

Art-based practice in nature for communal well-being

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of art-based research on community well-being within natural settings, under the framework of Applied Visual Art (AVA). Conducted through five workshops in collaboration with KUMA (Cultural Tourism for Well-being) and the Brahma Kumaris spiritual organization, the research focused on engaging participants in nature mandala making across diverse outdoor environments in Finland. Through Art-Based Action Research (ABAR) the workshops aimed at progressing on each cycle. Participants, including local residents and international visitors, engaged in collaborative art-making that encouraged connections with nature and each other.

The findings indicate that art-based activities in natural settings significantly enhance individual and community well-being by promoting self-expression, reflection, and social connection. This research contributes to arts-based well-being methodologies, highlighting the potential for integrating art-based interventions into public health strategies. However, challenges such as weather conditions, scalability, sustainable funding, and addressing diverse community needs remain. Future studies should explore long-term impacts and refine methods for evaluating the effectiveness of these approaches across different cultural and environmental contexts.

Keywords

Nature mandala, community art, wellbeing, applied visual art, art-based action research

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CONTENT

1. Introduction	4
2. Research Context	8
3. Literature review	
3.1 Well-being	12
3.2 Connection of Art with well-being	14
3.3 Nature and well-being	17
3.4 Mandala practice for well-being	20
3.5 Community Art for well-being	23
4. Methodology	
4.1 Art Based Action Research (ABAR)	25
4.2 Cycles of Action	27
4.3 Data collection and Analysis (Qualitative)	32
4.4 Ethical consideration and limitations	38
5. Results	
5.1 Storyline	41
a) Participants	42
b) Execution of workshops under the framework of ABAR	44
5.2 Results	
5.2.1 Individual Well-being	
a) Healing	58
b) Awareness	58
c) Introspection	59
5.2.2 Communal Well-being	
a) Sense of Belonging	59
b) Collaboration	60
c) Mutual Care	60
5.2.3 Individual and Communal Well-being	
a) Creativity	61
b) Give and Take	61
c) Continuity	62
6. Conclusion	64
7. References	66
8. Appendices	

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era where urbanization and digitalization increasingly dominate our lives, the pursuit of well-being has become more critical than ever. Awakened by the stressful lives of those around me, I was motivated to explore elements of well-being through art-based research methods. My goal was to investigate the multifaceted relationship between nature, mandala making, and creativity to understand their influences on both individual and community well-being. Being familiar with the art and culture of mandala making from my Nepali heritage, the idea of creating mandalas in nature using natural objects was particularly refreshing and compelling. In addition to the research studies, I also immersed myself in Artistic production through Moustaka's heuristic research method of self-inquiry to help gain deeper insights into the influences of creating nature mandala which I aimed to facilitate in the community workshops.

As an art student, I was deeply inspired by the Sustainable Art and Design (SAD) faculty at the University of Lapland where for the first time I got the opportunity to learn about environmental art. Their innovative approach encouraged me to explore the application of art-based research (ABR) methods through the lens of Applied Visual Art (AVA). The concept of AVA has evolved in northern Finland with a focus on community development through art. Professor, Timo Jokela at the University of Lapland, describes the AVA program as a response to the demands of national art education, businesses in regions, and the sociocultural challenges specific to the North. Its main goal is to train professionals who can collaborate with stakeholders to address the unique needs of northern communities (Jokela, 2013, pp. 12-13). In this context, I was motivated to investigate how nature mandala workshops could contribute to community development by promoting artistic engagement and collaboration within local communities.

In early spring 2023, the City of Kalajoki launched the KUMA (Kulttuurimatkailusta hyvinvointia, or Cultural Tourism for Well-being) project, funded by the European Union and Rural Development (Maaseuturahasto). The project's objective was to activate, enhance, and improve cultural, tourism, business, and artistic well-being in nine towns (Alavieska, Haapajärvi, Kalajoki, Kempele, Nivala, Oulainen, Pyhäjärvi, Sievi and Ylivieska) across Northern Ostrobothnia. I had the opportunity to participate in the project, which aligned with my research topic and time frame. Under the supervision of project manager

Merja Nevalainen, I conducted three art-based workshops in Kalajoki, Hiekkasärkät, and Ylivieska. Additionally, I facilitated two workshops as part of a spiritual retreat program in collaboration with the Brahma Kumaris organization in Nuuksio and Kuusamo. In total, I led five workshops within four months (June-September) to explore the influences of art-based activities in natural setting using natural resources for well-being.

By integrating theoretical frameworks of well-being through creativity, nature, mandala art and community art (see: Gilliam, 2018; Stickley et al., 2018; Russell, 2013 Baxter, 2019; Jung, 1963; Matarasso, 1997), this study seeks to discover the influences that art-based activities can have on individuals and communities. This thesis employs an art-based research practice set within natural environments to investigate these theoretical constructs in action. Through the creation and analysis of mandala art projects conducted in community settings, this research aims to demonstrate how artistic engagement with nature can enhance collective well-being. By examining the interplay between these elements, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into how art-based approaches can be harnessed to nurture healthier, more connected communities.

Conducting art-based research in natural settings, using natural objects, reconnects individuals with the environment, which is increasingly important in an urbanized and technology-driven world. Nature exposure has been linked to numerous mental health benefits, including reduced anxiety, improved mood, and increased cognitive function (Kaplan, R & Kaplan, S, 1989). Combining art-making with nature not only amplifies these benefits but also encourages a deeper connection with the natural world. Research underscores the therapeutic benefits of engaging with natural environments, suggesting that these interactions can enhance psychological resilience, reduce stress, and promote overall health (Ulrich, R.S ,1984). Simultaneously, the role of creativity in promoting well-being has been well-documented, with artistic practices serving as powerful tools for self-expression, emotional processing, and personal growth (Stickley et al., 2018).

Furthermore, mandala making touches us on a spiritual level by encouraging mindfulness and introspection, which encourages a deeper awareness of the present moment and our inner state (Husain, S, 2002). In addition, Carl Jung, a pioneer in investigating the benefits of mandala making, believed that creating mandalas acted like a form of therapy. He proposed that

mandala art holds significant benefits for healing, self-understanding, and balancing the inner self (Jung, 1963). The process of making mandalas involves creating symmetric patterns, which can bring clarity and order to our thoughts and emotions. This symmetry and structure promote a sense of calm, helping to alleviate stress and anxiety. Additionally, the act of engaging in mandala creation can provide a meaningful and reflective experience, contributing to overall emotional and psychological well-being.

While exploring our inner experiences through mandala art, communal art practice on the other hand contributes significantly to social cohesion and collective well-being, creating spaces for collaboration, dialogue, and shared experiences. By bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds, these initiatives can strengthen social bonds and promote a sense of belonging encouraging tolerance and reducing conflict (Guetzkow, 2002, pp. 7). The nature mandala's structured yet fluid design provides a symbolic framework for exploring interconnectedness within the community. It also helps individuals feel connected to a larger collective identity, leading to increased self-esteem and a greater sense of agency in their lives (Matarasso, 1999). This personal empowerment often translates into more active engagement in various aspects of life, including education and employment. Furthermore, Matarasso notes that community art projects allow individuals to express themselves, providing a voice and a role in shaping their environment. Creative engagement within the community has also been shown to decrease anxiety, stress, and mood disturbances, thus contributing to overall psychological well-being (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010, pp. 8).

Having lived in Finland for over three years, I have observed that nature serves as a sanctuary not only for the local population but also for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds who have lived in different environments. The Finnish landscape, with its forests, lakes, and distinct seasonal changes, has a profoundly meditative effect on me, bringing a sense of calm and stillness. Recognizing the powerful role that nature plays in promoting mental and physical well-being, I believed that conducting a mandala workshop in a natural setting would resonate deeply with the local community, offering them a meaningful way to connect with both nature and each other.

My research, titled *Art-Based Practice in Nature for Communal Well-Being*, sought to address the question: *What are the effects of well-being discovered through mandala making in natural environment within local communities in Finland*. The aim of this research is to

explore how art-based practices, specifically the creation of mandalas in natural environments, can enhance communal well-being. By integrating art-making using nature, the study seeks to understand how these practices influence individual and collective psychological states, improve community cohesion, and promote a deeper connection to both individual self and each other. This research intends to assess the potential of art-based interventions to alleviate stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation within local communities, while also evaluating their effectiveness in enhancing social interaction and overall well-being. Through a series of workshops and participatory art projects, the study aims to provide insights into the benefits of combining artistic expression with natural settings, offering practical recommendations for utilizing such approaches in community development and well-being initiatives.

The thesis is structured into four main sections: literature review, methodology, results, and conclusion. In the literature review, I begin with a brief discussion on the concept of "well-being" to establish my perspective. I then explore existing research on promoting well-being through various contexts: art, nature, communal art, and mandala art. This exploration is conducted separately and in combination to assess the individual and collective impacts on well-being. The methodology chapter demonstrates my use of an art-based action research (ABAR) method which seeks to progress after every cycle. This chapter also includes data collection and analysis through thematic analysis of qualitative research. The thesis also addresses ethical considerations and the limitations of the study. In the results chapter, I present findings from each workshop, providing examples to answer the research question. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings, suggests potential areas for further research, and offers recommendations for future studies.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Objective of the KUMA (Project for Cultural Tourism Wellbeing) project was to activate, enhance and improve the cultural, tourism, business and art for wellbeing of these towns, several open workshops and activities are organized through cooperation and collaboration with the town halls. The project was funded by European Union and Rural Development Fund (Maaseuturahasto), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. The main objective of this project was the development of these towns or villages mainly focusing on educating on their cultural, tourism, business factors and art. Several experts, consultants and professionals would be invited to conduct workshops in various fields. In addition, through collaboration and cooperation, a network within these nine municipalities will also be a major factor to be attained through these workshops.

The project aimed to develop the necessary skills through training and education in order to upgrade their services in tourism, cultural and tourism businesses which will also reform their service design. Eventually, through the process of learning, applying and practically experiencing during the project duration, the ultimate goal is to accomplish wellbeing, better understanding of community and building network within each sectors.

The target group for the big KUMA project were people who were working for cultural services, tourism and business operators, entrepreneurs, local heritage associations, local Artists and local people from the community. Some of the main topics included sustainability in cultural tourism, ecological, cultural, social and economic sustainability, intangible cultural heritage, cultural routes, paths and tours, introducing new products, service design, cultural experience as a product, Building network and collaboration, Art and tourism, communal art and environment art. The cultural director of the KUMA project was Tiina kangas, project manager was Merja Nevalainen (my main collaborator) and my focus was community and environmental Art for wellbeing.

Kalajoki

Kalajoki, located on the edge of the Gulf of Bothnia in the Oulu province of Northern Ostrobothnia, is a town with diverse attributes. Covering an area of 2,391.30 square

kilometers—1,469.15 square kilometers of which is water—Kalajoki has a population density of 13.45 inhabitants per square kilometer, with a total population of approximately 12,407 as of December 31, 2021. The linguistic distribution includes Finnish (98.8%), Swedish (0.2%), and other international languages (1%). The age distribution is 18% aged 0-14, 55.7% aged 15-64, and 26.2% aged 65 and older.

Kalajoki's history dates back to the early 16th century when it first appeared in historical records and was established as a parish in 1525. The parish system was abolished in the 1860s, and the town became a significant regional marketplace for tar trade between Sweden and Finland. As the tar industry declined in the early 19th century, the sawmill industry emerged, and Kalajoki remains known for its operational sawmill factories. Historically, tar, produced from tree sap, was used for ship coatings and medicinal purposes. An old Finnish proverb humorously suggests, "If sauna, vodka, and tar won't help, the disease is probably fatal." Agriculture also played a crucial role in the town's economy, with locals cultivating potatoes, vegetables, wheat, and rye. This tradition continues today, with local farmers selling a variety of products at weekly markets in spring and summer. Kalajoki was officially recognized as a city in 2002, marking the culmination of years of efforts for city status (Kalajoki.fi, Stat.fi).

Hiekkasärkät

Hiekkasärkät, a small town located 10 km south of Kalajoki along Highway 8, is notable for its 3.5 km stretch of sandbars and beaches. This area primarily consists of summer cottages, houses, restaurants, and various recreational facilities. The name "Hiekkasärkät" translates to "sand dunes," reflecting the region's sandy terrain. The permanent population is fewer than 1,000 residents, as the area has traditionally been used for summer holidays, with long-term residency historically restricted. Although regulations have recently changed to allow long-term rentals, the village remains a popular summer tourist destination due to its expansive sandy beaches.

The local economy is diverse, with a mix of private and public enterprises and a notable entrepreneurial presence at 20.9%. New developments in Hiekkasärkät feature a combination of wood, metal, and brick constructions, although some local express concerns about the rapid

changes. Despite this, the community remains vibrant, hosting events such as the Finnish Housing Fair in 2014, which attracted 40,000 visitors over two weeks. Social and cultural activities are promoted through various channels, including websites, social media, flyers, and local media, but much information is also spread through word of mouth (Hiekkasarkat.fi, Stat.fi).

Ylivieska

Ylivieska is a municipality in North Ostrobothnia, Finland, located about 100 kilometers southwest of Oulu. It spans approximately 1,485 square kilometers with a population of about 7,800, resulting in a population density of 12 people per square kilometer. The town is primarily Finnish-speaking, with a balanced age distribution. Historically an agricultural hub, Ylivieska has diversified into various economic sectors. Ylivieska's economy includes agriculture, manufacturing (particularly wood and metal industries), and services. Local farms produce crops and livestock, while manufacturing and services contribute to regional growth. The town is known for its cultural events, such as the Ylivieska Summer Festival, and hosts the Ylivieska Museum, which highlights regional history. Local infrastructure supports amenities like schools, healthcare, and recreational facilities.

The surrounding natural landscape features forests, lakes, and rivers, offering opportunities for outdoor activities like hiking and fishing. Ylivieska focuses on maintaining green spaces and promoting sustainability. Recent developments include improvements in housing, infrastructure, and community services. The town emphasizes community engagement and well-being, addressing challenges related to rural depopulation and seeking growth through local investments (Ylivieska.fi, Stat.fi).

About Brahma Kumaris

The Brahma Kumaris (BK) is a global spiritual organization founded in India in the 1930s. It focuses on Raja Yoga meditation to promote personal and spiritual growth. The organization teaches values such as purity, peace, and love, and encourages ethical living. With centers in over 100 countries, the Brahma Kumaris engages in spiritual education, community outreach, and social initiatives aimed at promoting peace and well-being. Two nature mandala

workshops were done with the collaboration of the BK from Finland. Spiritual retreat was held in these two location in old summer cottages which lasted for 2-3 days. Nature mandala activity was incorporated with their spiritual retreat program where the main objective was also related with mental well-being.

