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Cosiendo historias: textiles, texts, and wellbeing

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Abstract:

Through the lens of research coming out of occupational therapy, health-based arts therapies, and the Conflict Textiles collection, it explores general student feedback and two case studies of the visual and written elements of assessment submitted in 2020 in a Latin American literature course in Spanish and Portuguese Studies, Queen's University Belfast, to show the potential eudaimonic wellbeing effects of creative projects.

Cosiendo Historias: Textiles, Texts, and Wellbeing

The hand grasps the physicality
and materiality of thought and
turns it into a concrete image.

(Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand*).

Introduction

The relatively recent turn towards a focus on wellbeing as a core part of the student experience has had implications for many approaches adopted across academia, most particularly in provision of extra events and university support services, as well as provision of wellbeing spaces. Yet we have perhaps considered less the integral designs of our assessments and how these can positively impact the student experience. The analysis that follows is an attempt to understand how non-traditional assessments, particularly textile making, may have wider benefits for students, in addition to deep learning and critical engagement, particularly as demonstrated during constrained circumstances of the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this article, I work on the basis that the body is another place of learning, and that by encouraging students to use techniques that involve more of the sensory or physical approach, they can engage at a deeper and more personal level with the literary works we study than might be the case through the traditional essay (McCutcheon and Boudreaux 2020; Dormor 2014). The overlap of syntactical structures of crafting and storytelling can be clearly mapped onto the intertextual space between the short stories the students read and the *arpilleras* they create, as well as opening up consideration of touch as a means of locating us

and our stories in our environments (Adamson 2013: 186; Bradshaw 2018; Cranny-Francis 2011). Exploring these ideas around the uses of textiles and literature to support wellbeing, I am cognisant that we should also bear in mind the smallness of craft's power as Jessica Hemmings (2018) has noted - the fact that it is not always capable of bringing about change. I am also aware of the overlap of terminology used to refer to textile art, allowing it to move between art and craft, arts-based therapies, fibre-based therapies, needlecraft, and its changing status (Dunn 2014).

To understand the student responses to creating textiles, I have drawn from research into conflict resolution, occupational therapy, and arts-based medical interventions; exploring the impact of creativity in forms of healthcare but also differentiating between art therapy and art for healing (Malchiodi 1998). The latter, art for healing, is the more applicable for the pedagogical context. Most research undertaken thus far has explored the impact in circumstances of therapy, long-term illness, or within the realm of hobbies that enable wellbeing. This article considers the benefits of textile-making from a different angle – as part of a creative assessment in a class on Latin American literature. Although these considerations draw mainly on student experience during a specific, and hopefully unique, period of time.

[Arpilleras: Foundations for Learning](#)

Interest in Chilean *arpilleras* has grown substantially over the past years, perhaps linked to the growth of interest in crafting or textile making as a means of activism and expression among marginalised communities as well as growing emphasis on the mental health benefits. Although originating in the period before the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, the tradition of the *arpillera*, three dimensional appliquéd narrative textiles on sackcloth backing, is perhaps best known as a means of denouncing atrocities carried out under the regime, a time when thousands were 'disappeared', imprisoned, tortured, and forced into exile. They gave voice to the repressed, and a space to bear witness to the atrocities taking place, as well as a space for camaraderie in difficult conditions.¹ (Muñoz 2020, Bacic 2010).

¹ A much larger body of research than can be recorded here has grown up around *arpilleras* with particular focus on broader activism/artivism across Latin America, especially from Chile, Colombia, and Brazil. Some of the most recent research includes: Bacic and Huenún 2023, Barrientos 2023, Hamber and Bacic 2023, Pardo 2023. There are a smaller number of projects focusing particularly on *arpilleras* and mental health. See for example, 'Common Threads Project' in Ecuador 2012, 'Memoria, Tejido y Salud Mental', in Colombia, 2014-16 (Archivo Digital de Textiles Testimoniales: www.textilestestimoniales.org/creadores/. Accessed 21 February

