

Biblio/Poetry Therapy Education in Finland

Karoliina Maanmieli

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

karoliina.t.maanmieli@ju.fi

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5157-6750

Katri Kluukeri

Jyväskylä Summer University, Finland

katri.kluukeri@gmail.com

Abstract

In this article, we provide a comprehensive overview of the history, development, and current state of biblio/poetry therapy education in Finland. We trace the origins of the field, starting with its introduction and the formation of the Finnish Association for Biblio/Poetry Therapy, and highlight the significant milestones that have shaped its growth. We also examine the evolution of training programs, from their early stages to the present-day offerings, and discuss how they have adapted to meet the needs of professionals in diverse fields, including social services, education, and mental health care.

In addition to offering this historical and developmental context, we share our personal experiences in designing and refining the training model for biblio/poetry therapy. This includes organizing and facilitating courses at various summer universities across Finland, where we have worked with participants from different backgrounds to foster a deeper understanding of how poetry can be used as a therapeutic tool. A particular focus of the article is our experiences in adapting to the challenges posed by the global pandemic, which accelerated the need for remote learning. We describe the process of quickly transitioning to online training formats, the challenges we faced, and the innovative solutions we implemented to maintain the quality and effectiveness of the courses. Through these experiences, we reflect on the future of biblio/poetry therapy education, especially in the context of remote and hybrid learning environments.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; poetry therapy; art-based methods; adult education; remote learning

Introduction

In Finland, systematic therapeutic use of literature started in some hospital libraries as early as 1940s. The first group that combined creative writing and reading took place in Helsinki in the late 1970s (Ihanus. 2022, 25). Soon after that, in 1981 the first European biblio/poetry therapy association, *Suomen Kirjallisuusterapiayhdistys ry* (The Finnish Association for Biblio/Poetry Therapy) was founded. The association's goal is to support therapeutic, preventive, and rehabilitative work, training, research, and publishing in the field of biblio/poetry therapy. It operates throughout Finland and in Sweden and publishes the *Kirjallisuusterapia* [Poetry Therapy] journal twice a year. It has also published nine edited Finnish books on biblio/poetry therapy and

one in Swedish. The association has no paid staff but relies on many volunteers who organize poetry therapy groups and events (Suomen kirjallisuusterapiayhdistys, 2025).

One of the association's aims is to offer training in biblio/poetry therapy. Courses are organized through various summer universities, open universities, and the University of Helsinki Centre for Continuing Education (HY+). The courses are targeted at people working in various fields, such as health care, education, social care, management, arts and culture (Suomen kirjallisuusterapiayhdistys, 2025). In Finland, biblio/poetry therapy has been applied in all kinds of work requiring human interaction. Education in this special field has got more popular over years, and we already have hundreds of educated poetry therapy instructors in our country. In this article, we aim to offer historical and developmental context to biblio/ poetry therapy in Finland, but also, share our personal experiences in designing and refining the training model.

While both of us come from a background in poetry therapy facilitation, each of us has our own areas of expertise. Docent Karoliina Maanmieli has served as the scientific director for the Poetry Therapy Instructor courses. She holds a PhD in creative writing and works as a writing researcher and teacher. Karoliina also has extensive experience in the mental health field. She has worked with mental health patients for 20 years and has instructed poetry therapy groups for clients diagnosed with schizophrenia and other psychoses since 2001. Her dissertation (Kähmi, 2015, see also Maanmieli & Ihanus, 2021), was titled “‘Writing is a road to me, from me to you’. Group writing and the meaning of metaphors in poetry therapy for psychosis.” Her other areas of expertise and interest include autobiographical writing and autofiction. Katri Kluukeri has served as responsible teacher for the Poetry Therapy Instructor courses. She works as a solution-focused brief therapist, with a background in both creative writing and literature, as well as in the educational and therapeutic fields. She has extensive experience working with children, young adults, and families challenging situations. She has facilitated poetry therapy groups for people of all ages, including relatives of drug addicts, widows, individuals experiencing depression, and many others. She has collaborated with various associations and has trained professionals from the social and health services, as well as the arts and education sectors.

