

Examining the Views of Student Teachers on the Meaning of Crafting

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to examine the views of student teachers on the meaning of crafting. It employs a qualitative case study approach and uses essay submissions from a sample of craft student teachers enrolled in a craft-related course. The findings suggest that making crafts plays a significant role in both their personal lives and their academic pursuits. The student teachers perceive craft making as more than a merely recreational activity; rather, it is a means of expressing their creativity, honing their skills, and promoting sustainability. According to the study, crafts as a subject could take on a broader role by engaging students in cultural competence and enhancing their well-being.

KEYWORDS

craft making; craft student teacher; meaning; teacher education

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Introduction

Crafting has deep roots in Finnish society—indeed, crafting is widely regarded as an important aspect of Finnish identity and the country’s cultural heritage (Härkönen et al., 2018; Kokko & Dillon, 2011; Kokko & Räisänen, 2019). The meaning of craft making is highly subjective and varies from person to person, depending on the values that are significant to a given craft maker (Na, 2012); they can range from a sense of creativity and accomplishment to a connection with tradition and history (Huhmarniemi, 2021; Kokko & Räisänen, 2019).

Making things by hand is a fundamental human impulse (Dissanayake, 1995; Gandolfo & Grace, 2010). However, making crafts is no longer solely for the purpose of acquiring necessary items like clothing and supplies (Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2019), although crafting still has economic purposes (Pöllänen, 2012). Today, there is an emphasis on viewing crafting as a meaningful life activity and promoting a good life (Mason, 2005). Crafting serves as a leisure activity that offers a break from everyday routines by allowing individuals to focus on satisfying and enjoyable activities (Väänänen, 2020), express their creativity, and direct their energy towards a productive and enjoyable hobby (Collier, 2011; Pöllänen, 2015).

The significance of making crafts has been studied among highly diverse groups of people in various life situations (e.g., Collier, 2011; Corkhill et al., 2014; Kouhia, 2015; Mason, 2005; Pöllänen, 2015). According to Pöllänen (2012), crafting as an occupation helps reduce stress and serves as a calming activity for the mind. Stay-at-home mothers can use crafting to enjoy personal time, escape daily worries, and achieve self-realization, without the stress of balancing family needs (Pöllänen & Voutilainen, 2018). Furthermore, making crafts has been reported to support the recovery of people with illness-related problems, such as pain, fatigue, and worry (Reynolds, 2004).

In teacher education, Kokko and Räisänen (2019) explored how craft education helps sustain and develop textile craft traditions from the perspective of craft teacher students. Kröger et al. (2024) focused on student teachers’ views on materials in the context of crafting and consuming. According to Kokko and Dillon (2016), trainee teachers value crafts for their connection to cultural heritage and opportunity for self-expression. Väänänen et al. (2018) examined sustainable crafts from an educational perspective, suggesting that student teachers approach sustainability from different orientations: practice, product, immaterial, and holistic. The present study aims to investigate the meanings that students in craft teacher education (“craft student teachers” below) attach to their crafting hobbies and the role of crafts in their lives. It addresses the following research question: in what ways do student teachers perceive the meaning of craft making in their lives?

Crafts in the educational context

The Finnish people's relationship with crafts is rooted partly in the country's school system, where it has been a subject for over a century (Kouhia & Kokko, 2022). Craft education in Finland begins as early as kindergarten, allowing toddlers to work with craft tasks at their own level (Yliverronen, 2022). Crafts is a compulsory subject in Finland's comprehensive schools from grades one to seven and optional in grades eight and nine (Kouhia & Kokko, 2022). Several upper secondary schools offer courses leading to a general upper secondary school diploma in crafts (Porko-Hudd et al., 2018). In several other countries, craft education is incorporated into the curricula of subjects such as arts, home economics, and design and technology (Kokko & Räisänen, 2019). The curricula provide a framework for the implementing teaching at all educational levels (Porko-Hudd et al., 2018), and teachers adhere to it, focusing mainly on technical skills and traditional craft techniques through product design and making. Recently, a debate in Finland has emerged regarding the direction of craft education (Kokko et al., 2020), with some advocating for technology education and others suggesting that craft education should be closely aligned with arts education.