<https://www.brahmakumaris.fi/>

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Well-being

The concept of well-being is multi-faceted and varies across different disciplines, cultures, and individual perspectives and I wanted to start the literature review by first giving brief introduction on well-being. I was captivated by the intricate connection between art-based research methods and well-being. My focus was on reaffirming and comprehending the advantages of engaging with the blend of art and nature, where it serves as a source of inspiration, creativity, and mindfulness. Well-being is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing various measurements of an individual's life, including emotional, psychological, and social aspects as well as having the capacity to manage stress, maintain a positive outlook, and engage in meaningful relationships. It represents the overall quality of an individual's life, encompassing factors such as happiness, contentment, and general life satisfaction.

According to prevalent definitions, well-being captures individual affective and functional experiences on personal and social levels, as well as their comprehensive evaluation of life (Jarden & Roache, 2013, pp. 1). On the other hand, subjective well-being specifically revolves around an individual's self-reported sense of happiness and life satisfaction. It involves emotional responses to events and cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction. This aspect of well-being is often operationalized through self-report surveys that prompt individuals to introspect on their affective states and life satisfaction, interpreting it to deeply personal and subjective measure of well-being (Jarden & Roache, 2013).

Lay perspectives emphasize values such as mental health, feeling valued, work-life balance, and inner harmony, diverging at times from academic definitions that often prioritize components like meaning and relationships (Jarden & Roache, 2013, pp. 2). Moreover, cultural differences result in distinct conceptualizations of well-being, with some cultures placing emphasis on positivity and contentment while others prioritize mental health or social connections. For example, in Nepal, well-being is often associated with various social activities and constant interaction with families and friends. Whereas in India, spiritual knowledge and cultural significance has been one of the key factor to peaceful lifestyle.

Additionally, perceptions of well-being can shift across the lifespan, as adolescents may prioritize happiness, kindness, and safety, while older individuals tend to focus more on meaning and purpose (Jarden & Roache, 2013, pp. 2). In academic contexts, well-being is often defined as a multi-dimensional concept encompassing emotional, psychological, and social components, with various models such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs categorizing well-being into physiological needs, esteem, belonging, and safety (Russell et al., 2013, pp. 6). Furthermore, Russell et al., highlights ten constituents contributing to overall well-being in relation to nature, including physical health, mental health, spirituality, sense of control, learning, inspiration, sense of place, identity, connectedness, and subjective well-being. These diverse perspectives underscore the complexity of well-being and the importance of considering multiple factors when discussing or measuring it.

Finnish well-being models often emphasize the importance of a balanced life, supported by strong social safety nets, quality education, healthcare, and a focus on work-life balance. Additionally, there is significant attention to environmental factors and community engagement as essential components of well-being. According to the (OECD) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the idea of well-being in Finland is captured in the "Economy of Well-being," which has been developed over the past decade to achieve a good balance within financial, social, and ecological sustainability in decision-making. This approach underscores the interconnectedness of these dimensions, aiming to reinforce societal stability in the long run. Finland has actively led discussions on this concept at the European Union level, especially during its EU Council Presidency in 2019, advocating for the incorporation of well-being perspectives in national and Union policies (Fleischer, L., & Stokenberga, L., 2023).

Moreover, the OECD Well-being Framework serves as a foundational tool for evaluating well-being outcomes in Finland, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and trends compared to other OECD countries. The framework covers various dimensions of well-being, including material conditions, quality of life factors, and community relations, while also taking into account inequalities across different population groups. Overall, Finland is recognized as a world-wide role model in well-being and sustainability, with ongoing efforts to address challenges such as skills decline, environmental performance stagnation, and socio-economic inequalities.

However, when I examined Finland's statistics on mental health issues such as stress, depression, and loneliness, which are of considerable concern. According to Statistics Finland, approximately 30% of individuals aged 16 or older reported experiencing loneliness in 2022, a significant increase from previous years (Stat.fi). Additionally, a 2023 survey by the Finnish Red Cross revealed that 61% of respondents felt lonely at least occasionally, up from 52% the previous year. The survey also highlighted that young individuals, particularly those aged 15-24, are the most affected, with a substantial number reporting feelings of exclusion and isolation (Redcross.fi). Moreover, statistics on depression and stress reveal that these issues are widespread, especially among younger populations, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating the situation. These factors highlighted the pressing need for targeted interventions to improve community well-being in Finland, leading me to further pursue art-based research through Applied Visual Art (AVA) interventions as a potential solution.

3.2 Connection of art with wellbeing

I consider creating mandala as a form of visual art. In Nepal, I have engaged in making mandalas with my families, friends as well as in the community during various cultural rituals and spiritual symbolism. It is an act of artistic expression where the materials are arranged intricately and symmetrically carefully composed with spatial awareness and understanding of balance and harmony with high level of creativity. Moreover, the process involves great deal of selection such as natural materials which comes in different shapes and forms and sand or powder which comes in various colours. These are also fundamental aspects of visual art that involves aesthetic experience and artistic principles which is meditative and therapeutic promoting emotional release. In this theoretical underpinning in relation of art with well-being, I wanted to explore the relation of artistic processes and principles such as immersion, self-expression and creativity that influences the aspects of well-being.

The connection of art with well-being dates back to ancient civilizations such as in Egypt and Greece where art was integral part of their healing rituals and associations with deities were believed to give health and joy (Robins, 2008 & Pollitt, 1990). On the other hand, the medieval and Renaissance religious and anatomical art played an important role in promoting psychological and spiritual well-being (Hall, 2017). Later in the 18th and 19th centuries, art

and craft activities were incorporated in their therapeutic settings as a treatment for mental well-being which was also called the moral treatment movement (Porter, 2002). Then pioneers like Margaret Naumburg in the mid-20th century used art as a medium to reach the unconscious mind which formed as an emerging art therapy. Today, art therapy and community art based projects are globally recognized where numerous researches are supporting the benefits in overall well-being.

Before I dwell into this subject further, it is important to distinguish that using visual arts to build mental health capacity is different from ‘art therapy’ or arts education; it focuses on the visual arts process to promote positive mental states and self-regulation skills. Under the framework of applied visual art (AVA), my role here is that of an artist, researcher and facilitator for the art-based activities and I do not claim to be an art therapist or health care worker. Art therapy and art-based activities has distinct purposes and methods with different settings. Essentially, art therapies are used as a direct therapeutic work with clinical settings where creative activities are conducted by trained therapists as part of their clinical provision that helps them to establish specific mental health needs (Gilliam, 2018).

In contrast, art-based activities include a broader range of programs and initiatives particularly participatory arts which aim to make art accessible to community, underserved populations and complement traditional health practices. These initiatives are not strictly therapeutic but focus on enhancing holistic well-being, promoting social inclusion, and empowering communities. By engaging in artistic expression, participants can experience improved mental health, strengthened community ties, and increased self-esteem (Stickley et al., 2018). These activities highlight the role of art in promoting overall well-being and social cohesion without necessarily involving formal therapy sessions typically facilitated by artists.

I have benefited every moment spent in producing my artistic works and engaging in artistic activities has also helped me to calm my thought processes and relax during the art making process. Similarly, the process of creating mandala art can facilitate a flow state, which is marked by deep engagement, focus, and enjoyment in the creative act. In (Martin, 2022), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s studies shows that by engaging in creative activities, for example making visual art, allows the individuals to emerge in a mental state that he called it as “Flow”. This state of Flow is comprised of motivation, feeling focused and experiencing clarity. He described the Flow like being “in the zone”, where individuals are focused and

engaged that it is enriching their performance which enhances problem-solving abilities and improve creative solutions. He further explains that, “active engagement in a visual tactile process over time can lead to a shift to healthy mental states” which can significantly develop cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural skills that strengthens the mental well-being. This immersion in creative activities contributes to a sense of fulfilment and enhances overall mental health.

Artistic activities give participants the opportunities for expressing themselves through non spoken words that enables them to freely engage and communicate their ideas and emotions non-conventionally and in their own capacity and space. Creating mandala is an artistic process that allows the individuals to indulge in their actions rather than words. Without having the pressure of verbalising, participants are able to release physical tension, promote relaxation and conduct free movements during the art making process.

In the non-clinical approach, the individuals are able to engage and express their emotions, identify desirable and undesirable behaviours, develop patience and eventually learn to cope with life’s challenges positively (Martin, 2022). Involvement in participatory arts programs, under the guidance of artists, has displayed positive effects on health and wellbeing. These findings emphasize the potential of art as a protective factor in enhancing mental health and well-being, offering a unique opportunity for self-expression and social engagement outside of traditional medical interventions.

Lastly, Gorny-Wegrzyn & Perry (2022), highlights how engaging in artistic activities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, had offered significant support for mental health and well-being. He states that the stress and isolation brought about by the pandemic can be alleviated through activities such as art therapy, creative writing, music, and visual arts. These creative pursuits have been shown to improve self-compassion, alleviate anxiety and depression, and enhance psychological well-being and social connection. Moreover, the research emphasizes that creative arts interventions, whether in-person or online, can provide accessible and cost-effective ways to promote self-care, autonomy, and positive mental health outcomes, especially during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3 Nature and wellbeing

Nature has always been my ultimate muse, promoting not only my physical, emotional, and mental well-being but also stimulating my creativity. Its vibrant colours, intricate patterns, and unique balance make it a powerful source of inspiration. In my research, I wanted to delve into the multifaceted benefits of nature, its relation with humans and integrating visual art by creating mandalas using natural elements in natural settings. Throughout the process, participants were engaged with nature by collecting natural objects like leaves, stones, flowers, and twigs to design their mandalas with natural beauty. Following this, they shared their personal reflections in a group setting, advancing a deep understanding and appreciation for the individual mandalas.

Existing research suggests that a strong connection to nature significantly influences individual life satisfaction and overall happiness (Russell, 2013, pp. 19). Moreover, exposure to natural environments has been associated with improved mental health and reduced stress levels. For instance, empirical studies indicate that exposure to natural elements can serve to alleviate job-related stress and enhance overall well-being (Russell, 2013, pp. 8). Engaging with nature, whether through outdoor social activities or residing in natural environments, positively impacts mental well-being by promoting social cohesion and propagating a sense of community (Russell, 2013, pp. 8). Substantial evidence illustrates that various forms of nature experiences such as comprising observational, interactive, and residential encounters with natural settings can contribute to stress reduction, heightened patience, and enhanced emotional well-being too (Russell, 2013, pp. 8)

The impact of nature on people's well-being is significant. Being connected to nature has a positive influence on human health, especially in terms of stress reduction and cognitive restoration (Baxter, 2019, pp. 6). Studies have discovered with exposure to natural settings and a strong bond with nature are linked to improved psychological well-being, sense of purpose, independence, personal development, and cognitive restoration. For instance, spending time in nature, like walking in a natural setting, has been found to result in better cognitive restoration from tiredness compared to urban environments. This suggests that nature plays a significant role in enhancing well-being and lessening the impact of mental

fatigue. Moreover, feeling connected to nature is linked to higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (McMahan, 2018, pp. 17).

In addition, nature also provides a sense of identity and helps alleviate loneliness by offering individuals opportunities for self-identification and relatedness to the larger natural world (Passmore & Howell, 2014, pp. 5). Research suggests that individuals who incorporate nature into their self-identity tend to experience various indices of well-being, including reduced feelings of existential loneliness and increased social connectedness (Passmore & Howell, 2014, pp. 9). Immersion in natural environments can dissolve an individual's sense of separateness, promoting a greater sense of relatedness and connectedness, thereby mitigating feelings of isolation. Moreover, Passmore and Howell indicates that nature experiences can facilitate a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself, fulfilling the innate human need for connection to the natural world and promoting well-being.

Furthermore, Howell et al, (2011) found that nature connectedness promotes mindfulness by encouraging individuals to engage their senses fully, helping them stay present and attentive to the moment. Creating a mandala in nature allows individuals to fully engage in the present moment through their senses, from the initial arrival at the natural setting to the collection of materials and the final creation of the mandala. This process encourages mindfulness and a deep interaction with the environment, enhancing the overall experience and fostering a sense of calmness and well-being. According to Russell et al., (2013), nature helps individuals to be present and mindful and enhance overall wellbeing through four distinct ways. Firstly, knowing and understanding the natural systems. Secondly perceiving the nature attentively. Thirdly, interacting with nature and lastly living within the nature where we are surrounded by nature.

Diving deeper into the relation of nature and human, the concept of bio philia explores the relationship between nature and humans, suggesting that humans possess an inherent connection and affinity with the natural world. This concept postulates that due to evolutionary history, humans have developed an innate tendency to seek connections with nature, as it provides various benefits for well-being and overall health (Baxter & Pelletier, 2019, pp. 3). The bio philia hypothesis underscores the idea that contact with nature is crucial for humans and can positively influence various aspects of their lives, including physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. This inherent draw towards nature implies that

humans have a deep-rooted need for nature-relatedness and interactions with the natural environment to thrive and flourish.

In the article, 'Where eastern wisdom meets western Eco-psychology' the "Green Mandala" referred to a circular form created using natural materials and environments by Alexander Kopytin. This mandala-making practice involves utilizing various botanical ephemera such as, leaves, twigs, branches, flowers, seed, earth, sand, stones, and other natural elements to construct the mandala. The use of natural materials and forms is emphasized to create a fuller, more complex sensory and symbolic experience for the participants engaging in this eco arts therapeutic activity. The significance of these materials lies in their ability to evoke biophilic reactions and bring gratification, attentiveness, and a sense of completion to the individuals interacting with them as part of the mandala creation process.

On the other hand, Capaldi et al., 2015, suggests that while there may be a biologically based desire for nature, modern lifestyles are leading to a disconnection from natural environments. In their article 'Flourishing in nature: A review of the benefits of connecting with nature and its application as a wellbeing intervention', it is highlighted that throughout recorded human history, there has been a recurring belief that coming in close contact with the natural world improves well-being. The authors discuss how despite the enduring nature of this belief across time and cultures, many people today are becoming detached, both physically and emotionally, from nature. A large portion of people are living in urban environments has significantly increased since 1950, leading to a potential disconnection from the nature-rich surroundings typically associated with rural living. This trend is expected to continue, with less time being spent outdoors in financially wealthy, industrialized nations.

