

# Embracing multiculturalism through art based workshops: quantizing qualitative data

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## WHO

Deeply inspired by American singer, songwriter, pianist, arranger and activist in the Civil Rights Movement, Nina Simone's Interview from the movie - Nina Simone: Great Performances - Live College Concerts & Interviews, I found myself related to her definition of an artist as follows:

*“An artist’s duty, as far as I am concerned, is to reflect the times. I think that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians.. As far as I am concerned it’s their choice, but I choose to reflect the times and the situations in which I find myself, that to me is my duty. And at this crucial time in our lives, when everything is so desperate, when every day is a matter of survival, I don’t think you can help but be involved. Young people, black and white know this, that’s why they are so involved in politics. We will shape and mold this country, or it will not be molded and shaped by anymore. So I don’t think you have a choice, how can you be an artist and not reflect the times? That to me is the definition of an artist.”*

(Nina Simone, Interview from the movie - Nina Simone: Great Performances - Live College Concerts & Interviews)

Although a designer myself, at this crucial time we find ourselves once again, Simone's words are as timely as ever, regardless the field of expertise. Design has had its own share of failures, such as claims to solve the refugee crisis by building better tents, (Koskinen et al., 2011, p.101) while at the same time, the world-renowned architect Frank Gehry in his interactive architecture and design course from the online education platform MasterClass claims that “most of our cities are built with such a faceless glass along-way for economies and not for humanities”, concluding that “whatever you do, promise me, that every project you make or design, you will take the risk of doing something for humanity”. Baca (1995) claims that every inch of urban space is swallowed by skyscrapers and privatized into the so-called public space of shopping malls and corporate plazas (p.132) while previously had raised the question “What shall we choose to memorialize in our time?”(p.131)

## WHAT

“MY STAGE / MUN STAGE”, was an art based workshop supporting bi-directional social integration of young women in Finnish Lapland. The project has been running as a participatory design workshop where women from different cultural backgrounds have been sharing and creating collectively a story of their

past, present and future in Finnish Lapland. The workshop was organized under the umbrella of the “Art Gear 2016-2019” project (Hiltunen, Huhmarniemi, Ylikorva, & Laitinen, 2016-2019); a series of art based research workshops aiming to bring people together, share ideas and personal stories, develop friendships and empower both foreign and locals to face the constantly changing world we are living in.

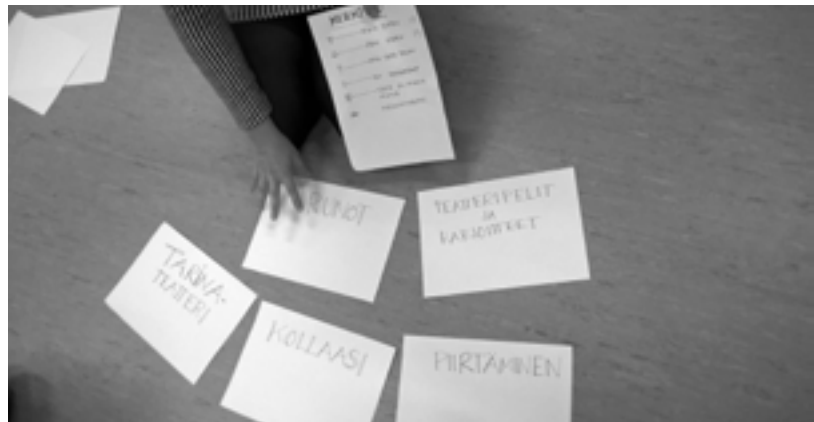
We hold six sessions in which, five to ten women with an age average from twenty to sixty year old, from Middle East, Latin America, Southern and Northern Europe attended. Through the sessions, different art and design methods were used such as visual representations, expectation maps, storytelling and writing, enacting and body-storming and the method of Play-back theatre.

## WHERE

The workshop, took place in Jokkakulma, monitoimitila, in Rovala 5, 96100 Rovaniemi, Finland, as one of the courses offered for students who were studying in Rovala during autumn '16. Rovala-College is an adult educational institution, which provides education and vocational training, as well as open-university education.

## WHY

Multiculturalism is a term widely used the latest decades through social media, due to the current unstable social and political situation in different parts of our world, which lead people to flee away their countries seeking for a new homeland. Multiculturalism is currently highly associated with settlement policies such as social integration, cultural assimilation and racial segregation. A Chinese thinker and social philosopher once said that human beings are drawn close to one another by their common nature, but habits and customs keep them apart (Confucius, 511BC-479BC). Migration is and always has been the main reason why culture and livelihoods evolved, therefore, if we are willing to find ourselves peacefully living together, we must find ways to interact, communicate, share and exchange information. Future predictions demonstrate a continuously evolve between cultures and languages as well as a merge between educational fields and design approaches (Baca, 1995; Jokela & Coutts, 2014) thus, multiculturalism is a major focus of research. Because migration creates culturally different groups of people who evolve either in working places or in their daily life routine, it is important to find ways to deal with the challenges multiculturalism unfolds. One way to investigate, deal and aim to achieve healthy multicultural societies is taking part in art and design projects aiming to achieve bi-directional social integration. As Robert L. Peters said, design is able to create culture, which is able to shape values, aiming that the values created are the ones which can determine the future.



