

Exhibiting my identity: Exploring the intersection of artist and arts therapist

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Abstract

A team of arts therapists chose to exhibit in a professional art gallery for the first time. The theme of the exhibition was ‘the intersection between being an artist and an arts therapist’. This reflective article explores and maps this experience to Heron and Reason’s (2001) four ways of knowing: experiential knowing; presentational knowing; propositional knowing; and practical knowing. Themes explored in this paper are self-care, working through challenges, being seen, and bringing awareness to the field of arts therapy. There is also an intention to encourage other therapists to reflect on their identity and to create and exhibit their art.

Keywords

Identity, artist, arts therapist, exhibition, experiential knowing

Introduction

The growth process is all about support and challenge. Friction is needed for growth and change. This is an idea I apply to my work with clients as an arts therapist. I am now more aware of this process for myself when I am working towards a goal or idea. This year I was drawn to offering a growth opportunity for the team of arts therapists who work in my business, Arts Therapy Spectrum, in Adelaide, Australia. The opportunity was to hold an exhibition in a professional art gallery with a focus on the intersection between being an artist and arts therapist. I was inspired by seeing other arts therapy teams around Australia doing this. My rationale for the exhibition was that I would give myself and my team the challenge to engage in art-making for ourselves, and to allow both the artist and arts therapist parts to be seen. The process of exhibiting in a professional gallery was rich and rewarding as well as and challenging. This article offers space to reflect on this process while mapping the experience to Heron and Reason’s (2001) four ways of knowing, ultimately inquiring into how the experience of exhibiting my own artwork in a gallery has impacted my identity as an artist and arts therapist.

The idea of writing about my experience of exhibiting in an art gallery only came to me several months after the opening exhibition. Pondering the rich learning experience gained from engaging in the process, I wanted to explore more deeply how and why it impacted me and what I have come to know. One of the containers I’ve chosen to hold and provide structure to this reflection is Heron and Reason’s (2001) four ways of knowing. This

paradigm is based on the concept that there are different ways of knowing that are reliant on each other. To give a brief overview, the four ways of knowing are experiential knowing, presentational knowing, propositional knowing, and practical knowing (Heron & Reason, 2001). Experiential knowing is about being present with a “direct face-to-face encounter with person, place, or thing” (p.183). Presentational knowing derives from this and is concerned with how we express what we know from lived experience. Propositional knowing flows from this and is about connecting with theories and ideas. “*Practical knowing* is knowing how to do something” and becoming skilful at it after knowing through the other three ways (Heron & Reason, 2001, p.5).

An unintentional inquiry – experiential knowing

The process began with the conception of the idea and the planning. Lett (2011) points out that art is a vehicle to represent experiencing and that we need to start with raw pieces of experiencing to get to the knowing and meaning. I started with the raw pieces and worked with another arts therapist, Georgie, who is also an experienced artist, to start mapping out a path. We discussed being inspired by other arts therapists around Australia who were exhibiting artwork and bringing awareness to our field of work. We also discussed the importance of ‘being seen’ and that this was a key part of what we offer clients. I felt it would be nice to give that experience back to ourselves as a form of self-care. Discussion about the impact of the pandemic on us as therapists also came up but we did not want to make the pandemic the focus. However, as a team we have felt an increase in a need for the services we provide since the pandemic. This has put extra strain on our resources as therapists. Intentionally setting time for art-making and giving to ourselves what we offer our clients seemed like a way to honour the extra pressure we were feeling.

This was the first exhibition I was both coordinating and exhibiting in and while I had a sense of the complexity of the task, I was still compelled to push on. Two concepts were meaningful for me at this stage: the need to be seen and the need for myself and my team to make space for the artist parts of ourselves as an act of self-care. I mulled over a theme that would link our group together. This meant that while each of us would form individual inquiries when creating and processing the art, there would be a link between our team’s works. These early musings and discussions led to the artist’s brief and vision that would provide structure to our art-making.

Artist’s brief and vision:

The vision is for the team to have space to focus on and nurture the ‘artist’ side of being an arts therapist (as an act of self-care) and to work towards a group exhibition that allows us to be seen and heard as artists. The vision is that as a team we hold a professional and curated exhibition that showcases the intersection of being an artist and a therapist. This exhibition will give viewers the chance to get to know us as a team and as an organisation with the emphasis on us as both professional therapists and artists who offer high quality work. The flow on from this is that we will be spotlighting and bringing awareness to the field of arts therapy concurrently.