Bacic has described *arpilleras* as ‘acts of resistance in the way in which they broke with traditions’, resisting ‘the traditional format of rural idyll by depicting images of political oppression and more urban reflections of daily life’ and allowing ‘women to resist traditional roles making them economically more empowered –something that was especially relevant when many of the traditional breadwinners had ‘disappeared’ or were imprisoned’ (2014). In addition to the symbolic links with the disappeared, Agosín has reflected on the corporeal connections between maker and textiles that goes beyond materiality,

The *arpillera* is made of many things, not just fabric. The process of its creation is similar to composing a poem or planting a tree to commemorate a death. The *arpillera* is born from deep inside of us, in a zone of intimacy, but it embodies the public voice and allows hands, previously used for caressing and loving, to tell their story. (2008: 15)

In the course that is the focus of this article, *arpilleras* play a key role in exploring protest, memory and environmental issues. The discussion includes extracts of reflective analysis that form part of the assessment, and general feedback provided by students at the end of the course. Further details on all elements of context, methodology, and assessment are included in Clark (2022).² Reading Tatiana Lobo’s *Tiempo de Claveles*, we consider how art and fiction can act as potential forces for environmental awareness; agents in shifting attitudes to keep, as Tittler and Kane note, ‘the environment in the discussion, to chip away at the ignorance of and indifference toward the nature that always lies at the base of culture’ (2010: 20). The use of textiles in community action and consciousness-raising demonstrates how the *arpillera* ‘unites the vast traditions of artists who sing, inform, paint, and weave hope. Retelling history from the voice of the dispossessed is to rewrite history and envision a better future’ (Agosín 2008: 36). They offer us the opportunity to engage in practices coming out of a long tradition within Latin American cultures to retell an element of a story incorporating each student’s individual experience as a new lens through which to bear witness. Recounting

2024; Gana and Jenkins work in Toronto 2016; Gana and Jenkins 2016; Garlock 2016 & 2021; Batista 2020; Bello Tocancipá 2020; Linnoseir, ‘Trama Textiles’, Guatemala 2023; and the ‘Storycloth Database’. Beyond that again is the excellent research that exists on uses of textiles generally as a form of protest and expression in Latin America.

² This article is based on reflective practice in the course ‘Protecting Paradise’, Spanish and Portuguese Studies, Queen’s University Belfast, between 2013-2022, with special focus on 2020.

experiences in fictional form and through textiles can serve to symbolically express traumatic experiences. In the context of peace-making, for example, Andrä has shown that textiles serve as a less direct and less confrontational means of processing experiences than either oral or written art (2020: 4). Lobo also uses fiction and metaphor to process difficult experiences, stating, 'Algunos de mis relatos "Abacá" y "El Enjambre", son metáforas de esta masacre demasiado real para contarla sin la ayuda de la ficción' (14). Compared to previous years, the core change noted in the 2020 assessments was the emphasis by the students in their written reflection on how the medium of textile making enabled them to manage their early experience of the lockdown. Crafting material metaphors opened a space for contemplating what was happening in society but also gave them some sense of control over the narrative of Covid-19.

Porch et al (2022) have argued, building on Dissanayake's work on artification and 'affordances' as signs or 'things in our environment that contribute to our survival' (2018), that within the clinical setting, textiles are present as 'affording behaviours' that help support adaptive coping. Within the context of a course on literature and ecology, understanding of affordances is particularly apt as we seek to explore how better to live within our natural and built environment. Using *arpilleras* in the assessment also embraces this idea of affordances; meaningful material elements from the nearby environment are included in the textile, the textile creator expresses something of personal import and what is helping them survive their experience as well as reflecting on the act of survival within the fictional short story. I adopt Hemmings' (2018) concept of 'smallness' to indicate that while textile making proved helpful to a number of students in their assessment, we cannot claim that as general practice textile making is a certain means to establish wellbeing. In fact, in these cases, the short story and textile go hand-in-hand, providing a context for reflection and means of communication. The written reflection can be as important for wellbeing as the act of creation itself.