Evolution of Biblio/Poetry Therapy Education in Finland

The first Finnish biblio/poetry therapy study program was established in 1989. This training program was designed for professionals working in diverse fields, such as social and health services, library work, and education. From 1989 until 2018, fifteen programs were organized, each lasting about one year. The trainers have been professionals who have applied bibliotherapy in their work in the fields of research, therapy, library work, rehabilitation, and education. Numerous writers have also visited as guest lecturers in the training programs. Most of these trainings were held in Lahti and Helsinki, though three programs titled *Verbalization in Creative Therapies* were organized in Jyväskylä by the authors of this article. These three programs combined poetry therapy with other creative therapies.

Bibliotherapy training programs have been very popular from the beginning, even though they are fee-based for participants. Also, there are no officially recognized professional titles for bibliotherapists in Finland that would allow for public health insurance-supported therapy or the establishment of positions for bibliotherapists in hospitals or other public institutions. The training programs have particularly attracted employees from organizations and public institutions such as libraries and schools. In Finland there has been an increasing interest in utilizing art and culture in

well-being. During the last 20 years numerous projects and studies utilizing art-based methods have been carried out (see e.g. Känkänen, 2013; Laitinen, 2017; Huhtinen-Hilden & Isola, 2019). A recurring finding in these studies is that such activities have had a positive impact, enhancing sense of participation, agency, and well-being of the target groups. As Huhtinen-Hildén & Isola (2019) point out, creative group activities can be multi-dimensionally utilized in social and healthcare services, such as elderly care, social rehabilitation, and strength-based group social work. Typically, the motivation for the participants to apply for the courses has been their need to find new creative tools that they could use as a part of their job.

The training is based on self-directed learning. It is experiential in nature and, typical for arts-based education, aims to enhance participants' well-being and self-awareness. Participants often enroll in the training to improve their work-related well-being and find new arts-based methods for their professional practice. Often the training has also helped with career changes and improved both professional and personal self-awareness.

Three-step training program

Because of the increasing demand for longer and more profound biblio/poetry therapy education, a new, three-step training program was launched in 2019. With this reform, biblio/poetry therapy education now better aligns with the training pathways and competency requirements of other art therapy programs offered in Finland, such as those in music therapy, visual arts therapy, and dance/movement therapy.

The first course of three is called *Basics of Poetry Therapy: Poetry Therapy as a Tool for Individual & Professional Growth* (15 ECTS). This course focuses on personal growth and is designed to be experimental, with an emphasis on learning by doing. It is also communal, with group coherence and trust being essential components. The course consists of five two-day periods. During the first period, the students are introduced to basic knowledge of bibliotherapy/poetry therapy as a creative method. Other contents of the course include autobiographical writing and journal work, therapeutic and communal reading and writing, dreams, fantasy, and stories as part of bibliotherapy, gender and parenthood as part of identity building as well as nature writing. The course integrates various creative therapies, including expressive arts therapy and dance and movement therapy.

In addition to the scheduled training days, the course involves significant individual work. At the end of the course, students present a portfolio summarizing their key learning experiences and reflections on their personal growth. This course has proven particularly beneficial for individuals experiencing life changes or crises and provides new tools for professional life, potentially preventing burnout.

The second part of the program is called *Poetry Therapy Instructor* (35 ECTS). It offers foundational education for those wishing to incorporate poetry therapy into their professional practice or train others to do so. The course is a rich combination of lectures, workshops, work supervision and discussions, as well as literature reports and essays that the students submit during the course. This course includes two training periods: In Jyväskylä Summer University the first training focuses on peer-based learning, while the second training involves working with clients. In Tampere and Helsinki, both phases are conducted with clients. Students are assigned to permanent small groups (4-6 students each) and participate in poetry therapy groups (2 hours per session for 10 sessions), with individual and group supervision. At the end of the course, students are required to

submit their final literary work. During the last course period, the literary works are presented to the group and discussed with a peer-opponent.

The final part of the program is called *Poetry Therapist* (40 ECTS). It involves the student's own therapy and provides a deeper understanding of the biblio/poetry therapy process. The training focuses on professional client work and supervised poetry therapy practice. It includes lectures and process-oriented experiential learning, as well as independent and remote work. The training includes writing a thesis and other written assignments. During the training, students lead poetry therapy groups or work with individual clients using poetry therapy methods. There are 20 teaching days. In addition, the training includes 160 hours of supervision practice, either individual supervision or working with special groups, as well as 45 hours of supervision. The personal therapy related to the training (80 hours) is self-financed during the training period or must be completed beforehand. Of these 80 hours, at least 20 must be dedicated to poetry therapy. (Suomen Kirjallisuusterapiayhdistys, 2025)

