expressions such as art, symbols, storytelling, and music. By so doing they were provided the possibility to process new knowledge and experiences perceived through all senses as well as intuition and imagination, in a stimulating way and from another perspective. Hence this practical case illustrates an alternative way of generating new knowledge through the arts.

CAPTURING A FLEETING MOMENT

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.
Henry David Thoreau (Thoreau 2008)

Kairos was the God of fleeting moments in Greek mythology, the youngest child of Zeus. He was responsible for bringing things together in the most convenient and right moment. Life is a sort of a becoming in the fleeting moment, as being in the moment is depended of the next one and obviously part of the future. As fleeting moments cannot be recaptured it becomes necessary to be aware of them, and learn from them. It is this fluidity of social life and flow of experiences that we wish to share an interlude in time which illustrates the value of the arts as means to generate knowledge. So, in a sense

our sharing of this experience does not derive from observing the world but from our actions and the movements from daily life.

In 2013 we were asked to organize and facilitate a workshop for Paradigm Brand Consultancy, an agency in the areas of brand strategy, design and communication, from Gothenburg, at the Museum of Public Art in Lund. Paradigm's central purpose for the workshop was to engage their team in activities which would offer them a better understanding of the individual's as well as the group's creating process; with the aim to initiate dialogues about their future goals.

And so to engage the team in dialogues about their future, we chose to conduct the workshop from the artistic outlook with elements from non-linear creative processes, involving all senses including intuition and imagination; to enable them a sense of how they can achieve a fluid direction. The participants were engaged in activities which involved observation, play and reflection through non-cognitive expressions such as art, symbols, storytelling, and music; offering opportunities to process knowledge and experiences in a stimulating way and from another perspective (Willis & Leiman 2013; Uhrmacher 2009), as well as promoting a mindset which embraces spontaneity, creativity, experimentation, and dynamic synchronization involving both a linear as well as a non-linear thinking.

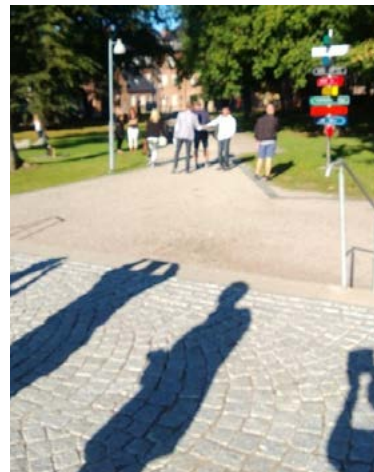


Photo: Matilda Merttälä

ARTICULATING A PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

The workshop was documented with the purpose to serve as a resonance of the participants' experiences and insights, enabling the group to develop and implement a strategy for the future. Based on selected extracts from the documented report which consists material we collected during the activities such as; photographs, notes from the participants and notes from our observations and dialogues with the participants covering ideas and reflections,

together with some theoretical reinforcements, we wish to construct a picture of our work which is non-linear and fragmented (Brown, Gabriel, and Gherardi 2009; Leavy 2015). We do this in an interpretive and a reflexive manner (Chenail 1995), intertwined as a dialogue throughout the text.

As practitioners we construct our knowledge based on our experiences, without separating our thinking and doing, nor depending on established theories or techniques. Therefore, we find it difficult to articulate practical experiences; to communicate the unrepresentable by systematically organize and formulate according certain criteria's (Simon and Chard 2014). However, we are guided by scientific studies about experiential and relational learning with aesthetical elements; learning on a case-by-case basis. So as we perceive the world in various dimensions, layers of mental pictures with selective recollections influencing our interpretations, we believe that a description can offer meaning and even valuable knowledge. And since everyday practices with its complexities is not scholarship, but the shaping of everyday experiences into telling can be (Pelias 2014), we hope that this description can offer some insights about an alternative way of generating knowledge through the arts.

AN INTERLUDE IN TIME

All our knowledge has its origin in our perceptions.
Leonardo Da Vinci (Schneck 2015)

Besides the arts as means to engage the 12 participants in various creative activities we also considered some valuable aspects while planning the workshop. Which is the importance of recognizing the whole-individual with all senses, including intuition and imagination as well as the awareness that people learn in different ways; some learn better visually, others orally while others by listening, or by actively being engaged. Hence learning involves a process of change by connecting cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions as well as being interrelated and connected to everything and everyone, including nature (Gergen 2009; Jarvis 2009). Saying, we believe 'our mind is a cultural product', that the individual is to a great extent a product of the social and cultural environment. Social interactions involve discovering and recognizing differences and changing behaviors to enable the interactions to evolve; making these processes part of learning (Hodkinson 2005).

And so as humans are part of the universe, inseparable from everything and everyone, the notion of space, place and artefacts becomes very central. Therefore we chose to plan and conduct the workshop at the *Museum of Public Art* in Lund, which is from the 60s, and is unique in its striving and collection of public art represented from all over the world. The art is presented in different forms, from paper sketches to large models in plaster; and not the "end results"; a place which not only promotes creative processes but also is situated in an environment which embraces nature.



