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Flag: A shared horizon

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A shared horizon

*Heidi Pietarinen, Amna Qureshi and
Melanie Sarantou*

Abstract: The *Flag* workshop explores visual and multisensory thinking as an internal process for the University of Lapland's fashion, textile art and material study students and artist-researchers (authors). The students verbalised and visualised their ideas, thoughts and feelings, which led to the initial ideas and material experiments being transformed into sketches. This culminated in the *Flag: A Shared Horizon* installation. The colourful and kinetic installation *Net*, emerging from *Flag*, mirrors the shared horizons of youth during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting extended global lockdowns. The installation came about in Agora Hall in the F-Wing of the University of Lapland. Both *Flag* and *Nets* are metaphors that look beyond the obvious challenges youth have faced during the pandemic, redefining their diverse understandings of hope, fear, needs and what constitutes novel ideas what they want in the future. Thinking towards the unknown can reveal insights into the underlying narratives, while arts-based methods can open up new approaches to the different challenges faced by society. *Net* will represent the portrait of the participating youth from December 2021 to February 2022. The objective of the workshop was to provide these youth with knowledge about pluralism and how to apply it in their (re)design thinking. It was a process for applying a lens of pluralism to a real youth-based workshop, solving problems by prioritising their (the participants') needs above all else and sharing what they learned in the workshop.

Keywords: Pluralism, narratives, visual literacy, arts-based methods, youth

Distance learning has been a pancake

In spring 2021, a mother wrote in the Finnish language on behalf of her 16-year-old son: 'Distance learning has been a pancake' (Kokiksi opiskelevalle, 2021). She observed her son struggling with distance studies and challenges with isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her son was able to gain only a couple of study credits over four months. In Finland, pancakes are made with a simple recipe of flour and water, and without rising agents. Therefore, a pancake metaphor in the Finnish context is often used to refer to a failure, as something that has quite literally 'fallen flat'. A pancake metaphor reminds the reader that distance learning is not for everyone. The digital leap has brought its own technical challenges, and an isolated young student might feel exhausted at home, while someone else would enjoy their freedom, thrive and see distance learning as a new kind of opportunity (Lavonen & Salmela-Aro, 2022, pp. 105–123).

As a new cohort of first-year students arrived in the Arctic city of Rovaniemi, *Flag* was initiated with a group of participants with the intention to explore their

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current dreams and fears for their new futures as youth embarking on another phase of their life journeys. In collaboration with the youth, the aim was to enhance dialogue by transforming the making and storytelling processes, here through art-based approaches, into concrete products that will be visualised in the installation. Rather than seeking closure on a predetermined problem, the intentions were to explore youth (as subjects) and specificities of their contexts. *Flag* and its art-based processes illustrated these features by representing a creative enquiry into the cofabricated, shared, plural and cultural values associated with a commitment to open dialogue between the youth and artist-researchers (see Edwards et al., 2016, pp. 319–328).

Flag unfolded the possibilities for manifesting diverse and interactive relationships for and interpretations by the viewer through plural interpretations of arts elements. In different contexts, colours, shapes or light can (re)constitute and express a pluriverse (Escobar, 2011) of visibility, feelings, meanings and stories embedded in artistic expressions. The objective of *Flag* was to unfold new perspectives through the materiality and spatiality of expressions by the participants, their work and the interactions between them. These plural narratives as well as the choices made during the *art in progress* led to diverse interpretations and expanded the participants' visual literacy. This chapter tackles research questions, such as the following: 'What can be accomplished by expressing life experiences in plural ways?' 'How do youth view their worlds after the pandemic, and how are their visions expressed in the new material outcomes?' 'How can art and material-based methods be used to expand the boundaries of visual literacy to promote plural expression? Addressing the topic of isolation, adaptive strategies and re-engagement in society in postpandemic times, *Flag* visualised and mirrored youth's voices. These questions were also examined regarding youth's views on individual thinking and their relation to questions of the power of the youth and impact of COVID-19 on young people.

