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Kuure, Essi

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Workshops as a Catalyst for Common Good

Essi Kuure

M.A., Researcher, PhD Candidate, Service Designer University of Lapland,
Faculty of Art and Design, Rovaniemi, Finland
essi.kuure@ulapland.fi

Bio

Essi Kuure is a Researcher in the Service Design Research Team and a PhD Candidate at the Culture-based Service Design Doctoral Programme of the University of Lapland in Finland. She focuses on creating new knowledge and methods of co-design and practice-based design research to social as well as industrial contexts.

Abstract

Workshops are a popular way of co-designing with communities as well as tackling societal issues with art and design. This article explores the meaning of workshops in art and design practice beyond the concrete outcome achieved in them. It extends the perspective from artist and designer to other participating stakeholder groups and reflects through their experiences, which kind of collaborations, aims and mode of working workshops can catalyze. The article examines different stakeholder experiences of workshops through two studies: quantified questionnaires done in five different co-design workshops as well as qualified interviews held after a co-design project with fourteen different stakeholder groups. As a result, the article reflects on the short and long term meanings of workshops in co-design and discusses how workshops transform design and research practice.

KEYWORDS: workshop, co-design, practice-based research, common good, community of practice

Introduction

Co-design workshops are no longer mere means to understand users or achieve changes, but rather interventions in participants' everyday lives that can catalyze collaborative ways of doing and even being. This article focuses on workshops from practice-based and human-centred perspectives. In workshops, that are usually part of a larger development project, new communities of practice (e.g. Wenger, 1998) are formed. Different members of such community contribute their time, enthusiasm and expertise to co-design and frame together future visions and possible solutions. What these communities in workshops are actually designing is not just better products, leaner services or well-functioning systems, but common good.

In today's society, the creation of 'common goods', such as order and equal opportunities, faces obstacles, and new approaches, like different ways of framing the problems, are needed (Dorst, Kaldor, Klippan, & Watson, 2016, pp. 6-7). The Oxford Dictionary (2015) defines common good as 'the benefit or interest of all'. The notion of common good invites us to imagine art and design practice that is community-centred rather than user-centred (e.g. Winschiers-Theophilus, Chivuno-Kuria, Kapuire, Bidwell, & Blake, 2010), takes into account the participants and their value systems in a respectful way (e.g. Tunstall, 2013), is deeply rooted in the local and everyday life (e.g. Manzini, 2015) and 'helps to make the world a better place' (Kusz, 2005, p. 29). Common good is in contact with the basic human rights and the social systems that benefit all humans, such as public healthcare, effective system of public safety, and unpolluted nature. Designs aim to rethink these social systems of common good becomes contextualized in workshops and is ultimately linked to construction of practices and solutions that increase wellbeing in a community.

The practice-based and creative methods of art and design used in co-design workshops enable defining and sharing of common good in dialogue. In addition to being a platform for practical co-design work, common good and concrete results, workshops also offer a possibility to research collaboration when working with social issues. In workshops, the principles of design research through practice (e.g. Koskinen, Zimmerman, Binder, Redström, & Wensveen, 2011), practice-based design research (e.g. Vaughan, 2017) and practice-led design research (e.g. Mäkelä & Nimkulrat, 2011) work together and build on each other's strengths in action. Artists and designers, through their practice as well as research, act as catalysts for change and raise

complex societal questions (e.g. Jäppinen & Kulju, 2017; Judice, 2014).

This article first describes the roles and meanings of workshops in art and design practice. Then it focuses on two research studies where the meaning of workshops is explored from different co-design community member perspectives. First study focuses on how workshops affect participants' sentiments towards change. The second study is presented as a practical example of how workshops can catalyze common good in, for and with the emergent community of practice. The article argues that as artists and designers we should adapt more broad understanding of workshops and the practice they enable. It concludes with reflections on how workshops allow rethinking art and design practice as well as research. Understanding of how workshops alter the designer, the aim and the process of co-design can be much of use to many art and design fields.