Nevertheless, natural elements have been used in traditional and contemporary art across various cultures. The significance of natural elements in traditional and contemporary art across cultures is profound, serving as a common theme that connects diverse artistic expressions. Historically, Tibetan sand mandalas were made of precious and semi-precious stones such as turquoise, coral, lapis lazuli and other colored stones that were crushed to create colorful sand (Redd, N. T., 2013). Besides that, other cultures such as North America, Aboriginal Australians, African Tribes and Asian cultures have used various natural elements like plant fibers, natural dyes, bamboo, wood and papers to name a few. Traditional art often draws inspiration from natural landscapes, flora, and fauna, reflecting a deep-rooted

connection with the environment. In contrast, contemporary art continues to integrate natural elements, albeit in innovative ways, reflecting evolving perspectives on humanity's relationship with nature (McMahan, 2018, pp. 6). This continuity in incorporating natural elements in art showcases a persistent acknowledgment of the beauty, symbolism, and inspiration derived from the natural world across different cultural contexts, bridging past traditions with modern artistic interpretations.

3.4 Mandala for well-being

The word mandala can mean “circle” or “center” in Sanskrit where “manda” is referred to as “center” and “la” to the essence of “accomplishment”. In Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism it is created and used for sacred performances and an instrument for meditation for self-realization with various meanings and interpretation. It is typically composed of geometric patterns radiating from the center to outward direction and can be in the form of drawings, paintings, sand, natural materials and various kind of physical objects in modern art. This circular form of mandala, often unnoticed, can also be found in the nature in abundance and shown to have a calming effects. These intricate patterns can be seen in various forms, ranging from the microscopic to the macroscale in flower petals, the spirals of the shells, the structure of the ferns, and even the segmentation within fruits like citrus and apples to name a few. These naturally formed symmetrical patterns is highly aesthetic and also resonate with sacred geometry that has shown to promote sense of spiritual and mindfulness connection (King et al., 2019).

Carl Jung was a pioneer in using mandala as a therapy. He was the founder who explored that drawing mandala could have a calm effect on the patients as well as facilitates psychic amalgamation. He viewed mandala as a symbol of Self's wholeness. Jung observed that mandalas were a symbolic mirror of the psyche which helped in facilitating and integrating conscious and unconscious energies, state of mind, and dynamics. He believed that mandala art was like a therapy and there were significant benefits in healing, self-understanding and balancing the inner being (Jung, 1963). Jung wrote:

“I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, [...] which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time. [...] Only gradually did I discover what the mandala really is: [...] the Self, the wholeness of the personality, which if all goes well is harmonious.”

—Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, pp. 195–196. pp.232 *Vintage books revised edition* (Doubleday)

Mandala art therapy have shown to be a holistic approach to self-expression, emotional processing and introspection. It has shown to help the individuals perceive themselves in a more balanced and healthy way that stimulated self-awareness and understanding of their relationships and ultimately promoting well-being (Kopytin, 2017 pp. 14). Moreover, research conducted on psychiatric inpatients found that mandala art therapy positively impacted subjected well-being, resilience and hope. Participants attended eight sessions of mandala art therapy over several weeks which resulted in significant improvements, particularly in their levels of hope. By engaging in the process of creating mandalas, individuals can experience a sense of accomplishment, observe changes in their mental status, and alleviate emotional confusion which leads to increased hope and improved subjective well-being (Kim et al., 2018, pp. 4).

Exploring further, mandala art making can enhance well-being through various mechanisms such as mindfulness that promotes self-understanding. Mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It involves being aware of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, or the environment around us in a calm, accepting way. One of the main goal of the nature mandala workshops in this research was to provide such opportunity that allowed the individuals to explore the influence of being mindful. Mindfulness is often cultivated through meditation, but it can also be integrated into daily activities and routines (Kabat-Zinn, J.,1994). Research has indicated a significant positive correlation between mindfulness and subjective well-being particularly through positive emotions. Mindfulness allows individuals to respond to situations with detachment, promoting accurate assessments, choice of coping strategies, and positive attitudes towards uncertain feelings.

This can lead to seeking social support, stopping negative emotions, and problem-solving to enhance positive emotions, ultimately boosting subjective well-being (Liu, C et al, 2020, pp. 3). Additionally, mindfulness has been shown to improve subjective well-being in different

populations, such as aged individuals, workplace employees, teachers, and college students (Allen et al., 2017; Aliche and Onyishi, 2019; Bajaj and Pande, 2016; Ge et al., 2019). The benefits of mindfulness practice include reduced stress, better emotional regulation, improved focus and concentration, better self-awareness, with sense of overall well-being and are commonly used in various therapeutic and self-care practices to promote mental and emotional health for example through mandala making.

On the other hand, mandala art making is an act of aesthetic exploration. It is a creative process allowing the individuals to engage in their self-expressions. Alexander Kopytin, (2017), similar to my research studies, utilized natural materials to create mandalas, connecting individuals with their environment and inviting them to express themselves through artistic creation. This process allowed for the integration of sensory, emotional, imaginative, and spiritual experiences, promoting a holistic understanding of oneself and one's relationships. The act of making mandalas can be viewed as a creative venture that goes beyond self-expression, emphasizing an inspiration to support and co-exist with nature and life. This blend of aesthetic and spiritual expression within mandala art promotes balance, harmony, and self-awareness.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, mandalas are considered as a spiritual and ritual symbol that represents a universe and serves as a spiritual maps guiding meditators towards enlightenment. They represent both the macrocosm of the cosmos and the microcosm of the individual psyche, reflecting the idea that external world and internal self are interconnected. The circular form in mandala can symbolize a multitude of things for different people and provides healing in cultural traditions worldwide (Kim H. et al, 2018, pp. 2). On the other hand, mandalas include depictions of deities or symbolic shapes that embody spiritual teachings where each layers can represent the unfolding journey or expansion of thoughts and feelings. While for the others, colors can resonate with their intentions and can represent various emotions or state of being for example blue for calmness, ocean, deep thinking and red for energy, passion and life and so on. Every individual will reflect their symbolic meaning and interpretation depending on their personal experiences, culture and beliefs that they associate with different elements in the mandala art. When the mandala art is completed, it can then be used to reflect on the overall design and reveal deeper connections with their personal insights and subconscious mind. Kim et al., (2018) suggests that the process of

creating mandala can be a potential tool for self-discovery and understanding, leading to a greater connection to one's inner self and sense of wholeness.

3.5 Community art and wellbeing

In my workshops, creating nature mandalas with the community in a natural setting proved to be one of the most successful activities for community building, conducted with ease and comfort while accommodating full benefit. This artistic activity involved a group of people, both familiar and unfamiliar with each other, who showed great respect for one another. Participants experienced a sense of fulfilment and joy, experiencing nature first hand giving a sense of calm and serenity. As well as I observed mutual understanding, collaboration, and sharing among them that supported intercultural dialogue and understanding, breaking down barriers and encouraging inclusivity. Participating in such creative activities promotes individual and communal well-being by enhancing social connections, developing personal strengths and skills, providing creative solutions, encouraging cultural understanding and contributing to overall health improvements.

Engaging in community arts cultivates social connections and networks, which can reduce isolation and enhance feelings of belonging. For instance, participation in collective art-making creates opportunities for individuals to meet and collaborate, thereby increasing trust and community pride. By bringing together diverse groups, these activities can improve tolerance and reduce conflict (Guetzkow, J, 2002, pp. 7). Besides, Matarasso (1997) explains that community art helps individuals feel part of a larger group or collective identity. Such community art projects create opportunities for individuals to meet and collaborate encouraging friendships and social networks which is crucial for building a sense of belonging. He further explains that the act of creating art together allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to interact, share experiences, and develop mutual understanding. Finally, when community members come together to express their shared identity through art, it reinforces their connection to one another and to their community.

Community arts activities contribute to personal growth by boosting individuals' confidence and self-worth. Participants often report increased self-esteem and a greater sense of agency

in their lives (Matarasso, F, 1999). This personal empowerment can lead to a more active engagement in other areas of life, including education and employment. Matarasso further explains that participants in community art projects allows the individuals to express themselves by giving them a voice and a role in shaping their environment. This empowerment can lead to a greater sense of ownership and belonging within the community, feeling more in control of their lives and more engaged in local decision-making processes.

In addition, engaging in artistic community activities allows individuals to express themselves creatively, which can be therapeutic. Creative engagement in community has been shown to decrease anxiety, stress, and mood disturbances, contributing to overall psychological well-being (Stuckey, H. L., & Nobel, J. 2010, pp. 8). The act of creating art can serve as a form of emotional release and a way to process experiences. Moreover, social interactions through community art projects can help reduce feeling of loneliness and enhance emotional support among participants (Jackson, M. R., 2006, pp. 41). Likewise, engaging in creative activities has also shown improvements in physical health where the number of medical visits have reduced because of enhanced immune function (Guetzkow, J, 2002). The physical act helps create movements encouraging the participants to manoeuvre through various anatomical gestures and actions. Last but not the least, engaging in creative activities provides enjoyment and fulfilment, which can lead to a more positive outlook on life (Matarasso, F, 1999, pp. 76).

To conclude, community art in nature promotes well-being by promoting creativity and enhancing connections with the natural environment. Engaging in mandala art within natural settings encourages participants to express themselves creatively, which can lead to emotional release, stress reduction, and personal growth. Creating art outdoors deepens people's connection to nature, which helps improve mental health by reducing anxiety, lifting mood, and cultivating a sense of peace and belonging. Through communal art activities, participants build social connections and a sense of community, which further contributes to overall well-being. The combination of creative expression and nature interaction creates a holistic experience that nurtures both mental and emotional health, helping individuals feel more grounded, inspired, and connected to the world around them.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Art Based Action Research (ABAR) and Heuristic research method

Creating mandala is an artistic practise which is visual, creative and aesthetic that made it possible for me to use Art-Based Research method. Under the umbrella of art-based research (ABR) method, I used Art-Based Action Research (ABAR) for the community workshops and heuristic research method for self-reflective approach through artistic production. And lastly qualitative method for research analysis. I conducted five workshops in different places, each of which developed in a continuous cyclical process following the previous ones.

Three workshops were conducted in collaboration with the municipalities of Kalajoki (Hiekkasärkät) and Ylivieska, who were launching a bigger project called KUMA (kulttuurimatkailusta hyvinvointia). One of their main objectives was well-being through art and nature for community building which matched with my research interest. The other two workshops were done in collaboration with retreat programs of the Brahma Kumaris meditation organization from Helsinki in Nuuksio and Kuusamo where the topic was “Healing”. Combining ABAR and heuristic research methods involved integrating the strengths of both approaches to create comprehensive, reflective, and experimental research methodology. *"In a sense, arts- based research is a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspect of the world"* (Barone & Eisner, pp. 3). Through ABAR, I could actively participate in artistic practices with the participants where I played the role of researcher, facilitator and also participant. Whereas, in heuristic research method I deeply engaged with the personal experience and self-reflection.

I was inspired to use Art-Based Research method when it was first introduced to me in the University of Lapland. As an artist, it was exciting and encouraging to use ABR (art-based research) method as a whole to get a deeper understanding of human conditions. It opened the possibilities of exploring the aspects of well-being because it offered a unique way to access obscure insights, form new connections, explore innovative research questions, and present research outcomes in engaging ways for diverse audiences (Leavy, 2020). ABR as a whole is a methodological approach that incorporates creative arts practices into the research process such as visual art, music, dance, performance, and literature as tools for data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation. Leavy further describes that ABR method

cultivates new insights, improves empathetic understandings, and enlightens factors of the social world and experiences of human in ways distinct from traditional quantitative and qualitative research methods. Arts-based practices are particularly suited for research projects aimed at describing, exploring, discovering, or unsettling, and they capture processes that mirror the revealing nature of social life (Leavy, 2020, Guilford Press pp. 49). This approach values flexibility, openness, and intuition, emphasizing conceptual, symbolic, metaphorical, and thematic thinking (Leavy, 2020, Guilford Press pp.57).

Under ABR, art-based action research (ABAR) involves the active participation and collaboration of local community members in artistic activities to express experience and knowledge beyond verbal and written language. This method was particularly suited for my research as the aim was to bring social changes through art and action. ABAR was established in the University of Lapland that embraced the interdisciplinary subjects of science and art. It is widely utilized in the fields of art education, applied visual arts, and contemporary art (Jokela, Huhmarniemi, 2015, pp. 1). This innovative approach involves integrating art into research to actively engage stakeholders and members of an organization or community. It effectively captures unspoken knowledge and experiences that may be overlooked by conventional qualitative methods that relies on verbal or written language based on principle and values. Whereas, Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2015), further explains that ABAR's primary objective is to facilitate practical change and yield valid knowledge while incorporating the tacit knowledge of stakeholders and local communities, often by articulating experience and knowledge through art.

Exploring further, Pirkko Anttila's art-based action research diagram employs a double dichotomy framework, classifying research approaches along two axes: objective vs. subjective and theoretical vs. practical. This structure situates art-based action research within a broader methodological spectrum, integrating subjective experiences with practical applications, and blending theoretical insights with creative expression. It highlights the critical, interpretive, and experimental dimensions (Pirkko Anttila, 2007, pp.23). In my research, creating nature mandalas with the community and also engaging in my artistic production fitted into Anttila's double dichotomy framework where it intersected in the quadrants of subjective-practical and subjective-theoretical.

Both activities in individual level and communal level involved personal and collective experiences, emotions, and expressions of the participants who actively engaged with hands-on creative process. On the other hand, the experiences and insights gained from creating mandalas were reflected upon and connected to broader theoretical concepts about well-being, community and nature and their interconnectedness. ABR enables researchers to explore research questions in a comprehensive and interactive way, blending theory with practice. The focus shifts from validity to credibility, broadening multiple perspectives and understanding of the experiences under study (Leavy, 2015).

Grounded in mutual understanding and shared values, the ABAR method follows a cyclical research process to promote ongoing development (Jokela, Hiltunen, & Härkönen, 2015). My research aimed to explore, identify, and discover the well-being aspects through creating nature mandalas in a natural setting with the community. Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2015) explains that the iterative cycle involves four stages: place and community investigation, practice-led artistic intervention, documenting and analysing, and finally reflecting and evaluating the collected data.

4.2 Cycles of action

In the first stage, the process started with investigating the place (Kalajoki, Hiekkasärkät, Ylivieska) and community mapping, where I familiarized myself with the operating environment and various methods. Initially, I drafted a research plan and interacted with the project manager of the KUMA project, Merja Nevalainen, through several meetings and email exchanges. We shared our ideas, views, and objectives and agreed to set dates, times, and places for the workshops. Similarly, the other two workshops in Kuusamo and Nuuksio were also conducted through similar process.