Wellbeing, creativity, and textiles

What do we understand by the word, wellbeing? In this case, I am working with an understanding of *eudaimonic* wellbeing in the sense of actualization of human potential resulting from being challenged and exerting effort, but with a touch of *hedonic* wellbeing, in terms of pleasure and moving away from problems (Ryan and Deci 2001). I will draw on the concepts of doing, being, becoming, and belonging as elements that help us function well in life and reach our full potential (Keyes and Annas 2009; Pöllänen 2015, Pöllänen and Weissmann-Hanski 2020), and elements of Seligman's building blocks for wellbeing (2018).

Research in various contexts has also shown that textile making can be source of mindfulness, cognitive coping, and intellectual stimulation, helping deal with loneliness and depression by managing stress. It occupies time and provides a purpose that can add new perspectives to reframe experiences and add to positive feelings, such as joy and social connection, it can help us understand the world and our embodied subjectivity as self-actualizing activities (Reynolds 2004; Moon 2007; Tubbs and Drake 2007; Futterman Collier 2012; Kenning 2015; Potter 2019; Nartker 2022). As Garlock (2016) indicates, the elements of sewing that are relational, repetitive, relevant, rewarding, and rhythmic, along with the uses of textures and colours, draw on sensory, cognitive, and emotional aspects of making. In broad terms, whether discussing arts in healthcare or in education, there is agreement that the project-based, creative process is a positive experience when the level of challenge and skill set required is manageable for the individuals involved (Rogers 1954; Hennessey and Amabile 1988; Koestler 1964; Eisner 2002 & 2004; Barnes 2015). Griffiths (2008) highlights that creativity is fomented when there is an absence of external pressure or evaluation, which would seem to be the opposite of a university assessment. Nonetheless, I hope to show that in the appropriate design and support the elements of personal interest, meaning, psychological safety, freedom, and the right balance of challenge can all still be present to aid the creative interaction and help wellbeing.

Textile-making and Covid-19

In her research on wellbeing and textile making in 2012, Futterman Collier noted that while some textile handcrafts, such as knitting were very popular, others, such as, crochet, embroidering, and cross-stitch in particular, were not as widely used due to the fact that they were perceived as 'old-fashioned' (2012:110). This perception has also been highlighted by Heidi von Kürthy (2020; von Kürthy et al 2021) in the occupational therapy setting (2020). By contrast, the 2020-2022 Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown situations saw a great increase of people taking up textile work in some form – knitting, crochet, embroidery, mixed media, weaving, and many others – to help them adapt to the limited circumstances in which they found themselves. This in turn, generated a swathe of websites and blogs sharing ideas and encouraging one another through creative practices toward good mental health. Needlecraft-based puns abounded. Singer (2021) found stories of both creative inspiration and creative block among hobby makers and textile professionals. Many who took part in her study reported that they,

struggled with not being able to access their usual sources of inspiration or felt so stressed that the creative brain could not drift off into its usual explorations. Many commented on the lack of focus they felt. The pressure to make good use of the time was significant to many, and this often led to feelings of guilt for not being able to do much (2021:15).

Whilst respondents in Singer's study noted that working on textile projects helped them deal with anxiety, depression, isolation, and stress, the mindfulness aspects were not as notable as under normal circumstances. Overall, 82% reported that textile making had been important for their wellbeing, noting particularly the importance of retaining a sense of control and achievement (2021: 44). Given the variance in experience, we cannot claim that textile making acts as a general panacea; the effects are often circumstance- as well as individual-dependent, as Lipson (2012) has also argued.