Personal Insights: Our Journey in Biblio/Poetry Therapy Education

The authors of this article have by far organized 15 *Basics of Poetry Therapy* (15 ECTS) courses at Summer Universities since 2019, and five *Poetry Therapy Instructor* (35 ECTS) courses, with the most recent one starting in January 2025. Our courses are multidisciplinary. The instructor courses involve collaboration with local organizations, with opportunities to engage with the university campus, the city's art offerings, and nearby nature. During our courses, we encourage students to share any existing skills or knowledge they bring, valuing multi-professionalism, inclusion, and shared expertise. There is also an ongoing readiness to update the course content and incorporate current popular topics (such as nature writing or the challenges and opportunities brought by changes and crises).

Our principle is co-teaching. The long history and joint development of the training courses, as well as shared values and interests, helps us maintain an open attitude towards new things and challenges. The students have reported that this approach fosters interactivity and builds trust within the group. This is why we have organized all our courses together. The extent to which two instructors have been present during the courses has varied depending on our personal circumstances and the number of participants, but often, we have handled most of the teaching together.

There are some differences in the way the courses are organized depending on the organizer. Each organizing team brings its own approach, which can result in variations in course structure, content focus, and teaching methods. For example, in Jyväskylä, we place a strong emphasis on *trauma-informed principles* (see Maanmieli, 2020; Malchiodi, 2020) in our teaching, ensuring that the course environment is sensitive and supportive for all participants. We also prefer to keep class sizes smaller (with a maximum of 18 students) to foster a more intimate and personalized learning experience. In contrast, in Helsinki, the courses tend to have larger groups, with up to 24 students, and the focus may differ slightly, particularly with more emphasis on therapeutic reading in Helsinki and Tampere as opposed to the emphasis on therapeutic writing and integration with other arts therapies that we prioritize in Jyväskylä. That is why we invite teachers from other fields such as expressive arts therapy and music therapy to share their knowledge and explore the possibilities that combining these fields with poetry therapy can offer.

Adapting to Change: The Shift to Remote Teaching During the Pandemic

Juhani Ihanus was ahead of his time when, over 20 years ago, he wrote that communal campfires had been replaced by flashing screens (Ihanus, 2002, 23). Today, this is a strikingly accurate description of the role remote tools play in fostering community. The most significant reason for the rapid development of remote teaching and the shift to online poetry therapy groups has been the global pandemic that began in the early 2020s. People were forced to isolate and stay at home, but their need for human connection did not disappear (Haverinen & Maanmieli, 2022, 279).

At the onset of the pandemic in spring 2020, we had just started two Basics of Poetry Therapy courses at the Summer Universities of Mikkeli and Jyväskylä. To continue these courses, we had to adapt quickly and develop an online format within two weeks. Since then, nearly all (13 out of 15) of our introductory courses have been held online. During the pandemic, we also conducted a Poetry Therapy Instructor course primarily online. By that point, the Basics of Poetry Therapy courses had already provided us with valuable knowledge about remote teaching, and this course turned out to be a positive experience. Since the pandemic, online segments have been incorporated into all our instructor courses. This flexibility has improved geographical accessibility, particularly during the winter months, when traveling in Finland can be less pleasant. Also, learning to use remote tools is a significant part of professional competence for a poetry therapy instructor. Karoliina Haverinen has interviewed poetry therapy instructors to find out how they have implemented remote instruction. For many, remote learning during their own poetry therapy education was an important factor that prepared them to use remote tools in their own work (Haverinen & Maanmieli, 2022, 276).

Navigating Remote Teaching: Challenges and Innovations

Remote teaching differs from in-person teaching in many ways and can be challenging for the instructor. Remote teaching requires significantly more preparation than in-person instruction. This includes managing technology, adapting materials for online formats, and ensuring accessibility for all students. Instructors must also be adaptable, adjusting their approach to keep students engaged.

There are many remote tools to choose from. For us, Zoom has proven to be the most effective remote tool for our purposes compared to Teams, Skype or Google Meet. Zoom's *Breakout Rooms* have proven to be incredibly useful for group work. These smaller, private spaces allow students to engage in pair work or small group discussions, followed by larger group-wide conversations. This structure mirrors in-person group activities, helping to sustain interaction and collaboration. Furthermore, Zoom's screen sharing feature enhances the sense of community and equality by allowing students and instructors to share presentations, images, lectures, and collaborative exercises with ease. It also plays a significant role in collaborative writing exercises, where participants can engage in real-time, contributing to documents or brainstorming ideas as a group.

