
Learning creativity - art activities for children in Vantaa City Library

Taru Liikanen

Vantaa City Library, Vantaa, Finland.

E-mail address: taru.liikanen@vantaa.fi

Teemu Kide

Vantaa City Library, Vantaa, Finland.

E-mail address: teemu.kide@vantaa.fi



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Abstract:

Two art educators with different backgrounds and methods of art education have been working in two public libraries in Vantaa City. The art educators create a safe and easy access to space where kids can fulfill their ideas and express themselves through different media. With the art educators, the library becomes a multisensory, exciting and fun learning environment. In this article, Taru Liikanen writes about her experiences at Point library and Teemu Kide about his experiences in Länsimäki Library.

Keywords: Art education, media education, improvisation, creativity, learning environments

1.Introduction

Traditionally, libraries have offered their customers an equal opportunity to learn and to develop themselves. Today, learning is lifetime, and team working and problem solving skills are more essential than before. Arts are known to have qualities that can penetrate people's rational layer, feed their creativity and even intelligence, and according to Carr (2007, 722) the library "*can occupy the same role that the studio occupies in an artist's practice or that a museum plays for the inquiring visitor making new discoveries: a place for trying out, incubating, and articulating previously disembodied parts of the imagination, an experimental setting where new possibilities can emerge (John-Steiner, 1985). It's a place for intensity and tenacity, reflection and pursuit, a workplace for process.*"

Therefore, in the autumn of 2015 Vantaa City Library started an experimental project with two professional art educators in two libraries. The project was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Library wanted to experiment with new ways of approaching children and teens who spend their time in libraries, establish a frequent art workshop activity for kids of various ages and develop these activities further. The Library hired two art

educators with different backgrounds and methods of art education. Taru Liikanen is a qualified art teacher, Master of Arts, majored in art education. She has worked in Point Library, in Kartanonkoski area. Teemu Kide is a musician, PhD and art educator specialized in improvisation. Teemu has worked in Länsimäki library.

In the next chapters both art educators write about their work and methods. First (Chapter 2) Taru Liikanen writes about her experiences at Point Library and then (Chapter 3) Teemu Kide writes about his experiences in Länsimäki Library.

2. The Starting Point

Point Library is located in Kartanonkoski, near the Helsinki-Vantaa airport. The library has seven full-time employees. In 2015, the annual number of library visits was 207 000 and the annual lending was 203 000. Point Library is also a self-service library and the customers can get into the library daily between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m., even when the library staff are not present. The staff is present between 9 a.m. and 8 p.m.. An English language day care center and the International School of Vantaa are located in the same building with the library. There are also two other schools nearby. The library is constantly filled with kids.

As I started my work at Point Library, I asked the customers and the visiting school groups what type of contents of art and media would they be interested in. I made large questionnaires asking "Would you be interested in..." and below contents like Photography/ Animations/ Crafting/ etc and a large space for suggestions. I also spent a lot of time just hanging around in the library, drawing pictures and comics with the kids. I did some pop-up workshops on comics, which was a great way to find out how these kids view this type of an learning environment. How do they interact with each other, how they participate, how long can they focus on the task at hand...

Listening and getting to know the kids is vital. Sometimes us adults have very different assumptions about childrens needs and expectations. A good example is filmmaking. If you discuss with kids about filmmaking, they often associate films with YouTube videos that don't necessarily follow the structure of classical Hollywood film narration. Some, on the other hand, want to make their own epic, five-hour-long fantasy films. In addition, filmmaking is teamwork so everyone needs to communicate and share a common ground on whatever they are doing. I used the questionnaires as a base for conversation. This way I quickly came to know a lot of the kids, their teachers and parents and got to market the upcoming workshops.

I use social media to market my workshops and events, mainly Facebook and Instagram. My workshops and events have their own hashtag #PointissaTapahtuu. Since I started the Point Library Instagram followers have more than quadrupled. The kids participating on the filmmaking and animation workshops wanted some of their videos on YouTube so I created a new channel (Pointin kirjasto).

2.1 Art education and the library as a learning environment

Art education is media education and vice versa! Environmental education is also a part of art education and media is a large part of our environment. Our entire visual culture needs to be observed with a curious eye and a pondering mind. I am a cinephile but also a critical media educator. Critical media education produces knowhow on the processes of media making,

analysing and making media yourself. As an art educator I guide and inspire the children to express their own ideas with different means of expression. We use all means of art education from pen and brush to cell phones and LED lights.

Art education involves storytelling, designing, installations, illusions, sound effects, street art, sculpting... Art can be whimsical, undisciplined, even rebellious and it can challenge our thinking. Art is all about change. Both as an artist and as an art educator I aim for change – change in how we feel about the world we live in, how we think and how we act. This personal experience of change is often forgotten when we discuss about the benefits of art and art education but was yet again brought forward by the recently published *Understanding the value of arts & culture* -raport (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016).

