

Developing a Sustainable and Healthy Working Life with the Arts: The HeArtS Programme—A Research Dialogue with Creative Students

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Abstract

There are few studies on how to use art to prepare students, through higher education, to lead a sustainable and healthy working life. In order to enhance and develop the learning environments regarding creativity and health in higher academic education curricula, more studies are needed. Studies linking the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the agenda 2030 into higher education practice are also few. The aim of this study is to gather information from creative music students to be able to build an educational platform for "arts & health" that facilitates a sustainable future working life for students. The results from two focus group interviews were used to develop an interview guide for five following in-depth individual interviews. The analytical lens that was used to conduct the interviews was based on a phenomenological hermeneutic method. The complete interpretation of the study is: "*Educating meaning instead of perfection—Building a Health-Arts-Sustainability (HeArtS) platform*". According to our results, meaning is not created by doing things that you are good at. The students want a curriculum where the focus is on challenges; skills that you are not good at and therefore need stimulating. The students want more collective self-awareness and body awareness training and sharing in their curricula. The results strongly imply that art-based curricula or the art intervention programs increasingly practiced in academia can be effective for enhancing workplace creativity and sustainable health in working life. Therefore, we suggest that higher educational programs should employ more art-related creativity training programs in the future.

Keywords

Arts, Higher Education, Creativity, Health, Sustainability, Hearts-Program, Working Life

1. Introduction

There is a lot of scientific evidence on how engagement with the arts can nurture health in health care and in school systems (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022; Grape Viding, 2021). However, there are very few studies on how we can use this knowledge to prepare our students, through higher education, to lead a sustainable and healthy working life (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2021, Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022). Similarly, few studies link the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the agenda 2030 into higher education practice (Bell, 2019). Therefore, and the rationale for this study is the need to generate and share case studies on how students, teachers, and researchers can connect the SDGs to pedagogical practice, and how this relates to their sustainable healthy working life.

Encouraging practical changes towards a sustainable and healthy working life through an academic programme can be challenging, not only because of the complexity of the problems we face globally as identified by the SDGs, but because many students in Sweden do not experience these problems in their everyday life. Thus, engaging with their academic programs can feel far removed from the problems discussed. In our educational curricula, there may be a lot we can do to initiate action towards sustainable healthy working life. We have become increasingly effective at gathering facts about the worrying status of our society and our planet, but presenting facts alone are often not enough to motivate students to act towards changing their everyday practices (Bell, 2019; Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022). A good deal of imagination and empathy is required to be able to understand how different unsustainable practices affect us, or how they might affect us in the future. In this study, we explore how working with creative students within music educational programs offers a way-in to understand the preparatory needs of students to enable them to make changes towards what they might need to develop a sustainable healthy working life and if this could be used as a model for other educational programs.

Agenda 2030 presents several complex challenges (UNESCO, 2011). By taking an inside-out approach, starting with the transformation of ourselves, we navigate a way in to dealing with this complexity. Building on previous work, we argue that if we are unable to take care of ourselves, it is difficult to take care of others (Grape Viding et al., 2017). Inner transformation involves changes in people's way of believing and thinking. These mind-sets, conscious and unconscious, consist of worldviews, beliefs, cognitive processes, and different views that are rooted in our minds. In this study, we ask students for their views on how

the arts could support the transition into new mind-sets necessary to the facilitation of developing towards sustainable healthy working life.

Much discussion of sustainability skills from a cognitive perspective frame them as disembodied and detached from emotions, however this has been challenged, with scholars arguing that we tend to neglect the importance of the inner dimensions in personal sustainability work (Parodi & Tamm, 2018). It is recognised that reflective and systems thinking, inner mindsets connecting to outer transformative changes are key ingredients that form part of sustainable and healthy change (Wamsler et al., 2018). We identified that these factors are also crucial parts of the artistic process: when we move to music or play an instrument, we begin to reflect and think in a new way, we undergo transformation in our state of mind and strive to achieve balance. This balance includes adapting our movements to synchronise our bodies with emerging states elicited by music, or collaborators around us. This embodied knowledge is important to collect and use when preparing for a healthy working life because of our bodies' capacities of communicating needs (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2021). The role of healthy non-verbal activities in academia is still subject to in-depth knowledge, where multimodal artistic practices focusing on embodied learning activities (e.g. music, art, movement and drawing) may be beneficial (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2017a; Bojner Horwitz, 2017b).