Our aim is to use the tool to create a space that feels both communal and separate. Cameras play a crucial role in this dynamic. We encourage all students to keep their cameras on during discussions, fostering a sense of presence and connection. However, we also respect the students' need for privacy, understanding that not everyone feels comfortable sharing their full environment during sensitive moments. This flexibility allows students to take breaks and maintain their privacy when necessary—whether it's stepping away from the screen or feeling more comfortable with their surroundings out of view.

While remote teaching offers many advantages, it also comes with its own set of challenges. Here, we explore some of the most common difficulties faced by instructors and students, along with the solutions we've implemented to overcome them.

One of the most common challenges in remote teaching are technology-related issues, including connectivity problems. Internet disruptions or slow connections can hinder communication and cause problems with timetables. In addition, other technical difficulties such as microphone, camera, or software malfunctions are frequent interruptions. To address these, we've emphasized clear communication with students about the importance of ensuring stable internet connections and using reliable devices. We also provide troubleshooting guidelines at the start of each course to help minimize disruptions.

Remote teaching poses a significant challenge for instructors due to the absence of non-verbal feedback. In a traditional classroom, body language and facial expressions help gauge student understanding and engagement. Early in the pandemic, we found it particularly exhausting to observe the mood, energy levels, and comprehension of each participant in a virtual setting. To mitigate this, we've made a point of encouraging students to communicate openly about their feelings and challenges, helping us adjust our approach when necessary. We also use Zoom's features like reactions or emoji responses to give students a way to express their emotions non-verbally.

Passive participation is a common issue, as students may feel more detached or distracted in a virtual environment. To combat this, we incorporate frequent breaks, engaging activities, and interactive discussions, ensuring that students remain actively involved throughout the session. Additionally, adding some playful elements, such as creating avatars or changing screen backgrounds, inject fun into the sessions, helping students feel less isolated and more connected.

Another challenge of remote teaching that our students have pointed out is the lack of informal social interaction—those casual chats during coffee breaks, the spontaneous moments of bonding, and networking opportunities that are in face-to-face settings (Haverinen & Maanmieli, 2022, 278). To overcome this, we encourage students to form their own support networks, such as creating WhatsApp groups for casual conversations, sharing tips, or simply offering peer support. Some students have even organized voluntary life meetings outside of class to maintain social contact.

Despite the challenges, remote teaching offers many opportunities to innovate and adapt. Through tools like Zoom, we've been able to create a connected, interactive learning environment that supports students' needs for both privacy and community. By remaining flexible, creative, and empathetic, we can overcome obstacles and continue to provide high-quality education in this evolving digital landscape.

Conclusion

Poetry therapy courses have firmly established themselves as a part of professional continuing education in Finland. The feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive—many have been able to apply the skills gained from the training in various ways within their professional roles. Additionally, numerous individuals have used the training as a stepping stone to transition into new careers or embark on their own creative projects. Many of our students have even started their doctoral studies in biblio/poetry therapy after the training.

The increased interest in arts and well-being research has undoubtedly played a role in the growing number of students seeking out this kind of education. This research has highlighted the positive impact of arts-based methods, especially in the realm of human services work and employee well-being. The systematic use of creative activities in social and healthcare fields requires the enhancement of skills related to these methods, as well as the promotion of interdisciplinary collaboration (see Huhtinen-Hildén & Isola, 2019). The ability to respond to societal and technological changes will undoubtedly continue to be an important part of the development of biblio/poetry therapy training in the future. Recent changes include, for example, the use of avatars in therapeutic work (Garety et al., 2024) and the new possibilities offered by artificial intelligence for biblio/poetry therapy (Pretorius, 2024).

Structures that allow for expert guidance in creative group processes are also essential. The professional skills needed for pedagogical work and emotional labour are particularly critical when dealing with deep emotional experiences. Building a safe and supportive environment for creative group interactions demands specialized expertise. Creative and artistic experiences often bring out vulnerability, psychological strain, and unresolved emotions, which is why facilitating these processes requires a profound understanding of creative group dynamics and professional competence. Furthermore, instructors must possess the ability to engage in these sensitive processes with care and conscious awareness, ensuring that each participant's journey through the therapeutic experience is supported and guided appropriately.

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