Upholding arts-based methods for embracing pluralism in the expression of social values

The literal meaning of plurality implies many kinds and forms. This chapter uses the term 'pluralism' to refer to a framework of multiplicity, for example, of societies, individuals, ideas and actions. Borrowing from Nandy (2010, p. 2), pluralism can be understood as social diversity and tolerance of others' beliefs, even when these beliefs are different or diverse; therefore, pluralism can be understood as a social value. Tsirogianni and Gaskell believe that social values stem from lived human experiences, describing them as 'socially collective beliefs and systems of beliefs that operate as guiding principles in life' (2011, p. 2).

Arts-based research (ABR) can support pluralism. The term was developed from numerous concepts (about 28) used to describe a plurality of ABR approaches (Leavy, 2017). This term moved away from the singular reference to 'art' as introduced by McNiff (2008) because various art forms and approaches can be used as media for data collection, analysis or dissemination (Foster, 2016; Leavy, 2017). Coemans and Hannes (2017) identified different types of arts-based methods (ABMs), including visual art, poetry, dance, theatre, film, video and music, in a review focusing on the use of ABMs in community-based longitudinal research spanning two decades.

The participatory nature of ABMs enables different ways of engaging participants in creating shared understanding and building empathy. These strengths are evident in certain marginalised and vulnerable groups, whose voices are seldom heard (Miettinen et al.,

2016; Li et al., 2018). Traditional research methods tend to be less effective in engaging such groups because they are often rigid in that they are not culturally neutral and, therefore, are likely to encounter obstacles during the research process. Cahnmann-Taylor maintains that educators and researchers should accept the responsibility ‘to explore even more varied and creative ways to engage in empirical processes, and to share [their] questions and findings in more penetrating and widely accessible ways’ (2008, p. 3) when engaging with ABMs. Therefore, the values of pluralism can be argued to be upheld by ABMs because they champion a multiplicity of different creative and artistic means that can be used in the various processes of research to generate more complex ways of knowledge creation through both individual and collaborative processes, but also through a plural means for expressing the social values and shared beliefs of an individual or group.

Methodology

The key methods of enquiry employed in the current research are narrative enquiry and ABMs. One of the successful ways in which ABMs have been employed is by combining the approach with narrative enquiry (Akimenko et al., 2017). The Ricoeur (1992) perspective on narrative underpins the organisation of action and life; narratives assist in the arrangement of human life (p. 157) while potentially drawing from recounts of vague units of life, rendering cohesiveness by creating a unity of life (p. 158). A ‘narrative unity of life’ enables sense-making in complex situations and the recounting of the care of oneself and care for others (p. 163).

ABMs often generate ‘interesting types of data’ that can be difficult to interpret (Coemans & Hannes, 2017, p. 41), but in combination with narrative enquiry to create dialogue, alternative ways of expression and enhancing engagement can be achieved. ABMs can assist in building a shared understanding not only among participants, but also between participants and researchers. The successful use of ABMs to generate impact in research processes, however, calls for different experimental and improvisatory approaches to data collection and visual content generation. The testing, assessing and comparing of methods and how they are used are important.

Data are a collection of notational data during the art- and material-based workshop during the autumn semester of 2021 (24 August to 5 November). Participants are first-year fashion, textiles art and material research students at the University of Lapland who participated in the workshop, which was coordinated by the authors. The data consist of group discussions with 12 students (participants), creative descriptive essays written in Finnish or English and sketches. The material is supplemented with the critical discussions on values, ethics and the role of the arts to re-engage societies in postpandemic times that developed from *Flag*. The aim of the workshop was to mirror youth voices, enabling their participation in the art installation and to express their own ideas, thoughts and feelings through materials and colours.

Before, during and after the arts- and material-based *Flag* workshop, focus group discussions with student participants were conducted. We encouraged students to explain their experiences while making the installation and to write a creative descriptive essay in Finnish or English about their learning and experiences of the ongoing workshop. We asked them to answer, for example, the following questions: What does it mean to work in *Flag*? Why did you engage in this workshop? What was the meaning for you? Students were also encouraged by a three-dimensional writing exercise to stimulate a plurality of senses (sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing) towards self-thinking and creative writing.