The openness to aesthetic experience and the appreciation of art appears from research to be linked to an ability to generate creative solutions (An & Youn, 2018). By "creative", we mean ideas and solutions that are both appropriate to a problem and novel (Amabile, 1983). Research in artistic educational programs has shown that art has a potential to enhance creativity (Burton et al., 1999), i.e., students with high exposure to dance, music, drama and art outperform those with less exposure to arts-related activities on different creativity tasks (Burton et al., 1999). Elementary students who participated in a range of arts-based improvisational activities such as making music, acting, and dancing increased their skills in divergent thinking among compared to those who participated in non-improvised movement classes (Sowden et al., 2015). Moreover, individuals with high openness to experience (measured actively seek and appreciate experiences for their own sake), are imaginative and sensitive to art and beauty, and have rich and complex emotional lives (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Many studies have found that the more open an individual is to new experiences, the more he or she will engage in artistic activities, and more open individuals show a greater capacity for imaginative and divergent thinking, which is a more flexible and fluent processing style facilitating idea generation (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009; Furnham & Avison, 1997; McCrae, 1987; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Rawlings et al., 2000). Greater openness to aesthetics has been shown to be highly predictive of self-reported creative pursuits and interests (Griffin & McDermott, 1998). There is a positive relationship between experiencing works of art and being healthy and creative and therefore in this study, we have asked students from

three different Music Education Programs in Sweden to reflect and share what they need to be able to better take care of themselves, what they think about creativity and to ask them for advice when developing a preparatory healthy artistic platform for sustainable working life.

We could learn from this work, that Music Education Academic Programs could facilitate knowledge acquisition regarding the preparatory work that people would require to make changes toward a sustainable healthy working life. In the present research, we therefore explore how students from *Music Education Academic Programs* understand creativity and its relation to sustainable healthy working life. To be able to understand how sustainably healthy working lifestyle could be facilitated through engagement with an academic curriculum, we propose that it is a useful starting point to engage in dialogue with students who are undertaking artistic academic programs. Creative students may have insights that could add content and pedagogical methodological ideas useful for our knowledge building. Collaboratively, we can build a rich source of foundational knowledge about the creative process and how it might facilitate sustainable and healthy changes in future work.

The theoretical background of this project has been derived from the “Agenda for research on the sustainable of public health programs” (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; UN, 2017), where the following variables are keys: 1) Trust, 2) Capacity for learning, 3) Capacity for self-organisation, 4) Diversity and 5) Common meaning. To be able to understand how to build educational programs that introduce and prepare students to a healthy and sustainable working life, we interviewed master students from the program in *Contemporary Performance and Composition* (CoPeCo), students from the *Teacher Education program* and students from *Music Therapy program* at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, Sweden. The overall project “*Sustainable and healthy working life—engaging through music and other creative activities*” is part of an Erasmus Plus program, hosted at the University of Applied Sciences in Turku, Finland.

1.1. Aim

The overall aim is to gather information from creative music students from three different music education programs, to be able to help us develop and integrate sustainable and healthy knowledge-based curricula within artistic higher education programs targeting students working life more specifically. This knowledge will help us build an educational platform for “arts & health” that facilitates students’ sustainable future working life.

In relation to this, our research questions were as follows.

1.2. Research Questions

How do students from three different academic programs i.e.: 1) Contemporary Performance and Composition, 2) Music Education and 3) Music Therapy program understand creativity and its relation to their sustainable healthy working

life?

How can we use this knowledge when building a sustainable health platform in educational programs when preparing for a healthy working life?