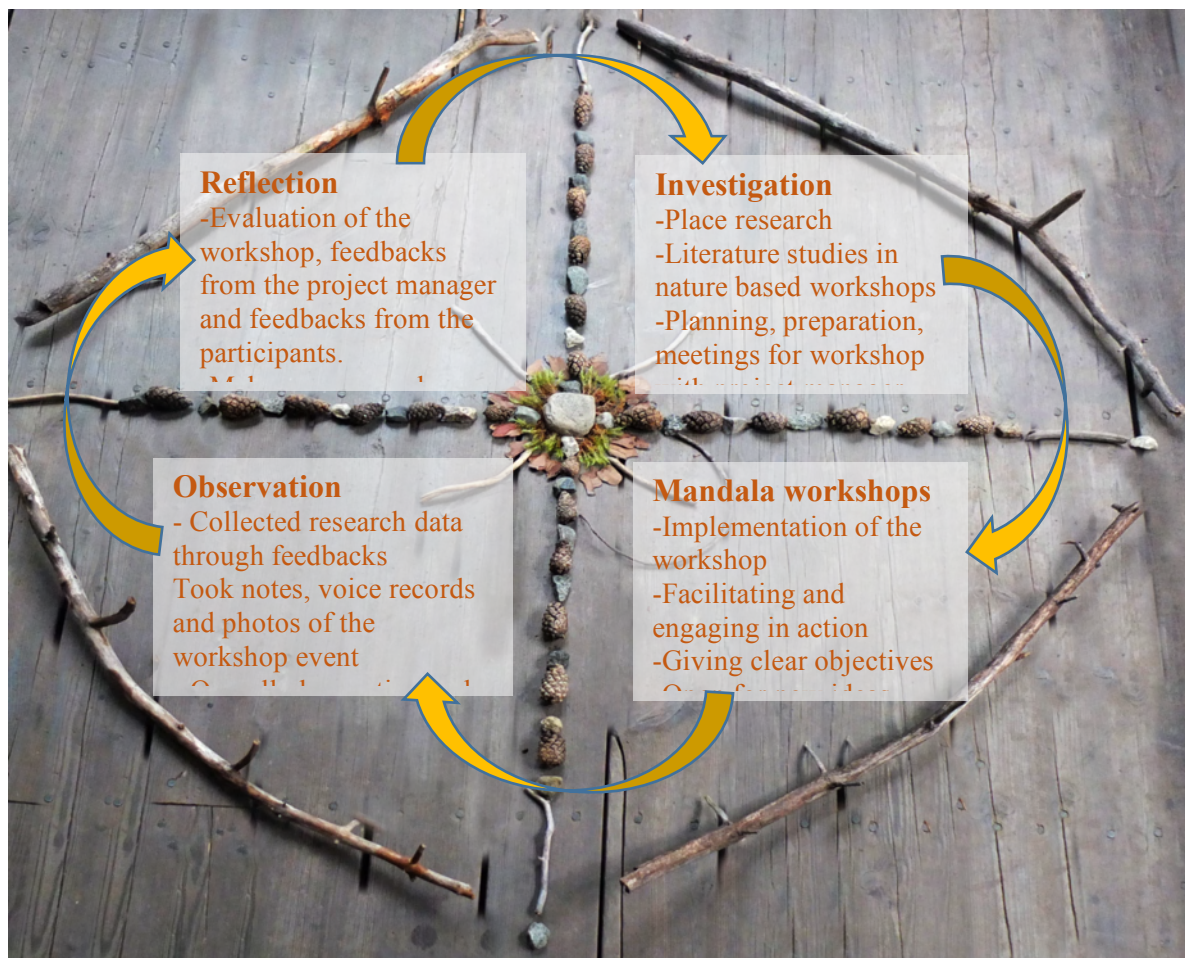


Fig. 1 Art-Based Action Research cycle based on Timo Jokela

I gained a thorough insight into the KUMA project's objectives, and Merja was the bridge between me and the municipality's cultural members. She conveyed all the necessary background information, the technicalities and the intended outcomes from the workshops. After several discussions, meetings, and planning, the plan proceeded. Marketing strategies were implemented to raise awareness of the event through posters, social media, and the city's web pages. Other than that, I also explored the cultural and art based activities happenings in these towns and met the art teachers to gain better understanding of the place in terms of art and culture. Similarly, the other two workshops, were planned with the retreat leader of the Brahma Kumaris organization and through several discussions and exchange of ideas, we agreed to conduct the nature mandala workshop as part of their retreat program.

During the second stage, participants engaged in mandala workshops at various locations and times. Participants gathered natural materials from their surroundings and collaborated to create a mandala, respecting each other's choices and contributions. The activity aimed to be conducted in silence, providing a chance for individuals to reflect on their inner thoughts while also respecting others' personal space. In the third stage, I gathered data through guided questionnaires, reflective feedback, group discussions, observations, and field notes. Subsequently, I analyzed and reflected on the collected data and experiences from the activity in collaboration with the program organizers, enabling us to improve the future activities as Leavy (2017) describes that community participation with all the relevant stakeholders are equally valued, enabling collective identification of core issues, problems and solutions (Leavy, 2017, pp. 20). Noting every detail of the mandala creation process was crucial for progressing and refining future nature mandala activities. In addition, Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018) also emphasizes, these stages are essential for understanding and developing the purpose of such activities.



Fig. 2 The action research cycles of nature mandala workshops

In my artistic segment, I seized the opportunity to explore the personal benefits of dedicating time to myself, engaging in what I call "me- time", a heuristic methodology for qualitative research approach aimed at understanding human experience and seeking meaning (Moustaka, 1994). Heuristic research method allowed me to immerse in the research topic, engage intensely with the subject matter through my personal experience and introspection. For several months, I gathered various plants, observed their characteristics, and carefully pressed them to create flower pressed mandalas. I aimed to assess how this method contributed to my quest for peace, serenity, and creative inspiration — an experience I also

aspired to facilitate within the community. By undertaking this individual artistic production, I pursued to thoroughly examine and analyse the entire process as a researcher and as an artist (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 15). *What were the individual- level benefits and outcomes I derived from this practice? How do they differ from the communal experience of mandala- making? What factors needed to be considered in evaluating these outcomes? And what novel insights (subjective interpretation) could I draw from this exploration* (Matthews et al., 2010, pp. 28). These were some of the questions I aimed to address. I engaged my sensory perceptions to connect with nature, experiencing the textures of surfaces first-hand. My goal was to establish a direct, personal relationship with nature, allowing me to reflect inwardly and explore fresh perspectives.

According to McNiff (2010), a researcher's active involvement in the creative process increases the credibility of the data being researched. Additionally, McNiff (1998) suggested using aesthetic criteria—such as heightened awareness, illumination, and meaningful discoveries—to assess the validity of heuristic research. Bloomgarden and Netzer (1998) discussed that using Moustakas' six-phase model in heuristic research makes the researcher's perception more powerful while the standardized pre- and post-assessments supported the validity. In addition, reflective journaling with consistent reminders improved reliability.

Initial Engagement: I began by identifying the personal interests that resonate most deeply with me and those that hold significance within a social context.



Immersion: In this phase, I pinpointed a specific research question and immersed myself fully in the topic. I devoted time to creating nature mandalas and documenting my experiences through journaling.



Incubation: I then stepped back from the immersive experience, allowing my existing understanding to evolve naturally. This period facilitated insight and the integration of new knowledge.



Illumination: This stage was marked by moments of breakthrough, discovery, and heightened awareness about my research topic.



Explication: I analyzed and articulated the discoveries made throughout the process, organizing and presenting the emerging themes.



Creative Synthesis: In the final stage, I brought together my reflective writings, data collection, and arts-based creative insights, expressing them in a personal and intuitive way

Fig.3 Moussaka's (1990) six stages of heuristic inquiry.

4.3 Data collection and Analysis (Qualitative)

For artistic part, I used reflective journaling and personal narratives to capture the internal experiences as a researcher. I documented visual data of the processes through photographs as well. Whereas for the community workshops, I collected the research data from participants through a reflective written feedback after the mandala workshop. Papers, pens, colour pens and cardboard for support were available for use. I gave and open ended questions verbally to the participants of which they wrote their feedbacks on their experiences during and after the workshop without any time limit. The feedback was not required to be answered to anything specific but rather a general feelings and experiences on overall workshop. However, separate paper with guided questionnaires were also provided such as, a) *What was the best part for you?* B) *Did you face any challenges or discomfort?* C) *How do you feel about this experience overall?* As a result, I could gather more detailed response through open written feedbacks. The participants remained anonymous.

I also collected visual data through photographs capturing the process from beginning to the end of workshop. Each mandala art was unique and colourful with its own forms, shapes and patterns. Some mandalas had symbolic meaning and some had spiritual significance. Through general open discussions towards the end of the workshops, I was also able to capture some of the verbal explanations of the participants' experiences during the mandala making. I was able to record their elaborated presentations on their mandala making journey through a voice recorder. I felt that these discussions gave opportunities for all the participants and myself to communicate and understand each other in a total different level. I also took field notes which described the nature of the workshop, settings, weather conditions, the atmosphere, any peculiar happenings, suggestions, comments, challenges, performance of the participants and overall observations during the day. All the data were stored in confidential in my hard drive digitally.

Traditional qualitative research is based on use of words, meanings, hermeneutical, descriptive, value driven, persuasive or interdisciplinary. It can also be achieved with few participants as well. I used thematic analysis method of the qualitative data that came from written reflections after the workshops, which were used in this study. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that finds, examines, and describes patterns (or themes) in data. It examines the data sets to pinpoint recurring themes, which are then interpreted to understand

underlying meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 77-101). This method is widely used because it is flexible and can be adapted to suit a range of research questions and data types. Thematic analysis is valued for its flexibility and utility in capturing the richness and complexity of qualitative data, making it a popular choice in various fields of research. I underlined specific statements and examined to categorize into themes that represented areas of interest related with my research title and questions (Creswell, 2018). I applied both deductive and inductive method in the manner that there were reconceptualised ideas and on the other hand open to exploring new findings.

Following each workshop, I thoroughly familiarized myself with the collected data by immersing myself in its content. This involved taking detailed notes and developing initial codes to capture key concepts. Subsequently, I systematically extracted noteworthy features, such as words and phrases, to align with my research question. Identifying potential themes, I grouped these codes into interrelated categories, representing significant patterns and responses. Reviewing this framework, I ensured that the themes accurately reflected the coded extracts and the entire dataset, culminating in a comprehensive thematic map of the analysis. Finally, I refined and named the themes, identifying the essence of each category within the context of my research and literature reviews. See the following figures for further demonstration from few examples.