The research data open up new and even surprising perspectives by focusing on the behaviour of youth. A broader understanding of the pressures and demands that are placed on youth through the pandemic can uncover the pluralities of societal structures (Mertanen, 2020), which may impact postpandemic futures. The narrative accounts of the participants are subjective and emotional responses to their experiences; they are recounts of histories and are driven by discovery. Narrative accounts are presented as a data source, combined with a reflexive analytical approach. The data analysis is supported by the literature and visual analysis.

A fishnet—the outlet for youth

Flag served as a metaphor and focused primarily on the topic of isolation and adaptive strategies. It focused on re-engagement with society in postpandemic times by visualising and mirroring the youth's voices. In accordance with the nature of the creative work, the author's experience was merged into the work, and a more specific theme and name was defined for the installation through joint reflections (Dewey, 2010, pp. 133–138). For example, students gave several nicknames to *Flag* installation art from COVID-19, *COVID-19 installation*, *fishnet*, *social network*, *no process*, *no art (without the process, there is no art)* or *outlet for people*. Nets are often used as traps; a fisherman captures fish, or an ice hockey player scores a goal with a net. However, in the workshop, the net represented entanglements by enabling contact with others. The net was a metaphor for life and connections between the youth and friends, while it was an invisible structure for the physical activity that assisted them to cope with postpandemic times. One youth participant reminisces in the following:

Overall, it's amazing to see a group like that. I've made new friends because of the workshop, and most importantly, I've been able to laugh, have fun, bring ideas to the table and enjoy the company of others and creak together. What an incredible opportunity I have been given, and I am more than happy to be a part of this.

(Participant 5)

We had a long and eye-opening conversation about COVID-19 with our group. It started by talking about the feelings we had during the corona pandemic and the colours we felt. Everyone shared their own experiences. I really feel like it made us even closer. We do the installation together and follow a mutual plan.

(Participant 3)

Every story told a picture; when students drew, language was present, and when they used words, they made images (Figure 19.1) (Bardt, 2019, pp. 77–80).

The net also has an ambiguous character: Designing and making a net together enabled the students to broaden their awareness, but they also found the scale of the vast space, the Agora Hall, overwhelming:

Like the COVID-19 pandemic, our workshop has had its ups and downs and unexpected turns. Because of the size of the project and of Agora Hall where the installation is going to be in, we were forced to look at things on a larger scale. Lots of redos, lots of different ideas and, most importantly, lots and lots of experimenting.

(Participant 7)

