The Use of Arts through digital technology in Distance Education. The case of the Mental Health Social Work Course.

L'ús de les arts a través de la tecnologia digital a l'educació a distància. El cas del Curs de Treball Social en Salut Mental.

El uso de las artes a través de la tecnología digital en la educación a distancia. El caso del Curso de Trabajo Social en Salud Mental.

Irene Katsama[1] (ORCID)

Abstract

This article presents the use of digital technology and visual arts in higher education during the second corona virus lockdown in Greece. The continuous effort to identify creative ways to renew the interest and commitment of students to ongoing distance education led to the engagement of alternative teaching methods via digital means for the course: Mental Health Social Work (7th-semester course of the Department of Social Work at Democritus University). Students were asked to actively participate in an art-based pedagogical activity and successively reflect on thoughts and feelings concerning mental health. They were invited to take a virtual tour of the exhibition entitled "Life on the line", organized by an NGO producing public multi-faceted art, fundraising, and initiating educational campaigns that focus on mental health, homelessness, and addiction in Canada. It was a campaign aiming to raise awareness of mental health issues through art. Following the virtual tour, students were asked to select a poster (painting or photograph), reflect on it, and note emerging feelings and thoughts concerning mental health. The objectives were to acquire insight to mental health issues through an experiential method utilizing arts. To present a comprehensive study many aspects need to be considered. The light here shines on the theoretical approaches and methods of social work being integrated with visual arts. Qualitative evaluation of a practice that uses arts in the field of mental health in social work took place. The focus is on the connection of data analyzed with theoretical concepts of mental health, as it relates to the pandemic's influence on conditions and personal experiences. All of this is thoroughly presented, indicating educational benefits for students along with implications for social work education. At the same time, the major contribution of digital technology in Higher Education is highlighted.

Keywords: distance education, digital technology, visual arts, Social Work, mental health.

Resum

Es presenta l'ús de la tecnologia digital i les arts visuals en l'ensenyament superior durant el segon confinament per coronavirus a Grècia. Es va demanar a els/les estudiants que participessin activament en una activitat basada en l'art i que reflexionessin sobre pensaments i sentiments relatius a la salut mental. Se'ls va convidar a una visita virtual a l'exposició titulada «Life on the line», organitzada per una ONG que produeix art públic polifacètic, recapta fons i inicia campanyes centrades en la salut mental, les persones sense llar i l'addicció al Canadà. Es va demanar als alumnes que seleccionessin un pòster i anotessin els sentiments i pensaments en relació amb la salut mental. Els objectius eren adquirir una visió dels problemes de salut mental a través d'un mètode experimental que utilitza les arts. Ens centrem en els enfocaments teòrics i els mètodes del Treball Social que s'integren amb les arts visuals. L'avaluació va ser de tipus qualitatiu. Es conecten les dades analitzades amb els conceptes teòrics de la salut mental, ja que es refereix a la influència de la pandèmia en les condicions i experiències personals. Tot això es presenta de manera exhaustiva, indicant els beneficis educatius per a els/les estudiants juntament amb les implicacions per a l'educació en Treball Social. Al mateix temps, es destaca la important contribució de la tecnologia digital en l'Educació Superior.

Paraules clau: educació a distància, tecnologia digital, arts visuals, Treball Social, salut mental.

Resumen

Se presenta el uso de la tecnología digital y las artes visuales en la enseñanza superior durante el segundo confinamiento por coronavirus en Grecia. Se pidió a los/las estudiantes que participaran activamente en una actividad basada en el arte y que reflexionaran sobre pensamientos y sentimientos relativos a la salud mental. Se les invitó a una visita virtual a la exposición titulada Life on the line, organizada por una ONG que produce arte público polifacético, recauda fondos e inicia campañas centradas en la salud mental, las personas sin hogar y la adicción en Canadá. Se pidió a los alumnos que seleccionaran un póster y anotaran los sentimientos y pensamientos en relación a la salud mental. Los objetivos eran adquirir una visión de los problemas de salud mental a través de un método experimental que utiliza las artes. Nos centramos en los enfoques teóricos y métodos del Trabajo Social que se integran con las artes visuales. La evaluación fue de tipo cualitativo. Se conectan los datos analizados con los conceptos teóricos de la salud mental, al referirse a la influencia de la pandemia en las condiciones y experiencias personales. Todo esto se presenta de forma exhaustiva, indicando los beneficios educativos para los/las estudiantes junto con las implicaciones para la educación en Trabajo Social. Al mismo tiempo, destaca la importante contribución de la tecnología digital en la Educación Superior.

Palabras clave: educación a distancia, tecnología digital, artes visuales, Trabajo Social, salud mental.

1. Introduction.

Crises in Higher Education force academics to reconsider their teaching practice and their use of technology. The challenges of teaching during the pandemic led to the utilization of digital applications. Recent lockdowns, during the global pandemic, served as a chapter of opportunity in the cultural evolution of teaching traditions, which are typically resistant to change (Offord, 2023).

