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Artful care for self and others in daily design practice

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Abstract

This paper examines how arts- and nature-based interventions can support thriving and mental health as an integrated part of daily design practice for freelance designers and one-person companies in precarious working conditions. The research is conducted as a practice-based, explorative case study at The Royal Danish Academy in collaboration with The Union of Architects and Designers (FAOD) and Design Denmark and financed by The Velliv Association. Thirty-two professional designers participate in a course of two full-day workshops and two coaching sessions. Data consists of preliminary questionnaires and questionnaires after each workshop, observations and registrations during the workshops and coaching sessions. Findings show that many designers place their full day-to-day attention on the outer world, making them forget to listen to and care for inner worlds central to being creative, e.g., the experience of personal meaning, playfulness, vulnerability, personal needs, and boundaries. The arts- and nature-based interventions can help designers connect to deep inner resources that are easily forgotten in times of rapid change, uncertainty, competition, and conflict. This in turn changes their focus and level of kindness towards themselves and others, and through this, the way they tackle projects, clients, collaborators, finances, and their role as designers, leading to new learning and more holistic ways of contributing to the community.

Author keywords

Arts-based methods; creativity; design practice; mental health; nature; well-being

Introduction

In Denmark, the design labor market is under increasing pressure from companies with demands for loose affiliation and 'freelancing' (FAOD, 2021). Project-based employment is on the rise, and the competition is fierce, not least due to global online players offering cheap solutions for standard tasks (Julier, 2021). These aspects of the market can cause a 'race to the bottom' in wages (Julier, 2021; Gleerup, 2016) creating precarious work conditions for freelancers not able to obtain permanent employment and for those who are voluntarily self-employed. The external dimensions of the industry can affect a person's internal well-being and development as well as professional identity formation (Gleerup, 2016). Many may experience stress symptoms and there may be an informal pressure to 'perform' a professional identity of creativity (Julier, 2021). In a working situation as the one outlined, it is difficult for designers to find the time and financial resources to prioritize well-being and mental health measures, therefore, the present research project investigates the potential for this target group to establish mental well-being and care for themselves as a part of their daily design practice. The approach is to include arts- and nature-based interventions in the design work. These are methods originating in art- and nature therapy, which are adapted to organizational creativity, e.g., within innovation and management (Darsø, 2018; Darsø & Meltzer, 2021). Along with the creative purpose, the methods have shown the potential to bring awareness to and strengthen the designer's personal resources (Friis &

Mølhave, 2021). We adhere to the WHO definition (2023) that 'Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community'. At the same time, we embrace the 'broaden-and build' principle (Fredrickson 2004) within flourishing, in that we seek to build and strengthen what already works in relation to well-being in the designers' practical workflows and enhance this as part of self-care. The knowledge produced about the challenges that professional designers in precarious working conditions experience forms the basis for developing a guide with hands-on advice for how to include arts- and nature-based interventions in individual and collaborative practice.

Method

The research project is a practice-based (Woolley in Dixon, 2001) exploratory case study where qualitative data production provides new knowledge about the methods and tools to be used in professional practice. The case study supports in-depth, multi-faceted knowledge about a complex situation (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Stake, 1995). The objective is thus to create 'robust' knowledge, which can lead to new workflows and procedures in design practice (Friis & Gelting, 2014). The term 'knowledge production' refers to knowledge that is produced in the context in which it takes place, where uncertainty is a condition and learning and the development of new knowledge are understood as closely related (Friis, 2007). According to Flyvbjerg, the closeness of the case study to real situations is important because human behavior is context dependent. By using preliminary questionnaires, questionnaires after each workshop, observations and registrations during the workshops and coaching sessions, the participants' own words about their situation and experiences are collected. This provides a detailed and coherent data set about the possible potential of the methods to promote mental health and well-being.

Workshops and coaching sessions

The workshops and coaching sessions run from March – September '22 in four groups of eight (a total of 32 participants). Via LinkedIn and newsletters from the collaborating union and associations, professional designers sign up for the workshops to experiment with the interventions and share their experiences. They bring along a theme or question within their practice to explore. The aim is for them to gain an understanding of the personal inner dimensions of their working conditions and an experience of the interventions' potential health-promoting and creative effects. Having concluded the course, the participants are expected to be able to use the methods directly in their daily work, according to their own choice and needs. Before starting the course, participants fill out an online questionnaire, 'Psychological working environment and well-being in the workplace' from the National Research Center for Working Environment (NFA). This provides a quantitative description of their working conditions and a general impression of well-being in the group. Following each of the two workshops, there are individual coaching sessions where the participants can talk about their experiences at the workshop and the methods in practice. The coaching is guided by the principles of building on that which works for each individual designer and their situation.

