Towards culturally sustainable projects

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The innovative aspect of the Arctic Art and Design (AAD) master programme is the way it combines the best practices from the disciplines of Applied Visual Arts (AVA) and service design when working with northern contexts, communities and Small and Medium Enterprises (SME). One of the aims of AAD studies is to learn to seek and choose approaches that consider the importance of cultural sustainability in the design and art processes. This can be achieved by identifying the local, in this case the northern ecological features, materials, cultural aspects and traditions.

The master's students studying in AAD come from various fields of study and international backgrounds and during their studies they learn to apply their skills to the context of the Arctic. These are practiced in the *project studies* class that aims to provide real working life experiences and insights. The students design and implement their projects with real stakeholders that mainly seek collaboration in environmental design, adventure tourism or third sector work with different communities. The principles of sustainability, especially working with the fragile northern surroundings are crucial aspects to consider throughout these processes.

The chapter discusses the benefits of combining the methods of discovering (service design) and place research (AVA) with the international student groups aiming to work with local stakeholders. We achieve this by providing experiences from the (AAD) project studies where the systematic use of methods from both disciplines is one of the key aims when planning a field project. We will shortly introduce the way students' project studies are constructed and what are the requirements to carry out culturally sustainable activity in the context of the Finnish Lapland. The experiences are based on the project studies and student projects implemented between 2015–2018.

Our backgrounds are in art education and service design and we have worked together developing the project studies in AAD since 2015. We have evaluated the challenges and good practices students have experienced and reported during their studies. Elina Härkönen works in art education and applied visual arts and the service designer Hanna-Riina Vuontisjärvi has been working with the local communities in Africa, China and Finland for several years and has observed AAD project studies particularly from the perspective of social innovations, empowerment and participatory development.

CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY AT THE CORE OF WORKING

Cultural sustainability in this context is about striving for understanding of the communities and their places who collaborate in the working. One of the key principles is to recognise that the ownership of local knowledge and the planned activities need to be based on the need that originate from the people living in the area (Auclair & Fairclough 2015). Therefore, the student project activities start from the expressed needs and visions of the collaborative community and these are used as a basis for planning. Executing these projects in a dialogic process with real stakeholders in real environments is seen to lead students to strive for sustainable and lasting solutions. The AAD curriculum is built around *project-based learning*, that is connected to the constructivist learning theory where learner is seen as an active producer of knowledge. Learning is seen to be based on an interactive construction of knowledge between people in a creative dialogue. Also, the subjective meaning constructed by individuals is tied to the meaning systems that prevail in the community. The reality is maintained and transformed in a dialogue between people (Tynjälä, 1999).

The projects are usually done in different sectors of the society, for example, with village communities, third sector actors, SME businesses and also in larger projects funded by EU and other financing bodies. We have usually worked with these partners on a long-term basis and have developed excellent working relationships with the people involved. The students are introduced to the options available and they can determine their project themes according to their own interests and previous skills.

The principles of AVA and service design lead the project processes before, during and after the action. Considering the nature of AVA and service design, learning can take place through dynamic social interaction rather than only in individual processes. Socially-engaged and place-specific applied visual arts means that the collaboration should be built on participators' values, needs and perspectives (historical, narratives, traditions). This approach to art requires the pre- and co-understanding of cultural identities, psychological and economic wellbeing that is gained only through an ongoing dialogue between local people about their locality, traditions and aspirations. Collaboration and communication are the vital learning points when working with people with different viewpoints and ambitions. These are also the core elements of cultural sustainability. To deepen the social-engagement, culturally sustainable ways of working relate closely to the principles of human-centric service design. There the designer/ artist acts as an equal participant using the skills of facilitation and empathy. Knowing the culture, history and place of the community becomes vital when selecting the use of service design tools and methods for the activity (Valtonen, 2005; Tan, 2012; Härkönen & Vuontisjärvi, 2017). During the planning of the projects, these aspects are constantly examined, tested and re-evaluated. It is important to find the tools that best serve the particular collaboration and project.

To deepen the students' orientation and engagement for their projects, they are encouraged to connect their research (master's thesis) to their projects. The research method they usually utilise in their research is art-based action research. Carrying out research alongside the practical work of the project helps the students maintain the elements for well-designed processes. The principle behind this is that profound knowledge and understanding of the working context can yield permanent positive effects. Understanding the place's multiple dimensions helps make culturally, environmentally and socially sustainable solutions (Coutts, 2013; Jokela, 2013; Jokela, Hiltunen, Huhmarniemi & Valkonen, 2006).

STARTING THE PROJECTS THROUGH DISCOVERY AND PLACE RESEARCH

The project studies start with a project management course where the first and crucial steps towards implementing the project are taken. The course aims to introduce the basic practices of applied visual arts and service design and show how combining the functional tools from both disciplines can lead to more sustainable projects. Through careful preparation and cyclical approaches of testing and redesigning the actual project activities are easier to carry out. The students are introduced to annually changing project partners and locations. The partners describe the need and set a loose framework for the collaboration. Seldom do the projects begin with needs set by AAD or UoL. When the partner has determined the need, the participating student groups are formed and the initial ideas are introduced to the partner. This is the very launch of the collaboration that, depending on the extent of the work, may last up to two academic years.