Workshops in Art and Design Practice

Establishing and maintaining solutions that enable and enhance wellbeing requires the cooperative efforts of some, often of many, people. We need to find ways of enabling professionals and people to work together: create spaces for simultaneous empowerment (Parker & Heapy, 2006). It is a complex work that involves bringing together multiple and even opposing agendas, acknowledging different voices, and working through unintended consequences and confusing struggles that do not have one clear answer (Barab et al., 2002). Experiences of co-designing with communities show that challenges still exist and that the process needs to be modified in order to be truly human-centred and open (Dragoman et al., 2013; Kurronen, 2013).

Workshops have a long tradition in art and design. Design workshops, in one sense, have become a promising foil for exploring collaborative programs of design (Rosner, Kawas, Li, Tilly, & Sung, 2016). In the 70's in Scandinavia, future workshops were used as tools for engaging citizens in social justice issues (Jungk & Müllert, 1987). In the 90's the social dimension of teamwork was acknowledged and studied in working context and between professionals (e.g. Cross & Cross, 1995). Especially participatory design researchers have relied on workshops to run design activities. In PD, workshops are usually held to help diverse parties (or stakeholders) communicate and commit to shared goals, strategies and outcomes. Brandt, Binder and Sanders (2012) discuss workshops as 'a community of practice in the

making’.

The past decades have seen multiple calls for reorientation of the design disciplines and research away from the established functionalist, rationalist, and industrial traditions. New epistemological bases are being explored in search for a practice that embraces complexity and contributes to the development of communal human/non-human assemblages that facilitate transition towards more sustainable and plural ways of being (Botero, Del Gaudio, & Gutiérrez Borrero, 2018). Workshops can be seen as an essential part of explorations like working towards enabling and fostering autonomía (Escobar, 2017) in and through design practice, freedom as design (Garduño García, 2017) or of the process of decolonizing design practice (Tunstall, 2013; Tlostanova, 2017). From a societal point of view, design research and education are seen to be moving through the socio-economic dimension into the public domain, to the area of neighbourhood revitalization and community building (Viña, 2013). In these instances, practice-led art and design is tackling societal problems of wellbeing with individuals and communities in local contexts.

In workshops, practitioner-researchers (Schön, 1995) are once more moving closer to the people and contexts where art and design solutions are used. Anyhow, it is crucial to not just give voice or to include the other in certain prescribed and restricted way but to take a positive border ‘both-and’ positionality, formulate any design decisions in a complex dialogue and dispute with the modern and rationalistic premises (Tlostanova, 2017). Involving people results in a range of positive outcomes such as mobilising and utilising existing resources and knowledge, and creating a strong sense of ownership of an idea increasing the success of implementation (Tan, 2012). Outcomes of co-design can be more varied than just the creation of tangible outcomes or implementable solutions. Co-design can result in capability building of individuals, which can happen through focused action, peer-to-peer as well as technology-aided learning (Kuure & Miettinen, 2013).

The application of workshops in art and public space contexts is seen as valuable as in the design field. Artists and designers both use co-design, and especially workshops, to create an impact on the communities as well on society. In the context of socially engaged art and related disciplines, such as community-based, dialogic, participatory, interventionist, research-based and collaborative art, the aesthetic experience is relative to the collaborative creative action (Miettinen, Sarantou, & Akimenko, 2016). If we locate design workshops in a wider spectrum

of social research, we can consider them as a field site, instrument and account (Rosner et al., 2016). The three approaches carry workshops beyond the design orientation, by treating workshops in research as temporary sites of making (field), as unfolding a happening that is ongoing and relational program of work entangled with the action underway (instrument) or as examination of existing research practices or instruments in the context of the study and analysis (account).

In many art and design research papers, workshops are also described as cases (e.g. Itenge-Wheeler, Kuure, Brereton, & Winschiers-Theophilus, 2016) or as a possibility for testing and refining new co-design methods (e.g. Miettinen, Preez, Chivuno-Kuria, & Ipito, 2014). The previous research has focused on facilitator's role (e.g. Kolfshoten, den Hengst-Bruggeling, & De Vreede, 2007; Kuure & Lindström, 2012; Kuure, Miettinen, & Alhonsuo, 2014) as well as listing existing methods and tools that can be used during the workshops (e.g. Moritz, 2005; Curedale, 2013). Workshops have also been proven an efficient means for dialogue (e.g. Jäppinen, Kuure, & Miettinen, 2015; Miettinen et al., 2016). What is less discussed is how the participating people experience the face-to-face workshops as part of their life and practices, not just as a possibility to participate and create innovative outcomes, and how this affects the art and design making processes.