Main features of on-line education are the presence of a group in a learning process through video conferences, that also offer the option to divide into smaller working groups (breakout rooms), given by the educational digital platforms (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.). In this way participants can take an active role in the educational process, interact with each other, as well as with the teacher, thus encouraging collaborative learning while using a computer.

Distance learning largely depends on individual and group initiatives (Abidah, et al. 2020). A study conducted by Papouli et al. (2020) showed many students attended their classes regularly. Of interest is also the finding which stressed that the students were trained in new/ up to date technologies and had developed personal and social skills. Additionally, an important element that emerged from the above research is that according to the students, they became more involved in the educational process through distance education. The use of digital technology in the provision of distance education activates the students during the learning process, as it creates learning environments requiring interaction, excluding passivity.

This article discusses the use of digital technology and visual arts in higher education during the second lockdown (2021) due to the corona virus. The shift to remote delivery highlighted the importance of educational technology in facilitating distance learning and maintaining educational continuity. However, the adoption of these remote teaching techniques was not simply a matter of technological implementation (Veletsianos et al. 2024). Reconsideration of the whole mentality concerning education is certainly needed, along with innovative ideas and flexibility in the use of digital technology.

The course of Social Work Department at Democritus University of Thrace: Mental Health Social Work, evolved to have both synchronous and asynchronous elements. Synchronous being in person or online lessons while asynchronous components refer to an e-class learning system. Asynchronous components allow students to access the course contents at a time most convenient to them. It was organized in 13 sessions over 13 weeks and every week's session consisted of a 3-hour synchronous learning experience with an on-line lecture via Microsoft Teams' educational platform. The learning outcomes of the course were: understanding the contribution of mental illness approach models from the perspective of Social Work, an introduction to practical applications of mental health Social Work, the development of skills regarding the diagnosis through the examination of case studies, the recognition of issues related to mental health of children and adolescents, and, finally, an exploration of personal attitudes concerning stigma in mental health.

¹ https://grahamrobinsonart.com/product/the-weight-sisyphus-is-happy-open-edition-print/

A virtual tour of the exhibition entitled "*Life on the line*", organized by an NGO in Canada, is a campaign to bring awareness to mental health issues through art. It provided a noteworthy opportunity for students to engage in course material in alternative way. The information about this digital exhibition was communicated to the professor of the course and author of the current article via a newsletter from the NGO Twentytwenty Arts. Given the lockdown conditions, it served as an excellent opportunity to discover and put into practice an alternative way of teaching. Successively, students were invited by the professor of the course to take the virtual tour of the exhibition showing one hundred posters at the Toronto subway between November 2019 and January 2020. The posters narrated stories regarding mental health through the eyes of twenty artists. Students had the chance to take the tour online in an asynchronous format allowing them access in optimal time. As Danis (2016) states, the optimal time of engagement in sensitive issues, such as mental health, gives students time and space necessary to process all information included. All students of the 7th Semester attending this course, were asked to select a poster (painting or photograph) and write down their emerging feelings and thoughts concerning mental health. The purpose was to promote free, creative, and inductive thinking leading to the identification and acknowledgment of feelings and thoughts. The objectives were to acquire insight to mental health issues through an experiential method utilizing arts.

Overall, ninety-six (96) relevant texts were sent to the professor of the course via e-class assignments. Data derived from the content analysis of fourteen (14) selected texts, referring mainly to a specific poster entitled: *The Weight (Sisyphus is Happy)*¹, is presented in the current article. The artist's reference to Sisyphus leaded to connections to the philosophical essay of Albert Camus, (1942), entitled: "The Myth of Sisyphus". This data significantly demonstrates the value and pedagogical impact of experiential learning.

2. The Power of Experiential Learning.

Learning is an essential element of human existence, as it allows the individual to comprehend what is occurring in outer world in addition to the inner workings of self. Consequently, the individual becomes flexible to the ever-changing reality (Kokkos, 2005). Experiential learning refers to what a person learns naturally, through experience, successful completion of a task, and interaction. This type of learning covers the whole spectrum of life and includes all its forms without exception, such as the acquisition of mental and cognitive skills, and learning of attitudes (Kassotakis & Flouris, 2006). The term *experiential education* refers to planned and structured learning activities, which are organized within specific educational institutions (Kokkos, 2005). It refers to a way of learning, which is attributed to the participants' gainful knowledge. Moreover, it mainly focuses on the empowerment that acts preventively/as a shield in the emergence of psychosocial difficulties, which are likely to arise inside and outside their educational context. Experiential education is about the process, which is based on experiential learning. According to Dewey (1997), who

was the first to systematically address the importance of experience in learning, "education" is built on experience and becomes a driving force of continuous learning. It is an experience of creativity, personal and social development, in addition to a learning experience (Bakirtzis, 2002).

However, the definition of experiential learning encounters many different dimensions and is often used with different meanings by different researchers and professionals. The definition of experiential learning adopted within the current article is a synthesis of the definition given by Fook (2012), what is experience: an amalgam of thoughts, feelings, and actions that can be personal or social. The learning process includes creativity, reflection, efficiency, personal involvement, and strong motivation. Experiential learning is a process of acquiring knowledge through experience and the search for personal meaning in it.