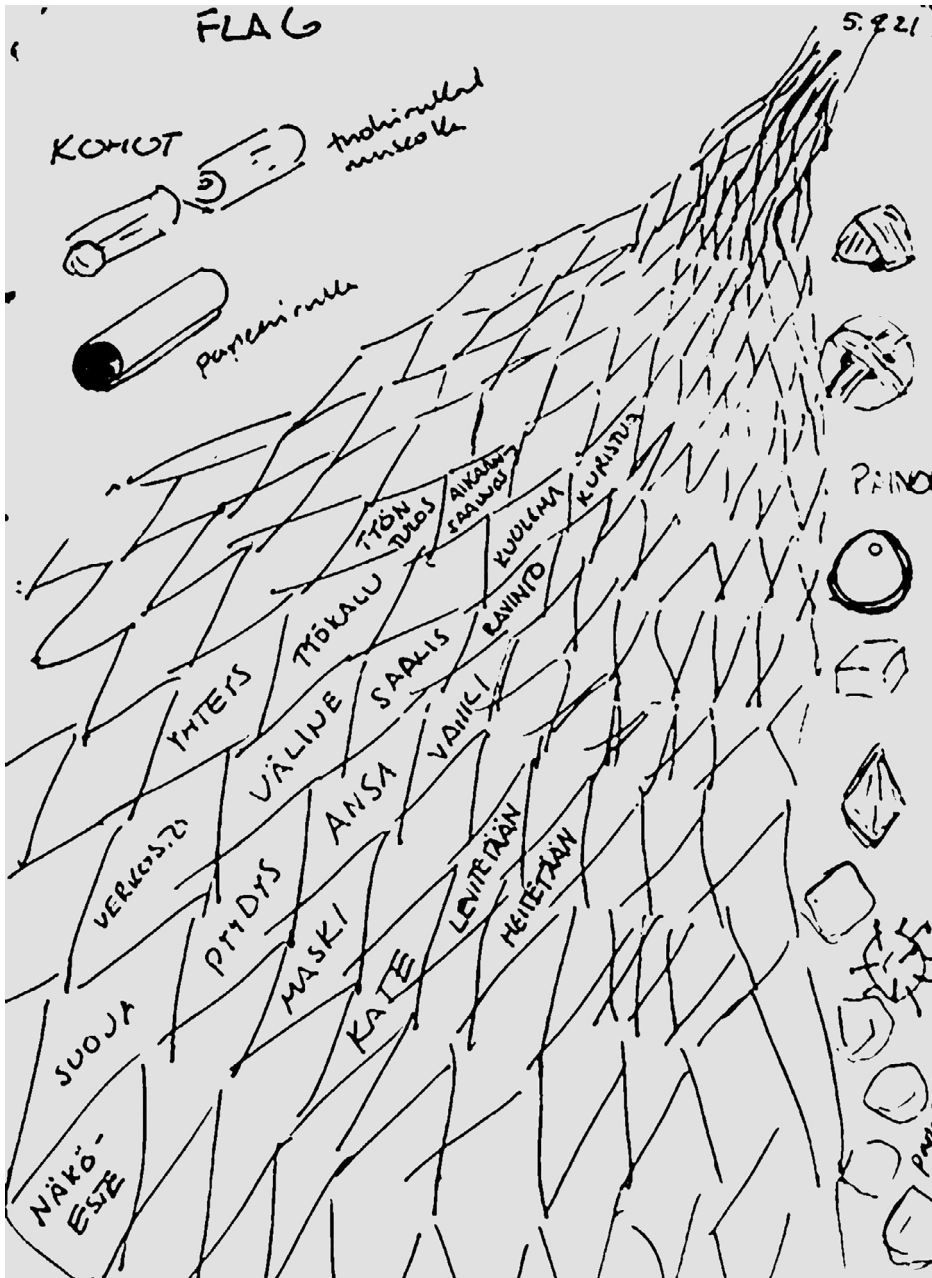


Figure 19.1 The outlet for youth. Regarding bringing in different pluralist perspectives, for example, group discussions, three-dimensional writing, mood boards and shared visual and emotional experiences were followed by a sketch of the Fishnet installation with keywords. Image credits: Flag workshop group, 2021.

When it takes 5,000 hours to master something, imagination must be part of the process, following what was imagined deeply enough to know it tacitly. Material and physical tacit knowledge is granular, distributed knowledge that is impossible to explicitly convey (Bachelard, 2014; Bard, 2019). Unintentional mistakes were made during the workshop because anyone who acts makes mistakes. Some risks were overlooked, causing hazards. Some parts of the installation were built on a too-small scale, requiring remaking. The hall acted as a black hole or never-ending story for whatever was installed. Challenges with (un)visibilities, volumes, colours and scales were experienced in the huge space. Both the process and building the components of the installation involved critique of the prevailing conditions under which the installation came about and calls for self-criticism and responsibility of actions, both of which are characteristic of a process (Böninger et al., 2021, p. 18). As explained by John Dewey (2010, pp. 83–103), the nature of the creative process and aesthetic experience is an activity.

The installation created a horizon for new insights. The net knotting began by students selecting a colour of yarn to represent their ideas, thoughts and feelings. Each student knotted a net with their yarns as a mark of their identity and as part of the installation. The idea was to build a colourful *Net* installation in Agora Hall to redefine their diverse understandings of hope, fear, needs and future visions. Multicolour yarns travelled around the four floors of Agora Hall, which represent the youth's different feelings during the pandemic: from grim and dark colours to brighter colours such as yellows, pinks and greens. The colours were simple yet an effective and universal way of conveying a message; therefore, they served as a suitable technique of communication in this installation. This also proved that the chosen colours cannot be described with words, because visibility, tactility, kinetics, experience and many other factors were not easily translated into verbal language. The differences in colour tones were in the eye of the beholder (Kuure et al., 2017; Naukkarinen, 2001, p. 154).