Research Strategy

As a design practitioner and practice-based researcher, a big part of my job with organizations and communities has been to run different kinds of workshops. While doing this, I became interested in what actually happens from different stakeholders' perspectives in face-to-face workshops, which seemed to be much more than mere development of an outcome.

In order to research this, I planned two studies that followed each other (Figure 1). In the first study, the interest is in participating people's individual sentiments before and after the workshop. I wanted to find out what kind of effect a workshop has on person's mood towards planning, making and achieving change. I chose to study this in five different co-design workshops that I planned and carried out in autumn 2014. This is a qualitative study done as a questionnaire (n=67).



Figure 1. the two research cycles. Author: Essi Kuure.

The first study focuses on individual perspective of different participants and looks at what kind of effect a single workshop can have in their perception towards change. Different participants of course experienced workshops differently, but what was interesting was that they seemed to value different aspects of change based on their role in the workshop. All the participants had a more positive approach towards change after the workshop than before it. Workshops worked as a platform for participants to get confirmation to their individual perspectives and ideas, but at the same time allowed other values and perspectives to co-exist.

The second study emphasises on the communal perspective and aims to understand more deeply design workshop practice from different perspectives. In order to study this, I participated in and instructed a design competition called Good Life in Villages in 2015. From a research perspective, this is a practice- based design research case where the aim was to reflect critically on design workshop practice as a part of design process. The data consists of my field diary, reports and lecture materials, but the main data studied in this article is semi- structured interviews held with different participating stakeholder groups after the competition (n=14). The interviewed groups varied in size from one participant (e.g. producer) to seven (group in one of the villages). In addition, the lengths of the interviews varied from just under one hour to almost two hours. Every interviewed group also visualized the co-design process from their perspective and explained that way their experiences of the collaboration. Next, both studies will be described from research perspective unfolding the contribution to design workshop practice.

Personal Experiences of Co-Design Workshops

The first study focuses on individual perspective of different participants and looks at what kind of effect single workshop can have on their perception towards change. In order to study this, a short survey regarding individual sentiments was carried out in total with 67 co-design workshop participants. It was done in a form of questionnaire and it included filling out background information and answering to seven rating scale questions (Figure 2). Answers were given in a scale of one to five, one being ‘not at all’ and five being ‘a lot’.

PHASE 1: Next questions are about your individual feelings related to this specific design challenge. How do you feel about the following statements?

	Not at all					A lot
	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel like I can have an effect in the current situation	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel like I can help with my actions	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel like I have means to have an impact in the situation	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel like my role is important in solving this challenge	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel that I have ideas how to make the situation better	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel like my ideas and comments are being heard	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel like I can easily tell or show my ideas to others	1	2	3	4	5	

Figure 2. seven rating scale questions of the questionnaire.

The same questions were posed to each participant before and after the corresponding workshop in order to find out how the workshop affected their feeling statements and which aspects the different participating groups valued. The survey was done in five different workshops with different aims and durations (Figure 3). What was common to all of these workshops was that co- design principles and methods were used at the workshop, multiple stakeholders were invited to the workshop, and the aim was to develop collaboratively improvements to societal everyday life challenges. My role in the workshops was to plan, run and facilitate the workshops, some of them alone and others with colleagues.