The above-described process promotes the enhancement of individuals' skills but also their awareness of social problems and issues concerning human relations while relying to a great extent on the active involvement of the individuals themselves, their self-management, participatory responsibility, and interaction (Katsama & Bourmpaki, 2017, conducted a relevant to the mentioned elements study). Accordingly, the achievement of learning is largely based on the active involvement of the participants themselves. To achieve and encourage their involvement, a series of experiential exercises are applied, which require the participation of all attendees. Interaction methods are used, such as discussion groups, working groups, and working in pairs. In the personal journey of an individual's holistic development, active participation is necessary. The aim of experiential learning in education is to motivate individuals by giving them an active role and emotional involvement in the process, learning significantly influences attitudes. It goes beyond the knowledge transferred from a teacher to a student. It refers to the organization and implementation of the learning process based on the concept of "learning by doing", e.g., the active participation of individuals in activities such as research, observation, interviews, etc. Experiential learning is essentially like exploratory learning, mainly in its use of "projects", without clearly identifying with it (Deloudi, 2002). It is an alternative way of educating that lies beyond desks, textbooks, and memorization (Triliva & Anagnostopoulou, 2008). On the contrary, it is the opposite of the traditional teaching methods, since it consists of a learning experience in which the individual is directly involved in the reality studied. Through the experiential method, communication skills are enhanced, since everyone participates equally and actively with personal and emotional involvement (Filippou & Karantana, 2010). The use of techniques is required that result in the students becoming more engrossed in their learning experience. Practices and techniques derived from the methods used in theater and the arts (Bakirtzis, 2000) can be utilized with activities, the most frequently used being theatrical plays and the visual arts. Distance education methodology is an educational process in which the learner is at a physical distance from the educational institution and the teacher. In the case of exp-

eriential learning, personal interaction appears to be an exclusive requirement. Regarding the limitations, obviously the transfer of experiential learning from a distance with technology in a mediating role involved difficulties and challenges. However, obtaining positive outcomes from participants analyzed below do not seem to have been affected.

3. Methodology.

The present article explores how students perceive, experience, and symbolizes their views towards mental health issues based on thoughts and feelings evoked and emerging on a selected poster (painting or photograph). The objectives were to acquire insight to mental health issues through an experiential method utilizing arts. As previously mentioned, students were taken on the virtual tour of the Toronto subway, with the utilization of digital technology. They were asked to select a poster (painting or photograph) and write down their evoked-emerging feelings and thoughts concerning mental health. Ninety-six (96) relevant texts overall were sent to the professor of the course. Due to the large number of paintings and photographs, one hundred (100), students' individual selections varied. Nevertheless, fourteen (14) students selected the same painting. Reflections derived from content analysis of the specific fourteen (14) selected texts, written by eleven (11) female and three (3) male students, aged from 21-23 years old, referred mainly to a particular poster entitled: *The Weight (Sisyphus is Happy)*, is hereby presented. They were able to identify mental health issues in themselves, through the analysis of the selected posters. Based on the virtual tour experience; they had the chance to reflect on both mental health issues and personal feelings. The richness of the texts allowed for a fruitful contemplation regarding mental health issues and served as a challenge for analysis using a qualitative research method (Mason, 2017). A qualitative methodology of research was selected for the analysis of the submitted texts. Qualitative research seeks to understand a given research topic from the perspectives of the individuals it involves. It is especially effective in obtaining specific information about their values in given situations, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts (Robson, 2002; Byrne, 2001).

4. Data analysis.

The produced data was derived from the written documents students electronically uploaded to an e-class platform (consent on behalf of respondents was given). In the writers' attempt to keep the identities of the participants confidential, random numbers were assigned to the uploaded texts. The numbers are represented in the text as No. 1, 2, 3, etc., where 'N' is represented by a number. As mentioned above, the selected texts were written by eleven (11) female and three (3) male students. All of them attended the 7th Semester course entitled Mental Health Social Work. The gender of the participants is mentioned as male/fem. The selection of the fourteen (14) out of the ninety-six (96) texts submitted was made based on the criterion that fourteen of the students had chosen the same poster named: *The*

Weight (Sisyphus is Happy). Concerning the fourteen (14) texts, a qualitative method of research was utilized, and a specifically thematic analysis was performed. Multiple readings led to the identification and uncovering of common themes connected to mental health issues. Moreover, emerging feelings and thoughts were revealed. All relevant quotes were transcribed in the process of construction of meaning. Codes of meanings led to the construction of six main themes analyzed and connected to the commonly described insight on mental health issues. Consistency and coherency were identified and as a result the areas emerged from the thematic analysis are the following: 1. Art (per se) colors and images, 2. The myth of Sisyphus, 3. Stigma in mental health, 4. The role of the social worker: desire to take action and links to theory. 5. Perfectionism and loneliness as a result because of social media. 6. Personal thoughts and feelings evoked.