Theory

The layout of the workshops and the use of arts- and nature-based interventions is informed by the four psychological functions identified by Jung: intuition, thinking, sensations, and feelings (Jung 1953–79). These are based on the movement of energy in our psychic activity. Out of habit, we often develop one dominant function. To most professional designers, the quick thinking-function is paramount. By bringing focus to the other functions, we seek, through a common design process, to provide new balance and let the body and mind open to new impressions and perspectives regarding the participants' practice and specific work tasks.

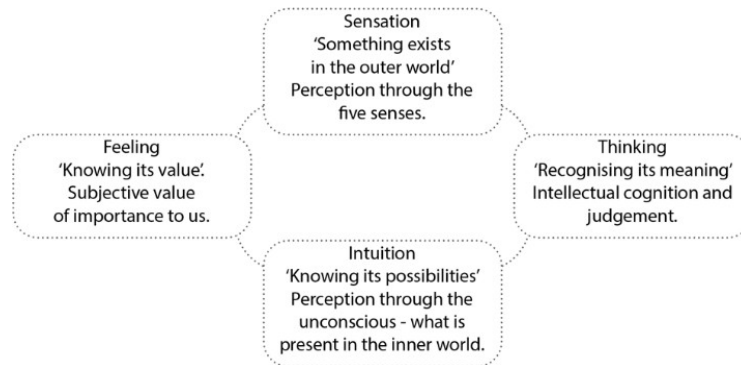


Figure 1. Four psychological functions. Based on Carl Gustav Jung (1979).

The arts- and nature-based interventions are incorporated into the design process to activate all four psychological functions in the investigation of a question or topic. Art is a way to our feelings and our humanity (Eisner in Darsø, 2001) and artistic approaches can redirect our attention to what is meaningful and makes a difference (Darsø, 2001; Darsø and Meltzer, 2020). In the workshop, we use interventions from an existing palette of methods that are easily transferable in a daily design business, e.g., creative writing exercises and making a stakeholder map in clay (rather than post-it notes). The workshop layout is based on Theory U (Scharmer, 2007; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), devising a transformation journey that takes the practitioner from everyday consciousness to deeper levels of cognition and connection to future collective possibilities. Scharmer describes how the awareness and ability to change the place in ourselves from which we operate is central to the results we produce - and thus how internal states and experiences are closely connected to external ones.

Empirical data

Before the workshop course

In the preliminary questionnaire, the participants provide insights about the inner conditions of their work life and their well-being. As self-employed, many express the demands and stress of always being on the look-out for jobs and find it hard to enjoy quiet periods in-between jobs. There's a lack of calm and ongoing worry about finances. Some of the participants have been down with stress, others feel that they are about to collapse and are worried that the duress is turning into physical defects. Some say that they are bad at listening to themselves and feel they need to be in a certain way with clients, which is a 'square and hard place to be'. The majority feels lonely and squeezed artistically due to money, time, and client demands. The designers in their 40s and 50s worry about pension plans, which many of them can't afford. There are feelings of being overwhelmed by work and a longing for freedom, working creatively, and being able to balance personal and professional life.

The Interventions

During the two workshops, the participants experience nine interventions of which three will be unfolded and examined here. The interventions are strung together in a process labeled 'artful inquiry'; a process ignited by a 'burning question' and explored via the arts- and nature-based interventions. Answers, insights, and new questions emerge, carrying the process forward. An artful inquiry process can be based on a single method or a sequence of methods.

The Other Hand is to explore a situation from two different perspectives by drawing and writing, first with the dominant hand, second with the non-dominant hand. It's a way to tap into the potential of the often-under-used right hemisphere of the brain, to explore the poetic, holistic perspectives that might arise (Capacchione, 2001). It is used several times during the workshops, initially for the participants to investigate their first question or theme, later to discern what has been learned about their working situation. The duration is 20 minutes. The participants work in silence with the dominant hand for 5 minutes then continue with the other hand on a new piece of paper for 10–15 minutes. Overall, participants are genuinely surprised by the perspectives appearing when using the other hand: unexpected ideas, attitudes, sentiments that they find strangely familiar and welcome. For many, working with the other hand is a way to let go of self-censorship and set aside internal criticism and perfectionism. Some talk of a fruitful dynamic between the two different voices, others how it's like having a friend to ask for advice. Several of the participants experience the other hand as forgiving, loving, and expressing self-care (something they are not in the habit of feeling, but are touched by). In between the workshops, *The Other Hand* is the method that most participants experiment with. One communication designer in her 50s, who 'hasn't been creative for years', feels the urge to make large drawings on the wall, but feels too vulnerable to share this with others. She waits for her husband to leave the house, puts up big pieces of paper on the wall and lays out her brushes. She then uses *The Other Hand* to cross the threshold of fear and inner criticism. Only then is she able to lean into the work and be in the process.

