

Activity-based and Art-based Methods in Work and Education in the Field of Social Services

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Introduction

Many Finnish universities of applied sciences offer activity-based, art-based and creative methods as part of their degree programmes in social services, but not as extensively as Turku University of Applied Sciences. The extent of the studies is 30 ECTS credits, comprising two modules of 15 ECTS.

Professionally, I feel like I've finally found home. I have worked in the field of social services for 30 years, and I am currently satisfied with the content and methods of my work. Everything I have worked on and studied over the years is present in my current job, in the diverse roles of lecturer and project worker. In this article, I describe the journey that made me become a social services professional who applies activity-based and art-based methods.

Social work is a profession that is primarily based on interaction. We cannot make things happen without building a good interactive relationship with other people. Good interaction is the prerequisite of helping others. Simple, but sometimes difficult to achieve.

When I graduated as a social worker at the age of 23, my first job was as a substitute in child protection. I walked to the third floor of a giant public office building. I was shown to a tiny office and told that it would be my room: a desk, two chairs, a computer and a filing cabinet full of case files. In addition, I found out that most of my clients were young people who had committed crimes, and I had my first customer meetings booked for the next day. I remember thinking about why on earth young offenders would want to visit my office.

In my new job, I was frustrated with being tied to a bureaucratic office environment and the strictly controlled working hours. As a student, I had completed practical training in social work in both the bureaucratic environment of a social services office and in a non-institutional environment within the Lokki project.

The aim of the Lokki project was to develop preventive work methods that are based on adventure education and take place outside of the office. I had seen that things could be done differently, and it felt like a world full of opportunities. Working with the young people outside of the office opened new opportunities for interaction. I was free from the cloak of officialdom.

I was free to live, go out and about and do things together with children, young people and families. I derived a sense of meaning from my work, thanks to the good interaction I had with other people. People, not clients. I find the term 'client' problematic because it means we give ourselves fixed roles as employees, authorities and clients. And that alone brings imbalances of power to social work in child protection.

Transition 1. Activity-based methods in social work in the 1990s

I studied adventure education alongside my child protection duties, which equipped me with new activity-based methods for encountering children, young people and families. I validated my presence in their lives by participating in various activities with them. Adventure education developed strongly in the 1990s. As an approach, it means supporting growth through challenging group activities. Goals are set for the activities on the basis of the target group's needs and the situation. However, the outcome of adventure activities can never be foreseen. There can always be surprises and changes. The key thing is to recognize and share the feelings roused by the activities.

Often, participants only realize how adventure education has affected them afterwards. The immediate effects are, to a large extent, related to noticeable changes in the atmosphere and team spirit. At the personal level, participants make observations about their own role within the group and their active or passive ways of engaging in the activities.

As an adventure instructor, I became an authority quite naturally because of my expertise. We sat around the campfire with the parents and shared our backgrounds, experiences, failures and successes. I have fond memories of a camp on the island of Kulho off Turku: tough pre-teen girls had a chance to be children again, running around the island and sleeping in a deserted building with me. Those were valuable moments that promoted good interaction between children and adults. Challenging activities also strengthen the ties between the instructors. I learned to love my job when it was founded on these interactive ties.

Transition 2. Art-based methods in youth work in the 2000s

At the turn of the century, I was employed in a large-scale EU-funded multiprofessional project where we met 800 young persons who were at risk of social exclusion. Our job was to guide them to seek services, education and employment. The project required us to stop and analyse each situation on a case-by-case basis, which made me and the young people see their situation better.

I wanted to find new tools for encountering young people, so I started studies in expressive art working. Expressive art working is based on a humanistic-phenomenological approach. The philosophy behind the method emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of interpretation. No one else can interpret our creative processes for us or take responsibility for them. Expressive art working integrates different artistic genres to support the growth of individuals and groups.

It combines visual creation, writing, poetry, music, movement and drama. There are several phenomena we are unaware of inside of us: figures, things, experiences and feelings. It is difficult to process and come to terms with these subconscious phenomena. Art working helps to make the subconscious visible and analyse and process it independently or with others. Feedback is shared among the group participants, based on predetermined procedures.