Perhaps most importantly for engaging students who have no background in textile making, Reynolds (2004) has shown that textile art and the resources required to take part are highly accessible and can be taken up without prior knowledge and without the maker considering themselves as 'artistic' and can lead to visually engaging work no matter the previous experience or lack thereof. It is a highly diverse form of art that can be adapted to a

wide range of projects and themes. The fact that it can often be time consuming may lead to those engaging with it to have a more 'future-oriented' perspective in the midst of illness, which can help retain hope. The social element of engaging with textile art can be found in the social networks that exist around the creative practice but also the fact that it is compatible with 'family living experience', which gives those engaging a level of social visibility, inclusion in homelife, and potential for positive feedback (Reynolds 2004: 63-64). These findings in the context of working with people living with long-term illness are equally as applicable to the experiences voiced by the students completing the *arpilleras* in the context of the Covid-19 lockdown.

Crafting Assessment: Preparation and Process

In the preliminary stages of the course all students are given the opportunity to attend a practical, in-class, workshop to learn more about this textile tradition and to have a hands-on experience at making the textile figurines that feature prominently in most *arpilleras*. I provide basic materials that we share among the class, thus building a sense of a making community. Pre-pandemic, this practice led to an additional lunchtime group that met once a week as a 'time out' to sit and sew and engage in general chit chat. The workshop and the sewing group became important elements for group cohesion. Students commented that it provided a lull mid-week where they could step outside the academic demands and re-charge. Generally, the textile making workshop provides an experimental space where we can laugh at initial, fumbling attempts to make the figurines, thus reducing anxiety about the process of crafting, and enabling free conversation or 'crafter thoughts' around the subject of the project (Corbett 2017: 57-66).

Students choose one out of three stories from *Tiempo de Claveles* as the basis for interpretation by textile or in essay format. For the textile choice, they are set a scenario in which they have been commissioned to create an *arpillera* for an exhibition examining how literature can serve as a means of environmental protest. Each *arpillera* contains a secret pocket wherein the maker places a reflective analysis of the process and key elements of interpretation. This blend of textile and written language becomes an act of learning to 'speak the language of the material through the embodied process [...] each gesture adding to the tale [...] The process of making is as critical an element as the product itself (similar to the theory of experiential learning)' (Schwarz 2016: 238). Textile making demands a slowing down

and a centering, a new form of living with the short story, allowing it to reside in body and mind before becoming action; letting the stories breathe (Frank 2020). This slow pace opens a physical as well as an intellectual route to increased empathy and compassion by slow association and internalisation of the story (Pajaczkowska 2015). The invitation to engage in textile making as a result of textual readings helps the student develop a new level of cognitive suppleness. Mitchell has argued that, 'the textility of making suggests a practice which informs thought; unlike an architectonic framework for cognition, it provides evidence of a more supple fabrication' (2012:6-7; Eisner 2002). This is in itself an act of translation between text and textile and intellectual and physical experiences of the world. As Pallasmaa reminds us,

The very essence of the lived experience is moulded by hapticity and peripheral unfocused vision [...] Touch is the sensory mode that integrates our experience of the world with that of ourselves [...] my body remembers who I am and where I am located in the world. (2007: 10-11)

Knowing with our hands testifies to the effect on our brain and motor cortex of using our hands, and the perception that we are able to order some aspect of our lives that might otherwise feel out of control (Pöllänen 2015). In a circumstance of social isolation of Covid-19, when we lived in a state of almost 'perpetual present', our eyes became 'the organ of distance and separation', fixed on screens waiting for the latest health warnings and drawing us deeper into a world that was 'flattened by speed and simultaneity' (Pallasmaa 2007:50). An assessment that allowed students to work with textiles and engage with touch provided a means by which they could engage with the 'sense of nearness, intimacy, and affection' (Pallasmaa 2007:50) within a more or less controlled environment – family clothes, household materials, objects from the garden. Working through symbols of textures, colours, and placement (space), the students sew together their own tales as they analyse the literature. They confront limitations in relation to skills, tools, and/or materials, needing to overcome and seek out a new language to express their thoughts and submit to the creative process. As Kary remarks,

Submission plays as important a role as dissent, and as a maker one can somehow be in both at the same time. Clarity of action is a vital component of the maker's craft,

yet so is submission to the natural forces of the materials and tools one is working with. To be at once decisive and submissive is the art of much making. (2020: 161)