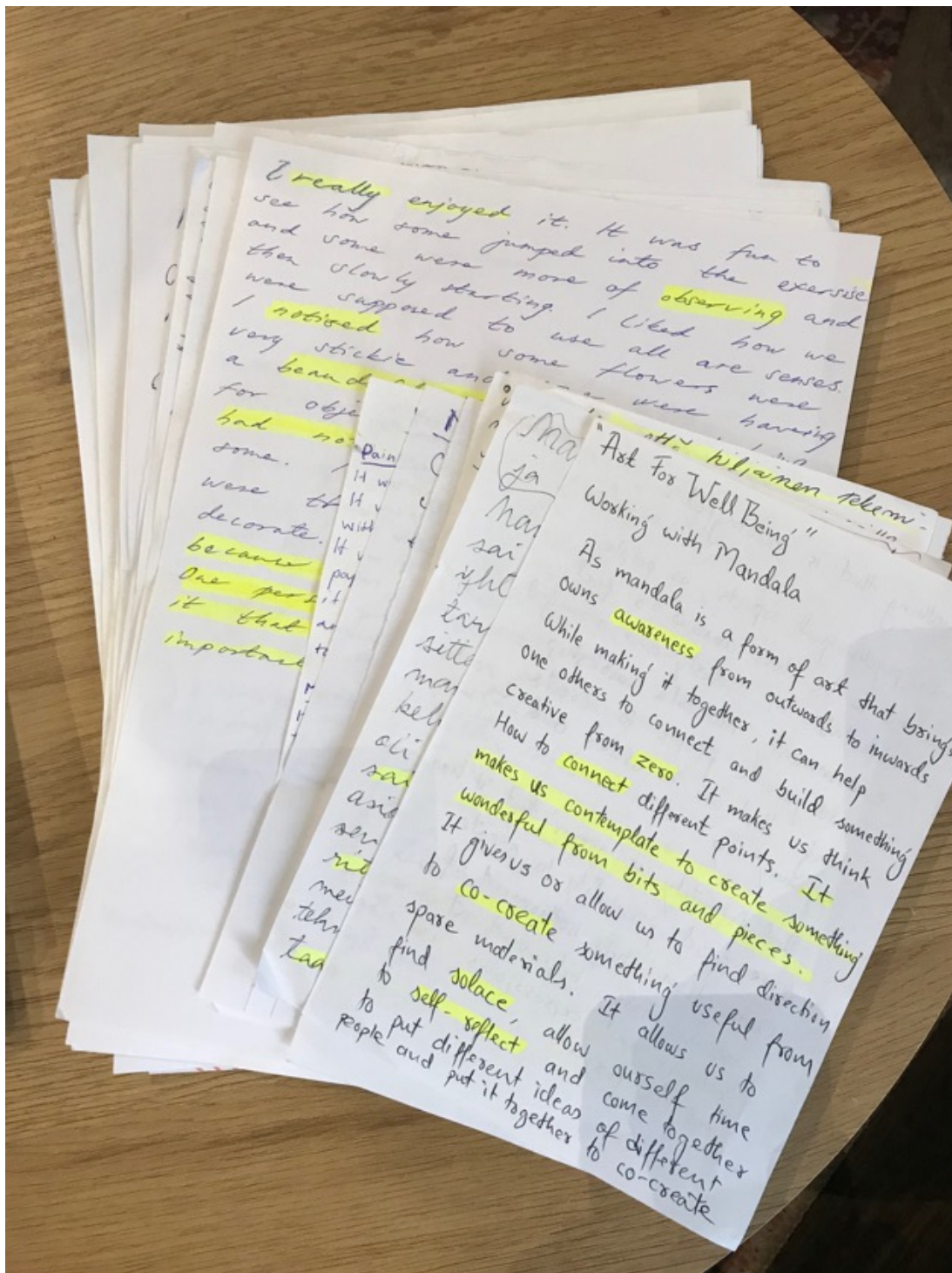
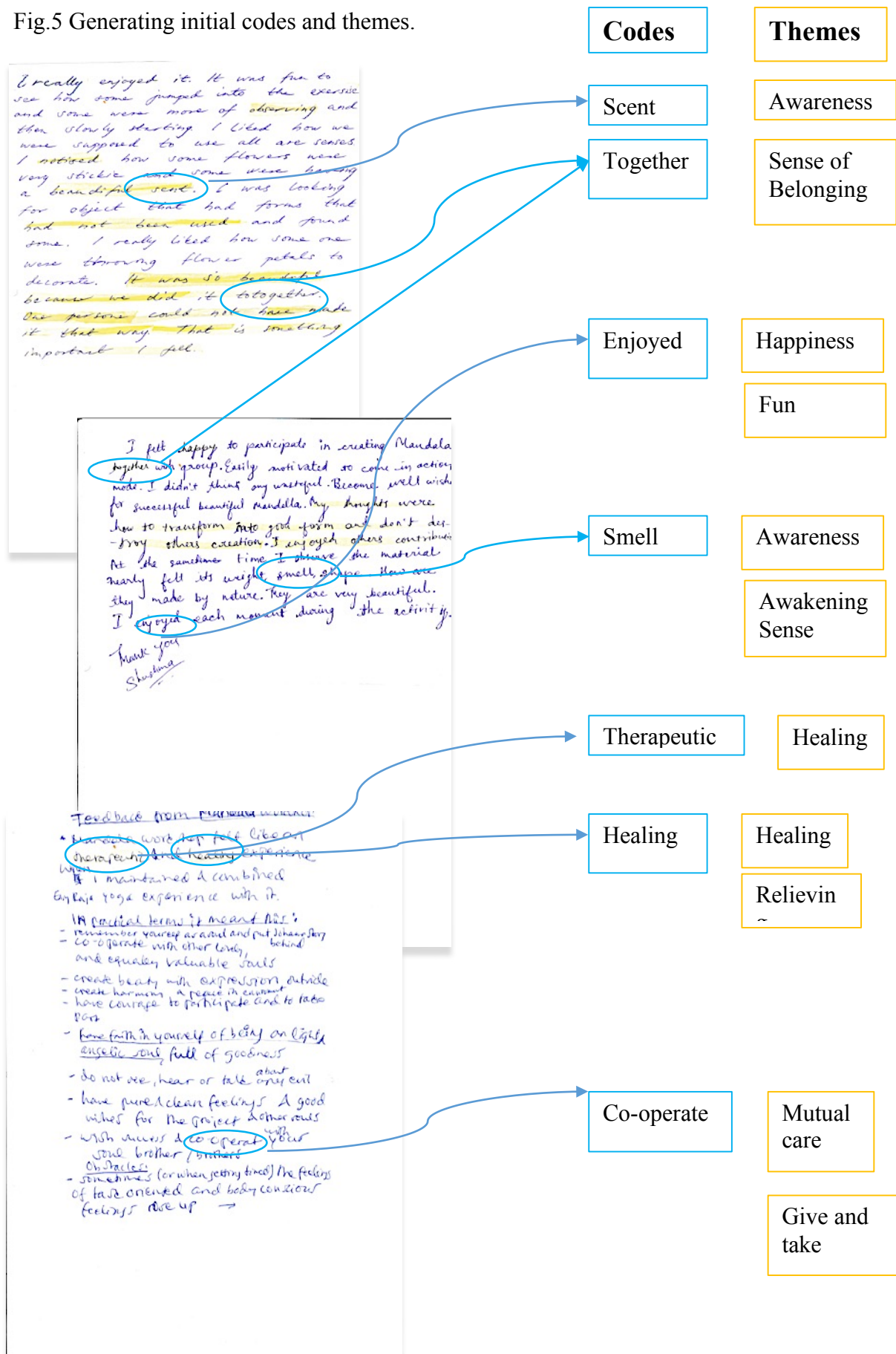


Fig.4 Written feedbacks

Fig.5 Generating initial codes and themes.



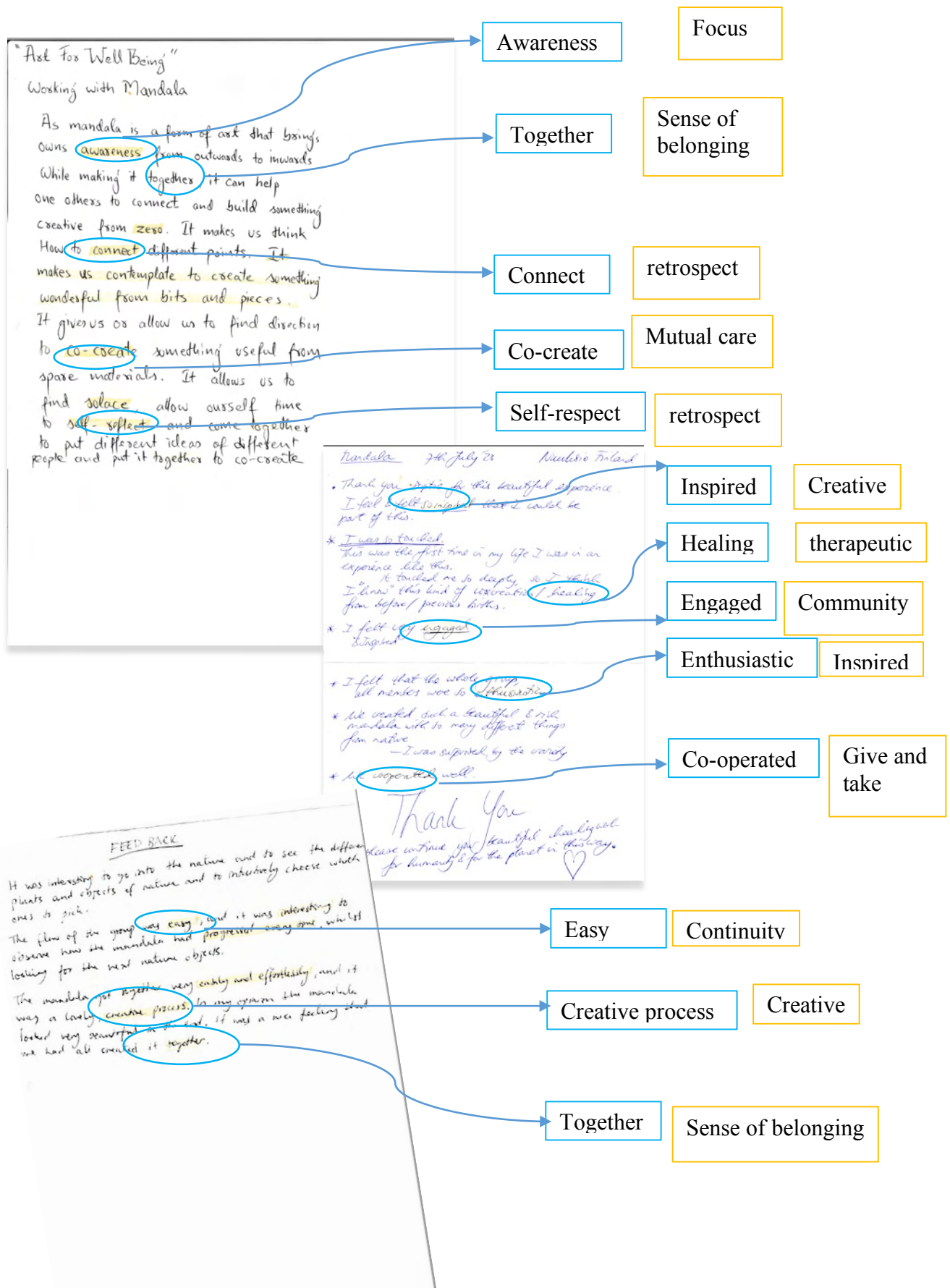


Fig.6 Categorising the codes into possible themes.

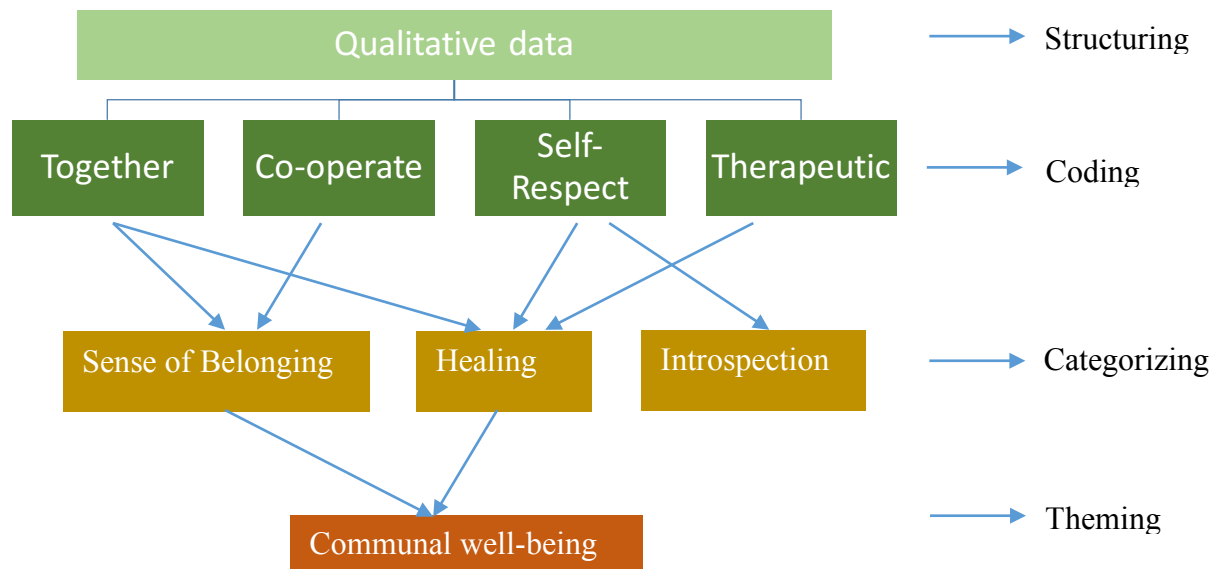
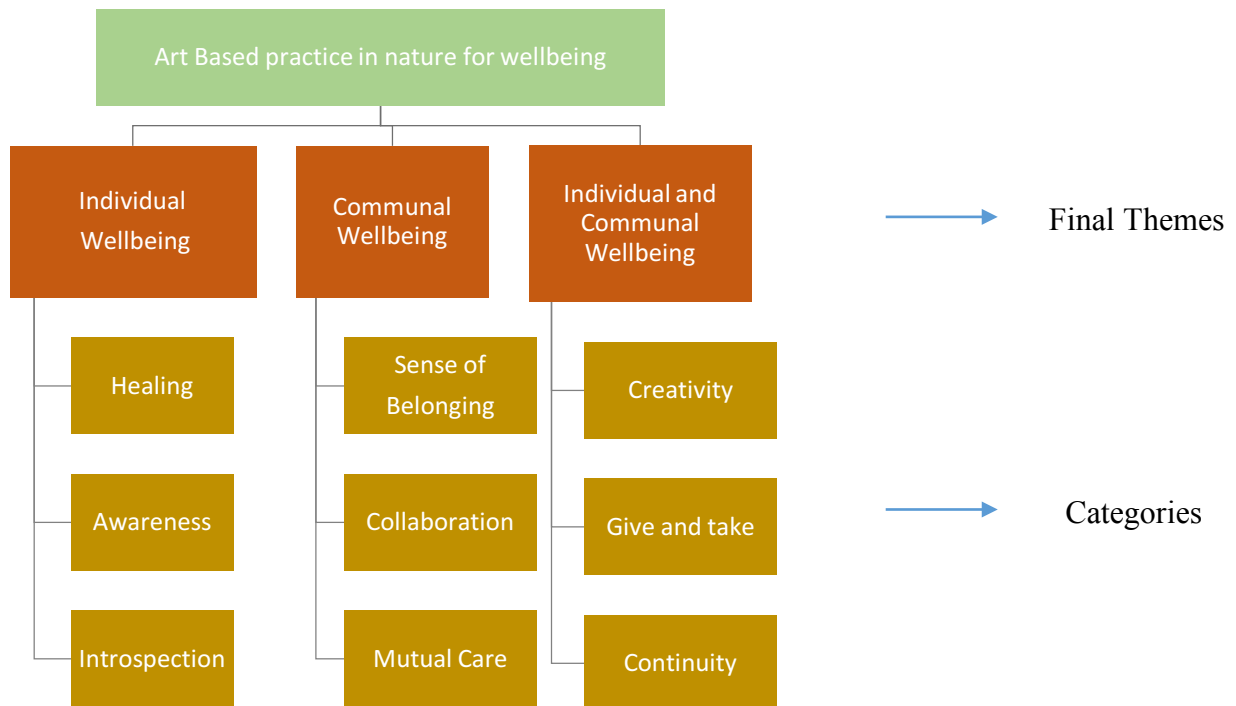


Fig.7 Table of codes extracted from the data and the categories.

CATEGORIES	SELECTED CODES					
	Healing	Liberating	Therapeutic	Healing	Relieve stress	Turned positive
	Awareness	Focussed	Noticed	Concentration	Focus	Sensitive
	Introspection/ Spirituality	Soul	Previous birth	Special experience	Inner being	Sacred ritual
	Sense of belonging	Unifying experience	Common goal	Together	Shared energy	Travel together
	Collaboration	Accepting	Group spirit	Engaged	Create together	Understanding others
	Mutual Care	Trust others	Careful	Respecting	No one changed	Contribute
	Creativity	First time	Newness	Surprised	Fun	Inspired
	Give and take	Overcome barriers	Connection	No ego	Unconditional	Touched
	Continuity	Again	Longer	More often	Humanity	Openness

Fig.8 Selected themes



4.4 Ethical consideration and limitation

In conducting this research, I have adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by Patricia Leavy, Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner, who collectively emphasize a holistic, reflexive, and ethically mindful approach to research. To begin with, participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, methods, potential risks, and benefits. In alignment with Leavy's principles, consent was sought not just as a formality but as an ongoing process. This approach is further reinforced by Barone and Eisner, who stress the importance of transparency and ongoing dialogue with participants to maintain ethical integrity throughout the research process (Leavy, 2017, pp. 62-64; Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Secondly, the participants were provided with written consent forms which gave permission for capturing audio recordings, video recordings and photographs for research purpose only

and any artworks created would be exhibited for academic purpose only. The participant's identity would remain anonymous and the consent form required their signature before the workshop started. I ensured confidentiality and anonymity of participants' data by carefully managing data to prevent any identifying information from being disclosed (Leavy, 2017, pp. 130-132). According to Leavy, Barone, and Eisner, the importance of protecting participants' identities was emphasized, especially given the potentially sensitive nature of the topics discussed. I emphasized the necessity of safeguarding participants' personal stories and experiences, that are sensitive topics (Leavy, 2015, pp. 48-50; Barone & Eisner, 2012, pp. 145-147).