5. Ethics and Confidentiality.

The consent was given on behalf of respondents, for the following analytical process of their texts. All documents were uploaded to the e-learning platform of the course. Individual access to the e-class had all the students attending the course. They were allowed to upload a copy of their text, without having any access to the rest of the submitted texts. Exclusive access to the overall submitted texts was held by the writer of the current article and professor of the referred course. The identities of the participants were kept confidential. All transcriptions were kept electronically in the writer's private electronic files.

6. Limitations versus Benefits.

The ongoing distance education, due to the corona virus restrictions greatly diminished the opportunities of group interaction in the classroom. The involvement of students in the virtual tour, as described above, gave a valuable opportunity for experiential learning through digital technology. The activity sought-after reflection on thoughts and feelings, which led to clear connections to theory through experience. Nevertheless, certain limitations must be mentioned. Students were not freely asked to reflect on certain paintings and photos. They were asked to identify feelings and thoughts on material meant to raise awareness on mental health issues. Consequently, the apparent instruction: *search for mental health issues* was (actually) prescribed, setting possible limitations to the range and orientation of thoughts. Additionally, responses to the work of art (painting) were subjected to personal views, background and perspectives.

7. Results.

As already mentioned, six individual subject areas resulted from the thematic analysis process and are presented and analyzed in turn below, with accompanying quotes supported by indicative verbatim text extracts. Successively analytical process is highlighted in the analysis is presented.

7.1. Art (per se) colors, images.

Students seem to focus on shapes and colors and their impact on thoughts, feelings, and imagination. According to the visual impact the poster has on them, they imagine, suspect, come to conclusions and interpret.

- Initially, what intrigued me were the colors and the intensity they have, the capacity to emote feelings and the shades of colors that are attractive to me have the power to please me. Colors and objects, everything that appears on a canvas, are always accompanied by meanings, which are not only related to a cognitive process but are dominated by emotions and unconscious impulses. It essentially creates an interaction, a relationship between the viewer and the piece of art. (text N. 8 fem).

- …the experience of color (how we perceive and interpret color) is like our emotions… The blue color that dominates the painting can symbolize the turmoil of the sea, grey can express how lost we feel, and white conjures the feeling of emptiness (text N. 3 fem.).

- There are positive emotions due to the existence of colors (text N. 6 fem).

7.2. The myth of Sisyphus.

Through the following lines, the myth's symbolism reflects mental health issues:

- According to Greek Mythology Sisyphus was punished by the Gods to bare a huge rock on his back while walking up to the top of a hill and back down again. He was condemned to repeat that eternally. The artist allegorically presents the story of people with mental health problems, (alcoholism, depression, anxiety, and fear) who might feel like carrying a huge rock (text N. 14 fem).

- Sisyphus was a very special personality. He was a clever and cunning king who was punished for his disrespectful behavior towards Zeus in addition to deceiving Ades. Sisyphus brought onto himself his eternal punishment. Sisyphus is mentally ill and is tormented by his punishment, which will probably follow him throughout his life (text N. 8 fem).

- Sisyphus carries the burden of mental illness without having chosen it. Was it a series of incidents, or was he "doomed by fate", that led to this situation? His burden consists of personal belongings and elements of the environment (text N.1 male).

- The title of the painting: "Sisyphus is happy" is a contradiction. I think that many mentally ill people may feel that as they try to find balance between optimism and despair, happiness and misery, health and illness. (text N. 8 fem).

7.3. Stigma.

Theoretical concepts on stigma were taught through the curricula of the course. As participants bear in mind the central theme of the exhibition was to raise awareness of mental health issues, they will continue to reflect on mental health issues:

- My first thought was the tendency of people to show the

best version of themselves and the strong will to hide from their environment any insecurity, fear, or hardship they experience. People with mental disorders isolate themselves and conceal what is really happening in their lives due to a fear of exposure and the stigma attached. They feel they will never be accepted so eventually they lead themselves to alienation and social isolation. (Text N 5. fem).

- I believe that the painting aims to present both the social stigma around mental health, as well as the tendency to hide who we really are, along with the consequences of that…The meaning is deep, and I believe that the painting depicts a very large percentage of people with or without mental health problems. (text N. 6 fem).

8. The Role of the social worker: desire to take action and links to theory.

The impact of the painting seemed so powerful that some of the students declared their desire and strong motive to act and "intervene" in the portrait. They also make clear reference to theories that justify that stress and discomfort do not only rely upon the person but mainly on stressors in society.

- In conclusion, this painting provoked strong feelings in me and helped me realize how essential it is to support people and help them take action and make changes in their lives. But also, from the point of view of Social Work, we urge them, we stand by them and together we find solutions. Therefore, it is crucial to reflection that. Offering help does not mean that we question someone's potential, but rather that we are there to offer them an additional perspective and stand by them during a difficult period. That someone in need could be us, a member of our family, or even a friend (text N. 5 fem).