Følge is to let your hands surprise you whilst making an aide in clay for the work that you are about to embark on and is introduced once the participants have decided the question each of them wants to explore. *Følge* is the Norse equivalent to a power or totem animal—a spirit being, that represents qualities and characteristics that a person needs or is in the process of developing. The duration of the exercise is 5 minutes and participants work in silence with their eyes closed. Each person gets a handful of clay and are asked to shape a helper for the journey ahead. Once the time has passed, participants open their eyes and one at a time talk about the experience and the figure in their hands. Just like the previous exercise, participants are surprised by what they have made. It can be a bear that was expected to be strong but looks disarmingly playful and sweet. A panther with wings. A bird that is resting instead of flying. Having to close the eyes lessens performance anxiety because it is impossible to be in complete control—and in that space something else can come forth. Most people react with care towards their *følge*, however some squeeze the clay back to a lump, finding it too ugly, or not what they wanted. One found it too difficult to engage with the material with her eyes closed, later explaining that she is too much of a perfectionist. However, most participants express how working with the clay, eyes closed, provides unexpected new experiences and insights: 'Being in the space, feeling welcome the way I am. Filled with energy, a loving, including space'. A female participant models the head of a male 'full of himself', resting in his own authority. She feels resistance towards the figure and only after talking about it does she begin to see how the authority can support her in her work. In the coaching session, she has warmed to him and exclaims: 'It is completely caricatured - the authority and calm that the figure expresses—there are core truths in this—it's wild!'

Medicine Walk is to bring a question into a silent, aimless wander, in conversation with nature to seek its advice. It's placed at the end of the first workshop. Participants start in a circle in nature (in our case, a green lawn in town bordered by shrubbery) and are invited to share their question to inquiry about. Next, they identify a threshold, e.g., two flowers in the lawn, to cross at the beginning and end of their walk. Setting a timer for 20 minutes, they walk slowly, question in mind and being led by experiencing what draws their attention. For many of the participants, the *Medicine walk* is an intriguing experience even though they initially fear that they won't get any answers, and some find it hard to let go of the need to perform. Several say that it is like a sacred walk, and helpful to only focus on a single question—something falls into place when sharing a

question with nature and the surroundings. Some people pick up things while walking, for instance a four-leaf clover or a snail house—and find that it brings deep significance to their question, particularly once they write and talk about it afterwards. One of the participants explains that the medicine walk is to invite aimlessness in. It is transgressive and demands of you a loss of control. She finds that her need for control is linked to insecurity - and she would like to be more welcoming, honest, get rid of the parades and have trust. Medicine walk helps her with this.

Analysis

In the following, commonalities across the participants' experiences of the interventions are identified and discussed with the theoretical perspectives to examine their potential for supporting thriving and mental health as an integrated part of daily design practice.

Let go of pressure to perform

Common to the described methods is, that they support the participants' open inquiry about a situation by enabling the critical mental function to be set aside for a while. This parallels Scharmer's encouragement 'to let go, in order to let come', i.e., dare to lean into the future and experience the unknown. The arts- and nature-based methods enable this 'release' to happen in practice, for instance through drawing with a hand of which you have no expectations or walking in nature exploring a question without attachment to the answer. This openness allows for novel perspectives to surface and be noticed – it's like setting the door ajar to a different level of perception and consciousness. It's a way to bypass the censorship of an inner critic and gain access to ways of knowing that the participants somehow recognize but have forgotten are there. The experience of release is quite literally a relief to many. It provides them with joy, the ability to relax, letting go, and beginning to see what might come from within.