Intersections between the youth and the patterns they selected became apparent in the knotting. The knots were a metaphor for and represented the empathetic connections created between the youth and Agora Hall visitors, allowing for a more general understanding to emerge based on exclusive and personal experiences.

These kinds of workshops are important because they create an outlet for people to express their feelings in a way that's not through words because that can be hard sometimes. It is extremely important to document this and let the world know about this kind of method of portraying one's emotions.

(Participant 7)

One of the students referred to the pandemic crisis as a defining epoch for the current generation of youth. During the workshop, the participants became personally engaged with one another, discovering links between storytelling and the sharing of personal perspectives, as well as addressing the benefits of taking a reflective approach to research. As Pillows (2003) reminds us, research can become more extensive upon reflection. The group discussed the cocreated data extensively, exchanging ideas and perspectives on how to present the installation in the extensive space. From this process, personal reflection was enhanced, which was beneficial for the postpandemic context that the youth entered during the autumn of 2021.



Figure 19.2 Final Net (a). Photo credits: Amna Qureshi (Researcher-author), Flag workshop, 2021.



Figure 19.3 Final Net (b). Photo credits: Amna Qureshi (Researcher-author), Flag workshop, 2021.

Leading the eye through art processes—intrusion to inclusion

Art processes can become a powerful means of bringing people together. This can help in engaging in creative processes to articulate one's thoughts. The possibility to reimagine youth's thinking and mirroring their voices to explore their intellectual abilities can help improve the limited imagination they encountered during pandemic times. Hence, finding the means to articulate and express the content of imaginative expression is crucial for the participants to be able to share their thoughts. As supported by both Barone and Eisner (2012), the manifestation of feelings and expressions becomes evident through engagement in the process of expression, which is similar to the thoughts of the youth during the workshop:

It is all about the process. Without this process, there is no art. Our work is far from complete, and it may change shape along the way, but I think the end result will be great anyway. However, I consider the process itself to be more important than the end result. I also believe that through this workshop, each of us has learned something new about ourselves, about each other and about art.

(Participant 4)

In addition to the ongoing art process, the authors engaged in the research as participants. They were able to relate to the viewpoints of the youth because they were a part of the process, engaging collectively and cocreating with the entire group of participants. According to the authors, each phase of the process had an impact on the next.

Consequently, *Flag* experienced an interesting incident. The university students were having their lunch break at the Petronella restaurant, situated in Agora Hall, when the authors were hanging the installation across the space. The installation consisted of long ribbons, tassels and light paper rolls, which were challenging to stabilise and install. During that process, one part of the installation gently touched a student's shoulder, interrupting a well-deserved lunch break. Although the student did not appear displeased, the author sensed the student's uneasiness through face expressions, and apologies were duly made. This moment of awkwardness made the authors realise that they were intruders at the wrong place at the wrong time. Not being able to build the installation after hours, the authors turned this incident to their advantage by involving anyone entering Agora Hall to engage in the *Net* installation process.

To accomplish this, the authors displayed a banner in Agora Hall, mentioning that there is 'art in progress' to create awareness of the ongoing process. The banner served as a visual clue to lead their eyes to the installation in progress. This provided a sense of inclusion, not only to the participants and authors, but also to everyone present in the hall throughout the installation period. The authors wanted the process to be visible and acceptable but not finished as a masterpiece.

Conclusion: *Flag* as a metaphor for a shared message, meaning and story

At the beginning of the workshop, the public Agora Hall, appeared an empty and uniform space. The space has four large ceiling windows and hosts three permanent artworks hung from its ceiling. Sculptor Kari Huhtamo's *Flamma Artis*, or *Flame of Art* (2006), which is installed in the space, recalls the necessity of fire for igniting and in creativity (Collection of the Kari Huhtamo Art Foundation, 2021). Campus life in

and around Agora Hall can be described as a community garden or a space with a plurality of functions where students, staff and visitors gather to dine, meet, study or enjoy arts displays. Students and staff also exhibit their art and creativity in the surrounding arts galleries that are in and open into the space. This shared public space offered an experimental research environment for the workshop, serving as a stage for making a layered installation.