Throughout the research process, participants were treated with the utmost respect, recognizing them as co-creators of knowledge rather than subjects of study. Leavy's approach to ethical framework, highlights the importance of recognizing participants' autonomy and agency, ensuring that they were active partners in the research process. My role as an artist, facilitator but also as a participant gave a sense of partnership which is crucial for cultivating trust and producing ethically sound research outcomes (Leavy, 2018, pp. 105; Barone & Eisner, 2012).

A key ethical consideration in this study was ensuring cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. I was aware of cultural contexts and avoided imposing biases. I took care to understand and respect the cultural backgrounds of participants, ensuring that the research methods and interpretations were culturally appropriate. (Leavy, 2011). In addition, I took steps to minimize any potential harm to participants. This included being mindful of the emotional impact of the research and providing participants with support resources if needed. Moreover, I ensured that the research environment was safe and comfortable for all participants. Overall I tried to balance between pursuing meaningful research and ensuring the well-being of participants (Leavy, 2017; Barone & Eisner, 2012).

On the other hand, I continually reflected on my own role and how it might influence the research process. I was aware of my actions and words and paid attention on my influence to the participants. This reflexivity was crucial in identifying potential biases and ensuring that the research remained ethically sound throughout. Leavy (2015) and Barone & Eisner (2012) emphasizes that ethical research requires ongoing self-awareness and adaptability, particularly in dynamic and creative research contexts.

Ethical considerations extended to the dissemination of research findings. I sought to represent participants' voices authentically and accurately, being mindful of how the findings could be received by various audiences. I considered the implications of the research data beyond academia, ensuring that the findings contribute positively to the communities involved and are presented in an ethically responsible manner (Leavy, 2018; Barone & Eisner, 2012). My intention was in promoting the concept of deeper understanding of having a new or different perspective in the experiences that are gained through the ABR method. That way I felt that there was a wider door to the deeper understanding of the knowledge that I acquired during and after the process as well as for the participants and the audience. The focus was not in validity but in credibility to broaden the multiple perspective and understanding of particular experience we were aiming for (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Limitations with the studies were noted during the process. Since the workshops were part of the municipality project under which I had to adhere to the rules and regulations, factors like choice of locations, date, time and means to approach the public were limited. Access to natural places where general people can locate and transport was an important factor and can be limited for those who cannot drive or take public transportations. Other practical limitations included weather unpredictability. In one workshop the weather forecast showed sunny but it changed at some point during the workshop and started to rain. This affected the participants' ability to freely go out foraging in the nature and they had to wait and adjust according to the weather conditions. That could have led to cancellation of the activity and cause complications in further adjustments in certain circumstances.

The variety of materials available in the nature was available due to summer and autumn season mostly here in Finland and that shows the limitation to certain outdoor seasons. Winter for example would be much challenging due to extreme cold and darkness. Other limitations to take into consideration was the physical health capacity of the participants to be able to walk, climb and stand. One participant required several rest during the workshop even though she had a knee issue and enjoyed being outdoors. This lead to further question as to whether this kind of nature mandala would be encouraging for people suffering from physical challenges. Other things to take into account were plant allergies and sensitivity to certain nature and the living insects living around it.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Storyline

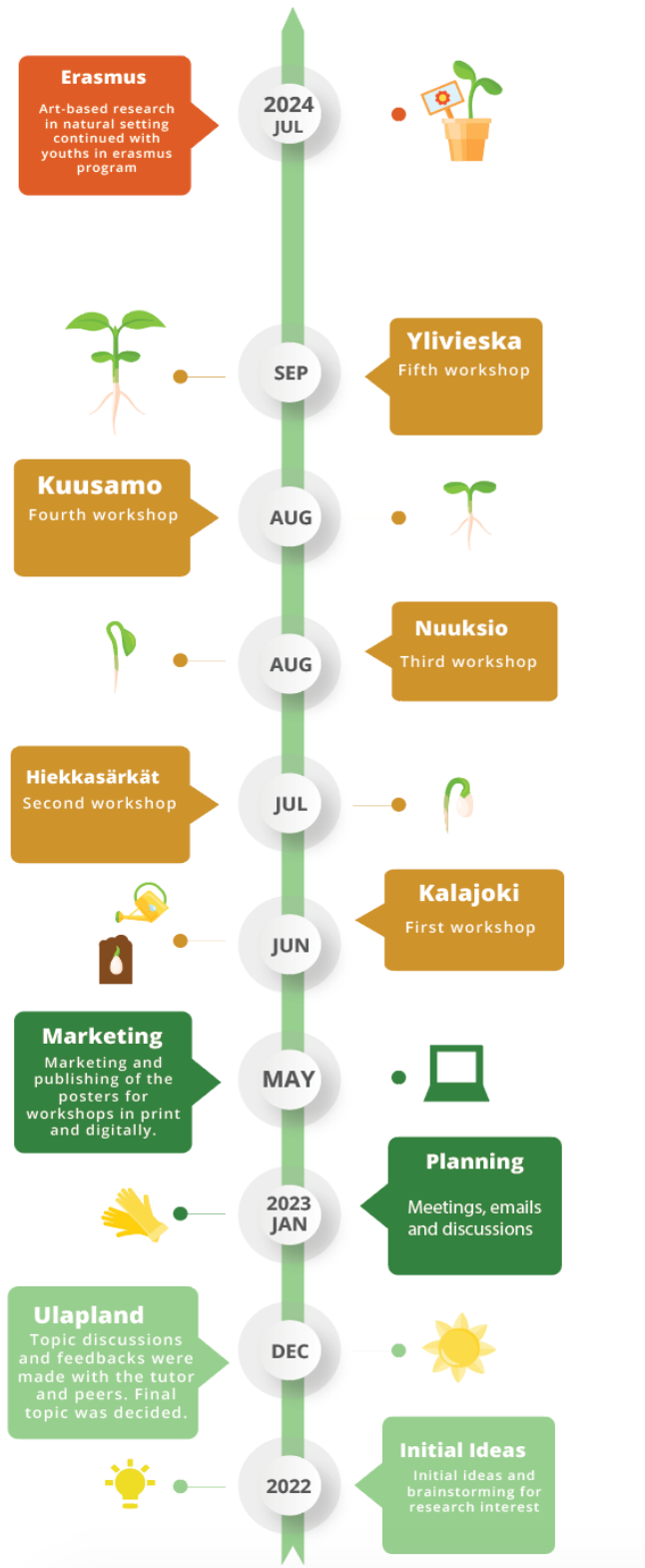
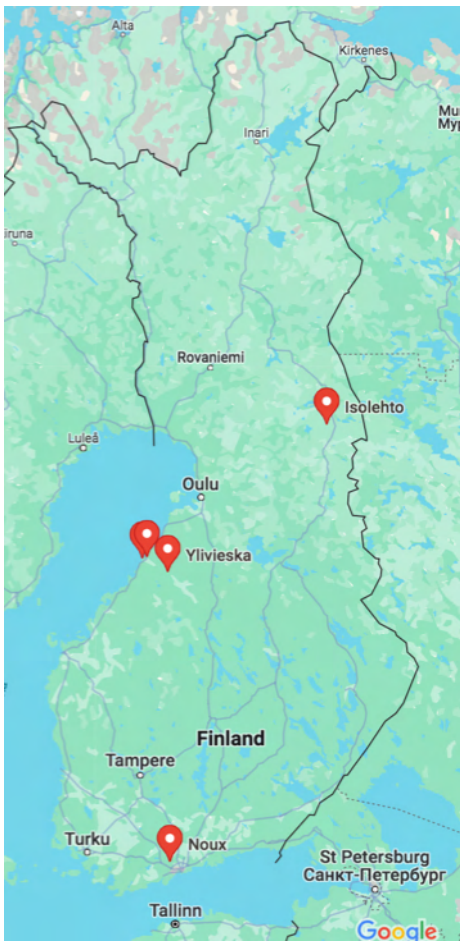


Fig.9 Timeline of the thesis



Place	Number of participants	Date	Time
River park, Kalajoki	10	17.6.2023	5-6 hr
Beach forest, Hiekkasärkät	5	24.8.2023	4-5 hr
Ylivieska	11	29.9.2023	5-6 hr
Spiritual retreat group			
Nuoksio	14	5.7.2023	5-6 hr
Kuusamo	6	5 - 6.8.2023	5-6 hr

Fig.10 Workshops Locations and table of dates, participants and duration

a) Participants

I collaborated closely with the project manager, Merja, to discuss essential aspects of the workshop series, including location selection, marketing strategies, agenda content, necessary tools, and scheduling that would accommodate all stakeholders. Merja played a key role in liaising with local municipalities to secure the required approvals, make any necessary adjustments, and confirm logistics. She communicated these updates back to me through a combination of emails and face-to-face meetings. The planning phase began in January 2023, with the workshops taking place between June and September 2023 in Kalajoki, Hiekkasärkät, and Ylivieska.

To promote these workshops, I designed simple posters that were subsequently posted on the official websites and social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) of the respective cities. The workshops were open to the public and free of charge, targeting local participants aged six and above. The number of participants varied between 5 and 14 per workshop, with attendees including individuals, families, and pairs such as mother and child or companions.

In addition to these local workshops, two more were held in Nuuksio and Kuusamo as part of a collaboration with the spiritual organization Brahma Kumaris from Helsinki. I was invited to take part in their retreat program and collaborate with my nature mandala workshop. These retreats attracted participants from various countries, including Finland, Hungary, the UK, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Nepal, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark. The group was diverse, consisting of people from different cultural backgrounds, professions, and life stages, including employed, unemployed, and retired individuals.

My role

My role was to facilitate and ensure that all necessary tools and materials were available for the workshops, in coordination with the project manager. I facilitated group activities, managed time effectively, and ensured that the workshops ran smoothly. Second role was that of an Artist where I provided constructive feedback on participants' work, focusing on aspects such as aesthetics, creativity, symbolism, and the meanings behind their art. As a researcher, I observed the dynamics of the group and the impact of the workshops, gathering insights for further analysis and collecting data. Lastly I was also a participant where I also took part in the collective creation of art, experiencing the process alongside the participants and contributing to the group work, which helped me feel integrated into the community.

Overview of workshops

Mandala workshop lasted for around 5-6 hours for each workshop. Since I wanted the participants to have an idea where to begin, I collected some objects from nature and displayed them near a chosen spot where the participants gathered for initial briefing. I chose a spot outdoor in chosen location by the municipalities where it was convenient for the participant to locate and park their cars and also have easy access to collecting natural objects.

I put few objects to create a centre point from where the participants would continue to expand the art work.

Brief instructions were given to collect natural objects that were found nearby and that which would attract them. I requested the participants to do everything as quietly as possible, to take time to walk around in nature, observe the natural object as they collected and to pay full attention to the colour, texture, smell or any peculiar characteristics. I suggested them to pay attention to the details of these natural objects and place them on the ground to expand the mandala making however was convenient for them.

Since it was a communal Art work, each participant took their chance to place their collected object without overtaking the others and respecting each other's decision on the creativity of mandala making. In silence, all the participants took chance to collaborate in making one big mandala and then those who were interested carried on making their individual mandalas in other spots. Water, coffee and small snacks were allowed during break times. When the making of mandala was complete in the sense that nobody felt the need to continue and expand the mandala art, then small discussions were held at the end. Sometimes we ended with a small meditation. They were also given blank papers and papers with questionnaires to fill and return to me anonymously.

Making of the mandala required silent inner enquiries, physical movement and being mindful to their choices of action. Some chairs and place to rest was provided in case if any participant needed it. Tools to cut for example clippers, threads, papers and other stationeries were available if anyone wished to use. During short break, participants rested for about ten minutes but they were requested to stay silent as much as possible.

b) The execution of workshops under the framework of ABAR (art-based action research)

1. Kalajoki

To explore the impact of art-based workshops in natural settings on community well-being, the first workshop was held in Kalajoki River Park, located next to the city hall which was an alternative location indoor in case of weather change. This location was specifically chosen

by city hall members after several meetings with the project manager of the KUMA project and city officials. The agreed objective of the workshop was to engage the community in art-based activities using natural materials to promote well-being.

Although my initial research focus was on creating nature mandalas, I also planned several other nature-related activities due to the park's specific environment. The park, situated near a river and covered with grass, presented certain challenges. I felt personally that there weren't enough natural elements available to gather for mandala construction. Additionally, the predominantly green surroundings, including the ground, led me to believe that the visibility of a mandala might be diminished against such a backdrop. I gathered materials beforehand like willows, tree plates, natural jute ropes, pines and other natural objects. I practiced constructing willow sculptures to familiarize myself with the materials as much as possible, ensuring that I could effectively teach others.



Fig.11 Initial preparation and getting familiar with the materials; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2022

I chose to keep my options open and included a variety of nature-based art workshops to see how they would unfold in that particular setting. The activities ranged from willow sculpting and painting wood blocks to creating fantasy creatures using natural objects from the surroundings and walking in nature. These activities proved to be well-suited for families,

especially those with children, as they provided an opportunity for collaborative engagement. The workshop ran smoothly, with coffee breaks ensuring a relaxed atmosphere, and I felt there was enough time to explore each activity fully. I documented the process through field notes, photographs of the visual outputs, and gathered general feedback through discussions with the participants. The artworks were exhibited in the river park.



Fig. 12 Kalajoki art and nature based workshop; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023



Fig.13. Data collection through alternative method; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023

For data collection, I hung various coloured papers on a tree, each inscribed with words that captured the essence of well-being, such as "Calm," "Relaxed," and "Inspired."

Participants were encouraged to mark, draw, or write on the papers if these words resonated with their feelings or state of mind. I believed this method would not only help participants get started but also provide them with a diverse range of vocabulary to express their emotions. Additionally, the option to draw allowed participants to visually express themselves, offering a more flexible and inclusive way to capture their experiences.