Drawings: Rolf Viberg

SYMBOLS AND STORIES

The first extract is from the first part of the workshop which was about interconnecting symbolically by drawing and sharing stories. It is an idea that has been around for thousands of years; cave-paintings. These images or works of arts constituted by symbolic textures and part of various rituals, mediated knowledge through the universe of symbols and cultures. These symbols most likely sprang from the everyday creativity of people; scratching in the sand with sticks or their fingers. And so, even today, sharing stories is commonly regarded as means to exchange experiences and learn; a way to make sense of our world. As studies show, stories support various activities both collective as well as individual since the practice is non-linear and fragmented, and includes; describing, understanding and explaining complicated processes in which multiple characters, contexts and events overlap and intertwine (Brown et. al. 2009; Siegel 2015). And so each participant was asked to bring an item, “something symbolic” and to share a story about it. This was done in small groups while travelling by car from Gothenburg to the museum in Lund. On their arrival, each person placed the item somewhere outside the beautiful grounds of the museum. In the photographs we observe various expressions of each participant together with their item. This was done so that the whole group would be able to partake of the items in the report and to encourage future dialogues.

Next extract illustrates when the participants were asked to draw; something they like to do for leisure and something they like doing at work. On the photographs we are reminded that when the participants were done they organized their drawings as they wished on a whiteboard; making sense of the group’s own creations by categorizing and putting them in certain order and places. Hence, sharing stories and drawing pictures can enable individuals to interact since as stated; an individual perceives the world in relation to others as well as the milieu (Rosenblum 2010), creating interconnections to both humans and non-human entities. Furthermore, sharing stories can also promote reflections and dialogues. Signifying, that studies in neurosciences (Damasio 2006) and education (Jarvis 2009; Schön 1983) support that reflection is crucial and part of the continuous process of reconstructing experiences and learning. But also, the value of being engaged in dialogue and to recognize the best of what is, through asking questions which can strengthen a group’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and enhance positive potential outcomes (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom 2010).

CREATION IS ABOUT EFFORT

Think about a moment when you’ve experienced art in some form and how it is difficult to comprehend or express the experience by means of rational ideas. On the other hand, we can agree with Elliot Eisner (2002), who was a professor of Art and Education at Stanford University, that the arts are means to express, communicate, and illuminate that which is invisible or abstract; maybe not always in the sense of talking but stimulating the mind to look in different perspectives, making it possible for people to express themselves and understand each other. And so, art cannot live in isolation from human life, because art derives from everyday life. Each of us has an enormous reservoir of creativity within. It is part of being human and provides numerous ways of knowing ourselves and our world. Revealing inner depths we never imagined, allowing us to more fully reach our potential. The benefits can come through making or viewing art, and are available to us whether or not we are artists. The associations we bring in and respond to by looking at art come from the inner sources of our imagination, the combined potential of our conscious and unconscious mind. Thus, we stimulate our thinking through the countless individual associations that involve our response to a visual stimulus at that specific moment. Finding meaning in a work of art allows us to participate in its process and become co-creators with the artist. So, to view a work of art is to incorporate it within ourselves as we are more than we think we are, and have more abilities than we realize.

With this in mind, the next extract describes when the group was engaged in a guided tour around the museum, with the purpose to look at the visual arts and learn about the creating processes and the artists. Our guide, Annie Lindberg at the museum, shared stories about different artists and their work; she explained that each creating process is unique in its own way. Harmonizing with Donald Schön (1983) who explained that thinking in action requires several considerations such as, that to simplify there is a need for a constant interplay between reflection and construction, something that has always been part of an artist’s way, since the process is non-linear and involves partly cognitive, and partly emotive/intuitive skills. Saying, artistic creation is not about inspiration but about effort.

Since reflection can also offer self-awareness as one is required to keep track of thoughts and ideas, we asked Annie to share her own process while preparing the tour. She said, quoting from the report:

I was offered an assignment with no instructions only a sentence to guide me; “the creating process”. I wanted the group to get inspired by the artists’ way of working. It has become clear to me that the artistic process is not necessarily linear and the end result does not always have to be a finished work of art. Creating processes have both obstacles and achievements, and sometimes one is required to take several steps back and start from the beginning. In some cases the process can ultimately be more important and valuable than the end result. Artists who work with public art need to think the whole context since public art is not isolated and thus there are several aspects that need to be considered including the place, architecture, the patron and the audience as well.

