

The Benefits of Combining Creative Arts and Narrative Therapy approaches: a preliminary introduction to a PhD research study

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Lisa has been working with music and creative dance, teaching children since 1990, and with a therapeutic perspective since 2000. A post-graduate study of creative arts therapy influenced her approach of teaching music and dance to focus on the participants' creative initiative and expression, and led to a move away from the education field. She has worked as a recreation officer at the Woomera Immigration Reception and Detention Centre as part of a welfare/social work team (see her contribution 'Dancing in the Desert', in Quarterly Vol.4, No.1.). This led to her seeking work in community positions where she is a community support worker for people with psychiatric disabilities. This role involves individual outreach with a number of clients and day program sessions, where there are possibilities for creative therapy to take place.

The initial interest for this research was „Therapeutic Conversations and the Creative arts Process“. This was an area that as a practitioner, I wanted a better awareness of. While the practice of creative arts therapy did apply „best practice“ approaches with regards to the sensitivities apparent in therapeutic relationships, I needed to develop my approach to the conversations that surrounded these experiences. I had been gradually

immersing myself in Narrative Therapy literature since attending the Dulwich Centre Conference in 2001, where Narrative Therapy emerged around 25 years ago in the work of Michael White and David Epston.

Dwelling on the essence of creative arts therapies, there are so many possible ways that it can proceed, and be understood, being open to becoming whatever it needs to be for the fulfillment of those involved. One possible form that seemed relevant to at least some people I had worked with, was how it can be a sacred experience; sacred personally or actually incorporating sacred music, art, text and movement. I am curious about the therapist's involvement with someone creating music and dance as prayers for discovering their own personal journey, and in understanding this process they make. While a theological perspective may be interesting for these ponderings, this research will not be a discussion within such a context. However, the possibility for these processes to be spiritually resonating will continue to be observed, as it seems to be intrinsic to how so many people feel about themselves and how they contemplate the world and life, in some form or another. What comes from the heuristic process of this study is yet to be known exactly, but there is most definitely a motivation for this research to be a way of strengthening a preferred way of working and an acknowledgement of the learning that may be found along the way.

As a way of establishing a supportive structure for this to best proceed, a supervisor with Narrative Therapy, theatre and mental health knowledge and experience, Catherine Ingram was sought to support the process, and to more fully understand the benefits of the combining Narrative Therapy (NT) approaches with Creative Arts Therapy. Some of the notions of NT that caught my attention were discovering unique outcomes, and how this related to talents, strengths and attitudes that could be celebrated and embodied through the artistic process. Realizing these within artistic experience can help connect oneself to the very creative and imaginative spirit that becomes an important dimension and force within the healing process. I was interested in observing a more conscious use of conversation that might take me to a new level in therapeutic engagement and understanding. I was also noticing in my work that sometimes conversations used few words but were never the less meaningful where shared understanding seemed

to be acknowledged by both concerned. Also there were some people I came across that really didn't want yet another „worker“ pressing them with questions, responding to my enquiring with the comment, “ no, please, not you too”. I thought from this encounter where there had been mutual respect, that perhaps I had passed over the line of what this person may have liked me for, that I saw them as a person, for who they were, not wanting anything more from them. I guess what is also useful to acknowledge here is that trust and best timing for reflection or conversation can be achieved through a process without words that can engage and involve people's personality, spirit and will, but allowing personal space and time for disclosure to be theirs.

Reflecting on what I considered my preferred way of working as prompted by some of Alice Morgan's questions, I noted down „hearing the story: the voice at the essence of their experience“ from the client and how they want the story to be told in a way they feel they can express themselves. Redressing disempowerment or disintegration that may have occurred in their life by following their story and working from the initiative and ease of their personality and talents, being flexible with what modalities are used, and also looking for clues in the person's story for when and where their life really felt whole were aspects of approach that seemed important from the onset. I had noticed that when someone discovers the experience of connection within themselves, I feel that it's what happens beyond what I can do that matters. I encourage them that they have made this connection, and that they have the ability within them. What I noticed about my own perceptions of the process unfolding before me was that the experience was more important than the plan for it, trusting the process of improvisation and experience-based education had contributed to my learning of this. „Trust does well when it's given plenty of ground“ became an attitude I felt consolidated this reflection for me.

