



FEATURE

Recycling Values for World Peace - Finnish pupils and student teachers inspiring a Cuban artist

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Recycling Values for World Peace - Finnish pupils and student teachers inspiring a Cuban artist

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Synopsis

This feature describes an ongoing art educational research project. Eighteen Finnish elementary school pupils and 85 university students of the University of Lapland were asked, "What do you appreciate about Finland?" They responded showing their values with photographs and briefly described their meaning. Topics of interest varied from Finnish nature to pure natural water, freedom, and everyman's natural right. The children focused on outdoor activities, reading, studying, and other school-related activities, as well as animals, plants, and artworks.

Cuban community-art artist "Reymundo de la Paz Mundial" will make sculptures of recycled materials based on his interpretation of these works.

Keywords: Visual Art Education; Values; Photography; Finland; Teacher Training

Introduction

On my exhibition trip to Cuba in 2016, I met a Cuban community-art artist who called himself "Reymundo de la Paz Mundial" (Reymundo of World Peace). He arranges art educational workshops with children from his neighborhood area and creates art from recycled materials. When he heard that Finland would celebrate its 100-year anniversary of independence in 2017, he suggested we make a project together. We exchanged ideas, and he accepted the work plan I e-mailed him. The idea was that we would make an exhibition of photographs that show the values of young people in Finland, combined with Reymundo's recycled-material sculptures based on these photos.

The general aims, participants, and practical realisation of the art educational project

In art education, pondering ethical themes, such as one's values, is one of the most important aims. This project also had other aims:

- promoting co-operation between the university and its practice school: the participants were student teachers and first-grade pupils of the university practice school

- expressing one's idea using visual means: taking a photograph and transmitting the intended meaning
- learning some ICT skills: experimenting with the basics of photo editing
- working artistically and in co-operation internationally: showing works of Finnish university students and university practice-school pupils with interpretative works of a Cuban artist in a joint exhibition
- asking people to ponder their values: asking the visitors of the exhibition what they appreciate about Finland

The students who gave me their permission to participate in this art educational research project were 85 first-year student teachers from the University of Lapland who studied in my basic visual art education course in autumn 2016. I told my students early in the autumn term about the project and in December officially tasked them with thinking about what they especially appreciate about Finland. They needed to respond to the question with a photograph. They could either use an old suitable photo they had personally taken, or take a new one. In February 2017, I taught the students some photo editing in a four-hour-session using Pixlr so they could improve the photos to suit their message. They wrote a short explanation about their intentions in Finnish, English, and Spanish, the latter via Google Translator.

The pupils who gave me their permission to participate in this art educational research project were 18 first-grade pupils from lecturer Anita Haataja's class. I had encouraged student teacher Merja Pääsi, who was doing her second-year three-week pedagogical practice in January–February 2017 in Anita's class, to make this experiment in her visual art lesson. Merja first told the pupils about the international project and its basic idea of promoting peace. There was a discussion of the meaning of "appreciation/valuing". Pupils could ponder what they wanted to photograph to show the "good things in their lives". Then Merja arranged for each pupil to take a photo with a tablet; afterwards, she wrote down their personal explanations. The art lesson I then mentored was a one-hour photo editing session with Pixlr. Pupils learned to balance the histogram, to frame the photo, and to save it.

Recycling values via photos and via exhibitions

I did the final editing of all the photos (framing them with a white background to make them same-sized) and ordered prints for the exhibition. I also sent the photos and Spanish texts to Reymundo in digital format in summer 2017. His interpretations were to be ready for a joint exhibition in Havana in November 2017. Unfortunately, due to personal reasons, I had to cancel my trip. Instead, the photographs were put on display in the Kilo and Kajo galleries in the Faculty of Art and Design of the University of Lapland from 5th to 19th December 2017. The opening took place two days before Independence Day on 6th December.

Merja, Anita, and other volunteers helped me hang the photos. When arranging the works, I wanted to put emphasis on some of the general features I had noticed when examining the photos with their texts. Most of the students' photos were of Finnish nature. As many students described the importance of *the four seasons* typical for Finland, I decided the Kilo gallery photos would be placed to show this cycling of the seasons (Photos 1–3).