2. Method

The project started with three lectures delivered to the participating students from 1) Contemporary Performance and Composition program (nine international master students), 2) Music Education program (twenty-eight students) and 3) Music Therapy program (eight students). These lectures addressed the three pillars that comprise the framework for the project: 1) Agenda 2030 and the 17 sustainable development goals (UN Agenda 2030, n.d., UN, 2017) that target both inner and outer sustainability, 2) enriched learning environments (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2021), 3) multimodal practices focusing on embodied artistic learning activities (see below). After the lectures, two focus group interviews with a representation from all three music educational programs were made. Questions related to key competencies in sustainable health were undertaken with the focus group participants.

The results from the focus group interviews were used to develop an interview guide for the following in-depth individual interviews. Five interviews were conducted with students taken from across the three different programs—a purposive selection made by the authors. These interviews explored students' views on sustainable growth, creativity, health, and their future working lives. Several themes were derived from the individual interviews through analysis using a phenomenological hermeneutic method (see Bojner Horwitz et al., 2017a). This methodology presupposes that embodied knowledge from the students, yielded in the interviews, could help us to understand the importance of developing space for reflection and contemplation in relation to a healthy and sustainable working life. In turn, these could contribute to building a platform for future use in artistic programs and curricula.

The following range of embodied artistic learning activities was presented to the students during the lectures and was the subject for reflections:

- 1) Contemplative Inquiry in Movement (CIM) (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2013);
- 2) Self-figure drawing (SFD) (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2006);
- 3) RASA box-emotional regulation (Bojner Horwitz, in progress);
- 4) Interpreting arts—training visual sight (Slota et al., 2017);
- 5) Knowledge concert concept (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2021);
- 6) Music contemplation (Bojner Horwitz, in progress).

The different embodied artistic learning activities were chosen because they represent different modalities i.e., music, arts, movement, drawing. The activities cover a spectrum of multimodal nonverbal perception, previously presented in scientific literature (Grape Viding et al., 2015; Grape Viding, 2021). This approach is built on a theoretical basis that combines Embodiment theory, Emotional brain theory and Mirror neuron theory, which all represents parts of the

theoretical groundworks of artistic learning (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2021).

3. Analysis

3.1. Focus Group Interview

Two focus group interviews were conducted with each class after the lectures. The purpose of the focus groups was to collaborate with the students to create an interview guide that could be used in the following separate individual interviews. The audio from the focus groups was recorded and transcribed verbatim. This text was subsequently analyzed using a thematic analysis and derived into a Naïve Reading (see below) which in turn laid the foundation to the Interview guide. A summary of the Interview guide is stated here.

3.2. Interview Guide

- 1) *What does “sustainable body” mean to you?*
- 2) *Could you please reflect on the quote: take care of your instrument in the first place and the body in the second place?*
- 3) *How do you maintain your creativity?*
- 4) *Could you reflect a little bit on the concepts of Human Being vs Human Doing?*
- 5) *Could you reflect on the idea that “Your body’s well-being permeates the sound of what you create”?*
- 6) *Can you appreciate doing something you are not good at?*
- 7) *Do you lose balance when striving for perfection? How?*
- 8) *How do you interpret Agenda 2030?*

3.3. Individual Interview (Five Students)

The analytical lens that was used to conduct and interpret the individual interviews was based on a phenomenological hermeneutic method (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2003, 2017a; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The text is seen as a source of meaning in relation to the phenomena in mind, in this case how the students understand creativity and its relation to a sustainable and healthy working life.

3.4. The Analytical Act

- 1) Naïve reading (see Table 1)
- 2) Structural analyses (meaning units, condensed meaning units, subthemes, and themes)
- 3) The complete interpretation

3.5. Validity and Trustworthiness of the Data

We recognize that the interpretations of the texts are derived from a preunderstanding that the two authors have i.e., means that the interpretative process is never complete and there is therefore no absolute truth. Due to this, analytical reflection takes place with the data as a whole material and strives to achieve a

“reasonable conclusion” on its content. The validation of this material is the value of the interpretation itself. Ultimately, a valid interpretation of the data will lead to a better understanding of the phenomena of study (Grape Viding et al., 2015; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

4. Findings

4.1. Result I

4.1.1. Creativity and Sustainable Health

How do students from three different academic programs in *Music Education* understand creativity and its relation to sustainable healthy working life (Table 2, Table 3)?

