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Inside an art therapy group: the student perspective

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Introduction

Group work is an important aspect of our profession as art therapists. There are many formats for teaching art therapy students about group dynamics; however, in this paper, we will call our group time an art therapy training group (T-group) because it was a specific time for observing and learning group dynamics first hand. The T-group is one of students' first formal introductions to group art therapy, and is often their only exposure to groups before internship and employment. T-groups offer art therapy students an opportunity to experience group dynamics first-hand, and allow them to find more authentic relationships with fellow students while enhancing self-awareness. In the ever changing clinical climate that challenges art therapists to wear several hats and to be flexible with their professional identities, group training offers an important format for expanding self-awareness and skill (Malchiodi, 1999).

Although therapists in the creative arts remember their T-groups as pivotal markers in their education, the student perspective of T-group experiences is rarely discussed (Carter et al., 1978; McClure, 1998; Wadson, 1987; Waller, 1993). Literature on group work and art therapy group work is broad and exten-

sive, but there is a pronounced absence of literature documenting an art therapy T-group from the student perspective (Carter et al., 1978; Swan–Foster, Lawlor & Scott, 1999). This paper seeks to partially remedy that situation by documenting a 15-week art therapy T-group of 13 women and 1 female leader. Weekly progress notes made by all the group members as well as a follow-up questionnaire yielded substantial comments on specific group dynamics and themes from which the authors focused on relevant subsections that were later woven together into this paper. Although the whole T-group participated in making this possible, the paper predominately reflects the experiences of these authors.

The T-group was regularly held at the end of a class, after the discussion of academic and ethical readings. The T-group was scheduled in the first semester of the second year when the members had established subgroups from their first year of classes. The leader entered the group as a newcomer. The leader's goals for students within the T-group portion of the class were to experiment with personal expression through talking and art, to experiment with roles and boundaries, and to expand the capacity to tolerate the uncovering of group conflict and tension. Two themes dominated this art therapy T-group: 1) how to interpose words with art within an art therapy group, and 2) how to clarify and understand group conflict and resistance within a multirelationship environment.

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The paper is organized into two main sections. In the first section, we provide background information that is relevant to our T-group experience. The relevant areas that we discuss are: the transpersonal paradigm, a contemplative context, the feminist perspective, multicultural issues, group ethics, and resistance. In the second section, we describe some poignant stages of the 15-session T-group art therapy process and analyze these stages in terms of the background information provided in the first section.

The student perspective: relevant background information

The transpersonal paradigm

Transpersonal art therapy is defined by Farrelly-Hansen as “both a perspective and a path” (Franklin, Farrelly-Hansen, Marek, Swan-Foster & Wallingford, 2000, p. 102). The transpersonal perspective engages with the notion of the transitions between words and art and between the process and the product. In the transitions, individuals may become aware of themselves in relation to the group and connect to an essence beyond themselves. A person may gain an expanded awareness of the “above and beyond” as they sit before their art within a group. For the first time they may see themselves connected to the whole, while at the same time the group also sees them in their wholeness. Winnicott’s (1982) work on the transitional phenomena supports the group to notice a “potential space” where the play of making art happens. To enter this space requires spontaneity, risk taking, nourishment, and trust (Levine, 1989). From a transpersonal perspective, moving in and out of making art is likened to a nonordinary state of consciousness (Farrelly-Hansen, 1998; Taylor, 1995). Also, as Skaife and Huet (1998) point out, the “transition between the different activities in the art psychotherapy group is where tensions mostly occur” (p. 18). Navigating into and out of the art making process requires the skill to move between words and images, which represent both the potentiality and tension in a group. As McClure (1998) states: “The therapeutic potential of groups can be maximized by utilizing the transpersonal realm” (p. 203).

A contemplative context

The term contemplative refers to group members intently watching their own process and the process of the group as a whole. The four main contemplative concepts that arose during our T-group were presence or mindfulness, meeting one’s edge, maitri, and silence. They were recognized and validated in this

T-group because of the specific contemplative training included in our curriculum (Franklin, 1999; Franklin et al., 2000). As Kabat-Zinn (1994) observes, in presence or mindfulness “we commit fully in each moment to being present. There is no ‘performance.’ There is just this moment” (p. 22). Meeting one’s edge (Chodron, 1991, 1997) is when we have the most difficult time staying present and the strongest desire to jump ship. Maitri is Sanskrit for loving-kindness towards oneself. It encompasses the idea of befriending oneself and others just the way we are (Chodron, 1991). Instead of trying to change things, one uncovers what is always present (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Silence is experienced in an art therapy T-group when members focus on breathing or making art. Silence is commonly viewed as an inhibiting factor or resistance (Becker, 1972). Because silence is often a necessary requirement for art therapy groups, a more suitable understanding is when Gans and Counselman (2000) point out that “silence does not have to indicate avoidance or suppression, and often occurs in the normal course of group work . . . silence and talking are . . . both opportunities for learning” (p. 72). They further state that a “leader who is comfortable with silences creates a slowed pace that allows for pause and reflection. For some members, it is the first time in their lives that they have been allowed to be slow” (p. 74).

The feminist perspective

When considering the feminist perspective it is important not to interpret the use of this paradigm as an attempt to isolate the genders but rather to enhance the understanding of a same gender T-group. Most traditional group dynamics were conceived by men and based on mixed gender groups, and the vast developmental, multicultural, and gender issues that arise in same gender groups were not considered when group theories originated (DeChant, 1996; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan & Kaplan, 1991; McClure, 1998). Recent research suggests that same gender groups are unique in their behavior (Bernardez, 1996; Brabender, 1992; DeChant, 1996; Levine, 1989). Most important is that women tend to develop a definition of themselves through attachment and relationships and, as a result, tend to be threatened by separation (Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982).

Another important aspect is that of finding and using one’s voice in an art therapy group. By speaking within a group, a woman challenges herself to be more clearly defined (Gilligan, 1982). And yet, paradoxically, “the creative process . . . value[s] interaction, nurturance, support, and interconnectedness” (Levine, 1989, p. 325). By experiencing both connection and self-definition within a female group,

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