Photo 1: Seija Ulkuniemi



Photo 2: Seija Ulkuniemi

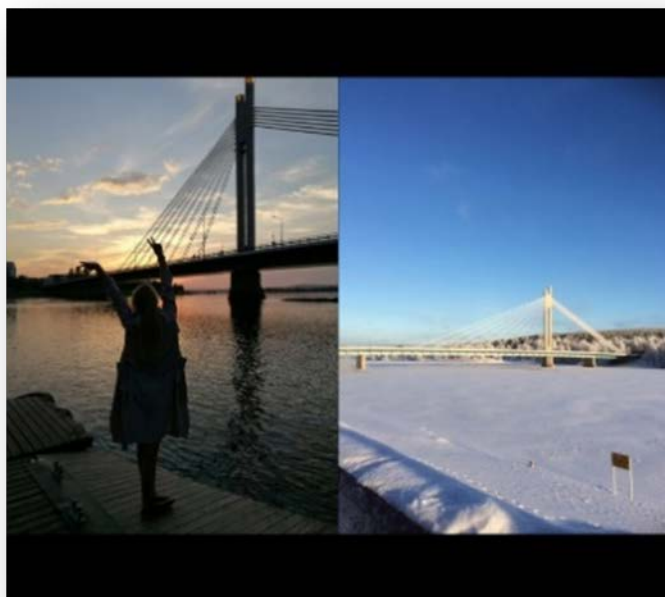


Photo 3: Enna Karppinen

There were also some values that the students and pupils had in common; I “mixed” these works and put them side by side in the Kajo gallery (Photo 4). In Kajo, we also hung students’ photos that had more abstract themes.



Photo 4: Seija Ulkuniemi

Visitors to the galleries were asked to write in the booklet on the table of each space and were encouraged to reveal their own values.

Common values of some students and pupils

I will describe the main findings by showing photo examples of various values. The title of the photos lists the name of the photographer. The quotations from the pupils' and students' statements are written in italics.

Interestingly, there were some common values in both the students' and pupils' works. One of these was the *possibility to go to school* (Photo 5). One student's text put it formally: *I appreciate the Finnish school system and equal opportunity for studying* (Photo 6).



Photo 5: Kerttu Back



Photo 6: Kristiina Rautio

Connected with this value could be the joy of reading or using the school library, which was stated in two pupils' photos (Photo 7): *I like the school library. We are fortunate to have a chance to read books.*



Photo 7: Ruusa Repo

In addition, one pupil (Photo 8) and one student (Photo 9) appreciated *school lunch*.



Photo 8: Veeti Heikkilä



Photo 9: Tiia Kollin

Some animals appeared in photos from both groups. Pupils paid attention to stuffed animals, such as a rabbit; one pupil wrote, *It has once been alive* (Photo 10).



Photo 10: Samu Uitto

A couple of students showed photos of their pets or *animals of our woods* (Photo 11).



Photo 11: Johanna Sipilä

Many pupils appreciated the school yard—especially when it snowed. They liked to be active: to play around during the 15-minute-break they usually have after every 45-minute lesson or *to make snow sculptures*—something they had just recently done in their visual art class (Photo 12).



Photo 12: Tom Visuri

Students who stressed the importance of activities with snow mostly referred to *downhill skiing* (Photo 13).



Photo 13: Perttu Heimo

There were also students paying attention to being active in nature, like enjoying trekking (Photo 14).



Photo 14: Veera Väisänen

Photographic representations of the first-grade pupils' values

For me, the most compelling photo was one taken of the lost-and-found locker placed in the main hall of the practice school (Photo 15). It was accompanied with the words *You can find a lost object in the lost-and-found spot*. I started to wonder if the photographer had once got back something (s) he had lost. This photo could even be taken as a symbol for the famous Finnish honesty: people tend to return lost property to its owner (or to the police).



Photo 15: Essi Pernu

A couple of pupils chose a pleasure-to-the-eye object they had found on the school stairs. One was a painting, and the other *a wooden shield* (Photo 16).



Photo 16: Roni Sainmaa

Other objects that had either aesthetic value or represented “nature inside” were plants. These individual plants may indicate same appreciation of nature’s relaxing power or its beauty. They also gave way to imagination: *They grow tall, and one can climb up to the space on branches* (Photo 17).



Photo 17: Rami Sainmaa

Photographic representations of the student teachers’ values

Though I had encouraged my students to visualise an abstract value, most of them chose to take photos of scenery. Finnish nature was photographed for aesthetic reasons, like for the sake of *its all beauty* (Photo 18).

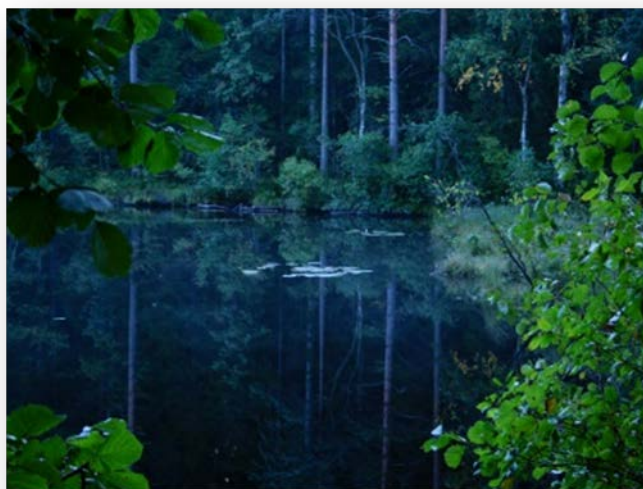


Photo 18: Anna-Elina Tiitinen

But there was also emphasis on the power of nature on people’s well-being: it gives *relaxation*, and there is *silence*. *Outing in a forest* was especially praised, as *there I can rest and forget daily tasks* (Photo 19).