- Seeking help during a difficult period is not a sign of weakness. This is good to remind everyone, since this is the reason why many people do not seek help. Additionally, the last interpretation I give of the painting, is that of the happy person portrayed as another Sisyphus descending the hill instead of climbing up the hill with the beautiful "rock" on his back. I view him as a person who accepts the help of medical staff, specialists (psychologists, social workers, etc.), and scientists, who help the person lift the weight being carried. It is now a weight that they will lift together (text N. 11 male).

- Such a view, after all, is quite intertwined with what Pearlin tells us in his sociological model of stress, according to which the environment and everyday reality are what often cause mental alteration and exhaustion of the individual (text N. 12 male).

9. Perfectionism and loneliness as a result because of social media (in the post covid era).

They reflect on society and identify perfectionism as a contemporary value stemming from the constant desire of people to show off and receive acceptance and admiration.

- He carries such weight, but he is smiling… This re minds us of the image we try to present on social me-

dia, where no one has flaws, problems, or any imperfections in their appearance… Everyone has a perfect job, perfect family, and perfect friends. People are afraid to show the slightest flaw, instead, they post on socials minor and meaningless achievements, such as shopping, travel, and outings. It is an endless marathon that involves an excessive state of competition, along with increasing anxiety/apprehension for the attainment of perfection* (text N. 9 fem).

- The painting brings to my mind the contemporary human beings that try to manage their daily load (using coping mechanisms) to survive in the modern yet harsh society. My emotions are anger and frustration in reaction to how most people feel…. It saddens me that we no longer care about each other. We only notice and appraise achievements and successes…. I feel fear and doubt when I think of how we will end up as human beings… (text N. 10 fem).

- The painting depicts modern society, as we are all overloaded with many responsibilities, hardships, stress, problems, and difficulties that are personal and environmental. Everyone is alone, with no one by their side for support or assistance in coping with all this weight (text N. 11 male).

- … the painting from another point of view could perfectly address the new condition that society has been experiencing with the covid-19 pandemic, as people learn to live alone and coexist through digital communication with others (text N. 4 fem).

10. Personal thoughts and feelings evoked.

Apart from the themes mentioned above, which are clearly connected to mental health issues and the broader social context, students seem to reflect on personal feelings and experiences because of their observations on the painting.
It has been affirmed that through the experiential method, everyone participates actively with personal and emotional involvement.

- Perhaps the weight carried by "Sisyphus' load is all the things that we hold onto, due to the fear of facing ourselves and reality". So, we get stuck in the past because we are afraid to move on and change. It is mainly due to fear that happiness may elude us… The only emotion that this painting triggers in me is fear, fear that I may have put myself in a position of compromise. (text N. 11 male).

- … I might have seen, for a second, myself in this painting. I feel trapped in thoughts and feelings that I am afraid to share… what if they are not accepted, what if they are criticized, what if nobody cares about how I feel. (text N. 6 fem).

- The artist here succeeds in relaying the feelings of Sisyphus to an observer, who in turn comes to identify with him… The weight he carries transfers the feelings of anxiety and the sadness of despair to the observer of the painting and is unconsciously called to think how many problems he carries himself/ herself (text N. 14 fem).

11. Analysis.

Concerning the first thematic entity, *art (per se) colors and images*, respondents identify colors with emotions and dare to connect the use of colors with the underlying emotions. Ernest Schachtel (1959) states that the experience of color is like that of emotion, or the emotion is similar to the color. In both cases, we tend to be passive recipients of stimuli. Emotion is not only the product of an actively organized mind but ignites us similarly in the way colors do. A pattern, in contrast, seems to require a more active response. We detect the object, we install its structural frame, and we relate the parts to the whole. Regarding the vision of colors, the action springs from the object and influences the individual, while for the perception of the shape the organizational mind goes out to meet the object. In the case of the students observing paintings inspired by mental health issues, it seems they want to meet the "subjects" and we shall follow them to that point through the following analysis. Images and photos consist of various forms of representation of people, culture, and social reality; they reflect on phenomena and human behaviors (Tsergas, 2021). Consequently, images contain a plethora of information, some of which is personal, eliciting thoughts and emotional reactions from those who see them. The images contribute to the best understanding of the human condition, of human nature (Prosser, 1998).

In the second thematic entity, *the myth of Sisyphus*, students seem to draw a clear line to the hero of Camus philosophical essay. Sisyphus (the main character of the selected painting) was punished for all eternity by rolling a rock up a mountain only to have it roll back down to the bottom when he had reached the top. He is the epitome of an absurd hero, and his punishment is representative of the human condition. Students, through their words, draw a clear line that connects mental health disorders with the weight Sisyphus is carrying, literally and metaphorically. They give their interpretations in the context of the Mental Health Course and the main theme of the exhibition. As they clearly state, problems such as alcoholism, depression, and anxiety might be a heavy load for contemporary people. No matter how clever someone might be, life can be punitive, or appear meaningless. Camus (1942) claims that there is a fundamental conflict between what we want from our lives, whether it be meaning, order, or reasons and what we finally find to be formless chaos. We will never find the meaning in life that we expect to find, and that's our fate. Suicide, as the ultimate form/act of disappointment and despair, may be seen as redemption from the burdens of life. Camus suggests that we can accept and live in a world devoid of meaning or purpose. We cannot defeat death; although Sisyphus won in his battle against Ades (The God of Death), nevertheless he was punished.