I see the library as a great platform for all kinds of experimental learning environments. The library is a versatile space that is driven by your own motivation and curiosity. The children bring all kinds of expectations with them when they participate in a workshop at the library. Us adults, librarians and educators, have to listen, be sensitive and alert. The children also have a different type of control – they can leave whenever they feel like it (unlike at school). This freedom also creates responsibility.

The workshops have reached some kids, who don't have other hobbies, and kids who would otherwise have no contact with kids outside their school or outside their own language barriers. But image is a common language we all share and the workshops enable new ways of communication, new insight and new friendships.

I work in close collaboration with our librarians. One of our librarians is studying process drama so we started a shadow puppet theater workshop together. She has also helped me guide all the media workshops. One of our librarians, who specializes in young adult books, is very into the fantasy genre started a Harry Potter club with me. I have learned so much from the librarians. We are all responsible for the children in our library – the interaction with children cannot be outsourced to one person only. Every librarian is an educator and "*librarians are agents of learning, to assist the user in discovery*" (Carr 2007, 703).

Creative collaboration with the librarians creates multiple possibilities to link art, information, literacy, different media and means of expression together. The learning environment is created in collaboration with the children, the librarians and the art educator.

2.3 Workshops and pop-ups

Point Library is one large space with no separate rooms. Only a few shelves have wheels and can be moved easily. There is also very little room for storage. I keep all the art supplies, iPads and tripods in our office and carry around what I need in a book cart. I create mobile learning environments wherever I carry my art supplies. The mobility of my work also encourages ecological thinking – I recycle everything. We have made treasure maps from packing papers, birdhouses from old books and a playhouse out of cardboard boxes. All our workshops and exhibitions are very visible and audible for everyone in the library.

During the autumn 2015 I organized a photography-, animation- and a claymation workshop, a movie group (where we made our own short films) and an IndieFlix -movie event (presenting Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid*). The participants of the photography workshops curated and put together the exhibition and parents and friends were invited to the opening.

The claymation workshop was demanded by the participants of the first animation workshop. I also educated the library staff on making animations.

Together with the librarians and the kids we have created a learning environment that sometimes runs itself. I did a pop-up workshop about using recycled materials in creative ways and the kids got so excited they asked me if we can do this every week. They wanted to be "assistant teachers" in their own club. They decided the time and the day for the club, they made the posters. The kids are very committed to this club of their own.

For kids who cannot commit to weekly workshops I have piloted after school pop-up workshops where I bring the iPads and toys next to the kids when they are playing at the computers. Sometimes I just start animating myself and the kids get curious and then start animating themselves. If someone gets even a little excited, I try to organize a way that they can continue and grow their projects somehow. Pop-up workshops are also a great way of trying out different ideas and getting feedback immediately.

I use all the library collections in my workshops. I reserve books and films about the subjects at hand on my workshops. For example the cardboard club made their own book exhibition: we built birdhouses from recycled materials and made an exhibition of birdbooks and DIY books. The children's art and actions are very visible to everyone at the library.

3 Länsimäki Library, teens` room Zoom

Länsimäki – a bit harsh suburb on the edge of Vantaa. Population is less than 6000, 33% speak some other language than Finnish as a mother tongue. Unemployment is the highest in the whole Helsinki region. The library building is a typical Finnish 70s-style box-like combination of multiple tenants: a library, a supermarket, a youth center and a simple bar. The library is relatively small: in 2015 the annual lending was 66 000 and the annual number of library visits 70 000. There are roughly three typical customer groups using Länsimäki Library: elderly people interested in books, middle-aged customers using computers and various groups of immigrant kids spending their after-school time. In 2010 library opened Zoom – a room for teens and younger kids.

Zoom is used by kids of various ages. Kids between ages from 9 to 12 play a lot, teens usually tend to watch YouTube videos, or just sit back and relax with their phones. Zoom is also used for occasional homework activity. There's also been incidents when teens` frustration has taken over and turned into bad behavior, even fights.

Zoom is a separate spot. Kids spend their time in there mainly on their own, and some of them might be in a danger of social exclusion. An adult is needed in there; a person who would see the kids as they are, make them visible and offer them something valuable that would make a difference in their lives. In this experiment, we thought improvised art would do the trick.

3.1 The problems with art and education

Art is at its best when it amazes one and doesn't require an effort to receive it. This is an essential principle of art education. Teens may see art as something boring that is being forced by adults. I see an art educator as a kind of *Hermes*: a person between art and a teenager. Art educator's task is to make the kids feel unique with themselves; they also should feel safe

enough in order to be able to express themselves. Another challenge is how they feel about education. In my experience, kids can show extreme creativeness especially when they don't feel they are being educated. I consider art education in Länsimäki library as a non-teaching event. Instead of traditional teaching, I'm the one who takes care of the intersubjective environment. When the environment is facilitating, sometimes even magical things happen.

