

## A documentary film project with first-year art therapy students

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### Abstract

New user-friendly programs for video editing, smaller and less expensive digital cameras, and the mobility of laptop computers have made digital video as an art therapy medium an accessible and realistic media choice for art therapy practice. Masters level art therapy students evolve dramatically over their first year and this evolution can be documented and used for supervision through this digital media. This paper discusses a documentary film project that was initiated to meet the particular needs of first-year art therapy students by having them document their year through digital pictures, digital film, traditional art making and written journaling. Ten first-year art therapy students worked collectively to capture what they defined as the “first-year experience.” Students took on the roles of video camera people, actors, still photographers, art producers, editors, and directors. They stated that the process of first-year art therapy education was challenging both emotionally and mentally and that this video project helped them to reflect on their experience, document their transitions, and become aware of the immediacy of the moment.

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### Introduction

In art therapy, the use of technology as a counseling intervention has been gradually increasing. Technology as an art medium first emerged with photography as a therapeutic intervention (Weiser, 1988). Photography has been identified as a rich modality for assessment, intervention, and self-expression in art therapy practice. In the 1980s and 1990s, magazine collage and photocopy manipulation of imagery became accepted in practice (Landgarten, 1983, 1993). Another electronic medium used in art therapy prior to computers was video (McNiff & Cook, 1975). Artists, therapists, and clients may use a video or film’s moving images for communication. The combination of this moving image with dialogue, music, and effects deepens and extends the meaning, mood, and message intended with the communication. People’s lives are often shaped by the moving image. With the abundance of television, film, and video on the Internet, people are exposed to it on a daily basis. The moving image is perhaps the single most important form of communication among those that allow people to know about the world and about other people, and that allow people to take part in and share cultures (Hooper, 2002).

Since the advent of digital technology and computers, the possibilities for creating and editing digital media in art therapy sessions have increased substantially. Weinberg (1985) wrote about the uses of computers for creating art with clients with physical limitations. In the study, Weinberg found using the computer as an art-making tool stimulated curiosity and motivation, and increased access to the art-making process, which would otherwise be limited due to the disabilities of her clients. Canter (1989) argued that computers work well with children and adolescents due to

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their prior knowledge of and comfort level with this medium. She found that creating art with computers increased concentration and improved self-esteem of this population. More recently, Parker-Bell (1999) and McLeod (1999) have written about using specific software programs as interactive and creative tools in art therapy practice with children and adults. New user-friendly programs for video editing, smaller and less expensive digital cameras, and the mobility of laptop computers have made digital video as an art therapy medium an accessible and realistic media choice for art therapy practice.

Orr (2005) explored ideas surrounding the inherent qualities of digital media in art therapy practice. The study showed that technology media have both benefits and drawbacks and are good choices with particular clients, but not with others. As with other media in the art therapists' toolbox, when an art therapist chooses to use technology, he or she must take into account its inherent qualities and its potential effect on the therapeutic process, as well as its relationship with the client. As Seiden (2001) indicated, when working with clients it is important to consider which materials fit the therapeutic goals for that individual, because the right choice of material may greatly enhance the therapeutic process, whereas the wrong material might hinder it.

This article extends the ideas in the Orr (2005) article by specifically exploring the nature and use of digital video documentary production as an art therapy intervention and reflection tool for first-year art therapy students. In order to understand the particular qualities associated with digital video production, a look at what research can already show us is helpful. Research being done on the use of digital video as an art-making medium has occurred in education, phototherapy in art therapy, and fine arts fields.

In the education system, digital video has been used successfully as an art-making medium, a tool for analysis and research, and a tool to provide behavior feedback for students and teachers. Educators have found that making and editing digital video (DV) films encourages students to think about their subject matter on a deeper level (Swain et al., 2003). Educators have also found that using DV increases motivation and enjoyment; can accommodate students with different learning styles and levels of ability (Burn et al., 2001); encourages self-expression and creativity; can help develop a range of social learning skills, including communication, negotiation, decision-making, and problem-solving; allows students to explore different roles and identities (Reid et al., 2002); and gives students a sense of achievement and improved self-esteem (Ryan, 2002).

In phototherapy, digital video has been used as "video-in-therapy" and "video-as-therapy" (Weiser, 2001). Video-in-therapy is the use of personal and public film within the framework of therapeutic practice to initiate discussion and review issues (Calisch, 2001). Video-as-therapy is the client creating, editing and manipulating the video for themselves as a path for personal change (Weiser, 2001). Often art therapists are using a combination of techniques and ideas from phototherapy within their art therapy practice.

Campbell and Linn (2001) developed a *Video Movie Project* in which pediatric patients in a large public city hospital were encouraged to create their own videos on topics of their choice. The purpose of this project was to facilitate expression and give the children a sense of control in the hospital environment. The children took the roles of actor, director, editor, and audience during the course of the filmmaking. The videos not only allowed the children an opportunity for expression and control, but also facilitated communication with the hospital staff about each child's subjective understanding of his or her illness and treatment process. This allowed the staff to provide better care for the more difficult children since they were not seen just as challenging patients, but as individuals with complexity and depth. Campbell and Linn used a combination of play therapy, phototherapy, and art therapy as a way to access children's sense of fantasy, playfulness, creativity, feelings, and concerns.

O'Rourke (2001) used video therapy with child war survivors to explore traumatic memories. She states that many trauma survivors describe traumatic memories as "moving pictures." The moving pictures become nightmares and intrusive thoughts. O'Rourke used video to provide the children with the capability to create their own moving images in order to regain the sense of control that is lost when they are overcome by these traumatic memories. The camera allows the child to frame, manipulate, and miniaturize images, and thus alters the child's perception of the images. O'Rourke felt that survivors gain a sense of mastery and safety when engaged in the video process, a sense of empowerment evolves with the ability to maintain control over moving self-images. This process also allows each child to feel that they and their concerns are actually seen.

More recently, art therapists have been presenting their work with digital video at American Art Therapy Association annual conferences. Presentations have ranged from the use of digital video as documentation in mural making projects (Malcom, 2004), to work with autistic children (Maxion, 2002), to general use in art therapy practice (Mosinski, 2005), to the production of films about underrepresented populations' experiences (Hoshino, 2003).

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