Continuing through the mud – presentational knowing

As we began moving into Heron and Reason's (2001) idea of presentational knowing, through art-making, there were several complex moments that arose for myself and for my team. I will focus on four key parts:

Shouldn't we be focusing on process and not product?

What if my art is rejected?

I fear the unknown.

But I'm not an artist.

Heron and Reason (2001) explore the reality of managing distress in their unpacking of a cooperative inquiry. This is a part of the process and to be expected. Moon (2001) echoes and extends this when she states that facing fears linked to the process of art-making "not only support us as individual artists, but also support the strength of our collective identity as arts therapists" (p.55). Reflection has allowed me to see that struggling with the four key parts outlined above were an important part of the growth process.

'Shouldn't we be focusing on process and not product?' was one of the main reflections from the Arts Therapy Spectrum team. 'Process – not product' seems to be a catch cry of many of my arts therapy colleagues. My experience of this is that there is then an inflexibility around sometimes wanting to consider how the finished result could be. While it is important to give attention to the process as it contains rich ground for therapeutic inquiry, we don't always have to forsake the final product or aesthetic sensibilities in an arts therapy process. For our art exhibition the only self-imposed stipulation was that we needed to use artist quality materials as well as good quality framing and canvases. This was to ensure the pieces were saleable. This meant that therapists could create in any way they wanted as long as they used high quality materials in the process. I am not arguing for or against the use of product over process. I am offering that a gentle expansion and flexibility to this thinking was needed. This is a rich example of the intersection between being an artist and an arts therapist. This is pertinent as Moon (2001) reminds arts therapists that "the profession of arts therapy has its roots in the studio and many of the pioneers of arts therapy were artists" (p.18). This reminder supports my desire to feel linked to the artist part of my identity.

The second complex piece I noticed was the fear of artwork created by the therapist being rejected and/or deemed not good enough. Putting art in a public space opens us up to being judged. Historically, public art audiences were critical and not open to the process and the vulnerability of what it takes to create art. I also reflected on how this fear taps into a larger theme of being seen and rejected as a person. Moving away from the gentle, caring, supportive spaces we create as therapists into what can often be the harshness of the public eye, it makes sense that this fear came up for members of my team. This felt like an excellent opportunity to remind ourselves of, and reflect on, how our clients may feel coming to an arts

therapy session for the first time. Being able to move through this space with mindfulness and care for ourselves meant that we could have experiential knowing that would impact how we were with our clients moving forward. Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) explore the idea that an arts therapist engaging with their own art processes allows empathy for their clients and that their own art-making “supports the development of compassion toward the self” (p.390). This idea links to one of the overarching goals of the process, which was to allow an opportunity for me and the team to engage in self-care.

The next piece to process was the fear of the unknown. Several members of the team had exhibited before but for me and the rest of the team, this was the first time. I was steering the ship and while being somewhat guided, I was still navigating uncharted waters and had to hold a space of openness. I believe that through my work as an arts therapist for over a decade, I have cultivated the ability to stay connected and regulated in experiences of the unknown. I know through experiential knowing that my ability to be with what emerges is cultivated through working with many clients.

Installing together

Our exhibition was held at the Fleurieu Arthouse in McLaren Vale, Adelaide. Our support of each other as a team shone most brightly on the installation day which occurred the day before the exhibition. We chose to install the art works ourselves and, although challenging, it became a rich bonding experience. We had around 50 artworks to curate in the space and then hang. It took us the whole day to achieve this goal with many people helping. There was a buzz and sense of shared purpose among the team members. When I reflect on the experience of exhibiting as a team, this day is one that comes to mind as a standout moment. For me the sense was that we were near the culmination of the process of exhibiting our artwork.

The start of an inquiry inside an inquiry

A side step from the larger inquiry into exhibiting artwork and exploring the intersection of being an artist and a therapist, is the theme of the art I chose to exhibit. The artwork series I exhibited contained all new works based around the concept of mapping personal landscapes. I had seven pieces using mixed media including watercolour, ink, collaged pieces, textiles, and thread. I have come to know that this series is the beginning of a new exploration for me – one I hope to engage with in more depth at some stage. The artist’s statement that appeared in the exhibition catalogue (Hedström Gold & Lisman 2023) read:

Mapping the Landscape is a series of works by artist Donna Hedström Gold. In these images Donna has used mixed media to offer an abstract twist on traditional landscape painting. The idea of mapping the landscape is a metaphor for working therapeutically with another.