**Figure 1.** Participatory workshop session - Visual representations, December 2016. Image: Moira Douranou, 2016.

**Figure 2.** Participatory workshop session - Body-storming & Play-back theatre, November 2016. Image: Moira Douranou, 2016.

**Figure 3.** Participatory workshop session - Storytelling & writing, November 2016. Image: Moira Douranou, 2016.

**Figure 4.** Implementation of the visual questionnaire, December 2016. Image: Moira Douranou, 2016.

This study aimed to contribute the studies done considering multiculturalism in the intersection of social sciences and the field of art and design. The conceptual framework investigated the themes of design management, art-based workshop and representation graphs of a qualitative to quantitative research evaluation, within the aim of embracing multiculturalism. In order to achieve an as diverse as possible research outcome, three different ways of evaluation were implemented: a visual, a physical and an oral questionnaire which together with the field notes, a visual diary and audio & video recordings, ended in a rich material to be analyzed.

## EVALUATIVE / REFLECTIVE COMMENT

*“The more stories i hear, the more common things i found. We are all, so much the same.”*

Field notes, workshop session 30.11.2016

Considering the participants and myself as one of them, I repeat my questions that arose through my participation during the whole process. I think they are questions that arose in other art based workshops as well, and together artists and researchers, as well as anyone involved in the organization of such projects, should be aware of, before planning:

1. Why someone should leave their duties, personal life, job, studies to come to the workshop, if we cannot persuade them that, what we will do is important enough for them to spend their time with us?
1. What can actually someone gain out of our workshop?
1. How could we attract people to join us? Should we firstly think what they can gain back and use this as the main marketing tool thinking not forward, but backwards?
1. Should we instead of asking people *“What can they do”*, support the workshop as: *“What they want to learn how to do”*?
1. With whom we would like to work with?
1. How can we give value to what we do in other means than money?

If I would like to summarize the general outcome of this “My stage / Mun stage” workshop, I would use the following statements of two participants during the workshop session on 14.12.2016:

P1: *“I am afraid that people see I am a foreigner and immediately they do not like me. I avoid interact with customers at work, but after being here I feel more confident ”.*

P2: *“I have no clue how the practices here could benefit me in my studies or work ?”*

The “Participant 1” could be characterized as the ideal persona, this art based workshop supporting integration of young women, could possibly have. A person who, unconsciously through the art practices, gets integrated in the social life, gets empowered as a person and an employee; while the “Participant 2” could be characterized as the ideal future target and as an open challenge for the Faculty of Art and Design to approach, get involve, and persuade that art based methods are useful and valuable and can be applied in all the aspects of our life.

Art based process recognizes process not just product (Leavy, 2009). I strongly believe art based workshops can develop our personality and awake our consciousness. Time spend in such workshops is extremely valuable as a process aiming towards understanding ourselves and the world around us, and as such a time must be seen and recognized.

Being part of this project was a challenging, yet rewarding experience. The challenges and obstacles I faced from the beginning of the first phase until the very last workshop session considered the language barrier and general communication both among the team group as well as among the participants. I coped every obstacle as a challenge to educate and practice myself and for that purpose: I participated in three lectures referring to intercultural communication both in theory and practice, I took part in a life drawing workshop in order to create my visual diary during the workshop sessions and I presented my work during the workshop to several different audiences in order to get feedback and insights, since my willingness was to create a commonly understandable visual and written report.

As an interpretative researcher in a performative art workshop, the knowledge of the Finnish language might not sound as a mandatory requirement, however, without the English explanation from the artist, Anne Niskala, I would not have been able to follow the instructions during the sessions, and without the English interpretation from the social work researcher, Enni Mikkonen, I would not have been able to have the oral questionnaire as presented in this written form. Art based workshops differ, and in this performative art workshop a level of understanding of the Finnish language would be extremely useful, since theatre practises demand the ability to express yourself not only physically, but also orally in order to share experiences. Another challenge I faced during the workshop sessions was the multitask role I had, however, handling different tasks and roles, gave me the opportunity to always have a holistic view of the process as well as keep a highly detailed report of what has happened. Considering the exchange of skills and information, I did learn a lot from both the artist, Anne Niskala, and the social work researcher, Enni Mikkonen. I think the participation of the social work researcher created a healthy competition between the ethnographic and the interpretative research. Moreover, I believe the difference in the levels of the research was valuable and, I highly recommend in future projects the combination of master and phd level research; through the collaboration, integration of the fields can happen, exchange of working skills and healthy competition that can lead in qualitative work and research.

These project studies have been an important source of information for me, a practice on my previous skills and an opportunity to develop my understanding in ways I could not imagine myself before. Being such a challenging project, led to such valuable results and quality work I am proud to talk about and share.

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