Areas of improvement

Prior familiarization with the participants would enhance the workshop. The location posed certain limitations for conducting the mandala workshop. Moving forward, I plan to seek access to alternative sites with more variety of natural materials. However, these activities could also be adapted for indoor settings during winter or in case of unexpected weather changes. Weather played a significant role, as such outdoor activities are

practical only during the summer and early autumn in Finland. Unfortunately, gathering materials beforehand deprived participants of the first-hand experience of collecting them. For willow-related workshops, it would be ideal to select a location where willow naturally grows. I also questioned whether the data collected provided sufficient insight to answer my research question and whether there was enough time for the feedback session. Additionally, one participant, who arrived in a wheelchair, was hesitant to participate as the setup and materials were all placed on the ground. Although she had someone accompanying her to assist, she ultimately only observed the activities.

2. Nuuksio

The next art-based workshop was held in Nuuksio, with the same objective and research question as the previous one. However, this time, the participants came from not only Finland but also various other countries. I participated in a three-day spiritual retreat beforehand, which allowed me to get to know the participants better. Although we had made prior plans and preparations, this retreat provided an opportunity for the organizers and me to readjust and modify certain aspects such as time, location and the order of the mandala workshop. I also had the chance to communicate with other members, exchange ideas, and share narratives, which enriched the workshop experience.



Fig.14 Nuuksio mandala workshop; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023

The workshop itself was met with enthusiastic participation from everyone involved. The atmosphere was relaxing and it felt as though each person had the opportunity to connect with and explore the surrounding nature. The big old cottage, calming view of the lake and natural environment was definitely impactful. Creativity grew as participants gave space to one

another, promoting a collaborative and respectful relation. I genuinely sensed that everyone was enjoying the process.



Fig.15 Participants writing feedbacks after the mandala workshop; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023

For data collection, I asked participants to provide open feedback on their overall experience of the workshop. I was pleasantly surprised by the level of detail in their responses. Additionally, I had the opportunity to gather feedback through discussions and shared experiences, which provided further insights into their perspectives on the workshop. I was definite that following workshops would be nature mandala.

Areas of improvement

1. **Space Constraints:** With fourteen participants, the space around the old cottage was limited, which made it feel cramped. In the future, I would divide such a large group into two or three smaller groups. This would make facilitation easier and allow everyone to participate without having to wait too long for their turn.
2. **Participant Feedback:** Some of the written feedback from participants was difficult to read. For future workshops, I would emphasize the importance of writing clearly to ensure that all feedback is legible and usable.
3. **Mandala Visibility:** While the intricate designs created with delicate natural objects were beautiful, they were difficult to notice against the greenish-brown ground. The mandala's visibility was somewhat blurred, which diminished some of the details. Moving forward, I would consider choosing a different background or adding contrasting elements to ensure that the artistic production stands out more clearly.

4. Enhancing Artistic Impact: Although the workshop was engaging and the process was fruitful, I felt that the artistic output's visibility was lacking, which might have affected the participants' overall enthusiasm. To capture attention and maintain enthusiasm, I would explore ways to enhance the visibility and impact of the final artistic production, such as using brighter or more contrasting materials, or perhaps even constructing the artwork on a different surface.

3. Kuusamo

The next workshop took place in Kuusamo as part of a three-day retreat. This time, I was determined to focus on creating a mandala with natural objects, but there was also time for other activities like indoor painting. The cottage was surrounded with forest, by wildlife, including reindeer, and we had the opportunity to pick berries and mushrooms. As in the Nuuksio workshop, I found that having time before the workshop to get acquainted with the participants and engage in their shared experiences and viewpoints was invaluable.

We had enough time to prepare for the workshop, and all the participants were actively

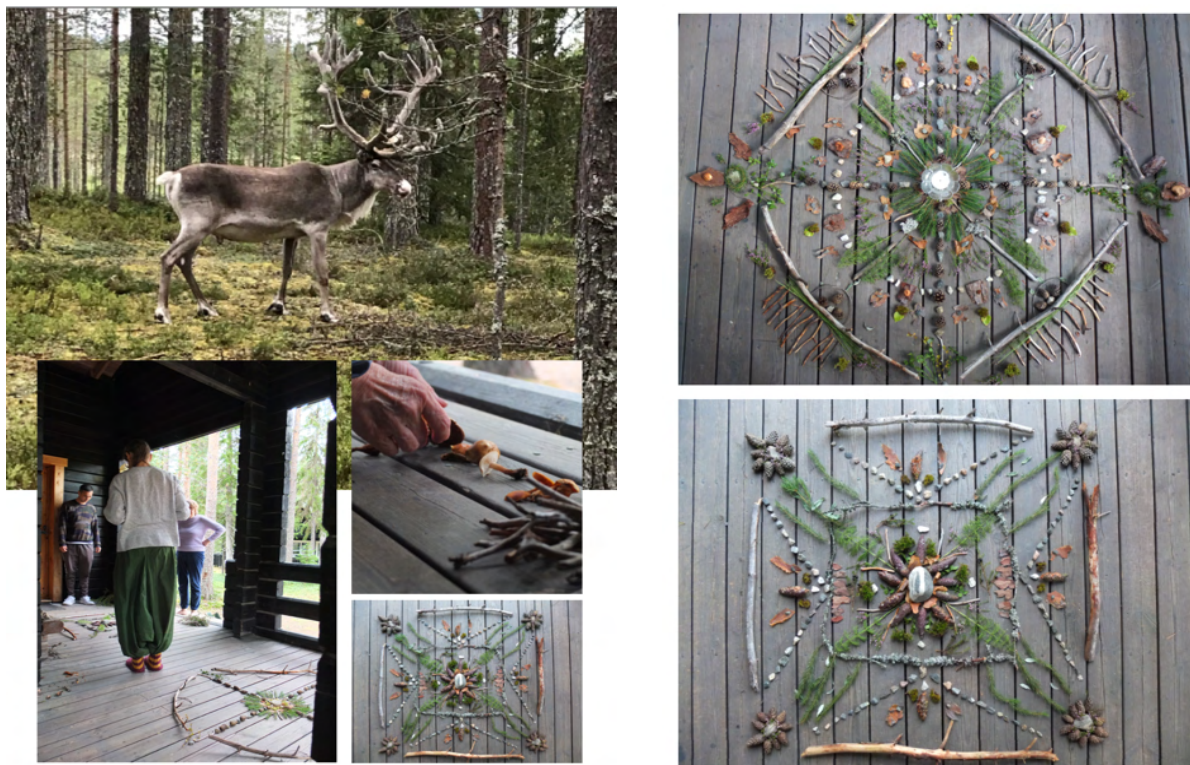


Fig.16 Kuusamo mandala workshop; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023

involved in organizing the activity. Due to the unexpected rain, we decided to create the nature mandala on the terrace. We were fortunate to have such a large cottage with enough sheltered space to accommodate everyone. Before starting the mandala, each participant had the opportunity to gather materials from nature at their own pace, promoting a personal connection to the process. Once the materials were collected, everyone contributed to the creation of the mandala, using various natural objects. The contrasting materials against the background resulted in a beautiful visual effect, and there was a profound sense of satisfaction and excitement among the group.

The mandala-making process spanned over two days, allowing participants the freedom to work on it at their own pace. This approach provided ample space for reflection and deeper engagement with the activity. In addition to the mandala creation, we also set aside time for indoor painting, where we shared our ideas and perspectives through group discussions. This combination of artistic activities enriched the overall experience and strengthened the sense of community among the participants. The participants provided me with written feedbacks as well as visual data.



Fig. 17 Art-based activities in Kuusamo workshop; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023

Potential new research



Fig. 18 Dismantling/cleaning/destruction of the nature mandala; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023

After the retreat concluded, we were responsible for cleaning the cottage. The participants gently swept away the mandala, returning all the natural materials to the forest from which they had been gathered. This act of dismantling the mandala invoked a profound sense of letting go and raised questions about the impermanence of life. By engaging in both the creation

and the destruction of the nature mandala, we collectively experienced a sense of detachment, prompting reflections on the transient nature of human existence.

This experience of dismantling the mandala opened up new avenues for spiritual reflection and potential research. It highlighted not only the significance of creating with nature but also the importance of engaging in the act of dismantling as a means of understanding detachment on a deeper level. The process emphasized the cyclical nature of life, where what comes from nature ultimately returns to it, evolving continuously. This insight into the impermanence of life and the natural world's cyclical processes offers a rich area for further exploration in future research.

4. Hiekkasärkät

The second-to-last workshop took place in Hiekkasärkät, close to the beach area. The workshop's objective remained consistent, with initial planning and preparation completed beforehand. The location was about a five-minute walk from the parking area near a café called "Beach Rose," making it conveniently accessible to amenities for participants during

the workshop. The chosen spot had a sandy ground surrounded by trees, which offered a unique environment for the mandala creation.



However, I observed that there were limited loose natural objects readily available on the ground, which posed a challenge but also encouraged participants to be more creative with the sparse resources at hand. Despite this limitation, the weather was pleasant, and the participants were actively engaged in the process, even if it required us to walk further to gather additional materials. Data was collected through photographs, diaries, general discussions, and written feedback.

Fig.19 Mandala workshop in Hiekkasärkät;
credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023

Future Ideas:

During the feedback session, one participant suggested incorporating a guided meditation. At the end of the workshop, I conducted a guided meditation, and it proved to be an effective way to conclude the session. The participants shared that this meditation allowed them to consciously reflect on the workshop experience and provided a relaxing, thoughtful end to the day's activities. This feedback highlights the potential value of integrating guided meditation into future workshops, enhancing both the creative and reflective aspects of the experience.

Ylivieska



Fig.20 Material preparation, mandala workshop and feedback writing in Ylivieska; credit: Diptee Thapa, 2023

The final workshop for my research studies took place in Ylivieska, near the city public park close to the river. By this stage, I had gained greater confidence from my previous workshop experiences. To ensure a variety of natural objects were available, I collected several materials beforehand and arranged them for everyone to use. Together with the project manager, Merja, we decided to create nature mandalas on the grey asphalt within the park. This surface provided excellent contrast and visibility for the natural objects used in the mandalas.

Participants gathered additional materials from the surroundings and were fully engaged in creating both group and individual mandalas. The ample space and time available allowed everyone to work comfortably and creatively. The event ran smoothly, and I received positive feedback through discussions and written comments. We also took the opportunity to review each mandala together, sharing our thoughts and reflections on each other's work. This collaborative and reflective process proved to be an effective form of community engagement.

For the first time during this workshop, I also provided personal feedback on each participant's mandala. I felt that this added more depth and meaning to their artworks, further enriching the overall experience for everyone involved. Furthermore, there was also a suggestion to interpret the mandala art through the lens of color theory. This idea intrigued

me, as it could add an additional layer of understanding to the participants' creations. Exploring how different colors might reflect emotions, moods, or symbolic meanings within the mandalas could provide deeper insights into the participants' inner experiences and the overall impact of the workshop. Integrating color theory into the interpretation process could enhance the reflective discussions and offer a more comprehensive analysis of the art created during the workshop.



Fig.21 Sharing and reflection on the mandala making experience; credit: Chia-Chen Chang

Artistic production



Fig.22 Collecting, pressing and storing natural materials;
credit: Diptee Thapa

My artistic journey began several months before the exhibition, driven by a desire to immerse myself in nature and gather materials for my project from my surroundings. After careful consideration, I decided to create mandalas using pressed plants. This approach not only allowed me ample time to collect and dry various plants but also enabled me to

experiment with different techniques as the resources would be limited in winter. I constructed a traditional plant presser with heavy wooden blocks and layers of cardboard and paper to press the flowers and leaves. Initially, I used old books for this purpose, but they had limited capacity.

Through the process, I realized that some plants didn't hold up well when dried—they became too thin and fragile to be effectively glued. This led me to be more selective in choosing the plants for my mandalas, and with experience, I improved my ability to make these selections. This careful curation allowed me to begin the creative process of assembling my mandalas.

Inspired by the success of my mandala art, I was motivated to explore other creative uses for pressed plants. While the mandalas were characterized by their symmetry and structured patterns, my subsequent pieces embraced asymmetry and spontaneity. This shift in approach enabled me to experiment with color choices and themes, responding more freely to the natural materials and their inherent qualities.



Fig.23 Final artistic production and exhibition in University of Lapland; credit: Diptee Thapa

5.2 RESULTS

5.2.1 Individual Wellbeing

In this theme, effects of mandala workshop on participants' emotional and psychological wellbeing were analyzed through thematic coding. There were three main categories that were found to be more relevant to the research study. Words with similar meanings were grouped in similar category.

a) Healing

Through the written feedbacks collected after the workshops, participants reflected signs of emotions related with their thoughts and experiences. Making mandala in quiet allowed the participants to have a silent contemplation. They got the space to observe their thoughts and emotions which is an important process in healing, as one participant stated, *"Emotions and anxiety started to come to surface as a sorrow and need to cry. Maybe these emotions started to have "room" in silence."* The freedom to be imaginative *"...was a very liberating feeling to create naturally with what idea was bringing into mind"*, which sometimes might be challenging to get from our daily routine. An important aspect of healing is also transforming through acceptance of one's own emotions which is a gateway to self-compassion, and has proved to be helpful in reducing negative thinking (Wadsworth et al., 2018) as was reflected in the feedback by a participant, *"... I burried a bad thought/experience, but the thought turned positive and did good."* During the data collection through written feedback and discussions, several signs of "feeling like a therapeutic" and "stress releasing" were reflected which are calming and shows promising method for healing.

b) Awareness

Making mandala in nature mindfully, allowed participants to be aware of their surroundings and their choices of action. The process can be meditative which could be used as a method of mindful experience. The participants were paying attention to the natural objects that they were attracted to and were paying attention as to which object to put in what order and that built a sense of connection to nature which Berger and Tiry (2012) believed it was a means to reconnect with self. This was reflected in data, *"...in a focused and calm state of mind, it felt as if mandala was telling what is still missing? What does it need? Is it ready?"*. Sensory experiences were reflected on the feedback such as, *"I noticed how some flowers were very sticky and some had beautiful scent."* By being aware of the present situation, creative

solutions take place as participants paid attention to uniqueness “... *looking for object that had forms that had not been used....*”. In the path of wellbeing, change is essential and that can be influenced by being aware of present life situations. “*Awareness is the greatest agent for change.*”, (Eckhart Tolle, 1997).