As noted, the fact that this form of making is tied to external assessment would seem to go against elements that are necessary for creativity and wellbeing, however, the choice between completing a textile project or a written essay allows for an element of freedom, albeit in a more directed manner than a hobby project. For some students, their hobbies fed directly into the creative process connecting the in-class learning with life experience in a valuable way and making the assessment a more enjoyable activity. This is supported by general student feedback on why they opt for the textile making,

‘I was quite fatigued with essay writing and all of the preparation that was involved in it, and I thought that a creative assignment that still showed I was able to critically analyse a piece of writing would be interesting. Even though it was an assignment and I spent a lot of time on it, working on it during the exam season felt like taking break for creative outlet and I enjoyed it.’³

In the spring semester of 2020 while teaching this course we were suddenly interrupted by the move to lockdown and the outbreak of what would become the Covid-19 pandemic. The little sewing group that I had been running alongside the course at lunchtimes came to an end, needles were left suspended in pieces of work that were only half finished and never collected. Students dispersed to their homes and the switch to digital began. Given the suddenness of the limitations, I did not expect any students to continue with the textile option but to revert to the more traditional and potentially more manageable essay. However, a third of the class still chose to continue with the textile. Most years, when I sit with the *arpillera* before me, I can sense the physicality of the creation process in a way that is not possible with an essay, particularly with online submissions. As an instructor, it has highlighted just how important it is to dwell with the finished projects and to take in all the detail of each *arpillera*, to experience the fabrics and materials and how they interact, to return to them several times and appreciate the levels of interpretation possible. Regrettably,

³ Student feedback from textile assignment submitted in May 2023. Permissions to use feedback comments and assessments have been granted by the students and follow the requisite ethics approval in the School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen’s University Belfast.

2020 was the one year I did not get to hold and feel the textures of their work as we moved to photographic online submissions.

The two case studies that follow are extracts taken from the reflective analysis placed in the secret pocket of each textile, wherein the students discuss the making process as part of the assessment. They were submitted in 2020 and explore 'El enjambre'. This short story depicts the fatal impact on humans, animals, and environment of an attack by a swarm of bees that are not indigenous to the area. The story highlights the diversity of human reactions when faced with an outside threat – individualism or solidarity, dependence on government support that never arrives – and the fatal indirect impact that choices and actions have on the most vulnerable in society – in this case, the inadvertent death of a child when the mother attempts to protect it. The account is told through the voice of an unnamed mother whose opinion holds little sway within her family. As a result, the student *arpilleras* echo the tradition of giving women a voice to express their experiences through an alternative language of cloth.

Case Study One

In Study One, we see clearly how the student has chosen to interpret the story through the lens of Covid-19 with the sense of threat and the disruption to daily life. The presentation of the figures in the textile is directly linked to lived experience, note the face mask on the woman and the newspaper held by the male figure. Whilst threat is indicated through the use of red – pipe cleaners indicating where farm animals have been killed by the bees – the economic potential despite the threat is reflected in the use of gold, sparkly materials indicating those who make profit amidst the suffering. Green pipe cleaners are introduced to signify the vines and plants embracing the farmhouse, created by brown sheets of material, while orange buttons portray pumpkins growing in the field. Tucked into the sunshine above the threat, we find the hidden message. The textures, shapes, and malleability of the materials form part of the language of the textile narrative converging around a retelling of the experience of Covid-19. The *arpillera* is not only an act of literary interpretation, it is a part of the student's own history, taking elements of the changing world in April 2020 and analysing social responses to a pandemic and ensuing environmental impact.