When the project location is clear and the initial ideas start to take shape, the next phase focuses on the launching principles of service design processes. This phase focuses on understanding (Moritz 2005) or discovering (Design Council 2015). The discovering phase includes a variety of service design tools that roughly determine the user and stakeholders, the organization and its operating culture, mission and vision (if existing). In addition, best practices of similar examples existing in the market are benchmarked. When cooperating with local communities, discovering phase tools are more attached to the local community, its individuals (key actors) and their stakeholders (service providers, municipality decision makers, third sector actors) rather than a company or business. Tools such as observations, interviews, probes, surveys or benchmarking are used when trying to understand the people, environment and cultural dimensions of AAD projects.

Narrowing down the broad picture produced during the discovering phase, the students are guided to direct their attentions to the target location of their project. This approach brings the planning process closer to the grounding principles of place-specific AVA. In order to make sustainable decisions and understand

the history, traditions and social contexts of this particular location the students are required to conduct a thorough place-based investigation. This is based on the notion that through real investigation with local people and familiarisation with related literature, the students gain an authentic understanding of the place and are better informed to carry out the work in a culturally sustainable manner (Jokela 2013; Härkönen & Vuontisjärvi, 2017). The place research begins with lighter investigation of information going through books and the Internet resources. Visits to the site are organised during the research but the so-called textual research is considered to form a ground to the research. When the visits take place, meetings with the partner and other local stakeholders are organised. Students often use their materials from the discovering phase to start the communication and planning with their partners. Interviewing locals, documenting features of the physical space and agreeing the next steps accelerate the design process and increase motivation for the students to continue their project. This approach has been developed at the University of Lapland over the past decade and has its roots in environmental and community-based art education (Jokela, Hiltunen, Huhmarniemi & Valkonen, 2005).

These human-centric and place-specific approaches focus on people's place-related experiences and memories rather than on the terms of the physical space (Jokela, 2013). The idea of 'place' here is understood as a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world (Cresswell, 2004). When the planning requires a constant dialogue and collaboration with the community about their places, it is crucial to understand that places are constantly changing depending on how people perceive them and what they mean to people (Fairclough, 2009). According to Jokela (2013), the designers /artists are required to analyse the place-related dimensions where the environment is understood as a basis of cultural identity, psychosocial and economic well-being. This requires an ongoing dialogue between local traditions and reforms (Jokela, 2013). The traditions are linked to cultural heritages that can offer understanding of historic processes and of how a place evolved from its current state to the planning and design processes. Fairclough (2009) points out that cultural heritage in cultural sustainability is focusing on the ways everyday life is lived in different places and what people value in their lives and places. This can enable a heritage-informed perspective on what should happen next, which could as easily be a decision to promote radical change as to encourage continuity (Fairclough, 2009). The central aim of the students' place research is to gain awareness and understanding and seek directions and raw material for future change in that particular place Fairclough et al. (2014) point out that:

> Place-based cultural activity of any kind should fundamentally be about dialogue, discourse, debate, argument, persuasion. It requires us to listen as well as to talk.

The discovering and researching phase normally lasts between four to six weeks after which, the place, the final plans for action are made. However, these first steps in the project usually continue to some extent,

throughout the action phase. When the location and people become more familiar, different layers of place usually start unfold. This increases sensitivity and understanding and helps in decision-making throughout the project. This aspect is especially crucial in the context of AAD. Most of our students come from different countries and are visiting the Arctic region for the very first time. Benchmarking and the place research helps them to get acquainted with their new study and working context but does not change the fact that the language and cultural barriers challenge them more than it would the local students. In cases like this, the intercultural dialogue becomes essential. The students have pointed out that the main challenges in collaboration are in communication. As most of the students do not speak Finnish, it affects the understanding of hidden nuances. In the next section we present one example of students working on a place specific project in a dialogue with local people.

THE STUDENT PROJECT: *TIRROVOIMAA*

One of the students project cases we are examining from the perspectives of discovering and place research is the 'Tirrovoimaa' project. The aims of this larger project is to develop a new kind of nature-based resort in village of Pasmajärvi, Kolari and it is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. From the environmental aspect, the project is examining a longer-term value of forests besides of logging and the interest is also in the area's suitability for nature tourism and nature tourism being part of the traditional village landscape. From the community perspective, the project aims to involve local residents in the participatory development process and encourage them towards long-term self-oriented entrepreneurship. As an outcome, the project will create a process model which takes into account the special features of the area, people and the local culture. The AAD student group working in Tirrovoimaa (2017–2018) consists of service designers and visual artists. Their backgrounds are in interior design, industrial design, filmmaking and architecture and they were all used in the project.