Photo 19: Jasmin Sagulin

The *cleanness of Finnish nature*, offering *clean air* (Photo 20), *clean food* (Photo 21), or *drinkable water from the tap* (Photos 20 & 22), was often mentioned.



Photo 20: Tiinamaiju Kauppila



Photo 21: Marje Raatikainen



Photo 22: Toni Berg

Some student's paid special attention to *freedom*, such as *everyman's rights* that make it possible to pick up berries and mushrooms in the forest and the *freedom to go ice fishing* and *wander around relatively freely* (Photo 23).



Photo 23: Riikka Vaarala

Several works highlighted the famous Finnish water system. These photos were often taken in summer; for one of them, *becoming part of the nature* was the top experience (Photo 24).



Photo 24: Jussi Mäkelä

Other summer photos showed Finnish specialties, such as White Summer Nights (Photo 25), typical Finnish summer-cottage life, *sauna*, and other *Finnish summer traditions* (Photo 26). *Finnish traditions* were also mentioned in general.



Photo 25: Mari Turunen



Photo 26: Alisa Mäkelä

A more active social life was also connected with summer: *sunny and warm summer evening enjoyed with friends* (Photo 27).



Photo 27: Noora Kiviniemi

One student praised her boyfriend, *the love and safety he offers*, whereas another found great value in *the freedom to choose one's partner no matter their gender* (Photo 28).



Photo 28: Inkeri Kokko

Individual specialties were honouring *Finnish football* and using a photo of a dog as a symbol for *Independence-Faithfulness-Safety* (Photo 29).



Photo 29: Vili Peltomäki

Afterthoughts—even before the project is officially over

I would consider this project to have fulfilled its aims. The exhibitions showed that both students and pupils could make meaning of their values via photos. Many kinds of co-operation and communication took place during the project within the university.

Of course, many photos could have been interpreted differently than how the accompanying text defined the meaning. It would not always have been easy to know when scenery was referring to appreciation of nature's beauty or when it was showing the joy of silence. In the pupils' texts this was even more obvious: a photo taken of a decorated stone accompanied the statement *family is important*. There was a restriction for the pupils that affected their possibilities in choosing an object. For both availability of devices and safety reasons, they needed to take the photo on the school premises.

As for my students' works, I would have liked them to have expressed more abstract values. I am sure the results would vary more if they had been only writing about their appreciation. It is more demanding to show themes like "equality" or *freedom* (Photo 30) in visual form than "nature's beauty". On the other hand, we probably agree that the aesthetic beauty of Finnish nature including its environmental value is something to celebrate, something to photograph—and something to conserve.

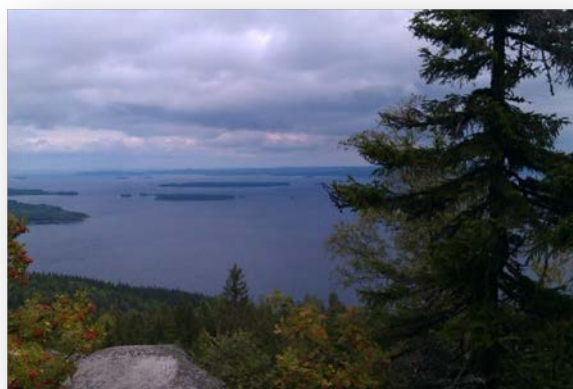


Photo 30: Roosa Hiltunen

In the Kilo gallery booklet, visitors wrote statements confirming the importance of clean, beautiful nature and its silence. One comment praised the freedom of speech and social security of Finland.

In addition to the initial aims, there was some extension of the project, as Anita took her pupils, now on their second grade, to the two exhibitions. According to Anita, the pupils were excited, and afterwards they created a joint story of their experience. During their excursion to the main university, the pupils were happy seeing their own works nicely lit. They noticed interesting details both in the students' photos and in the nature on their way back to school. Anita's exhibition excursion serves as an example of the power of opening the eyes: looking carefully, paying attention to our surroundings. The important aims of art education were thus fulfilled.

What did not go as planned was the timing of exhibiting the works in Cuba. Instead, we had a great chance to enjoy them here in Finland in honour of our special Independence Day.

The project will continue: Reymundo is preparing some more artwork based on these Finnish values. We already have an exhibition space in Havana—Memorial Salvador Allende—reserved for the joint exhibition in November 2018. Hopefully, all will work out well this time—and we may, by sharing, contribute to increasing cultural understanding.