Participating in the group does not require previous experience in art working. The method is not based on artistic skills but on trusting one's own potential to grow through art. Trusting the process is important. The last exam I took as part of my studies in social work was on the topic of social work as art. The exam books drew parallels between interactive and artistic skills: both require expertise and include a touch of magic. I become more and more interested in the potential of applied and participatory art working in the context of social work.

Transition 3. Education in social services and activity-based learning in the 2010s

Currently, I teach activity-based and art-based methods in the degree programme in social services at Turku University of Applied Sciences. The teachers in our activity-based team offer two modules of optional and advanced activity-based professional studies (a total of 30 ECTS credits). The first module of 15 ECTS teaches bodily, narrative and visual methods, applying them to different target groups. The second 15-ECTS module focuses on working with young people and on learning the skills required of a school welfare officer.

Learning activity-based methods is founded on experiential learning and the application of the skills to customer work. When I teach activity-based methods, I feel like I can combine my professional history with my vision of how to work as an interactive professional in the social field. The professional must seek good interaction with people/clients and allow them to be heard, seen and understood through diverse methods.

Transition 4. Projects promoting multidisciplinary teams for applied arts

The MOMU project (Moving Towards Multiprofessional Work) was launched in September 2015 and continued until June 2018. The project involved four higher education institutions in Finland, Spain, Estonia and England. The teachers who participated in the MOMU project taught multiprofessional courses to students. In the MOMU project, we carried out pair work in the social services and arts, learning how to teach multidisciplinary teams of students and navigate around different professional identities and cultures.

The multiprofessional student teams held youth workshops in cooperation with working life partners that work with young people. The aim of the youth workshops within the MOMU project was to increase the participants' self-esteem and self-awareness, provide tools for self-expression and interaction and support their collaborative skills, self-regulation skills and ability to concentrate. Workshop participants were expected to have new opportunities and tools for empowerment, learning, working life skills and life skills in general. A dedicated questionnaire was developed for assessing the experiences of the participants as a thesis.

The well-being exchange service (HVVT), which was active in 2015–2018, resulted in new applied art-based products for social and health services. The products were developed in multidisciplinary teams that featured an artist, a producer and a professional from the social or health services field. The multidisciplinary coaching that was part of the service taught me to listen to, see and understand things from multiple perspectives.

As a social services professional, I stepped onto the field of applied and participatory art and production, marvelling at how our interactive skills became intertwined and resulted in shared, multiprofessional development. In my view, our common denominator is respecting the value of the participant's experience. For me, participation means active agency and equal encounters between employees and clients. One of the outcomes developed by the well-being exchange service was quality cards. The quality cards help to plan and assess art-based working and applied and participatory art from different perspectives.

Transition 5. Cultural well-being for everyone in the 2020s

In the field of social services, activity-based methods and art-based methods have become the most common concepts related to cultural well-being. These are the concepts that are also used in social services education. Activity-based methods cover almost any possible activity alongside speech. In my opinion, art-based methods do not require a professional artist. Trained professionals in social services can learn art-based methods and apply them to interactive work with clients. In my view, the concept of participatory art suggests that professional artists guide applied and participatory art working.

Providing everyone with cultural well-being opportunities is a fine goal that is also linked to the values of social services. **Taikusydän**, a national project funded by Art Promotion Centre Finland, builds structures for promoting cultural well-being. **Arts Equal**, a large-scale national project funded by Academy Finland, seeks to promote the availability of arts for everyone in Finland with the help of researchers. This is an important mission because, in particular, clients of social services struggle for inclusion in cultural well-being.

Including activity-based and art-based methods in studies in social services can help students to understand the theory and practice of cultural well-being. Furthermore, the positive attitude to cultural well-being gained during the studies can result in the inclusion of arts professionals in the demanding customer work in social services, which will further support cultural well-being.

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