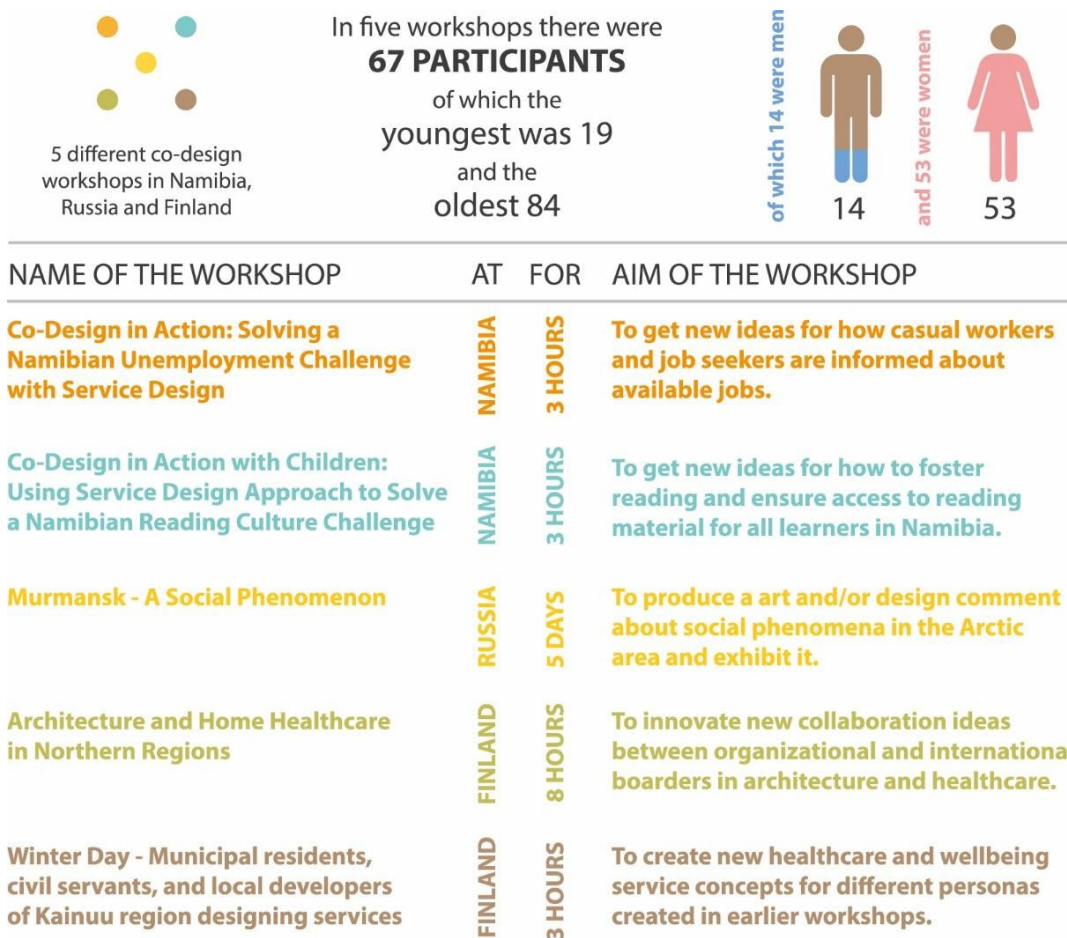


Figure 3. names, locations, durations and aims of the studied co-design workshops. Author: Essi Kuure.

The questionnaire answers were first transcribed from paper to excel sheets. The analysis was based on the viewpoints of different participant groups so the answers were divided into three: producer or enabler (14 answers), designer or student (32 answers) and resident or community member (21 answers). This was done to ease analysis and comparison of the results. Then an average score for each question before and after workshop was calculated based on these set groups.

This way it was possible to compare the scores before and after the workshop as well as between the different participant groups.

In all of the cases, the overall mood was more positive after the workshop than before it. This was true for all the participating groups. For producers, the biggest positive change happened in the feeling statement of having ways of influencing the challenge dealt with at the workshop (question 3) and of being heard (question 6). They valued workshop as it enabled them to

achieve positive change concretely as well as co-design with community members in an informal atmosphere.

For designers and students workshop affected most the feeling statement of having an effect in the current situation (question 1). This resonates quite well with the designer's tasks, which aim to transform current situation into a preferred one (Findeli, 2001; Simon, 1996). Workshops were able to increase understanding and skills of this for designers as well as social engagement to the challenges and issues handled at the workshops. For residents workshops increased feeling statement of acknowledging own role as important in relation to the challenge (question 4). The workshops seemed to empower residents and community members as they saw the impact and possibilities of their actions.