Since the establishment of the Finnish school system in the 1860s, learning by doing has been a hallmark of craft education (Marjanen & Metsärinne, 2019). Initially, teaching crafts was primarily divided into two content areas: textiles and technical work, previously known as girls' and boys' crafts (Kokko & Räisänen, 2019). Nowadays, teaching and learning crafts emphasize multi-materiality, involving the use of a variety of materials in educational settings (Porko-Hudd et al., 2018). Students can carry out a holistic craft process in which they can ideate, design, and choose suitable materials for their project (Rönkkö & Aerila, 2024). During this process, students learn to identify, use, and maintain materials, while considering ecologically sustainable solutions that support a circular economy (Härkönen et al., 2018; Kouhia & Kokko, 2022).

Typically, craft teachers obtain a master's degree from a university (Porko-Hudd et al., 2018). In recent years, there has been a noticeable decline in interest in enrolling in teacher education programs (Heikkinen et al., 2020). Many applicants initially target the class teacher education track but after failing to gain admission, some of them may switch to craft teacher training programs. Despite the diversity of educational paths, all students already have some relationship with crafts when they begin their studies, shaped by their living environment, personal history, and elementary school craft education.

Crafting as a leisure activity and source of well-being

According to a survey by the Finnish Crafts Organization (2021), half of participants ($N = 4,387$) reported engaging at least monthly in craft-related activities, such as stitching, sewing, woodworking, or carpentry. Additionally—and perhaps more importantly—the survey revealed that 85% of respondents expressed an interest in learning more crafts. This growing interest in crafting has been amplified by its increasing popularity on social media (Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2019). Through online platforms like Instagram, crafting enthusiasts can connect with like-minded individuals from around the world to share tips, techniques, and creations while encouraging and exchanging ideas with one another (Kouhia, 2023).

According to Kenning (2015), crafting is much more than just “fiddling with threads,” because it offers opportunities to reshape the past, engage with the present through enjoyment, and imagine the future, creating a sense of belonging, connection to history, and achievement (e.g., Huhmarniemi, 2022), all of which promote happiness. Crafting, which involves designing and creating handmade products, contributes to a healthy lifestyle by enhancing subjective well-being and providing positive life experiences through stress reduction, increased mindfulness, and a sense of accomplishment (Mason, 2005).

As a leisure activity, crafting offers a respite from daily routines, providing opportunities for engaging in satisfying pursuits (Väänänen, 2020) while also enhancing well-being by promoting a sense of empowerment and self-direction (Pöllänen, 2015). Indeed, crafting can evoke positive emotions and encourage individuals to approach problems from different perspectives and facilitate a better understanding of worrying issues (Kouhia, 2012). As a result, it can lead to improved clarity and the ability to better analyze the relationships between events and situations in one’s life (Collier, 2011) and provide a therapeutic experience for individuals dealing with stress or other mental burdens (Pöllänen, 2015).

No longer seen as inherently solitary, crafting has shifted toward greater collaboration among crafters (Adams-Price & Steinman, 2007; Kouhia, 2012), who increasingly seek opportunities to work and socialize with others who share their passion (Corkhill et al., 2014; Kouhia, 2023). Research suggests that crafting with others not only fosters the formation of new friendships but also strengthens connections within a community (Huhmarniemi, 2021; Kouhia, 2015; Niinimäki et al., 2021). In addition, engaging in craft making can provide with the opportunity to connect with one’s cultural and familial heritage, express creativity, and further develop craft traditions using traditional techniques and materials (Dormer, 1997; Huhmarniemi, 2021; Kokko & Dillon, 2011, 2016).