Sisyphus must struggle perpetually without the hope of success. When he accepts that there is nothing more to life than this absurd futile struggle, then he can find happiness in it, and this is what students describe as the struggle to find a balance between happiness and misery. Similarly, as the participants note: *"people try to find balance between optimism and despair, happiness and misery, health and illness"* as this seems to be the fate of humankind. On the last page of his essay on the absurd hero, Camus suggests we must imagine Sisyphus happy, while at the same time the painting under observation seems to reflect this: Sisyphus is Happy, proving the interactive nature of the arts.

Concerning the third thematic entity, *stigma in mental health*, respondents reflect on the stigma accompanying people suffering with mental illness, especially in the case of Greece, where the rate of discrimination is high (Zisi, 2013; Tzouvara et al. 2016). They conceive the weight as being all the thoughts and feelings people try to hide due to their fear of rejection, whether they suffer from mental illness or not. Stigma is a socio-psychological phenomenon in which processes of social categorization and hierarchical classification of individuals and groups are involved, which imply social comparison, labeling, and consolidation of criteria for the social construction of the "normal" - "pathological" dipole. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is defined as a characteristic that is deeply degrading, and whoever identifies with it transforms from a complete and ordinary being into one who is being progressively underestimated. The labeling, that addresses the behaviors of people who are socially unacceptable or differentiated based on some identifying form (e.g. gender, race, nationality, social class), is done by the dominant social group or people who associate with it (Zisi, 2013). Nevertheless, "diversity" is a philosophical and anthropological term that identifies' otherness' (Soulis, 2008; Kandylaki, 2009), highlighting that the "other person" may be the "imaginary other". This can be the opponent, the enemy, or even the cherished, the desirable.

Research shows the disposition of people associated with addiction, substance use, and mental illness to social distance (Martin et al, 2000, Poulopoulos, 2014). According to Link (1987), when individuals receive a formal label from the institutional system, they tend to internalize the stigmatization and stereotyped beliefs that exist among members of mainstream society. This then leads to a transformation of their expectations for negative treatment, which are expressed through a fear of rejection. People who are stigmatized suffer from the fear of rejection and develop defensive and self-defense strategies. They tend to disguise and conceal violations of their dignity, avoid any such discussions, choosing isolation instead. The social environment significantly affects the occurrence of mental health problems and phenomena. To illustrate this, we must look more closely at socialization based on traditional gender roles, segregation of people based on gender, sexual orientation, etc. The potential of individuals is limited in such an environment. Therefore, the pain experienced by individuals is not purely personal but is influenced by the respective social context (Cook, 1990; Worell & Remer, 2003).

In the fourth thematic entity, respondents refer to *social worker's role*. Their words indicate "strong feelings" that lead to empathy and a desire to act in the direction of professional support for people in need. They seem to reflect on *coping* and *support*, which are major terms in the discipline of Social Work. Coping refers to the actions that people take on their own behalf, as they attempt to avoid or lessen the impact of life's problems (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Support can arise from social or community networks, and participants refer specifically to the network of professionals. They mainly seem to refer to counseling or therapy concerning the relevant levels of intervention.

With professional help, a weight being lifted can feel lighter. Nevertheless, seeking help in a society where everyone strives for perfectionism, can be stigmatizing, and viewed as a sign of weakness. As can be seen, students refer to the sociological model of stress and Pearlin's theory. Stressors are mainly based on society's values and conditions. Therefore, the structural contexts of people's lives are not extraneous to the stress process but are fundamental to that process. They are the sources of hardship and privilege, threat and security, as well as, conflict and harmony. In searching for the origins of stress, we may begin fruitfully by scrutinizing the social arrangements of society and the structuring of experience. As Pearlin (1989) continues, the relationships of social stressors to an individual's stress may be seen most clearly when we consider social values that help to shape the deeper meaning of the stressors. At the very core of perfectionism, as has manifested in the present, are values that largely contribute to anxiety, as stated below.

In the fifth thematic entity, respondents reflect on *perfectionism and loneliness*. Admittedly, we all carry a burden; nevertheless, we smile and try to look happy to fit the standards of society. As hardships attract zero interest from others, people try to hide their flaws and difficulties and find an outlet on social media to find the interest promptly that they so desire. In this context, feelings of anger, frustration and fear are expressed. Additionally, the covid era brought a violent attack on relationships and broke bonds between couples, families, and friends. It had a major social impact on mental health and communication. A fear of death and a fear of others as "dangerous" were dominant in holding an objective basis but also a subjective experience of fear. The fear of others is inherent in everyone and as previously stated, includes the fear of differences. Nevertheless, in the case of people with mental health problems, this fear intensified the difficulties of connection. People of all ages sank into loneliness and isolation. Technology defines communication in many ways (social media, distance learning), thereby leaving us with minor control over the condition of communication.