In autumn 2017, the student group started their discovery phase by exploring the area of Pasmajärvi village and meeting the local residents. Their first task was to identify the characteristics of the area through place research and understand the motives and needs of the local community by using observations and interviews. When the group started to seek good practices related to nature-based tourism, they carried out a benchmarking exercise of the existing local and global markets to clarify strategy and frame their design task.
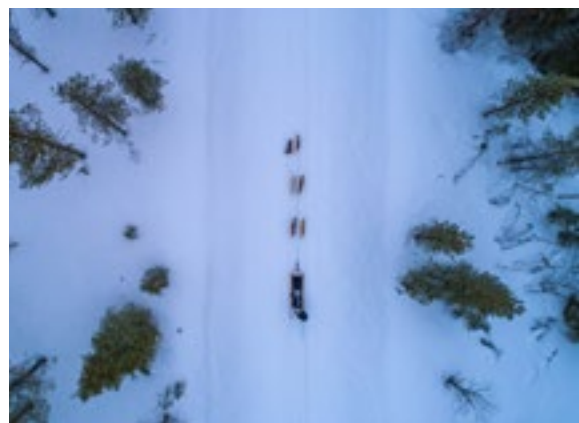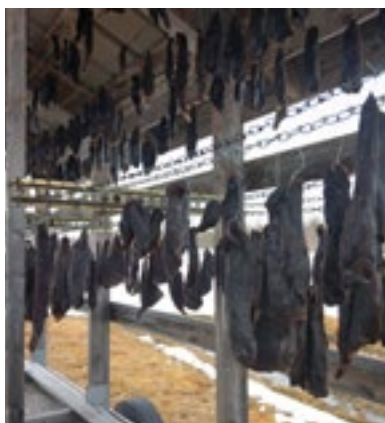
Figure 1. Objective and subjective aspects of Pasmajärvi - unique, fresh, beautiful, pure, wild, virgin, special place to learn, to live, to love, to relax, to return. Images 1,2,6: Marcelo Souza de Araujo. Images 3,4,5: Hazal Doga Kilickap, 20017–2018.

Figure 2. Mapping a customer journey to Pasmajärvi resort and pondering on how to solve logistic problems. Meetings at Pasmajär-vi school. Image: Elina Härkönen, 2017.

After the place research, students interpret gathered information by using customer journey tool to vis-ualize nature-based tourist's service path in Pasmajärvi resort. Customer journey tool is a visualised path or a story of a user experience of a certain service in a certain environment. Storytelling was also used as a tool during the phase and the group designed a drama arch of this unique nature resort experience. The drama arch tool is used to visualize the recognized emotions during the service experience. In the internal meetings they started to prototype products and services around the themes they had discov-ered during their first field visit. The key themes agreed on were uniqueness, freshness, beauty, purity and the wilderness.

Figures 3–4. Joint workshop in the village of Pasmajärvi organized and facilitated by Arctic Art and Design students. The workshop theme was selected by local residents and aimed to support local entrepreneurship through product development of local materials. Images: Hazal Doga Kilickap, 2018.

One of the challenges the group faced was to reach the local residents during their investigations. Later, the tasks such as joint workshops and field trips in the village were able to tackle this problem. Another difficult issue was to catch the nuances of conversations with the locals as none of them spoke Finnish. Language barriers brought some extra work for the collected workshop data as it had to be translated into English before analyzing. In similar situations our international students have creatively tackled the challenge by using design and art tools in data collection. For example they have observed the participants and sketched the body language. They have considered this as a positive experience, as they have been able to pay more attention to the non-verbal communication.

The actions implemented during the discovery phase turned out to be crucial for the group to approach the place through culturally sustainable manners: from the perspectives of the local community and through understanding its culture and the unique qualities of the local natural surroundings. Tools used in the discovery phase helped the group to draw an overall image of the project. The development task

and different joint tasks such as gatherings and workshops helped build trust and promote engagement between the locals and the student group. Place research raised the sense of understanding the environment, its characteristics and, together with the interviews and observations, helped to appreciate the local community and its traditions.

CONCLUSIONS

We have discussed the benefits of combining the methods of discovering (service design) and place research (AVA) with the international student groups aiming to work with local stakeholders. Although discussing these in the context of the Arctic, the tools used and levels of cultural learning may be applied to other cultural contexts with a little adaptation. To design culturally sustainable activities, we believe, one needs to first understand the cultural, social and ecological layers of the location one is about to work with. Project work is as much about learning to work as a team as it is to learning to collaborate with the local community. It is also about learning to maintain a constructive dialogue and finding ways of engaging people despite the lack of common spoken or cultural language. Continuous dialogue, flexibility and readiness to adapt to unexpected changes are the key factors towards sensitive working.

Besides collaborating with local communities, the international students in AAD also need to be able to work in multicultural and multidisciplinary teams inside their own student group. At the end of their projects, the students have reported that although challenging in so early stages of their studies, working in real environments has made learning more meaningful. We believe that bringing studies to real contexts and to the local cultural traditions can support the students to develop their cultural understanding quicker and give them strategic tools to navigate in the cultural environment. In their feedback, the students point out that cooperating with real partners leads also to a better understanding of the local language and the behavioral models of the place. When not being able to understand the language, the nuances may remain hidden and there becomes a need for cultural interpretation: the visuality of art and design tools can form a universal language that functions as cultural interpreters and increase mutual understanding.

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Willow sculpting workshop in Muodoslompolo village in Northern Sweden. Photos by Maria Huhmarniemi.