One of the most important parts of therapy is getting to know the client’s personal landscape, there are many ways that a therapist can walk with another in their world discovering parts. The therapist then reflects this back to the client, so they get to understand themselves better.



Figure 1. Donna Hedström Gold, Uncovering layers II, 2023, ink, watercolour and thread on calico, 800 × 640mm. Photo: Angela Lisman.



Figure 2. Donna Hedström Gold, Overview I, 2023, mixed media on watercolour paper, 560 × 380mm. Photo: Angela Lisman.

Full catalogue of works available at <https://fleurieuarthouse.com.au/new-page-1>

Shining a light on myself, the team, and arts therapy – being seen

One of the driving forces motivating me to undertake this exhibition process was my personal exploration around being seen. Over the last several years through my own reflective process, I had been challenging my fears around being seen. I knew from an artist's perspective that going into this exhibition I wasn't putting in my best artwork. However, I was putting in the artwork that best represented me and my arts therapy self. It was an incredible thrill on the day of the opening exhibition to have so many friends and family come and support me. It wasn't even the thrill of people liking my work but rather the pleasure of being seen as an artist and arts therapist. McNiff (2014) writes that one of the most important issues related to our profession and identity is "how we show what we do to the public" (p.89). As part of the opening exhibition, we invited the Honourable Emily Bourke MP to speak. Emily is a state government minister with the portfolio of ensuring the Autistic community is represented. This is the first role of its kind in the nation. It was an honour and privilege to have Emily engage with our works. Emily spent time looking at the show before giving her address to open the exhibition. Emily was able to express much of what we felt just by engaging with the artworks and it reminded me that art gives us such a unique way of being seen. I am proud that through holding the exhibition there was a spotlight placed on the arts therapists in my team, on arts therapy as a practice, on art as a way of communicating, and on the Autistic community who make up a large percentage of our client cohort. It was by going through this process of creating art and exhibiting it that the team and I could have an embodied experience of new ways of knowing. It enabled us to move from presentational knowing that derived from our lived experience into propositional knowing and how we make sense of what we now know.

Embracing the artist and the arts therapist – propositional knowing

The outcome of an inquiry based on experiencing is to come to some new knowing that can inform how one wants to be in the world moving forward. I planned an exhibition based on my experiential knowing and then created and exhibited the art through presentational knowing. Then through the process of writing this article, and choosing to engage with the literature, I moved into propositional knowing. I now sit with what I think I know and how I want to be in the world moving forward.

I have come to know that I am an artist because I love making art. In fact, I love everything to do with art and I pursue art-related activities whenever I can, which includes my work as an arts therapist. Moon (2001) believes that in their search for identity and credibility as a profession, arts therapists have denied aspects of their core identity, including their artist part. Being an artist and claiming that title is a part of defining my arts therapist identity. Through acknowledging and claiming the artist, I can now carve out more time and space for this part of me which provides me joy and nourishment.

I have come to know that the empathy, compassion, and unconditional positive regard that I extend to clients can be extended to myself and my team when we feel unsure creating art. I look forward to more opportunities to exhibit to put this new knowing into practice. I have

also come to know the importance of the tricky bits in the growth process and the importance of continuing to move forward while keeping our visions and goals in sight. Ultimately, I have come to know the importance of the artist identity as a part of the arts therapist. It is my belief that the more I embrace the artist, the more I flourish as an arts therapist.

Conclusion – moving forward with practical knowing

Choosing to hold an exhibition as a team was an incredible and rich process to move through. In this reflective article, I explored themes around fears and challenges and had the experience of being seen and engaging in self-care at the same time. I am proud to have a place in raising the profile of this profession that I love so much. I ultimately explored the importance of embracing the artist part of the arts therapist identity and in doing so my identity as an arts therapist.

I used Heron and Reason's (2001) four ways of knowing to hold the exploration of the idea from conception to culmination. The experiential knowing came from the raw data, ideas and experiences which then moved into the presentational knowing. The presentational knowing was the process of art-making and exhibiting. Writing this article allowed for propositional knowing and I will now move forward with practical knowing when going through a similar process in the future. I have plans moving forward to continue to allow space for the artist part. I am excited, through my business, Arts Therapy Spectrum, to be engaging in the SALA (South Australian Living Artist) festival this year and I look forward to providing space for both the team and our clients to be seen. I also hope to inspire other arts therapists and teams to exhibit and continue to bring awareness to the field of arts therapy.

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