Overall, this first study revealed that an individual and even rather short design workshop can increase the sensation of participation and ownership towards change. Although it is hard to sustain this sentiment, workshops do affect people's life in a positive way. The study also proved that workshops empower, help to focus on 'doing' change (compared to talking or planning it) as well as increase understanding and dialogue even about complex issues, at least temporarily. Although, of course, in different workshops, some of these matters were achieved better than others. This was dependent, among other aspects, on guidance and facilitation, group sizes, as well as how well participants knew each other beforehand or had experience on the topic discussed and designed at the workshop.

In planning and running workshops, more emphasis should be put on enabling different ways of participation. In addition to solution focus and concrete outcome, the participating people also valued to see their role and capabilities in relation to others. In order to understand other aspects of workshops from a social perspective, a second study was planned. While the first study focused on single individual workshops and individual feeling statements of the participants, the second study looks at workshops from a broader perspective through different stakeholder group experiences in a co-design project.

Workshops as a Communal Practice

The second study focuses on understanding the design workshops from a communal perspective. In order to study this, I participated as an instructor, practitioner and researcher to a Good Life in Villages (GLiV) design competition. In GLiV the practical aim was to co-design

new ideas and concepts for enhancing good life and wellbeing in remote villages of Finnish Lapland. Solutions are needed because of aging population, rising unemployment rates in Lapland, current centralization politics and long distances that all have their own challenges to villagers' everyday lives. The competition started in December 2014, ended in March 2015, and happened simultaneously in four villages, namely Autti, Juujärvi, Oikarainen and Hirvas. With the villagers, four multidisciplinary student groups created new solutions. Other participants included professional designers, producer and instructors of the competition who facilitated GLiV and sparred the groups.

In this study, I worked as a practitioner-researcher producing knowledge that is not fixed or absolute, but more descriptive by nature. The competition provided me a possibility to build knowledge through experiential and operational position and reflect on the changes in and the potential of design workshop practice. According to Schön (1995), our knowing is in action, ordinary in tacit form and implicit in our patterns of action. Through action, a practitioner is able to reflect upon her/his own practice, in this case the practice of design workshops. Reflection happens in-action when practitioner encounters an unusual situation and has to adapt different course of action than originally planned and on-action when practitioner reflects on their thinking, actions, and feelings in connection to particular events in their professional practice (Schön, 1995). Also in arts, the 'doing-knowing' is endorsed (e.g. Nelson, 2014).

According to Scrivener (2002, p. 25) documentation can assist in capturing the experiential knowledge in creative process, so that what the practitioner learns from within her/his practice becomes explicit, accessible and communicable. In this case, the reflection-in-action was documented in my personal field notes, lecture materials, e-mail discussions, created concepts and student reports. In order to document reflection-on-action I organized a set of interviews with different stakeholder groups: villagers, student groups, professional designers, producer and instructor. The semi-structured interviews examined the context, content and process (Young, 2008) of co-design in the case. They were done after the competition, so that the participants would have experience of what happened and in which order and would be able to reflect on it.



Figure 4. different process visualizations done by stakeholders of Autti village case. Author: Essi Kuure.

The four villages are considered to be ‘a set of individual case studies’ (Robson, 2002, p. 181), where common features were studied and reflected upon. Every interviewed group reflected on their own experience of the competition. During the interview, every group also demonstrated the process from their point of view by using process phase and thematic paper pieces prepared in advance (Figure 4). First, the group visualized the process from their perspective by stating what happened, in which order and how they would describe the happenings. After that, themes of social engagement, empowerment, co-design and positive change were discussed in connection to the competition. Interviewees marked specific moments in the process with the thematic tags and described at the same time how they felt that these themes were present or non-present during their collaboration.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the process descriptions were photographed after each interview. The results show that in the context of workshop intensive art and design practice: (1) the designer or artist is not a single person, but a group of people or a community; (2) the aim of co-design is not only an art piece, product, service, or system, but a more complex and socially-driven aim of common good; and (3) the process is driven by gatherings, interventions and doing together. These changes are interlinked. Workshops offer a platform for doing together where a community of practice can be formed and act as designer. This creates potential for increasing individual and communal wellbeing during the collaboration as well as in the solutions created in the workshops. Next, the article will present through GLiV case how workshops can catalyze common good in interactions, in the process as well as in the outcome of co-design.