Even before the advent of social media, craftspeople who prioritize handmade products as an integral part of the crafting process emphasized the visual and technical qualities of their work (Dormer, 1997). These qualities include the shapes, colors, and styles of a product, along with its intended purposes and the materials and techniques used in its creation (Kouhia, 2012). On the other hand, leisure crafters, content with replicating existing patterns and following instructions, derive significance from their crafting despite the absence of original designs; they find a sense of accomplishment and even joy in both process and product (Pöllänen, 2015). Indeed, crafted products are not only physical objects but also serve as symbols of the self, reflecting the personal histories and identities of their makers (Huhmarniemi, 2021; Krugh, 2014; Rönkkö, 2011).

Method

The present study is based on data collected during a 12-week master's level course called Craft, Well-Being and Action Competence (worth 4 ECTS) held in autumn 2021 at a Finnish university. It consisted of lectures (4 hours), group studies (8 hours) and independent work (69 hours). This was a mandatory fifth-year course in the program for craft student teachers and aimed to highlight the importance of making crafts in strengthening self-esteem, increasing well-being, and maintaining and developing functional ability (University of Turku, 2022). Students were tasked with planning and implementing an activity session for groups not involved in primary education, targeting hobby or recreational groups, such as the elderly, immigrants, and participants in liberal adult education. The allocated class hours were dedicated to planning and presenting these activities.

To orient themselves to the course theme, the student teachers were asked to write an essay on the following topic: "A craft process that is meaningful to me." The essay writers were expected to answer that prompt from their own perspectives and express their thoughts in a personal style, rather than simply summarizing information (Oktavianti et al., 2021). The essays were intended to describe what was important to the students about crafting and hobbies, and this was to be considered in light of a craft process that genuinely mattered to them. The students wrote their essays in the first person, relating their thoughts and experiences to the ideas raised during the course. Notably, the essays were not graded on a numerical scale; this approach allowed the students to express their ideas freely, without the pressure of meeting specific assessment criteria. However, given the academic context and mandatory nature of the course, it is possible that the students might have embellished or selectively presented their ideas to better align with their educational goals.

All materials produced during the course were collected, with 45 craft teacher training students participating in the module. Of these, 33 gave permission for their essays to be used in the present study; the text data consisted of 107 A4 pages. No personal information about the participants, such as age and gender, was collected. Ethical principles of research with human participants in the human sciences in Finland (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019) were followed.

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of the essays' textual content, using a combination of data- and theory-driven approaches (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The objective was to delve into the process of meaning-making within the realm of crafts, thereby enriching our comprehension of the individualized significance attributed to crafting. The essays were carefully read multiple times, after which notes were grouped into larger themes. Previous research (e.g., Kokko & Dillon, 2011; Kouhia, 2012) and the researchers' experience supported the naming of categories based on the data. The framework is not a fixed composition; rather, it seeks to deepen comprehension of the meanings inherent in crafting by presenting typical categories. Consequently, the categories of meaning are interconnected and partly intersect.

The students' essays emphasized multiple areas: Product, skill, and material orientations in crafting; expression through crafting; and meaningful leisure activities and well-being via crafting. Translations of original expressions from the student teachers are included in the presentation of the findings; all the initials appearing below are pseudonyms.

Findings

The study explored the role of crafting for craft teacher students as a counterbalance to their studies and the meanings they associate with their crafting. Craft teacher students are likely to have a natural interest in crafting and to imbue their work with various emotions and meanings.

Product, skill, and material orientations in crafting

The results indicate that craft student teachers are typical craft makers with product, skill, and material orientations. They leverage existing knowledge and experiences while gaining new expertise and skills through trial and error, inquiries, and collaboration with others. Crafting was associated with the functionality of the product, and the activity aimed at the uniqueness of the material being used, its properties, and sustainability.