Table 1. Naïve reading—a summary of the students’ needs in relations to the research questions.

Self-help techniques are required and desired to be able to:

a) achieve creative states and b) handle stress

Distancing from the ego and leaning towards the ego is important for sustainable working life

Creativity is a necessary part of a healthy sustainable working life

The meaningful instrument is part of a sustainable body

Learning involves making mistakes

Meaning is more valuable than perfection

Table 2. Theme 1—sustainability is a whole-body awareness.

Raw data	Condensation	Sub-themes
<i>“Don’t put all my energy in one place in the body”</i>	Spread energy throughout the body	Whole body awareness
<i>“People think that you can’t be unsustainable and healthy at the same time, but you can”</i>	Unsustainable and healthy body	Sustainable unsustainable body
<i>“A body in harmony with your mind and your mental state”</i>	Embodied mental harmony	Embodied harmony
<i>“Taking care of your inner self”</i>	Inner-self care	Self-care
<i>“A body that can cope with everyday activities without becoming someone that needs to prevent things”</i>	A body coping with everyday activities	Embodiment everyday coping
<i>“Being honest with parts of your body that are negative”</i>	Embodied honesty	Embodied honesty

Table 3. Theme 2—the instrument helps to build sustainable health.

Raw data	Condensation	Sub-themes
<i>“You need to reflect more when you are in a relation to an instrument”</i>	The relationship to the instrument helps you to reflect	Relational reflexion via an instrument
<i>“Starting to adjust the instrument and then you think of your body”</i>	The instrument comes first and then the body	Tuning in to health via the instrument
<i>“It is easier to reflect on things that are outside (instrument) the body first”</i>	Instrument helps inside reflection	Instrumental relational awareness
<i>“The body is the instrument”</i>	Body and instrument are inseparable	Embodied instrument

4.1.2. The Complete Interpretation

The complete interpretation of the texts is the final step where all the texts is considered. In this last step, the naïve reading, the purpose with the study, the structure analysis together with the researcher’s pre understanding, are comprised. It helps us to consider how we can use this knowledge in a broader perspective when building a Platform for Arts in Health for students, teachers, and researchers to facilitate sustainable working lives. The complete interpretation in this study is called: *“Educating meaning instead of perfection—Building a Health-Arts-Sustainable (HeArtS) platform”* (Table 4).

5. Discussion

Building a Meaningful Platform for Developing a Sustainable and Healthy Working Life through Engagement with the Arts

To be able to understand the needs of students in order for them to achieve sustainable healthy working lives, we needed to collaborate first with students. Following the process of a broad target group, we engaged students to help define interview guides. We prepared them through three lectures that explained the study framework, then explored the agendas that were co-created using deep interviews. Finally, the findings were presenting the content in relation to the goal of developing an educational platform, here called the *HeArtS platform*. The process has been very challenging and at the same time meaningful.

Starting from the perspective of the students has been a key. The students articulated in different ways that we as educators need to put more focus on the things that people need in that moment and for that we need to have a pedagogical education more based on sharing. Through this study, we have learnt that we need to be aware of the “here and now” and ask about the needs of our students more frequently. Students also need to engage with exercises that strengthen body sensations. We need to create space for creative tools that are multi-modal and let the students themselves share and challenge their needs with others and to offer pedagogical opportunities to increase their embodied awareness, helping to facilitate a “collective creativity”. Without this creativity, we lose an

Table 4. The table presents the content of the complete interpretation: “Education in meaning instead of perfection”—building a Health-Arts-Sustainable (HeArtS) platform. To be able to build a sustainable healthy working life with arts, the following is important:

Teachers need to create space for creative tools that are multimodal
Students need a guide on how to get in touch with what is inside of their bodies
Students need to meet and to connect with other people with new challenging ideas
Students would like to do things that they are not good at
To be able to change the society in a more sustainable direction, you need to start with self-awareness to be able to connect to collective awareness
Distancing from the ego and leaning towards the eco
Students need to learn to not judge others, and instead to reflect together with others regarding sustainable health
Students need to find a vocabulary that contains words that strengthen sustainable health
Meaning is not created with doing things that you are good at

important portion of motivation, meaningfulness, and wellbeing for our future working life. Reading pre-signals of stress and unhealthy bodily behaviors should be a more integrated part of curriculum of all student programs, to be able to avoid unnecessary dropouts from academic programs. Procrastination and to postpone assignments can be bodily signals that can be traced to undetected ill health (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2013).

