

## Clown workshop: Playful self-discovery

A report by presenter Liz Dowling

### Abstract

The experience of 'changing costume' can reveal other aspects of a personality, and those aspects depend on the context in which the costume is worn. In this clown workshop activities were introduced to explore processes of self-esteem and self-image through intuitive responses in a playful, supportive group environment. With all 21 participants in clown costume, and with makeup expressing 'how they were feeling' it was a socially equalising and uniting process. As the workshop progressed the group created its own dynamic, transcending stressors, and became more and more spontaneous. Participants' responses were assessed by comparing their free drawings, made before and after the performance.

### Keywords

Self-esteem, intuitive, supportive, equalising, transcending, spontaneous.

### Introduction

The clown workshop evolved from one experience I had as a diversional therapist working with residents in a mental health unit in Brisbane. I borrowed clown costumes for staff to wear in a spontaneous show for the residents.

Through this equalising of status, previously unknown aspects of their personalities were liberated as each staff member stepped up to their own perceived clowning role. I could feel the breaking down of barriers as we entered the realm of the ridiculous. We had united to entertain and the residents really enjoyed it. So did the staff.

Since then, I have held clown workshops in an art therapy context with various client populations, each of which has shaped my timing and delivery of activities. I have discovered that the process of a participant choosing a costume, putting it on and applying clown makeup became a revealing projection of their self-image. My direction being "to show how you are feeling", I have therefore allowed more preparation time for participants to consider their choices to accomplish this.

### This workshop

I invited other arts therapists and other conference attendees to discover or rediscover their unpredictable selves by dressing up in clown costumes. The invitation suggested that "with life stressors abounding, during the workshop people may transcend pressures and let go of the mind to act and react intuitively with the other clowns. It's a chance to change/borrow/act out a character as if your inner child has come out to play". I also

commented that the process may revive some childhood memories. Twenty one people accepted the invitation. It was a comedy from the beginning. Due to conference delays, the 15 minutes set-up time was reduced to five minutes. My conference assistant helped me set up tables and chairs and participants were to do a freestyle drawing and write '1' on it when finished. This drawing was the first part of my assessment for the workshop. The chairs were then set up in a circle and I put on my MC's jacket and hat.

While everyone was settled into drawing, my assistant and I had placed one costume on each of the chairs. Drawings completed, participants each chose a costume and put on makeup. People helped each other get into costume and then took photos of each other. It was chaotic in a positive way. I felt my role was to assist the preparation progress and ensure each person handled the process to their satisfaction. Examples of clown makeup were provided for their inspiration. A table of accessories – with musical instruments, horns, wigs, hats, spectacles, tutus, noses, etc – was provided for participants to put finishing touches on their costumes.

All this preparation is a very important process and lasted about half an hour. Each clown was invited to choose their clown name and pin it onto their costume. There were names like 'Zog', 'Ponti', 'Bip', 'Cha Cha La Vuong' and 'Cupey'.

Soon everyone was in full clown persona, and unrecognisable. After tidying up the makeup table, I turned around to face a squad of clowns all fully dressed and loudly making honking, tinging, and rattling music. It was glorious! They were ready!

Having introduced myself at the beginning of the workshop, I informed the 21 participants that there would be limited verbal direction from me except for introducing each activity. I encouraged them to spontaneously respond to whatever occurred after my directions, and as we were a group, I asked them to be aware of responding to each other with support and empathy. At the same time, I encouraged understated and overstated behaviour.

Perhaps this was too liberating for some although this is where personal boundaries are discovered and there is a choice to retreat and observe and still participate in the event. I felt I could trust everyone to understand those elastic boundaries in search of the self in a safe environment. And, on that basis, I also mentioned that “naughtiness” might occur, self-expression which ignored those boundaries and took its own path beyond the group, possibly changing the group dynamic.

## Sequence of activities

### March on:

I instructed all clowns to form a queue as we prepared for the grand parade. “There is an imaginary audience around us excited to see you appear,” I said. With a marching band pounding out the rhythm I encouraged them to show off their own unique marching style. A queue was formed but the marching showed no sense of order or keeping in time. Some occasionally waved to the ‘crowd’ and some arms were swung enthusiastically.

### Tightrope:

A long strip of masking tape was laid across the floor to represent a tightrope. My instructions were to face the challenge with courage and to support those who attempted it. Various characters approached me to guide them to the line. Here the true inner self could be expressed and a range of heroism was displayed taking on this role. One particular clown, Bip, was obviously terrified, hunched over and looking down, but managed to tiptoe neatly and slowly across the ‘rope’. There were loud cheers from the other clowns. Another clown took a running start from behind the line and flew into a body skid on the floor. A brave attempt was met with doubts, gasps and cheers vocalised by the onlooking crowd of clowns.

### Juggling:

This was difficult to organise. Both soft and hard juggling balls were distributed amongst the clowns. I asked them to practise their juggling on their own, in a double act or as a team, then whoever wished to perform for us could randomly, spontaneously do so. I remember a shower of juggling balls with

ambitious faces appearing inside it. Then the group parted and one clown would juggle until dropping the ball and another would take over. I am uncertain as to whether I need to give more direction with this activity in the future.