Participants reported that their activities enabled them to create functional artifacts tailored to their specific needs and interests. Examples include crafting customized clothing or accessories for specific events or hobbies, such as knitting a pet blanket or creating personalized furniture for their living spaces: *“The meaningful craft making process for me is one where I feel like I’m doing something useful and necessary”* (GMB).

As student teachers engaged in the process of crafting, they encountered a variety of challenges and obstacles that required creative problem-solving skills:

Planning based on the mapping of one’s own needs and requirements is interesting—despite its challenges—and thinking about the practical implementation of the planned product often contains numerous different challenges, the successful solution of which gives the greatest pleasure. (KTB)

The meaning of developing craft making skills through a multifaceted approach that involved various aspects of craft making was emphasized by the craft student teachers’ views on crafting. This included demonstrating existing skills, acquiring new skills, and pursuing professional development for those working as craft teachers or professional craft makers:

It has also been important for me to learn something new and focus on what I am doing. By this I mean that when I have done something, I have devoted myself deeply to it and thereby developed my own skills. (SBB)

The economics and sustainability theme emphasized the importance of using materials in a responsible manner. The student teachers discussed how crafting allowed them to be mindful of waste and to engage in sustainable practices like reusing and recycling materials. The focus on sustainability also reflected a wider trend toward conscious consumption and ethical production practices:

The choice of raw material allows me to influence the ethics of the product, as at least I know that there is no unethical activity involved in the production process when I make it myself. In terms of climate impact, with the budget that I would normally spend on an acrylic hat, I can make a woolen hat that has a significantly longer lifespan and has not been transported as freight from faraway countries, potentially multiple times back and forth. (QKV)

Expression through crafting

The significance of the product was evident in how student teachers made personalized gifts that express their creativity and strengthen personal relationships. The study highlighted the uniqueness and personal touch of these crafted gifts, emphasizing their special significance. Pleasing others with crafted products underscored the importance of social interactions and the joy of giving. Student teachers described enjoying the process of making crafts as gifts and the pleasure they felt seeing recipients appreciate their work: “I often give the crafts I make as gifts to others or store them away for future use” (MFN).

Additionally, crafting for charitable purposes was popular among student teachers. The act of creating handmade items not only served as a means of self-expression but also to give back to the community and engage in productive activities that contribute to the well-being of others:

I have sewn, among other things, pencil cases that I donated to a charity in Senegal for small school children. [...] In addition, through a relative, I have also participated in other charity projects, such as knitting patches for blankets. I think that these have been meaningful to me because I have felt that I can help others through my actions. (TXJ)

Out of respect for their heritage, craft student teachers viewed the integration of traditional elements with craft making as an opportunity to reconnect with their personal histories and identities. By incorporating long-established techniques and materials into their crafts, student teachers explored their cultural heritage, preserved family traditions, and expressed their individuality. Such practices allowed them to create meaningful objects that reflected their values and their community's cultural roots:

Some of the artisans, like me, get their motivation to make a craft product from cherishing handicraft traditions; for example, the desire to learn something about traditional handicraft techniques, to learn them under the guidance of someone close to them, or to learn from someone. (TUJ)

Many students described their relationship with crafting through a timeline: their earliest and most powerful crafting memories came from childhood. In several texts, parents, grandparents, or close friends were intertwined with these memories. A temporal perspective emerged in TXJ's essay, where she described how she uses her grandmother's materials:

Grandma's old supplies got a new home from me after she moved to a nursing home. These old craft materials from grandma have a very special personal bond, and the products made from them bring back a lot of memories.

