

# anzjat

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## A cross-cultural perspective: Living and working intersubjectively Editorial by Elizabeth Coss



I am honoured and privileged to have been asked to write the editorial for this new edition of ANZJAT. Having relocated to Singapore three and half years ago from New York City, I am very aware that in reality I am just beginning to assimilate into the country I have chosen to live in. I can only hope I represent my students and graduates from LASALLE College of the Arts and my colleagues in Singapore as they deserve to be heard. Navigating the eastern emphasis of the 'we' in relationship and the western emphasis on the 'I' has encouraged our use of the intersubjective theorists who integrate both self and community into their thinking.

Singapore is a sophisticated, beautiful, tropical island city-state situated at the southern tip of Malaysia in the region referred to as Southeast Asia. It is predominantly Chinese in culture but is also influenced by Indian, Malay and various expatriate communities. It became an independent nation in 1965 after a long period of British colonisation and after the trauma of occupation during World War II that one can still feel when talking with Singaporeans who lived through this painful part of their history. Singapore maintains a low profile about its high globalisation index, strength in the world economy and high ratings in terms of high quality of life. This is typical of the culture's

admiration for humbleness and not flaunting one's success.

I personally think the trauma of World War II led Singapore and its leaders to work very hard to strengthen the country's economic existence so the population would never encounter being a victim again. There is an extraordinary emphasis on developing premier intellectual capital and customer service capacities and insisting upon being the best at everything that is taken on.

To me, what is very interesting about this approach is that in the true fashion of a collectivist culture, this means the best for everyone. It is common to see someone with a disability working in your local grocery store or food court and an excellent education is affordable to all. When I have complained to my Singaporean colleagues about what feels like excessive control in managing how I work and teach I have been told, "but Elizabeth, it means there will be more for all of us..." Indeed, the culture does take care of its own and although at times it seems to be at the expense of creativity, this balance is something many world centres, including Singapore, appear to be contemplating today.

As the government has become more aware of the existence of our MA art therapy

programme and its graduates, it has actively sought ways to integrate our students and graduates into Singaporean mental health settings. I assure you the past three and half years have been as challenging in Singapore, as any other place where our field is new and growing. We are constantly explaining what we do and why the creative arts in therapy are important in mental health treatment, but often this is followed by a gracious and heartwarming response. There is a care and interest in the graduates and the populations they serve that I have not experienced elsewhere that is uniquely Singaporean. This was demonstrated last November when the programme was paid a visit by the Minister of Health in Singapore, Khaw Boon Wan.

The Minister came in response to hearing about our first conference in January, *The internationalisation of the creative arts in therapy*. It was an energising and exciting gathering of attendees and presenters from approximately 21 different countries at our beautiful award-winning campus in the commercial hub of Singapore. The presentations and workshops ranged from a variety of themes on trauma, inter-cultural collaborations, war and counter-terrorism, violence in the workplace, ethics on many levels and men's and women's issues, to name just a few of the topics.

Dr Ikuko Acosta, Director of the New York University Graduate Art Therapy Department provided a discussion of the globalisation of art therapy in regards to colonialism and phenomenology as opposite ways of dealing with the process of cultural assimilation in her keynote address. We celebrated the richness of Singaporean traditions through Chinese, Indonesian, Malay and Indian food, cultural music and contemporary and cultural dance performances.

We were greatly moved by the interest in our programme and country by so many other nationalities. Since I have a pulse on what our own students felt, I can only say they were thrilled to have access to so many gifted practitioners from around the world. And the conference would never have taken place without the extra-ordinary efforts of our students who volunteered tirelessly and our then graduate assistant Dian Handayani who designed our brochure and helped to coordinate every detail of this major event. We are thinking about and planning for future conferences as I write.

If you are wondering what it is like to be a practitioner and educator in Singapore I can tell you there is a constant blending of my ideas and training, which are western in nature and Singaporean norms. I have come to fully comprehend and revere the importance of Chinese New Year and how important structure and planning are to students here. I like to think my students and graduates have become more spontaneous and creative as the result of working with me and that I have become a much better organiser and manager as a result of working with them. I have had to adapt to many different accents (about half of our students are Singaporean and the other half are internationally mixed), learning to speak much more slowly so that my own accent is understandable.

More importantly, I no longer believe my ways of practising are the only ways to work as a creative arts therapist. I still believe quite strongly in many of the theoretical concepts that I learned and later practiced as part of the faculty of NYU's graduate art therapy programme, but I have learned that practice can be very culture specific. This is an extremely important ethical issue we all



LASALLE MA Art Therapy students assisting with the orientation and logistics at the front desk for the conference attendees.



Dr John Wong, Associate Professor and Senior Consultant Psychiatrist, Department of Psychological Medicine, National University Hospital System, Dr Ikuko Acosta, Director, New York University Graduate Art Therapy Department, Ms Agnes Wan, Director of Human Resources LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, Mr Matthew Easter, Assistant Public Affairs Officer, US Embassy Singapore attending the first conference on The Internationalisation of the Creative Arts in Therapy in Singapore, January 2010.



LASALLE MA Art Therapy students during a research seminar.



Singapore's Minister of Health, Khaw Boon Wan talking with Ms Coss during his visit last November to the LASALLE campus and the MA Art Therapy Programme.

need to consider when practicing or imposing our methods in different cultures as Ikuko highlighted at the January conference.

I have brought to Singapore ways of working that have suited the culture well such as meeting the client where they are at, proceeding slowly and having a good sense of privacy and boundaries. My ability to express my feelings and frustrations in difficult situations fairly openly has not always been received well, even though in my native country I was considered reserved. I've learned to be more careful about how I express myself and am constantly learning from my students and colleagues about better ways to voice my opinions and ideas in ways that can be heard and understood in the Singaporean context. In my desire to have what I bring to art therapy education recognised in Singapore, I have had to willingly change how I interact. According to the intersubjective theorist Jessica Benjamin (1988) in her seminal book, *The bonds of love*, "Recognition is thus reflexive; it not only includes the other's confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response." (p.21).

All in all it has been an exciting time in my life and assimilating into another culture has transformed how I look at the world and what we do as creative arts therapists in ways that I could never have imagined. I could not have imagined the commitment and passion of the students who have embraced this field that is so new here which will take them so much effort to develop. It has not always been easy, but it has been incredibly rewarding and I am grateful to my students and Singaporean friends who have been endlessly patient with my learning process.

My recognition of Singaporean culture and their recognition of mine is summarised

by Benjamin (1999), "the other must be recognized as a subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other's presence. This means, first, that we have a need for recognition and second a capacity to recognise other in return – mutual recognition." (p.186). She suggests that if we can move beyond aiming for only the complementary in relationships and if we can survive and repair the negation of dominance, we achieve "the pleasure of shared understanding" (p.193) and all the creativity that the movement between understanding differences brings us as creative arts therapists and as human beings. In other words she would say we see each other as subjects rather than objects.

In keeping with the theme of celebrating differences, collaboration and the blending of ideas we have some wonderful writing to share with you in the journal this year. We are presented with a variety of ways to research and share this research.

Thank you again to Tarquam and his team for giving me the time and space to tell you about the creative arts in therapy in Singapore. We are proud to be a part of ANZATA and appreciate the opportunity to share with you who we are. The creative arts therapists here join me in sending good wishes to all ANZATA members and hope you will stop in when you are next in Southeast Asia!

## REFERENCES

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