3.2 The theory of an ideal interaction and the Floating Impro

The principle of an ideal interaction is simple: once you are offered an idea, you accept it and add something; the other receives your idea and adds something. All the impulses must be accepted immediately, also the ones of your own. Theatre improvisation scenes work brilliantly with this non-thinking, ongoing circle. By this mutual decision of full acceptance ideas can be expressed without the fear of failure. (Johnstone 1979.) Accepting is an attitude I wanted Länsimäki kids to assimilate. A crucial factor for an improvisator is to feel safe inside. This concerns professionals too.

It's fascinating to see that this principle works – whether when we improvise a theatre scene or a piece of music. I have developed a method of teaching musical improvisation called *The Floating Impro (Kelluntamusiikki©)*. Floating Impro is a music that exists on just a few alternating chords, with a stable pulse and for a longer periods of time. Floating usually creates an unusual environment of unplanned formlessness, and a feeling of not being responsible.

Why Floating Impro? Why not play something else in Zoom? Because Floating Impro is stylistically non-idiomatic music, and thus doesn't require any studies on music. I have found it the easiest way to begin with non-musicians. Floating is like a musical *Tabula Rasa*; it is intentionally carried away from common harmonies, but it can easily turn into idiomatic music if needed. I'm a professional musician. But when I improvise with others, I don't see myself as a teacher, and I shouldn't act like one. When the art educator is seen as just somebody playing something, the entire environment clearly makes it easy to engage in improvisation without prior thought. In Floating Impro, both of these environments – the music and the nonverbals – are carefully looked after. (Johnstone 1999; Kide 2014; Kristeva 1984; Stern 2004; Winnicott 1971.)

3.3 The improvisational workshops in Zoom

I first began my weekly improvisational workshops on interaction. It seems to me that people in Finland are taught to be afraid of mistakes. In my experience, the best way to become creative is to make mistakes, to make them a lot, and to see that screwing up isn't dangerous. Therefore, all my workshops began with a high-speed games where mistakes were unavoidable for everyone. This practice of screwing up is from a method by Keith Johnstone, and it usually makes the group laugh, remove their filters of self-expression and feel relaxed. As expected, it worked brilliantly with Länsimäki kids too. After these warming exercises we practiced to be interested in each other's ideas and created short improvised scenes together. In few weeks the improvisation group became very popular – and noisy.

I adopted a very different approach to music workshops. Instead of taking a leadership role, I started to improvise music by myself in Zoom with an electric piano and Maschine mk2 controller. And the kids started to jam with me! For me it's obvious that asking total strangers to improvise with me wouldn't have worked. Kids play if they feel like it. Engaging in the

improvised music happens naturally if not asked or even suggested. I played the music that existed *per se*; we didn't have to begin it. Furthermore, it's also evident that my nonverbal communication must have been friendly, self-ironic and non-threatening enough to get them play with me. Some days I improvised music in Zoom for hours just by myself, while kids were relaxing and playing with computers. And when I stopped playing, they always noticed it! Improvised music has already become a kind of furniture or an oxygen for kids in Zoom. It is a part of the environment, and they enjoy it!

3.4 Art Educator as a hidden professional

In Länsimäki, it is hard to "teach" art to dozens of multicultural, fantastic kids, but my work there was surely educative. Kids should be making art in their lives, and fortunately many of them already do. Art educator isn't necessarily needed on stage only; art educator is needed in library to inspire kids in a subtle way, to help them explore their personal ways of expressing themselves. Creating improvised scenes or music makes them laugh, learn, enthuse, develop their social skills and – most importantly – it increases their self-confidence. Art educator may help kids to trust themselves. Library is the place they are gravitated to after school, whether they seek for art or a peaceful spot to chill out or just company of their age-mates. Making art may also be frustrating. But frustration is also an experience, which is necessary in order to learn anything new.

4. Conclusion

With the art educators, the library becomes a multisensory, exciting and fun learning environment. The art educator is present and pays attention to the kids' wishes and needs, their thoughts and sentiments. All activities and workshops are based on this presence in the library and in the community. The art educators create a safe easy to access space where kids can fulfill their ideas and express themselves through different media. The kids move from passive media consumerism towards making their own media productions with their peers. They now have an access to fun, high quality art and media education – just by stepping through the library door! In its strategy, Vantaa City Library embraces all types of literacies – including visual literacy and media literacy – so art and media education is now becoming a permanent library activity and will be developed further.

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