[Figure 1: Arpillera - El Enjambre 1]

Student reflection

'I have only used recycled materials to convey the underlying importance of conservation and to tie in a personal element. I drew parallels between the threat of the bees and the current threat of Covid-19. [...] The bees are seen as an outside threat coming to ruin their family and farm livelihoods. This really reminded me of what is happening to our world right now with Covid-19. It is seen as an outside and foreign threat coming into our world to ruin our family and social structures, even our urban working situations. Both these threats are life threatening and in the story animals and people die whether that be direct or indirectly. [...] The indirect death of the baby which was caused by the mother rolling on top of it during the bee attack. This is just like Covid-19, it directly kills some people, but it is also indirectly killing others. For example, due to the strain on the hospitals from people being treated for Covid-19, they have had to stop some cancer treatments, meaning that some cancer patients will indirectly die from Covid-19.

I have made some of the bees out of a gold material. This is to reflect the part in the story where Juvencio saw the bees as a commodity rather than a threat. [...] Just like Covid-

19, some people have thought that the virus was artificially made and released as a way for the Big Pharma to make money and sell drugs to profit from the virus. On top of the hill you can see Toño. He is holding a newspaper with a recent Covid-19 headline of a 5-year-old boy dying. This is to foreshadow the baby dying in Lobo's story but more importantly it is to show that the males in this story were not preparing for the bee attack and instead they were reading the newspapers and listening to the radio waiting for the government to help. Again, this is similar to Covid-19 where everyone is listening to the news all day to hear what to do next from the government.

On the other side of the hill we have the woman of the story making her tortilla and wearing a mask. This is to show that she is prepared, because in the story she was preparing for the attack while the men didn't listen to her. This is similar to Covid-19 because some people are taking the virus seriously while others aren't taking the necessary precautions like wearing a mask or staying inside. Just like Lobo's story, my *arpillera* seeks to highlight the concerns relating to environmental and social change caused by Covid-19.'

Case Study Two

In Study Two, the response to the threat of Covid-19 is also a core feature. The language used in the media coverage of the reaction of government and society comes to the fore in this reading as does the importance of solidarity and a community, including creative communities. The use of different shades in the materials reflects the maker's emphasis on the positive elements of coming together as a community to confront a challenge, which is also the social element missing from the response in the short story. Yet, interestingly, we find a recognition that even positive community action cannot forestall the imminent arrival of destruction. It does, however, point a way to the future and retaining hope. The sun shines on all the figures, as in the tradition of the original *arpilleras*, they all look in the same direction, but the tightly knit grouping on the left reflects an extra sense of comfort and link to the home. Re-purposing the materials and foraging around the home has brought a sense of satisfaction in making this *arpillera* as well as the material link to online creative communities. This is reflective of Nartker's findings on the value of online communities in providing social support and instruction for new craft techniques (2022) and von Kurthy's analysis of the therapeutic effects of embroidery, enabling a person to be 'with themselves,

absorbed in a co-operational relation [...] feel a sense of development, progression, and transcendence [...] satisfaction, pleasure, and meaning that can transcend imposed challenges and restrictions related to the body or environment' (2020: 212, 227). As the student makes clear, this textile assessment also serves as an outlet and the recording of sensations and memories of a very particular time, an experience that has been noted consistently in the use of arpilleras and textiles generally (Campbell and Dalton 2019; de la Garza et al 2021; Harrison 2022; Odabasi 2022).



[Figure 2: Arpillera – El Enjambre 2]

Student reflection:

‘Within the story there are two opposing reactions. On one side the wife suggests working together as a community and supporting each other, whereas the husband firmly believes that everyone should just do what they can to protect themselves. This element of the story stood out to me as it relates to our current situation and how a crisis causes people to react in many different ways. Some people are quick to react in a very individualist approach, as depicted in Lobo’s story. However, as the current situation develops, we continue to hear of

the multitude of ways communities have been working together more than ever to help those most vulnerable in society and those who are on the frontlines. Whilst through adhering to government guidelines we are physically further apart, the crisis has brought a sense of solidarity among the majority that was somewhat lacking beforehand.