The last thematic entity refers to *personal thoughts and feelings*. According to the theoretical background of the art-pedagogical activity, as it draws from Fook's, the approach encourages contemplation of personal experiences on any topic the participants wish. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the topic they have chosen to work on, in a more personal way. In this case, they seem to reflect on personal experiences, devoting a significant amount of thought to their situation at the time. The created image is based on the perceptions and ideas projected by the artist; therefore, they hold symbols and metaphors. Images "narrate" stories; while at the same time consist of tools for personal investigation, self-expression, and reflection (Hughes & Noble, 2003). The projections made by observers, and the way they interpret or give meaning to this, are of great interest. Particularly interesting is the contemplation of issues concerning the relationship with oneself, as well as with others, placed in the present or the past. Self-projection about the future is something related to the individual's life plan (Weiser, 2014). Images act as stimuli, which invite participants to narrate personal stories and express desires, thoughts, and feelings for themselves and other people. In this context, the students highlight major issues faced by humanity: the fear of having been left alone, along with the tendency *"to get stuck in"* situations and compromise. Through their words, we are met with the feeling of being *"trapped"* between the possibility/expectation of not being accepted for who they are and no one really caring. According to the participants, the image of the painting touched them deeply and managed to make them identify with Sisyphus.

12. Discussion.

As already stated, experiential learning is a process of acquiring knowledge through experience and the search for personal meaning in it. This process enhances awareness of social problems and issues concerning human relations, since it relies on the active involvement of the individuals themselves. What seems to have happened through the students' involvement in the arts-based pedagogical activity described in the current article, is that art, through digital technology, made them brought their stories to life, embrace unprecedented emotions, open new horizons, and think more freely. They verbalized their experience in long texts, highlighting the benefits of the use of visual arts in distance education, and its value as a projecting tool, along with its contribution to the cultivation of consciousness, empathy, and awareness.

Specifically, the connection of the educational subject area, that is mental health, with the students' experiences and feelings seems to be a means of connection to both the individual and their social reality. As students themselves stated to the dialogue that took place after the data collection, this is done in a way that books or lectures would never succeed in accomplishing. Students were invited to react to a certain experience, contemplate and actively reflect on their feelings. The whole experience appeared to have led to insight and contemplation concerning mental health issues.

They described the impact of colors and shapes on the posters in trying to interpret the mood and feelings of the artist. Successively, they reflected on the myth of Sisyphus, by observing him carefully, to get to know the hero better. They felt for him; they tried to understand and comfort him. They interpreted his carrying weight in various ways. They saw it as a stigma, as well as an effort to hide from other people. Relevant responsibility was attributed to both the individual and society. Although university students have not yet formed a professional identity, they directly referred to the role of social worker and drew from theory taught and insights gained, according to the teaching outcomes. It seems that they accomplished what is desired in experiential learning, which is connecting theory to practice. It is a major aim of education in social work. As they consider mental health issues in a broader scope, an opportunity that art

seems to offer, they contemplate society's values as being formed by contemporary circumstances justifying clearly that life is "on the line". Loneliness, various hardships, and the covid pandemic social restrictions have led to digital and iconic relationships characterized by perfectionism, maximizing the "weight". They finally identify themselves with the absurd hero in various ways, as they mainly reflect on feelings about their own lives. They contemplate their lives in a way both personal and global that reflects the fears and anxiety of humankind.

13. Conclusions.

The current article arose from the reflection of fourteen (14) selected texts, written by an equal number of higher education students (7th semester course of the Department Democritus University), mainly referring to the poster entitled: The Weight (Sisyphus is Happy). It consisted of a pedagogical activity; a novel approach based on visual arts through digital technology. Apparently, the use of creative teaching strategies for online and in-person learning is of great importance in higher education. The broader purpose of education in general and higher education more specifically is clearly to focus on the student (skills development), and the curriculum (knowledge, diplomas). Although, it is equally important, as the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (2006) states, to make students feel like: "trying to be at home in the world". That is to be at the center of a world that evokes a desire to be part of it. Therefore, the emphasis of education should lie on the interaction of education with social reality. An exhibition in the Toronto subway certainly stands as a source of experiential learning in an alternative, nontraditional way outside the classroom.

The virtual tour of the exhibition, "Life on the line", appeared as a challenge to utilize visual arts through digital technology for the benefit of the students. The painting selection, observation, and writing experience of all the feelings and thoughts evoked seem to have contributed to the accomplishment of basic educational goals: skills development as they gained insight in to themselves, acquired knowledge, and made connections concerning mental health issues, which as the main objective of the activity.

The described results highlight the benefits of the use of visual arts in distance education, as it proved to be a creative and effective means of training. Distance education through digital technology is here to stay as the digital applications address a broad scope of educational needs. Before the pandemic, distant educational programs were lagging, underdeveloped, and made up only a small part of a person's education (Offord, 2023). Nowadays many postgraduate programs are designed for distance learning. Additionally, the method described could be utilized in sparsely – populated regions, in collaborative online international learning programs, on site, or some other alternative in person. As stated above, the opportunities digital technology can bring could have a major impact on educational outcomes and introduce novel approaches as alternatives to traditional education.