c) Introspection

Carl Jung was the pioneer psychologist who explored the symbolic significance of mandala and believed it to be beneficial for bringing the mind in transcendental “order”, “wholeness” and “balance”. By being sensitive and paying attention to experiences with natural materials, it encourages to create patterns and design which can give a deeper relation to one’s inner self and others. The participant noticed a sense of detached observer as she reminded herself to be a “... *soul and put ‘Johanna’ story behind.*” And on the other hand the data revealed a meaningful connection as stated, “...*it felt like doing a sacred ritual even though it was a first time for most of us*”. The meditative nature of mandala making cultivates a state of present-moment awareness which could aid in deeper connection to one’s spiritual self (Kopytin, 2017). The data also revealed that some participants needed courage to participate and the new experience had touched them so deeply. A deeper contemplation with the spiritual past was demonstrated by the quote, “...*I think I “know” this kind of healing from previous births*”. Spiritual connections with other participants that meant something greater than themselves was shown through this quote, “*In practical terms making mandala meant to me was to co-operate with others lovingly and equally valuable souls.*”

5.2.2 Communal Wellbeing

Mandala making in a community with a group of people showed clear evidence of collaboration and mutual care for other participants. When the individuals felt a strong sense of belonging, they were enthusiastic to cooperate and participate as a community. Such signs of inclusivity and social connectedness was reflected through the data.

a) Sense of Belonging

The participants showed emotional connection through shared experiences that gave them comfort and sense of security (Guetzkow, J, 2002). Participants showed active participation throughout respecting and accepting each other (Matarasso, 1997). One after another observing and waiting patiently, participants made their move and carefully put their objects

on the mandala. The group spirit was illustrated by the quote, *“It was so beautiful because we did it together. One person could not have made it that way. That is something important I feel.”* The participants showed interest as a whole which was apparent through data that stated, *“I felt the whole group, all members were so enthusiastic. We developed a group spirit and it was important that everyone could add what they wanted”*. Through social, emotional and shared values, the participants showed sense of belonging which is a fundamental building block for community wellbeing (Matarasso, 1997) as was clear in this statement, *“The shared energy and non-verbal understanding between the participants was an important unifying experience. We had common goal with which we searched for form together”*.

b) Collaboration

Making mandala was a collaborative process. It was creative collaboration in the sense that there were no plans and no rules. Everyone could participate with their own ideas and imaginations in the progress of mandala until the time everyone felt it was ready to stop. It was done in silence and needed collaboration that could be understood without words. Action spoke louder than the words (Kim et al., 2018). That was beautiful to see as an observant. The data also confirmed these signs of collaboration through quotes such as, *“We created such a beautiful and rich mandala with so many different things from nature- I was surprised by the variety.”* And other quotes, *“The artistic activity was really fun and we were excited to join, I felt very engaged and inspired”*. To collaborate a good sense of co-operation is essential which can be inspiring to co-create artistic works, and that was clear to see through this statement, *“En olisi ikinä uskonnut kuinka upean taideteoksen luomme yhdessä.”* (Translation- *“I never would have believed how wonderful a work of art we would create together”*)

c) Mutual Care

The emphasis was given by the participants to collectively participate with mutual care and understanding. They showed mutual support and compassion for each other by sharing their objects and helping each other with maintaining their delicate patterns and design (Guetzkow, J, 2002). There was no sign of competition, in fact it was quite the contrary and that was evident by the feedback data that reports, *“No one changed what anyone else had added. Which was interesting. Like both respecting each other but also just letting it emerge however things were contributed”*. Mutual care involves empathy towards others’ feelings and needs without prejudice and it was clear to see through the data (Stuckey, H. L., & Nobel, J. 2010),

“My thoughts were how to transform into good form without destroying other’s creation. I enjoyed others’ contribution.” The data also revealed that trust is an essential value for the wellbeing of community and it was well-defined by this quote, *“There was inner voice that said that now it is enough...let others complete it and trust in others”*.

5.2.3 Individual and Communal Wellbeing

This theme explores interaction, intersection and connection in individual experiences of wellbeing and communal wellbeing. Individual experiences effect the others and communal group spirit influences and encourages the individual too, inspiring in continuing collective works. Such signs of wellbeing through individual and communal relations were reflected through data.

a) Creativity

Creativity plays an important role in promoting individual and communal wellbeing. It allows the individual to express freely, has proven to calm the mind, make social connection and enhance the cognitive stimulation. The data revealed such signs. For instance, the quote, *“It made us think how to connect different points. It made us contemplate to create something wonderful from bits and pieces”*, shows the signs of problem solving. Several quotes in the data shows that the participant felt making mandala in nature was a creative experience for example, *“It was creative, cooperative, harmonious, newness, united and aesthetic”*.

Engaging in mandala making required creative action seemed to bond the participants together in a shared purpose and meaning which resulted in an accomplished result full of varieties and surprises. Making mandala gave chance to be creative while it could have symbolic meaning that *“.... help vent out feelings and expressions in artistic form.”*

b) Give and Take

A community is built with individual people. Individual wellbeing contributes to communal wellbeing and vice versa depending on each other in reciprocal relationship. The data showed evidence of how individual participants were overcoming self to work together taking responsibilities in order to keep the collective work consistent without any obstructions as was evident by the quote, *“It was lovely to work together in silence. Words often create more barriers than connections. There was no ego in the process. Unconditional.”* Participants showed they were comfortable and *“The flow of the group was easy and it was interesting to*

observe how the mandala had progressed every time.” Even though one quotes, “...this was the first time in my life I was in an experience like this. It touched me so deeply...”. The sense of accomplishment that was gained as a group in turn gave a satisfying feeling individually.

c) Continuity

Participant’s reflections on the possibilities for evolving and extending the benefits of the silent mandala workshop beyond the immediate experience, were shown through the data. For example, this quote from data justifies that point, *“It was a really good experience and I would participate again, thank you!”*. It was evident to see the inspiration drawn would also be beneficial for contemplation and mindfulness practices into daily life as indicated here, *“I enjoyed and liked it very much. I should do these kind of practice (staying in peaceful state of mind) and creative stuff more often!”*. The acknowledgement through data showed clearly that contemplative art based practice would be beneficial for strategies in community building, *“Making a nature mandala was my first time. A great tool to improve cooperation skills and to do things together, creativity increases playfulness and openness to the new”*. On the other hand, it was clear to see the inspiration for greater good as stated in this quote, *“Please continue your beautiful healing work for humanity and for the planet in this way.”*

In the artistic segment, I found that crafting mandalas with natural elements served as a stress-relieving practice, especially during my most challenging days. Engaging g consciously in this process led me to maintain a constant curiosity while exploring nature for suitable objects, promoting attentiveness and keen observation while also discovering the rich diversity of the natural world. The sensory experiences of smell and touch that followed sight were particularly enjoyable, stimulating my imagination throughout the creation process and leaving me with a sense of achievement upon completion. This positive experience encouraged me to carve out mindful time consistently, as I found myself eager to continue the creative journey. Despite encountering several challenging thoughts during the process, including the pressure of pending tasks, I persevered and ultimately reached a peaceful resolution to address those tasks later.

The limited space in my home, compounded by the presence of two cats, added to the sense of urgency to complete each mandala. Additionally, I realized that my choices in selecting natural elements were often meticulous, aiming for the optimal combination, which at times led to moments of frustration. While this attention to detail brought a sense of accomplishment, it also made me ponder the endless possibilities for rearranging the plants to create different mandalas. Although the practice helped in centring my mind and being present in the moment, I recognized the need for regular and sustained engagement to yield lasting benefits. While it effectively activated my focus, its impact seemed fleeting, highlighting the necessity for consistent practice to achieve enduring effects

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis examines the use of natural objects in natural settings to create mandalas as a way to improve communal well-being. The research focuses on art-based research and applied visual art to highlight the strong link between artistic expression and holistic health. Creating mandalas in nature improves a deep sense of community, mindfulness, and interconnectedness among participants, both individually and collectively. Using natural materials for mandala creation encourages participants to engage meaningfully with their environment, helping them reconnect with nature in a way that is often lost in modern society. This not only raises environmental awareness but also contributes to emotional and psychological well-being, providing a peaceful space for contemplation, creativity, and shared experience.

From an art-based research perspective, this study illustrates how the aesthetic and symbolic aspects of mandala patterns, which traditionally represent the universe and the self, can be effectively used to explore and express communal identities, cultural narratives, and collective aspirations. The use of visual art in this context serves as a powerful tool for communication and transformation, enabling individuals to convey complex emotions and ideas in a non-verbal, visual language that is universally understood.

Additionally, the communal nature of this practice has shown potential in promoting social cohesion. By working together in a natural setting, participants not only create a tangible, collective artwork but also improve a sense of belonging and mutual respect. The collaborative nature of the project encourages dialogue, empathy, and shared purpose, all of which are essential for a healthy community.

This practice can also be undertaken individually in independent settings to promote personal well-being. Its effectiveness in relaxing the mind and enhancing self-awareness makes it suitable for addressing various psychological health issues. Participants of all ages could engage in this practice, making it particularly interesting for mixed cultures, families, and diverse environments, thus promoting family bonding and a holistic approach to well-being.

For extreme weather conditions that limit outdoor activities, an indoor mandala-making setup using previously collected natural materials could be utilized. Reusing these materials to

create the mandala, followed by a ritual of cleaning it away to start fresh in another session, could inspire reflections on the impermanence of life and prompt deeper inquiries into our attachments to materialism. Future research could explore this practice through various lenses, such as "Meditative Art-Based Methods for Healing" or the application of Color Theory in natural mandala creation. Investigating the role of color in natural mandala creation, particularly how different color schemes might influence participants' emotions and perceptions, could deepen our understanding of the therapeutic potential of this practice.

In addition, research could examine how virtual mandala creation compares to its natural counterpart in terms of psychological and communal benefits, and whether it can replicate the same sense of connection with nature and community. Exploring how different cultures engage with natural mandala-making could provide insights into the universality of this practice and its varying impacts on communal and personal well-being across cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the integration of art-based research and applied visual art in the creation of natural mandalas offers a unique and effective approach to promoting communal and individual well-being. This practice enriches participants' connection to nature and each other and serves as a reminder of the therapeutic and unifying power of art. As communities continue to seek innovative ways to enhance well-being, the creation of mandalas in natural settings represents a promising and accessible method for developing collective healing and growth. The potential for future research in this field is vast, offering opportunities to further understand and expand upon the benefits of this practice. Future research should focus on the long-term effects of nature mandalas in natural settings and refine methods to evaluate their effectiveness across diverse cultural and environmental contexts. This will help tailor these practices to different communities, ensuring their benefits are both accessible and impactful.

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Appendices

Posters



*Koetaan taide
ja luonto yhdessä*

YMPÄRISTÖTAITEEN
TYÖPAJA
Jokipuisto
Kalajoentie 5

17.6.
13-17

Sään mukainen vaatetus.
Pidämme tauon Ventelän talolla, pieni
evästarjoilu. Järjestäjät: Yhteisötaiteen
maisteriopiskelija Diptee Thapa,
Kulttuurimatkailuhanke, Kalajoen
kaupunki ja Visit Kalajoki.

#kalajoenkaupunki

KULTTUURIMATKAILUSTA
HYVINVOINTIA

maaseuturahasto KALAJOKI



luontomandala

Yhteisötaiteen työpaja Ylivieskassa
Pe 29.9 | 17:30- 20:30

Kokoontumispaikka: Kiviojan ulkokuntosali.
Pieni syyssade ei häiritse, rankkasateella tapahtuma perutaan.
Järj. taiteen maisteriopiskelija Diptee Thapa,
Kulttuurimatkailusta hyvinvointia -hanke ja
Ylivieskan kaupunki.

Euroopan maaseudun
kehittämisen maaseuturahasto:
Eurooppa investoi maaseutuun

YLVIESKA



Luontomandala

Yhteisötaiteen työpaja Hiekkasärkillä
25.8 | 9:30-13:30

Kohtaamispaikka Beach Rosé, Tuomipakkaintie 5.
Työpaja on ulkona hiekoilla. Pieni evästarjoilu.
Järj. taiteen maisteriopiskelija Diptee Thapa,
Kulttuurimatkailuhanke ja Kalajoen kaupungin kulttuuripalvelut.

KALAJOKI maaseuturahasto

KULTTUURIMATKAILUSTA
HYVINVOINTIA

#kalajoenkaupunki

Agenda for Kalajoki workshop

Agenda for 17.6, 13-17

13:00- 13:15 – **Meeting** and gathering in the park-
Signing the paper

13:15- 14:00- **Willow hanging**: Use willows to make fish and hang, work in pairs if possible

14:00- 14:30 – **Coffee Break** Ventelän Talo

14:30- 15:00 – **Finding your object**: pick an object from nature that fits in hand.
Describe the object through your senses- what you see, feel, smell and hear?
And why we chose that object? How it reflects with you?

15:00- 16:00 – **Wood paint hanging**: Paint on the wooden slice the object you chose.
Can be abstract, something you like, observe, any details, anything about the object.

16:00- 17:45- **Fantasy creature**: Find objects in nature to make your fantasy creature that needs to have eyes, nose and mouth. Then choose a “negative” feeling word and write the story of that word to that creature. Anything that reflects when you see or read that word.

Anytime of the day before you leave~

“Positive” feelings tree-

How do you feel at this moment? Find the words on the tree or create your own.

Write or draw on the papers hanging on the tree or use your own paper.

Any comments on how to do it better in future also would be great!

(Anonymous)

Consent form

RESEARCH / DOCUMENTATION CONSENT FORM

Your consent is being asked for the use of documented activities and outcomes relating to the
"Ympäristötaiteen Työpaja 17.6.2023" by

Diptee Thapa
+358 4578337767

We are asking permission to use the documentations (photos, videos, written, audio recordings) in their research articles, conference presentations and exhibitions where the actions, findings and artistic outcomes (written, visual, artistic) are being discussed. Concerning any artistic, and other visual productions done by you will be credited to you.

I give my consent (mark those you agree, leave empty those you disagree)

_____ to use **such images and video documentations** where you can be identified

_____ to use documentations of **my artistic productions** so that they are credited to me

_____ to use **my visual documentations** (photo and video documentations done by me) so that they are credited to me.

_____ to use **my assignments** as a data so that I cannot be identified

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Name and Signature _____

Date _____

Art-Based Research (ABR) in natural setting continued in 2024 summer

After the success of the nature mandala workshops in the summer of 2023, I was honoured to be invited back to lead art-based workshops in natural settings in July 2024 with the Erasmus youth group in Kalajoki. This opportunity was made possible through the invaluable collaboration with the city's cultural organizer and youth coordinator, further enriching the experience and deepening community engagement.



Fig. 24 Youths from Denmark and Kalajoki participating in creating nature mandala;
credit: Diptee Thapa, 2024