On the right-hand side we see one man, alone in the darkness and loneliness of what would be an individualist society. However, on the left we see a society that stands together in order to deal with the imminent crisis. In the foreground the sun is shining and the sky is blue, which is not to say that solidarity prevents the crisis arriving. It still arrives. However, through the crisis and especially in the aftermath, the solidarity of a community brings hope [...] As I was unable to go to the shops and buy the perfect materials, I foraged all that I could find from my own environment, both inside and outside my home. [...] I used old buttons, t-shirts, shirts and jeans [...] These textiles were old and worn out, so being able to give them a new purpose was satisfying. It was important for me to use, not just my own personal materials, but also small pieces of what belonged to others in my community in order to bring them all together to create something that was one. I also ran out of wool for two of the character's hair, so I had to try and find something else that was suitable. In the end I decided to use the scraps of cord left over from making a macramé. This is a hobby of mine that has led me to become part of an online community therefore, including it in my *arpillera* made it very personal for me.

I felt overwhelmingly compelled to relate this *arpillera* to our current crisis as it allowed me to use it both for memory and as an outlet, in the same way they were originally intended.'

[Assessment and Wellbeing: Considerations](#)

It is striking that both the short story and the creation of the textiles became vehicles for understanding the outbreak of Covid-19 and reflecting on how the space for creation helped form part of a coping strategy during this period. Across all the *arpilleras*, a range of approaches emerged that incorporated the symbols around Covid-19 into their engagement with the short stories and references to 'being' present with both the story and the textile. For example, one piece included rainbows as elements of hope and solidarity with embroidered writing outlining 'esperanza'. This process of finding hope came through the

creative interruption of the routine of lockdown but we also find the perception of danger embroidered into the narrative,

‘I have represented the danger as the Covid19 pandemic that the world is currently experiencing and, which I feel has influenced my understanding of the human-environment relationship. This global health issue has interrupted modern life, making it slow down and rest. [...] I have linked the red virus circles with a chain which also symbolises nature's reaction of defence to revive itself by forcing human activity to stop for a period and reset.’⁴

The sense of ‘belonging’ may also play an important part in the experience of completing these arpilleras. In addition to those students who reported being part of online creative communities during the lockdown, based on anecdotal feedback, students chat together about the *arpilleras* and the experience of making them.⁵ For one student who took part in the lunchtime sessions, ‘it was a lovely experience where I got to know my fellow classmates better and my tutor too. It was very relaxing and an escape from the academic pressures of Uni. life.’⁶ Another commented that, ‘I attended most of the craft sessions. It was lovely to be able to chat with my university course mates in a more casual way, discuss our plans for the future or concerns about the pandemic whilst learning how to make the figures for the *arpillera*.’⁷ This feedback picks up on Corbett’s idea of ‘crafterthoughts’ (2017) as well research showing that sharing experiences of crafting is an important part of the process leading to wellbeing. Short conversations, a student’s posture leaving the class, or a passing comment in the hallway, these are instances of feedback that are not collected in any official university questionnaire and can be difficult to capture statistically, as Hemmings and Nordström also note (2020).

The fact that the process, or ‘doing’, was time-consuming and demanded intense focus and attention helped students avoid rumination, remaining ‘future oriented’ and more optimistic much in tandem with Reynolds’ findings (2004). Another student reflected that whilst she was surrounded by uncertainty on a daily basis,

⁴ Student reflection on the *arpillera* process. Submitted May 2020

⁵ One student told me that he had heard about the textile assessment when he was in his first year and particularly chose the course three years later in order to have the experience.

⁶ Student feedback. Email 24 June 2020.

⁷ Student feedback. Email 26 June 2020.

‘The process of making this *arpillera* was extremely therapeutic to me. Simply being able to take time out of my day to focus on something (other than the pandemic) provided me with a good coping mechanism. As a result, I now appreciate how crafting has power in portraying someone’s story, in expressing what words fail to say, and in processing one’s inner thoughts into an outward expression.’⁸

Where time taken to complete the task could have been understood as a disadvantage, in this context it was perceived as part of deepening engagement with the story, an escape from traditional assessment burdens, and a means of relief from Covid-related anxiety,

‘I was new to needlework and this tested my patience however it forced me to slow down and just enjoy the process rather than thinking of the final piece.’