Crafting enabled student teachers to weave their personal memories and emotions into their craftwork. Historically, the joys and sorrows of life have been infused into crafts, although this aspect was rarely discussed because these items were seen primarily as utilitarian. The essays showed that incorporating personal experiences and emotions into crafting not only boosted the student teachers' creativity and artistic skills but also contributed significantly to their personal and emotional development. Crafting allowed them to manifest and encapsulate their inner thoughts and feelings in tangible forms, as with a student teacher who knitted sadness into a blanket:

Knitting as a coping mechanism in extreme stress has been evident in my life. After my father died unexpectedly, I knitted a 180 x 220 cm blanket from leftover yarn. The blanket is ugly as sin, because at that time my brain capacity was not big enough to do anything else but grab a strand of yarn and knit stitches. The blanket is still unfinished, and I don't intend to ever finish it. However, the blanket is in use. Through knitting the blanket, I was able to grieve. (IBO)

By using expression in their crafting, the student teachers developed a deeper understanding of themselves and their experiences while creating meaningful and authentic pieces that showcased their creativity and individuality. TNB bodily experienced wool as a material and felting as a technique when describing the felting process as an expressive form:

With wool, as a material and object of processing, I especially like its naturalness, tactility, and malleability. As far as the smell goes, it seems natural, and it's fun to see and feel how it takes shape when obeying the commands of water, soap, heat, and hands. [...] Making it always felt like molding, shaping according to visual boundary conditions, not technical execution. [...] The feeling of the material and its working is preserved despite the passage of time. (TNB)

Social media platforms provide an opportunity for student teachers to connect and share their work, skills, and instructions with a wider audience while also learning from and collaborating with other crafters. These platforms offered an avenue for drawing inspiration for future projects, even if they were not actively contributing to the public domain: "I counted myself as belonging to over twenty different craft groups. [...] The groups inspire me to learn more or give me new ideas. [...] This same

interactivity also emerges from the importance of social media in handicraft production” (NBJ).

Meaningful leisure activities and well-being via crafting

Craft student teachers recognized the importance of engaging in meaningful leisure activities to promote their own well-being. Activities provided a space for individuals to pursue their interests and passions, allowing them to engage in activities that they found both enjoyable and relaxing. Additionally, these activities served as a form of stress relief, providing a break from the grind of everyday life. Engaging in such activities allowed the student teachers to enter a state of flow characterized by complete absorption in the experience and a sense of timelessness and enjoyment:

For me, the benefits of crafting for life management and mental well-being are evident in the nature of the crafting process. During stressful times, so-called “mindless” projects such as knitting striped socks or projects that don’t require much brainpower help me cope with stress while allowing me to process my thoughts. (NIF)

Crafting was also identified as a valuable tool for building self-esteem. By engaging in the creative process, student teachers gained a sense of achievement, accomplishment, and self-worth. As they developed new skills and created unique pieces, they gained a greater sense of confidence in their abilities. This process was particularly beneficial for student teachers, who often faced feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty as they navigated their professional development: *“I’ve gained a lot of self-confidence and courage to face similar situations in the future. These successes have developed my perseverance and patience. In addition, they have supported me in trying new things and try harder.” (NNB)*

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings behind craft making among craft student teachers. In addition to focusing on the final product, the participants emphasized the fundamental elements of making crafts like problem solving and the functionality of crafted products (e.g., Kouhia, 2012). Making crafts was associated with the quality and nature of the materials, particularly on the themes of the circular economy, recycling, and sustainable development, often by reusing materials (e.g., Kouhia, 2015; Vartiainen & Kaipainen, 2012; Väänänen, 2020; Walker et al., 2019). Additionally, the importance of learning new skills was

experienced as beneficial for personal and professional growth, leading to feelings of achievement and confidence.

The study highlighted crafting as a form of expression that reflects both personal and communal identities, as participants found joy in making, using, and sharing their creations. Participants expressed affection by donating self-made products to their close relationships and global communities (Na, 2012), and shared craft activities such as virtual knitting groups strengthened community bonds through common interests (Kouhia, 2015, 2023; Na, 2012). According to the results, crafting can serve as a fulfilling activity that promotes well-being. Participants were looking for meaningful ways to relax in their free time to balance the demands of studying or working life (Kouhia, 2015; Na, 2016; Pöllänen & Voutilainen, 2018).