These words embrace valuable knowledge about the artistic process which requires a non-linear thinking as well as the need to improvise. Two central skills which are also part of a musician's work. Therefore the tour ended with a musical session. And as studies show (Ball 2010; DeNora 2000; Schneck & Berger 2006), that though music is universal, its meaning is not as musical situations and the very concept of music mean different things and involve different activities around the globe. Nonetheless, we can all agree that music affects. Music can also explain that which is abstract, it can be a form of hybridity - a musical space where different elements merge and create something new (Levitin 2006), something we experienced with the group how the impact of music can come instantly and unexpectedly as we engaged in listening to music, singing and dancing together with several musical genres which offered various emotive expressions and interconnections in the group, promoting dialogues.

We also discussed about a musician's non-linear way of thinking and working and included in our dialogues an essential part of learning jazz which is, becoming a member of a jazz community, "hanging out", and learning the codes in order to gain a sense of a fluid direction to develop a mutual orientation to one another's actions. This metaphor developed by Frank Barrett (2012), a Professor of Management, provides a view into the world and mind-set of jazz musicians and stimulates an alternative way of thinking about management and organizations. He explains that when mutual fluid orientation is developed and reached a so called "groove" is achieved in the group. Groove is more than simply playing the correct notes; it occurs when the players have a common sense of the beat and share the common rhythm. When musicians are able to successfully connect with one another at this level and establish a groove, they sometimes experience an ability to perform beyond their capacity. Signifying that the limitations of previous patterns and structures change to an effort to listen and respond to what is happening at a certain moment; creating something new. Hence, we agree that when groove is achieved, a sense of trust in the flow of experiences arises, something that is relevant in all processes of change.

BEING IN THE MOMENT ENABLES VISUALIZING THE FUTURE

And so, creation is about effort, it is about taking small steps; ordinary acts. Creation is the result of thinking, thus creating means to reshape our understandings so that we can notice that which we have not noticed before. Therefore, the second part of the day was about envisioning the future. The group was asked to create a piece of art which visualizes the future of *Paradigm*. To do this they needed first to think and imagine their process as individuals and as a group, to be able to progress and achieve their future goals. Each participant was asked to consider the question; "let's say in the future, in 2018 you go to a party and you are asked; what did you personally do to contribute to *Paradigm's* success? And what did you do together as a group to reach this success?" Each one answered individually by writing a sentence on a piece of paper starting first one with "I did..." and the next poster with "We did..." These posters which they put



Above, photo: Rolf Viberg. Below, photo: Matilda Mettälä

on whiteboards all included implicit information; here are some examples which can give an overall idea of the outcome. On the posters "I did", we can read; "I learned to collaborate better and evolved in my new role". Another wrote; "I was able to work with my main proficiencies" and further; "I was driven to create a process that would enable the recognition of each individual". On the posters "We did" we read; "We worked as a team and respected each other's abilities and qualities". Furthermore; "We found new source of power in each other and in the process. We grew confidently".

To imagine into the future requires the ability to be in the present and trust that very moment of creation. Therefore in the following extract which is from the museum's creative workshop, the participants were instructed by the art teacher Ulrika Thorell, to work in two groups, and to create a piece of art; "a symbolic visualized future planet of how *Paradigm Brand Consultancy* will expand until 2018". As we observe the photographs we see the participants in two groups each engaged in collaborations as they are building a 3D model from various materials which illustrates an imaginary "future planet". Signifying the importance of materiality and that by developing and creating an art-work which illustrates their process and future they are able to describe and evaluate

an abstract process into a communicable form (Dodgson, Gann and Salter 2005). This kind of shared visualizing may also create a “group state” or a unified system composed of linked individuals to be achieved. It can facilitate the development of a highly effective problem-solving system which enables energy and information to emerge within the interactions of a group (Siegel 2015).

TRUSTING THE FLOW OF EXPERIENCES

From the discussions we had with the group two months after the workshop the participants shared how the activities enabled them to reflect and work through different options in a fun and stimulating way; that by working and creating together offered them a better understanding of what they wanted to attain. But also, how they had learned more than they were aware of during the workshop and how the report had offered them a narrative track by generating questions which enabled them to reflect, interpret and make sense of the activities; promoting reflection and dialogue.

We believe that there is a need for a wider, more generous, and more imaginative perspective in various learning processes, therefore, we hope that this practical case has illustrated an alternative way of generating new knowledge through the arts, which is that through systematic focus on non-cognitive communication individuals can be encouraged to express themselves and learn through symbolic representations, art, play, drama or music and develop a more nuanced non-linear thinking. But, there is also a need to focus inwardly; a time when the mind can organize its own processes and create meaning, enabling small changes in input to lead to larger, often unexpected changes in response through reflection (Siegel 2015). Finally, highlighting an understanding that shared experiences through the arts create meaning and learning becomes relational.

Since knowledge which is generated from daily experiences is an ongoing movement, our intention has not been about drawing conclusions but rather to offer an experimental construction of our knowing choosing to view our work as a relational process of crafting, sense-making and understanding (Pelias 2014; Simon and Chard 2014) making this paper an exploratory instead of conclusive one; by so doing trusting the flow of experiences.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

The image on page 57 is a section of Rolf Viberg's drawing