### Strongman/woman:

I positioned a pool noodle on the floor and called for volunteers to try lifting it. A pool noodle as the ‘barbell’ to be lifted required a good deal of mime, imagination and overacting. There was only one contender for this challenge. Ponti stepped forward, posed to flex her muscles to an admiring audience before bending over to lift the weight. She gave it her all amid all possible support with cheering and honking, although one naughty clown rushed forward and put her foot on the weight as Ponti was tugging at it. Gasps from the crowd. Unnerved, the increased strain showed in Ponti’s face and body but it was worth it when she finally lifted the ‘weight’ above her head and received a rousing cheer.

After this, no one else wanted to try, although one clown did pick up the ‘barbell’ and carry it off afterwards.

### Clown cricket:

A balloon was the ball, two pool noodles were the bats and three people at each end of the pitch were the stumps. After some shuffling around, the clowns formed two teams. The balloon was unreliable as a ball, and often didn’t make the distance to the batsman, so other team members helped it along (clowns’ rules). The fielders weren’t always alert when the ball came their way and often had difficulty catching it. We had the full range of the highs and lows of clown cricket when one batsman was ‘injured’, and consoled by one clown and laughed at by another.

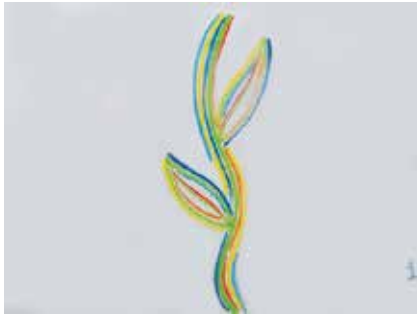
### March off:

Ideally the march off should be triumphant – a grand conclusion to a clown’s journey of self-discovery through performing various challenges within a group environment. Instead, it was an unruly march-off. Some participants settled on the floor, others marched once around the circle and disappeared out the door to run amok and peer into serious presentations. “Don’t forget to come back,” I called out feebly. They did eventually return.

### Second drawing:

Finally, participants took off their costumes and makeup, and settled into creating a second freestyle drawing. This can be a revealing method for assessing how participants have responded to the whole experience. There can be a change of energy in the lines, imagery, colour and use of space.

Here are some of the before and after drawings:



## Summary

There were many processes operating throughout this workshop, primarily those of variations in self-esteem expressed through the self-image created with costume and makeup choices. Everyone took part in the activities, whether as an individual performer or as part of the cheer squad. Not everyone decided to come forward as an individual performer, but contributed to the group dynamic in their own way. Their presence within this group was confirmation enough of their search for new experience in a playful environment.

As the workshop progressed, more individual clowns were confident enough to emerge from the crowd and show themselves, so much so that by the march off at the end I realised the group had let go of any fear and released themselves into play – following or leading.

Examples of this progressive emerging of personalities are:

- I was repeatedly retrieving one clown from outside the room as she ran off with a noodle
- One clown lying in the middle of the floor needed to be 'removed' by being dragged her off by the legs
- Clowns sitting or lying on the floor to complete their second drawings
- The clown coming forward to stand on the 'barbell' as another clown was trying to lift it.

This workshop was presented for self-discovery and I certainly discovered that while I felt I had lost control of the group, it had taken on its own energy, decided on its own expressions and its own responses to whatever happened. After all, these were my initial instructions. Trusting the flow of energy meant I had to keep the workshop progress on track no matter how much chaos there seemed to be. By the end the workshop felt busy and joyful, and there was a new level of free personal exploration.

Thank you, clowns.





Photos by Elske Reyneke-Barnard.

# anzjat

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

## Editorial team

**Chief Editor** Sheridan Linnell

**Co-Editors** Stacey Bush, Catherine Camden Pratt, Deborah Green

**Arts Editor and Editorial Assistant** Vic Šegedin

**Journal Coordinator** Rigel Sorzano

**Copy Editors / Proofreaders** Marie Shannon and Margo White

## Peer review

The editorial team wishes to thank all peer reviewers who have generously contributed their time and expertise to the peer review of this edition of *ANZJAT*.

*ANZJAT* is a peer-reviewed journal and as such all accepted submissions are reviewed by peer reviewers well-versed and respected in the subject of the submission. Full length articles 5, 9, 10, 15, 22 and 24 in edition one, and full length articles 11, 12, 16, 17 and 25 in edition two were double anonymously peer-reviewed.

Published by the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association  
ACN 072 954 388  
PO Box 303, Glebe, NSW 2037, Australia  
[www.anzacata.org](http://www.anzacata.org)

© Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association, 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Opinions of contributors are not necessarily those of the publisher. The publisher makes no representation or warranty that the information contained in articles is accurate, nor accepts liability or responsibility for any action arising out of information contained in this journal.

ISSN: 1833-9948

**Design and production** Vic Šegedin

**Printing** Tender Print, Geelong, VIC, Australia