Workshops Catalysing Common Good

Firstly, workshops can transform the way we interact with each other during co- design. As workshops become the driving force of the collaboration process, the main actor of the process

transforms from a single designer/artist or a group of professionals to a group of people with different expertise, talents and interests. In workshops, people meet and work together regardless of their background, education, titles or life situations. Then it is not enough that designer can work as a facilitator. Designer must get used to the role of a modest team player (Junte, 2014) and develop a pedagogical perspective on their craft (Tan, 2012).

All the workshops in GLiV cases were face-to-face meetings where the design team also shared the co-design space physically. The villagers valued this a lot. For them, the fact that students, producers as well as some media representatives visited the village was an important aspect of the collaboration. Actually, the collaboration would not be even possible, if the producer of the whole competition would have not first visited the villages, their associations and negotiated the collaboration terms and goals with them.

In Autti, students felt that engaging in workshops was a good way of building empathy. In the workshops, they divided participating people into smaller groups, thus, creating more intimate surroundings for sharing and dialogue. During workshops, interaction does not happen the way it does in workplaces, where the development work we do is measured and validated in time and money equivalent. The collaboration needs to offer the participants much more than previously determined roles and tasks, it needs to consider participants from a more holistic perspective and welcome people to participate with their identities (Akimenko & Kuure, 2017). The small things, like drinking coffee together, take us from ‘work mode’ to more informal setting where the discussions can wander to other topics as well. In all of the villages, coffee and snacks were offered in the workshops, which brought nice and cosy mood to the meetings.

Meeting and workshopping in the surroundings where the development was set to happen helped students to understand what already existed and how the changes that were proposed would transform that. Students and design professionals also thought that by visiting the villages they could understand better the ‘spirit’ of the village and its community. Through the visits to the village and running workshops there, the villagers started to be perceived more like acquaintances than customers, users or participants. In conflict situations, such as discussing what concept to choose for further development, workshops also worked as a platform for dialogue and understanding.

Secondly, when the aim of co-design is set to primarily achieve common good, it also

encourages, even forces, us to look at our practices and see how they (in addition to the outcome) increase common good in our surroundings. Nelson and Stolterman (2003) state that as humans we must design because we are not perfect. We share the potential to do great good or immense harm, but we are motivated to design because it is an accessible means to bring order and give meaning to our lives. Students reported in GLiV that their expertise in the case was to support other people's creativity. The realization that not only professionals design is important for students. People are already constantly designing and redesigning their lives and design experts have to use their knowhow to support individual and collective projects (Manzini, 2015, p. 1).

In all of the cases, the workshops set the rhythm for the collaboration process. The workshops divided the project to different phases as well as pushed it forward (Figure 5). Workshops work as interventions to our mundane life and can this way transform the ways we share our work, spaces and experiences. In workshops, we move from offices and meeting rooms to much messier real life situations. Workshops are not a feedback form, user study or presentation, but a complex and multifaceted action-driven way of sharing, learning and designing.

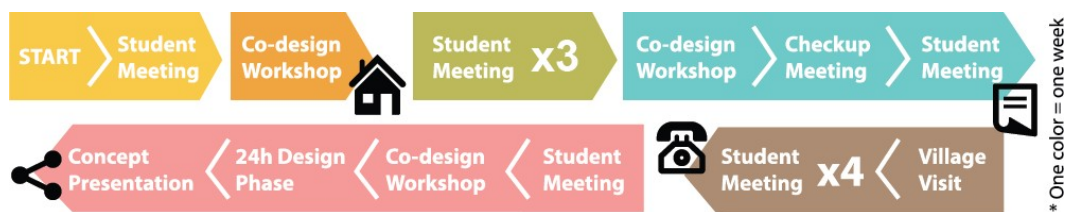


Figure 5. example of progression of the co-design project in Autti village case. Author: Essi Kuure.