Flag, a mixed media installation, served as a metaphor for the plural social processes that students engaged in, including discussing, exploring, creating and expressing. *Flag* also served as a metaphor for the plural life experiences the participants had during the pandemic, which was expressed through the manifold of colours, textures, materials and stories the participants used to create the installation. Also, working as a group demonstrated how hands-on work following approaches such as do-it-yourself (DIY) and do-it-with-others (DIWO), that is, shared authorship, can offer diverse and plural ways of working, for example, as a community of youth (March, 2021; Grisoni, 2012; Lovell et al., 2014). *Flag* was built in a context of risk taking, exploration, incompleteness and interpretability, conveying the idea that beauty is created during the interaction between youth and this environment.

Flag enabled the rethinking of artistic processes that are underpinned by the narrative identities of students, including those of the artists-researchers, creating a unique relationship and interplay between their stories and environment. How they made sense of their identities during the challenging pandemic times, which was exacerbated by ongoing disruptions and disconnects, was enabled by working through their plural individual experiences, which were shared through discussion and storytelling and expressing their plural identities through the multicoloured and textured installation. The students wove their stories of isolation because of the pandemic, narrating them as verbalisations of their own identities. The students' sense-making supported place-bound identity work (Akimenko, 2018, pp. 136–137). The workshop strengthened their interaction skills and provided an opportunity for positive interaction with the university community, making invisible encounters visible:

The workshop has an important meaning and a message—how we could describe our feelings through art. Not everything has to be spoken or written; it can also be told by art and painting and creating. The way we built this installation really helped me sit down and think about the past year and how I personally felt.

(Participant 3)

The installation was the result of several months of work, but the result was not only an installation. According to Rautio (2010), beauty should not be thought of only in terms of artefacts but also in terms of what is done. The workshop provided a pathway for the development of the university community and students, which also developed the quality of life of students at the individual level. The aim of the workshop was to benefit students and the entire university community. The *art in progress* banner and roll-up enhanced sharing by giving people the opportunity to connect on a personal level and through collective making with the faculty event, thus creating a sense of inclusion and community.

It is important to document this project because I think it is necessary that people see how this whole art project came to be, and they will see our thought processes.

(Participant 4)

The purpose of the visual message was to engage everyone in the work process and experience of both space and environment more holistically—following the life of the event instead of working in studios behind closed doors from an isolated space towards a plural, welcoming, care to the other and shared horizon. This was seen at the very end of the workshop, when the students placed a bright and overflowing green plant wall over the railing of one of the four levels of the building. This addition to the installation symbolises their hope for a future that entails new growth, opportunities and continuity after the disruptions experienced in their young lives because of the pandemic. The idea of a sensitive but vibrant hanging piece of plant art had been abandoned at the beginning of the workshop, but in the final review, it seemed to be the strongest and an inseparable part of the installation. It showed that the students kept their own vision and, during the workshop, shared their needs of being heard. This final piece of work reminded us that pluralism is not straightforward, nor is it comfortable to always attain; instead, it showed that hope in the future and a willingness to work towards shared goals are the values that the youth wanted to express their beliefs and visions. It is an achievement that takes time, but *Flag* gave the youth an opportunity to go beyond passivity and actively express their pluralist values and beliefs in a positive future. Despite the high expectations the youth had for their entry into university and a new phase in their lives, which ended as a deflated pancake because of the isolation and disruptions of the pandemic, *Flag* rose high and tall over four stories of Agora Hall to express the pluralist views and values of the group in colourful and textured ways. The new interconnections they were able to understand, build on and establish throughout the process were expressed in a very physical manifestation of the installation *Net*. This assisted them, at least to some extent, in shaping their new world of shared pluralisms, or what Escobar (2011) refers to as the ‘pluriverse’.

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