The notion of possibly overcoming „stuckness“ in conversation by turning to artistic expression; that art can often be gifts we make for others and what this might mean with regards to finding connection within the world, and the act of observing with all senses were also matters of importance emerging in my last five years of work. It is possible that art can express dimensions of experience where conversation is difficult to form, so that connections to others can be forged and explored, with less pressure. Previous to this research I had felt compelled to forge a peer group of musicians, artists, poets and dancers, to try this out for myself. We called ourselves „artists@play“ and met, improvising music and dance that was recorded to hear back and „drawn to“ on a large mural together. The experience was free and fun, bringing around ten or so people

together regularly for about 18 months. Friendships sprang from this that have outgrown the sessions, and indeed a friendship group that developed trust, varying and multiplying connections for each of the individuals. These were perhaps some key aspects of social integration and belonging that are of interest to this study here. Possibilities like these are what may influence some of the decisions made in generating group experiences.

Within the research, I am researching on behalf of the people in this group (formed for the research to some degree,) being aware that their own personal enquiries are what spur them on. I also think that to be open within the group, as a person, but also as a researcher is important to the integrity of this research, which will reveal the truths of personal experiences in a context of the whole experience, which is where hermeneutic phenomenology and Narrative Therapy coincide. Hermeneutic Phenomenology being a philosophy of the personal, individual, which we consider against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the other, whole, the communal or the social (Max Van Manen) and Narrative Therapy looks to reveal truths of the social and relative discourses that interplay with an individual's experience. And what drives this acquisition of knowledge is to quote Van Manen again, „to know the world is to be profoundly in the world“, and this intentionality is a shared quest of the researcher and the person isolated due to a period of mental illness.

The actual roles and perspectives that are found being a therapist and researcher bring much due curiosity. There are the aspect of co-creation, co-authorship, being involved in this shared experience together that prompts the question of how this and research itself is done. In Community Health, evaluation begs the inclusion of qualitative evidence, the relevance of documenting these kinds of considerations as a creative arts therapist is a means of protecting the survival of healthy, creative programs that are interesting for all, when they can be created from the very hearts of the people involved. Attempting to address the stigmatization of mental health, feelings of shame and fear of annihilation (metaphorically: of personal expression) or rejection and emotional vulnerability that causes people who have suffered or continue to suffer from mental illness is perhaps the social quest of this project. The intentions are to make art together, to give a platform to make otherwise isolated pieces of art and creativity visible, make creative experiences where the negative experiences can be counteracted or counterbalanced, bring forth alternative experiences to the isolating forces in their lives, make group experiences more accessible, and provide a „practice space“ for these alternative ways of seeing themselves so that they may strengthen and

develop into real options of perceiving themselves in life.

Creating a project for people to express themselves publicly can be appreciated as fulfilling a „very natural desire to want to carve something from the rock that we originated from. Our cultures are dependant on this expression. An artist, if they are a folk artist/musician will express the nature of the whole community that they are from. Standing face to face with someone singing their culture“s songs- you should have all the history and their lives and their family“s and the community“s lives singing through.“ (Alan Lomax“s daughter, from an interview of „remembering Alan Lomax, 2005) Lomax was a folk music historian, collecting relics from all over the world, recording them face to face. It was said that he „made people feel that what they did was as good as anything else they heard“. Who benefits from this kind of interaction? I think all involved, and beyond, as I was able to witness this through the film documentary made.

I was prompted in supervision, as to whom is benefiting from this process? To keep abreast with the privileged position of therapist or researcher: What are the affects of how I am conducting this research? These questions are necessary to consider as ethical and methodological issues and will be matters to discuss in the thesis.

“As I witness the process of the project“s development, I noticed my own excitement and anticipation that the performance could be anything it wants to be, expressing the stories of the characters in whatever way the members want to. As we started the story, there was fun, humor, irony, acceptance, anticipation of what the audience will think, and as it developed, it took on its own life force. We started to see that it was greater than the sum of us, more that anyone of us thought it could have been, and gladly I think as everyone let themselves into it, trust emerged, the beginnings of sharing positive regard and acceptance of themselves and others.” (O‘Beirne)

The thesis may be completed in 2008 and I would gladly welcome any discussion or comments anyone would like to make. I am contactable on lisa.obeirne@gmail.com

Reading material on Narrative Therapy Approaches: International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, Available

Monash and other University Libraries, also Dulwich Pub. Adelaide.

An Introduction to Narrative Therapy, Alice Morgan, also available from Dulwich Publications, www.dulwichcentre.com.au