Initially, the participating students were skeptical towards the presentation of Agenda 2030, because the first Sustainable Development Goal starts on a somewhat negative note with a NO-word (e.g. No poverty). One student immediately interpreted this as a very capitalistic slogan, with an underlying context of selfishly striving for increased wealth, and not as a powerful trigger for actual change, in order to de facto end poverty in all forms everywhere. The student suggested that we instead need to: “embrace the Agenda via power and not via addressing NO-words”. Finding and using vocabularies that inspire and encourage change by focusing on positive aspects that strengthen sustainable health and empower action is obviously a very important consideration that the input from the students clarified.

What could Agenda 2030 be “without the colors” was another question posed by the students. If we are to transform and develop the world into a more sustainable one, the content of the sustainable development goals needs more pedagogical empowerment. Without the colors, it will be “more black and white kind of agenda”, very polarized and powerless. A concrete advice from the students when working with sustainable health was to “*distance from the ego and leaning towards the eco*” (Table 5), this was an interpretation consensus from most of the students in our study.

Table 5. Theme 4—Human being awareness.

Raw data	Condensation	Sub-themes
<i>“Human being is when you start to be aware of things”</i>	Be aware of things	Develop the ability to increase awareness
<i>“I find it easier to believe in things that I do than in what I am... When I distance from the ego and leaning towards the eco”</i>	Doing eco is easier than being ego	Distinguish between ego and eco
<i>“Human being for me is being more in the present and rather more forward than backward”</i>	Being in the present	Focus on the present moment
<i>“Human being is being in a space without external input”</i>	Internal input is linked to being	Internal input is the core of being

The input from our data indicates that creativity is elusive. It is something very personal that comes from a spark within, and it cannot be taught. What the curriculum and teachers *can* do is to provide a safe and encouraging environment with sufficient time and space and resources to allow students to grow in their own creativity. It is important for both teachers and students to distinguish between myths of creativity and creativity in practice; for example, the romantic concept of the creative genius that just seem to get inspiration effortlessly versus sitting down with a blank sheet, concentrating and working hard in order to create. Another key factor for creativity to happen appears to be making allowances for errors. Making mistakes and constantly learning from those mistakes is vital, as seen in our results. In conjunction with this, perfection is a word that our students use as something negative in that sense *“that there is no such thing as perfection”* (Table 6). It is a quality that doesn't exist, and therefore it is unhelpful to strive for it. Interestingly, striving toward an amateur status instead of professional seemed to be more desirable for the students, even though they have been selected for their outstanding musical skills and promise.

Creativity is also closely linked to health and the body. Many students find that they are more creative early in the morning when they feel well rested and refreshed with a clear mind. One student pointed out that her creativity is interconnected to her being a woman and that her creativity is at a peak at the end of each menstruation cycle. Furthermore, the environment, the weather and different seasons have a big impact on the creativity. Another student said that creativity is transient and that *“it is not possible to stay in a creative state all the time”* (Table 7).

According to the study, meaning is not created by doing things that you are good at. The students want a curriculum where the focus is on challenge: skills that you are not good at and therefore need stimulating. This will also have an impact on the areas you are already good at. If you are a musician and not a dancer, for example, one could schedule dance before music lessons in order to introduce new ideas into music composition. The curriculum, according to the students, sometimes is felt to be too “narrow minded” and needs to be more open, thus allowing for creative achievement in the long-term.

Table 6. Theme 5—Meaning instead of perfection generates health.