Grounding, inner calm

Setting aside the thinking function, helps the participants embody their feelings, sensations, and intuition as described in Jung's four functions. Scharmer describes a similar movement in awareness in Theory U: Going from 'seeing', to 'sensing' to 'presencing'. Our participants describe the space that they encounter as 'deeper', 'calm', 'magical', 'coming home', 'grounding'. For instance, a communication designer, becomes aware that he is over-reliant on what the clients think and mainly uses the visual sense when working, a monotonous type of stimuli. Using clay opens to enjoyment and to a more versatile design process in which he reencounters instinctual and rebel energies that have been lost in what he labels the 'corporate world'. This, he finds, reconnects him to core feelings of self-worth. 'It's hard to describe what happened [in the workshop]. You encountered something different than you are used to being in contact with. It was a bit like winter bathing, you get down into another element.' Hence, the interventions transport the participants to places within themselves that provide them with meaning and nourishment—and the experience of self-care and self-inclusion.

Healing design practice

The arts-based methods resemble the process of 'active imagination' described by Jung, which is to give form to images and sensations in text, pictures, and sculptures to gain access to the mythopoeic imagination (Shamdasani in Jung and Shamdasani, 2009). By systematically eliminating critical thinking and taking seriously the inner notions and figures that we see, they begin to emerge - and by giving them physical form it's possible to enter a conversation with them – a conversation between the awake, normal personality and the underlying ways of knowing. Says Darsø and Meltzer: [It helps us] access layers of knowing, which would otherwise remain tacit and non-conscious. [...] The material "speaks back" in surprising ways, metaphorically and symbolically' (Darsø & Meltzer, 2020). According to Jung it's a way of including the personal and collective unconscious constructively rather than having it control us in often inappropriate ways

(Shamdasani in Jung and Shamdasani, 2009). 'He [Jung] saw inner health as requiring a practice of inner work or dialogue. Early on he began to draw mandalas as a daily form of healing practice. He discovered that using his hands allowed a greater depth of the unconscious to emerge. Crafting images from dreams and visions into paint and wood became for him a form of relationship-building with the unconscious' (Bobroff, 2020, p. 11). Hence, by bringing to light and enabling a dialogue with unconscious material, the arts- and nature-based interventions helps the designer accept and care for their deeper inner dimensions, build a stronger relationship to all parts of themselves, and in turn enhance both their well-being and their creativity.

Implementation

There is an overwhelming request from the participants for a continuation of the workshops and for more help with integrating the methods into daily work. This indicates the potential effect of the interventions, but also the limitation of our project due to its 1-year scale. Most participants experimented with the methods at home, and several had ideas for how to use the methods in their practice, e.g., in a project, a collaboration or a work-life situation, however, many felt limited in terms of fully implementing them. Integrating a new habit, let alone working practice, can be difficult when facing the pull of demands in daily life. Being part of a culture that is fast-paced and thinking-based is a barrier when having to set aside time for something that may need artistic materials at hand or getting to a location in nature and is without a guaranteed outcome. Says one of the participants: 'Many of us have had an experience. We found an opening. It is vulnerable. It's round and soft. But how do we get back into the square [life] with this?'. This elucidates a level of trust and courage that may be needed for practicing this way and going against the norms. For many it was a new experience to become aware of and start caring for their inner life. Some saw the methods mainly as an intimate and personal practice with limited professional use, for instance, only in the final coaching session does a participant under great economic duress realize that she can use The Other Hand to investigate and find ways to cope with the situation. Others found the workshops helpful for starting to identify and articulate the value of this type of practice—several went on to use some of the methods with clients. This hints at the benefits, and possible necessity, of regular practice with these methods, as demonstrated by Jung in his experiments. Also, Scharmer recommends daily contact with what he calls 'source' (2013), to help oneself embrace and face uncertain situations.

In conclusion

The presented research shows that the arts- and nature-based interventions enable designers to work creatively with greater care for themselves and others. The methodical approaches help them to let go of internal barriers and criticism and connect them to inner resources. It's a holistic way of designing that balances control and rational thinking with 'softer' sides like intuition, feelings, and sensations, thereby gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the situation, as described by Jung. Hence, the participating designers see with greater clarity the situation that they are in. They find new ways to creatively inform their projects and shed light on and resolve conflicts whether internal or with other people. It is a process that mirrors and contributes to the devised path through Theory U, with new concrete and simple ways to gain access to diverse forms of knowledge. It is also in line with the definition by WHO that describes mental health and well-being as a prerequisite for being able to contribute to others and to the world we are a part of, providing practical approaches for how this can happen. This research is thereby timely since many of the designers, express feelings of being overwhelmed by work, a longing for working more creatively, and being able to balance personal and professional life. Future research will include participants from a wider range of disciplines to further investigate the significance of using the arts- and nature-based interventions in daily practice—for the practitioner's creativity, mental health, and well-being. There will be a focus on long-term effects, the quality of the creative output and the design of learning spaces supportive to the implementation of these practices.

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