

Reflections from the classroom: Research in art therapy – a photo essay

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Abstract

This photo essay describes insights from master's art therapy students at Florida State University about their personal views on undertaking research. The art-based inquiry was provided as a class activity to elicit students' individual responses about research after a semester of pedagogical instruction about quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method and art-based research. Art-based postcard representations prompted written responses demonstrating the relational and emotional investment required of those conducting a study within art therapy. Through this activity students demonstrated the need to be curious and courageous and to have a sense of wonder, as well as to be willing to take risks in order to discover whatever stirred within.

Keywords

Art therapy research, higher education learning, art-based inquiry.

With this current journal marking ten years of published research in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy*, I thought that reflections from the classroom of future art therapy researchers would be fitting.

As the instructor of a research methods class for graduate art therapy students at Florida State University, I frequently hear the reverberating murmurs that learning about research is irrelevant when one is trying to learn how to be a practitioner. The challenge for me is to ignite some excitement by showcasing the smorgasbord of quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method and art-based research methods available within the field of art therapy.

Towards the end of the semester, after learning about the theory and application of research, students are given an opportunity to reflect at a personal level. This previous semester, the students were asked to create an image on a piece of postcard-sized cardboard that reflected their experiences, thoughts and feelings towards research in art therapy. Upon completion they were encouraged to write a response to their image on the back of the postcard.

This process followed the postcard method of inquiry initiated by Allen and Rumbold (2004). During my doctoral studies at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, Dr Jean Rumbold convened a regular writing group and offered postcard reflections to assist in initiating alternative forms of knowing. These forms of inquiry helped us to see new ways forward and opened up possibilities for issues that we thought were otherwise in a state of predicament. For example, in our postcard reflection about learning spaces in academic settings, we came to appreciate how our relationship to university places afforded diverse knowledge growth at emotional, psychological, social and ecological levels (Varney et al., 2014). Additionally, our review through a postcard inquiry of personal associations with community revealed the constraining as well as sustaining elements that influence the creation of a community (Horsford et al., 2014).

Following the postcard inquiry method (Allen & Rumbold, 2004), the completed postcards were used to initiate a presentational form of knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997).



Figure 1. Grouped postcards based on patterns within the images.



Figure 2. Example of grouped postcards by Nicole Dieguez, Adina Moore, and Alison MacLeod.

A Research Journey

Words from letters blurred,

Parallel

but not connected.

Piece by piece, the unknown,

*The darkness, is coming
into light.*

The colors begin to separate and

progress into a logical pattern

All getting to a point.

Figure 3. Example of collective response by Nicole Dieguez, Adina Moore, and Alison MacLeod.

The postcards were laid out in the middle of the classroom floor and Betensky's (1995) phenomenological approach of 'What do you see?' was used to prompt students to look for common themes within the images. The students worked together to move the postcards around as they discussed the following questions: 'What stands out to you about these images?', 'What are the common patterns?' and 'How can we group them?'. Figure 1 demonstrates the results of the grouped postcards.

Subsequently, the 17 students were divided into small groups based on the assembled postcards. They were asked to share their personal responses and then develop a collective response that encapsulated the main essences of the accounts. Figure 2 demonstrates an example of one group of postcards, with Figure 3 providing the resultant collective response.

Extracting the themes involved reading the collective responses in class and then working all together to derive themes. The thematic analysis process loosely followed Braun and Clark's (2006) technique of inductively drawing out patterns from the responses to derive themes. As this was a class exercise I used the whiteboard to help in the lifting, sorting and categorising process. I then worked with the agreed upon themes provided by the class to develop an 'I poem' based on Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch's (2006) *Listening Guide* to assist in developing the polyphonic voice of the class. My role here served as the narrator.

Voices from the classroom – How do we see research in art therapy?

'I struggle internally' – We must come to terms with our own limitations.

'I feel uncertainty' – We embrace the unknown as an intrinsic part of the research process.

'I see the need to disconnect' – At times we will move away from merging with the mainstream in order to make new connections.

'I will make connections' – We bridge concepts to assemble the old with new forms of knowledge.

'I will take many directions' – We need to be open to taking new directions for future research to emerge.

'I see growth' – We expand our knowledge and experiences.

'I want to explore' – We go on an internal exploration of personal experiences, while taking an external exploration of the research world.

Conclusion

Research endeavours in art therapy require intense curiosity, a sense of awe, as well as a willingness to take risks in order to discover new terrains. As these future art therapists demonstrated, we strive to develop research that challenges us both internally and externally. For us, research is relational; through coming to know ourselves, our participants, and the wider communities that we are part of, research seeks to create change at a deep and meaningful level. While the task of learning about the theoretical and applied aspects of research is very necessary, acquiring a personal investment in a study topic enables us to see the pursuit as a worthy mission. It is the discovery of something that inspires, breathes life, and stirs us within that makes the link between what we find and how we practise such an integral aspect of being an art therapist.

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