‘They were a great tool for expression. Because it was naturally time consuming, it meant I spent a lot of time thinking about the stories and engaging with them. I also thought a lot about the ecological theme when choosing the materials for my *arpillera* and even the colours. As an assessment the main advantage was that it was different to the usual assessments in university. It was an escape and a chance to shine academically in a very different way, so thank you for this opportunity.’

‘I guess a disadvantage could be that they are of course time consuming, however I actually saw this as a positive because I was doing this assessment when Covid just broke out and I was feeling very anxious about the pandemic. This project put in the day for me so to speak and was a creative outlet for any anxious feelings towards the pandemic.’⁹

One might argue that given the assessment context there was a lack of choice and higher level of stress compared to choosing textile making as a hobby and this would impact negatively. However, feedback from those who decided not to write an essay reflects

⁸ Student reflection on the *arpillera* process. Submitted May 2020.

⁹ Student feedback. Emails 25 - 26 June 2020.

Reynolds' (2004) findings on the ability to pursue valued goals, exercise autonomy, and engage with work that is stimulative but achievable,

'I chose to make an *arpillera* piece as I thought it was a unique opportunity to do something more creative at university and didn't want to pass up on it. After hearing about where the arpilleras were born from, I found it inspiring that people were able to join together to make something that represented what their words could not (or were not allowed to). I love that art can be used to express such varying opinions and allows people to interpret things differently.'

'For me personally, I tried to use as many materials as possible that I could find at home whether it was an old t-shirt or an old bed sheet. I loved being able to add an even more personal element to an assignment. I think that doing the arpilleras made me think more deeply about the effects that we, as humans, have on our environment and how we should do our best to protect it.'¹⁰

What Pöllänen has termed 'positive stress', that is, 'a situation in which individuals are active, feel pleasure, and have influence over their own actions', forms part of this assessment process, which then helped students resist being overwhelmed by difficulties despite shaken autonomy in the Covid-19 lockdown (2015: 59, 69). The textiles, as a manageable and tangible challenge, created a sense of influence not only over the assessment but the wider context of the lockdown and Covid-19 threat. This also picks up on Thomas and Mulvey's conclusions that:

While we continue to learn, we have found that most students are willing to participate in arts-related activities when they feel it is safe to do so, when the activities relate to their lived experiences, and when the activities are clearly and meaningfully connected to learning objectives. [...] students' encounters with the arts facilitate active learning, risk taking, and greater capacity in approaching difficult concepts and problems (2008: 248).

These *arpilleras* reflect the 'traces of life' connecting the past, present, and hoped for future (Odabasi 2022: 7). As a form of assessment, using *arpilleras* also allow us to introduce

¹⁰ Student feedback. Emails 25- 26 June 2020.

sewing and textile-making as a means of confronting the academic status quo, benefitting mental health and allowing for what Arias-López refers to as ‘una lógica de lentitud, de recuperación de lo aparentemente insignificante, pero pleno de posibilidad habilitante de capacidades compartidas, en una respuesta ante las formas hegemónicas que determinan quiénes y qué se incluye’ (2017: 69) Equally, Cuéllar Barona highlights the importance of the physicality of ‘making’ in the classroom as a means of decentring pedagogic practice (2019). In responses and feedback we find evidence of positive experiences similar to those recorded by Reynolds (2004) in her work on textiles and long-term illness, which also align with Seligman’s concept of core features of wellbeing – Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) (2018). This study is limited, of course, and was not designed to test impact on wellbeing but to understand the responses to textile making as an assessment in a particular time period and set of circumstances where students reported impact on well-being. However, repeated experiences with this form of non-traditional assessment over the past decade have indicated that with appropriate supports and clear expectations, such assessments can have beneficial results for the students, above and beyond graded attainment and overall enjoyment of their studies in Latin American literature and culture.

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