Based on the research findings, we envision a future of crafts that should be integrated into craft education at both the basic education and teacher training levels. First, future teachers could focus on themes of joy and well-being in crafting, offering students ways to process their empathy, values, and feelings. For example, the study by Bosch et al. (2022) found that eighth graders can practice empathic design by considering end users in both concrete and abstract ways throughout the process. Crafts as a subject can enhance well-being by offering students opportunities for creative expression, stress relief, and personal development. By incorporating these elements into craft education, teachers can help students develop skills that enhance both personal fulfillment and community connection. This perspective supports the idea that teaching crafts could boldly seize the opportunities offered by the curriculum to emphasize different focus areas in various craft assignments.

These perspectives address the gap by which cultural heritage, though considered an essential part of craft education, is not widely taught in schools (Kokko & Dillon, 2011). Cultural heritage is not automatically passed down to future generations; it is the responsibility of student teachers, in their future roles as craft educators, to promote students' awareness of their country's cultural roots. Integrating cultural thinking directly into craft practices is essential, as it not only helps preserve the cultural heritage of crafts but also offers new perspectives on learners' personal histories and provides channels for expression and non-verbal communication.

Second, craft teaching should encourage students to engage with materials and to consider the lifecycle of products they create. By learning to make ethical and ecological choices in their projects, students develop a sense of responsibility toward the environment and society (Väänänen et al., 2017). This aligns with the elements of sustainable crafts, which state that the foundation of sustainable craft practices lies in developing skills or the desire to do so, gradually leading to the formation of one's own craft ideology (Väänänen, 2020). The meanings associated with the

product often relate to its material, aesthetic, and technical qualities. Craft can also be a means of communication, where the craft product serves as a tool for self-expression, representing immaterial craft (see e.g., Väänänen et al., 2017, 2018).

Third, influencing through craft expression and sustainable crafts could create a legacy for the future by developing emotional skills and shifting the focus of craft education toward learning life skills. Crafting should become deeply embedded in education and everyday life, helping to nurture the evolution toward a more thoughtful and sustainable approach to living (Na, 2012). The source of crafting should lie in students' sensitized—even awakened—selves that understand their ability to make things meaningful while strengthening their identity.

The emphasis in crafts on well-being and sustainability aligns with the goals of basic education, fostering both personal growth and a thriving society. These themes are mentioned in the curriculum, as the central purpose of teaching crafts has consistently been to nurture students' personal growth, enhance their creativity and self-confidence, and broaden their understanding of local culture and sustainable lifestyles (Kouhia & Kokko, 2022). The objectives emphasize developing skills for the 21st century, including problem solving, teamwork abilities, creativity, and innovation (Porko-Hudd et al., 2018). However, there are challenges around the implementation of those aims. Since these themes do not fall under any specific subject, teachers are not yet strongly committed to addressing them. This problem is particularly evident in upper school. Craft education has the opportunity to take on this challenge (e.g., Härkki et al., 2023.)

The basic education curriculum and its implementation should include more content related to learners' values and emotional skills, which has long been practiced in early childhood education (Finnish National Agency for Education FNAE, 2022) and in arts schools for youth (Saariaho, 2023); the present curriculum already offers opportunities for adding that content. Integrating this approach into craft teaching in both basic education and teacher training would be a valuable advance, especially at a time when learners need opportunities to calm their minds and process experiences.

As a school subject and hobby, crafts provide an excellent platform for discussing sustainability and individual, social, and cultural existence (e.g., Väänänen, 2020). The value of craft education may be underappreciated in Finland, as crafting is a ubiquitous part of Finnish everyday life, making it seem overly familiar. However, the future could bring a shift in perspective. As digitization permeates all aspects of life, crafting can be a refreshing respite, enriching both the educational setting and leisure time. From these perspectives, today's student teachers can play a crucial role in fostering a greater appreciation of crafting among their future students.

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