During the co-design process in addition to sharing the spaces, our experiences and expertise in workshops, we also share the materials for designing such as cardboard, pens and post-it-notes. This means that knowledge that is produced at the workshops does not happen only by the facilitator but that knowledge production should be understood from and enabled as a communal process. All participants should have equal opportunity to use the materials. In Oikarainen, students produced a working prototype of the gamified digital service for neighbour help. The prototype was not just presented for the villagers, but students brought multiple tablets with them to the workshop, so that the experience of using the digital service could be shared among the participants.

Thirdly, by working together and truly sharing the co-design space, the elements of common good can be inbuilt to the outcome created. “We suddenly noticed that we do not need what we initially wanted, which was a care centre for older people in the village, but that we could actually design something much better and useful which will increase ‘sense of life and vividness’ in our village”, one of the villagers in Autti said. The next idea was to build a casino in the village, which eventually formed into a final concept of portraying Autti as hidden treasure to tourists. In these cases, designer should be able to not just take into account, but also promote everyone’s best interest.

In the creation of concrete concept, the everyday as well as expert knowledge that every participant has gets to be used in a productive way in workshops. One of the villagers said: “It was great that we didn’t see any SWOT analysis that was presented to us about our village”.

From this perspective, villagers valued that knowledge and concepts were truly created together. What we witnessed in the workshops of GLiV was that much more complicated issues, life stories and experiences were related to design work than initially was expected. In addition to working side-by-side and developing concrete changes, the workshops also dealt with negotiations of what would be good or the best solution, how it could be good for majority and in which way to achieve that. I call these ‘negotiations of common good’.

The negotiations considered individual, economical, communal as well as political issues. In addition, ‘more than human’ perspectives like the ecological viewpoint was discussed and considered in connection to the village. In the negotiations, the history, today and the future were bound together. In practice, the first workshop in every village included negotiations of common good, discussions and definitions about good life and how to maintain that in the respective village. This complex work needs time and is part of the process of creating trust. Many times, the co-design does not end when the outcome is produced or implemented. Judice (2014) calls these ‘long tails of trust’ which means that the relationship continues after an intensive working period and enables continuing communication with the community of practice as well as the opportunity to continue working together.

Conclusions

When working with complex societal issues that include multiple perspectives and dimensions, workshops can offer a platform for discussing and understanding as well as designing and defining common good. This kind of opportunities are needed in modern society where busy lifestyles, fear of the unknown and the technology can separate us more than we notice in our everyday lives. Common good is always defined in line with the present nature of things, local context and conditions of human social life. For this, workshops can offer simple means by increasing possibilities for collaboration and helping the discovery or rediscovery of the created solutions. In workshops, people from different social classes or from different silos of organization can work together, and this alone can be big enough intervention to change the course of development.

Workshops can offer us great possibilities to increase common good in our surroundings: to see and understand the conflicts, but move beyond them by working together. This requires new and modified research methods, in order to document what happens in workshops from different perspectives. In workshops, the art of research is profoundly participatory and open (whoever can join and leave) and the research knowledge is not only produced by designers but also by participants. Workshops encourage new culture of design (e.g. Manzini, 2015) that we are all creating. A culture where collaboration is more important than consuming and where relationships are the true source of value.

Workshops offer us possibility to work with short term and long term goals of common good. From the short-term perspective, workshops increase wellbeing by offering people possibilities to come together in a practice-oriented way as well as by acknowledging the empirical knowledge that everyone has and using that to create solutions that ease everyday life. The results can be created, shared as well as exhibited in workshops. From the long-term perspective, the common good is built through co-design activities in every case and always in a particular context. In the workshops, experiences and expertise is shared enabling different participants to grow new kind of capacities and competences. Ultimately, these capacities and new ways of working together created at the co-design workshops can also contribute to the societal common good by influencing the existing social systems through new or improved structures and policies.

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