Raw data	Condensation	Sub-themes
<i>“When we do things that we are good at, we have more pressure. We have more expectations and judgement about it”</i>	Less pressure in doing things that we are not good at	Meaningful doing things you are not good at
<i>“Opening your ears to new things, not to the things you already know”</i>	Listening outside your comfort zone	Listening into the unknown
<i>“Appreciate things that you are not good at”</i>	Appreciate doing thing that you are not good at	Not good at appreciation
<i>“Finding a vocabulary without words of judgement”</i>	The words you use are important for your health	Finding a vocabulary that is nonjudgmental
<i>“Think about things that you are ‘good enough’ at and not about things you are not good at”</i>	The cognitive part needs to be positive	Positive cognition
<i>“It is easier to let go of a performance thing that you are not good at and this is part of creating meaning and health”</i>	Letting go of things may generate meaningfulness	Letting go of things
<i>“Doing something else with your brain is a good distraction”</i>	Distraction is a good thing	Distract your brain with
<i>“I don’t believe in perfection—it does not exist, so it does not make sense to strive because it does not exist”</i>	There is no such thing as perfection	Perfection does not exist

Table 7. Theme 3—Creativity stands above cognition-Learning involves making mistakes.

Raw data	Condensation	Sub-themes
<i>“Creativity is a multimodal mode of transformation”</i>	Creativity engages many modes of modalities	Creativity is multimodal transformation
<i>“Communicating creativity is a way to stay healthy”</i>	Creative communication is taking care of your health	Communicating creativity is a way to stay healthy
<i>“Making mistakes and willing to learn is to be creative, it is not possible to stay in a creative state all the time”</i>	Mistakes are part of creativity, and that state needs some break	Learning by mistakes
<i>“Putting ideas on a long-term energy enthusiasm, so I do not get overwhelmed”</i>	Long term awareness pacing	Long term energy enthusiasm
<i>“I do not need to understand something for being creative”</i>	Creativity is not something you need to understand	Creativity is above understanding

Continued

<i>“Creativity is a value that is more important than cognition”</i>	Creativity stands above cognition	Creativity stands above cognition
<i>“For me creativity is just to start to do something...”</i>	Start doing means being creative	Doing creativity
<i>“To let go of self-criticism”</i> <i>Ask your students what they need before your ordinary class</i>	You don’t need to think to become creative—just start doing	Creativity is doing
<i>“Unbalanced mind is a way to trigger creativity”</i>	When you are in a state of unbalance—creativity can be triggered	A balanced mind can hinder creativity

In our study, the students want more collective self-awareness and body awareness training and sharing in the curricula. Emotions are socially and culturally bound and “contagious” in social networks: happiness, joy and excitement are known to spread far and wide, as do negative emotions (Cacioppo et al., 2009). Emotions are transferred between individuals even without verbal communication: emotion-specific vocal, facial, and postural expressions, mutual adjustment of attentional focus, and social appraisals function as a means of coding and decoding emotional information. They simultaneously trigger unintentional bodily synchronization of expressions and emotional sharing (Witkower & Tracy, 2019). When focusing on creativity as part of an entrance to sustainable health, emotionally contagious activities might serve as part of a form of compassionate “sprinkler system” to nourish creativity, (as seen in Bojner Horwitz et al., 2021).

Our findings suggest several practical implications for a program that seeks to facilitate sustainable healthy working lives. The results strongly imply that art-based curricula or the art intervention programs increasingly practiced in academia can be effective for enhancing workplace creativity and thereby sustainable health. The link between creativity and health as seen in our results needs to be better integrated in higher education. Thus, we suggest that educational programs should employ more art-related creativity training programs. We also suggest that we need to support the development of teachers’ creative problem-solving abilities, especially in the context of new skills development, but that suggestion needs more research. Most educational programs do not provide any type of formal creativity training for employees working in key areas of innovation and creativity, (Burroughs et al., 2011). Our results show that simply working with Health-Arts-Sustainability (here referred to HeArts) continuously later in the work environment could enhance creative capabilities, thereby driving innovation into a healthier working life for students, researchers and for teachers. Although this study only worked with arts students, i.e., arts students agreed that art-based curricula helped them to be more creative. The study cannot imply that the results generalize beyond our group of students, even though we have research that points into this direction (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022). Next step

with this research is to evaluate the HeArtS-platform, as recommended by our students in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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