14. Bibliography.

Abidah, A., Hidaayatullaah, H. N., Simamora, R. M., Fehabutar, D., & Mutakinati, L. (2020). The impact of covid-19 on Indonesian education and its relation to the philosophy of "Merdekabelajar". *Studies in Philosophy of Science and Education*, 1(1), 38-49. https://doi.org/10.46627/sipose.v1i1.9

Arendt, H. (2006). "The Crisis in Education", in Between Past and Future. Penguin

Bakirtzis, K. (2000). Experiential education and motives for learning. *Pedagogical Review*, 30, 87 – 109.

Byrne, M. (2001). Grounded theory as a qualitative research methodology. *AORN Journal*, 73 (6), 1155-1156. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0001-2092(06)61841-3

Camus, A. (1942). *Le myth de Sisyphe*. Gallimard

Cook, E.P. (1990). Gender and Psychological Distress. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 68 (4), 371-375.

Danis, F.S. (2016). Teaching domestic violence online: A step forward or a step backward? *Violence against Women*,22(12), 1476–1483. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215626810

Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.

Deloudi, M. (2002). Experiential Learning [Βιωματικήμάθηση]. *Review of Educational Issues*, 6, 145- 159. Pedagogical Institution.

Filippou, D. & Karantana, P. (2003). *Two hundred five (205) experiential exercises for animation of psychotherapy, social work, and education groups*. Kastaniotis.

Fook, J. (2012). *Social Work: A Critical Approach to Practice*. SAGE.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Simon & Schuster.

Hughes, A., & Noble, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Phototextualities: Intersections of photography and narrative*. UNM Press.

Kandylaki, A. (2009). *Social Work in a multicultural environment*, 2nd Vol. Athens: Self publication.

Katsama, I., & Bourmpaki, E. (2017). Bullying in primary education. A social work intervention with students. *Journal of Education and Social Policy*. 4(3), 98-111. www.jespnet.com

Kokkos, A. (2005). *Adult Education*. Metexmio

Link, B. G. (1987). Understanding labeling effects in the area of mental disorders: An assessment of the effects of expectations of rejection. *American Sociological Review*, 52, 96-112. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095395

Martin, J. K., Pescosolido, B.A. & Tuch, S.A. (2000). Of fear and loathing. The role of "disturbing behavior", labels, and causal attributions in shaping public attitudes toward people with mental illness. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 41, 208-223. https://doi.org/10.2307/2676306

Mason, J. (2017). *Qualitative researching*. Sage.

Offord, M. (2023). Educational Technology: A Post digital Social Tradition. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1-24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-023-00445-1

Papouli, E., Chatzifotiou, S., & Tsairidis, C. (2020). The use of digital technology at home during the COVID-19 outbreak: Views of social work students in Greece. *Social Work Education*, 39(8), 1107-1115. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1807496

Pearlin, L. I. (1989). The sociological study of stress. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 241-256. https://doi.org/10.2307/2136956

Pearlin, L. I., & Schooler, C. (1978). The structure of coping. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 2-21. https://doi.org/10.2307/2136319

Poulopoulos, Ch. (2014). *Crisis, Fear, and disruption of social cohesion*. Topos

Prosser, J. (1998). *Image-based research*. Routledge Falmer.

Rogers, A. (1999). *Teaching Adults*. Metexmio

Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*. Blackwell Publishers

Schachtel, E. G. (1959). *Metamorphosis: on the development of effect, perception, attention, and memory*. Basic Books.

Soulis, S.G. (2008). *A school for all. From Research to Practice: The pedagogy of inclusion*. Gutenberg Publications.

Tsergas, N. (2021). La Photographie dans le Conseil et la Thérapie comme Outil de Prise de Conscience de Soi, de Développement Personnel et de Changement Thérapeutique. *Review of Counselling and Guidance*, 126-127, 53-75.

Tzouvara, V., Papadopoulos, C., & Randhawa, G. (2016). Systematic review of the prevalence of mental illness stigma within the Greek culture. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 62(3), 292-305. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764016629699

Triliva, S. & Anagnostopoulou, T. (2008). *Experiential Learning*. Topos Publications.

Tsitlakidou, E., & Manousou, E. (2013). The role of the teacher in supporting autonomy within the distance learning process. *Journal of Open and Distance Education and Educational Technology*, 9(1), 47-61.

Veletsianos, G., Jandrić, P., MacKenzie, A., & Knox, J. (2024). Postdigital Research: Transforming Borders into Connections. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-023-00450-4

Weiser, J. (2014). Establishing the framework for using photos in art therapy (and other therapies) practices. *Arteterapia*, 9, 159- 190. https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_ARTE.2014.v9.47490

Worell, J. & Remer, P. (2003). *Feminist Perspectives in Therapy: Empowering Diverse Women*. Wiley.

Zisi, A. (2013). *Society, Community and Mental Health*. Gutenberg Publications.