



## Technology use in art therapy practice: 2004 and 2011 comparison

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### ABSTRACT

Seven years after an initial survey of art therapists that explored digital media use and training, the survey was re-issued to determine how art therapists' perceptions, practices, and training related to the use of digital media in art therapy have evolved, and whether or not this evolution in understanding and use of digital media kept pace with that of the general population. Both surveys targeted 250 art therapists each. The first survey was conducted through email and the second survey was conducted using Survey Monkey. After comparing the two surveys to each other and trends from the general population, it was determined that the adoption of digital technology by art therapists to manage their practice has kept pace with the general population. The use of digital media as an art tool within practice is increasing quickly, but with reservations. The main reservation that art therapists cite about using digital media surrounds ethical issues. Generally the training in the use of digital media by art therapists has not kept up with the adoption rate of technology by art therapists. Thus more training for art therapists in the use of digital media is needed, particularly in the area of understanding ethics that surrounds its use.

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### Introduction

In 2004, fresh from my Doctoral work, I conducted a survey of 250 American Art Therapy Association (AATA) art therapists in order to determine the perceptions of practicing art therapists towards the use of technology. I wondered whether or not art therapists felt prepared by their graduate programs to use technology within their practices (Orr, 2006). At the time of this research, I stated that art therapists needed to address this issue because teens were using many digital devices such as MP3 players and cell phones for entertainment and communication, which was having a large impact on their communication modes. In 2004, The Kaiser Family Foundation Study found that teens spend an average 6.5 h a day with media—and managed to pack in more than 8.5 h through multitasking (Kaiser Family Foundation Study, 2009). Today (2011) the average teen spends more than 7.5 h a day using digital media because they can now access media content from their phones, computers, TV, and game consoles, and that does not include the time they spend texting. Added to this average, teens multitask their media, like listening to a digital music device while surfing the Internet, more than they ever have before. In this way, they pack nearly 11 h of media time into that 7.5 h (Kaiser Family Foundation Study, 2009). The use of digital media is the way teens and young adults communicate, socialize, and express themselves. This 34% increase in 5 years in media use points even more strongly to the need for art therapists to understand and use these same tools, so

that they can meet their clients where they are, and can help them to move towards where they want to be.

In 2009, Cathy Malchiodi wrote an article titled *Art Therapy Meets Digital Art and Social Multimedia*, in which she stated that digital media is being adopted quickly by art therapy clientele, but “Ironically, art therapy as a field is a slow adopter of new ideas.” Her point was that the field of art therapy is lagging behind other related fields, such as visual arts, counseling, and education in their understanding and adoption of these new media and communication platforms.

Thus, 7 years after my first survey of art therapists recording digital media use, I have re-issued the survey in order to determine how our perceptions, practices, and training as art therapists related to the use of digital media in art therapy have evolved, and whether or not this evolution in our understanding and use of digital media is keeping pace with that of the general population. For the rest of the article, I will refer to the 2004 survey as Survey 1 (Orr, 2006) and the 2011 survey as Survey 2.

### Method

#### Sample selection

Survey 1 was conducted by sending 250 emails to AATA members who were either current students or were practicing art therapists. The response rate to Survey 1 was low due to outdated addresses (165 of the emails were valid) and program compatibility issues, resulting in 45 surveys completed. When using the 165 number, Survey 1 had a 27% response rate. Survey 2 also targeted 250 AATA members who were either current students or

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**Table 1**  
Use of technology in art therapy practice.

Type	Percent	
	2004 (N=45)	2011 (N=96)
Ancillary to treatment		
Word processing	71.4	84.4
E-mail	71.4	93.8
Photo/picture archiving	57.1	72.9
Lecture/presentations	57.1	76
Research	45.2	75
Treatment planning	42.9	55.2
Do not use technology	11.9	2.1
Within therapy with client		
Do not use with clients		56.5
Client conducted research/education	33.3	27.1
Digital art making	19	32
Manipulate or create drawn/painted images	Not in Survey 1	21.2
Animation	Not in Survey 1	11.8
Create/edit film	Not in Survey 1	17.6
Online fantasy environments	Not in Survey 1	2.4
Web camera communication	2.4	9.4
Chat/conversations with therapist	Not in Survey 1	11.8

practicing art therapists. Emails were sent to randomly chosen members and the participants were instructed to fill out a linked survey on Survey Monkey. Of the 250 members contacted, 98 filled in the survey. Using the 250 number, the response rate for Survey 2 was 39%. By using Survey Monkey rather than a direct email, the confidentiality of the survey process was much better, but prevented the researcher from being able to determine if any of the addresses used were invalid.

#### Questionnaire design and procedure

Questions from Survey 1 were used to create the questions in Survey 2 with a few changes to accommodate the evolution of technology over the intervening 7 years. The survey “questions focused on the current use of technology within art therapy practice, current and past training in technology for art therapy, the quality of the training, ideas about future technology training by art therapists, and demographic information” (Orr, 2006). Survey 2 was administered through the online service, Survey Monkey, in which emails were entered and participants were given a link to the survey. This change in method of distribution prevented compatibility issues that some respondents ran into with Survey 1 and allowed for complete anonymity for those who responded.

#### Results

The purpose of Survey 1 was to determine what art therapists were doing with technology, their perceptions of it, their training in it, and their perceived need for training. Survey 2 had the same focus, but also asked some additional questions in order to gain more insight into the relationships.

#### Use and perceptions of technology by art therapists

The survey participants were asked, “In what ways do you use technology to help you administer your professional practice?” and were given categories listed in Table 1 with the addition of an “other” category. The survey participants were also asked, “In what way do your clients use technology within sessions in your practice?” and were given the categories listed in Table 1 with the addition of an “other” category.

It is interesting to note the changes in technology use between 2004 and 2011. On average, there has been a 36% increase in

technology use by art therapists as a tool for managing their practices. This statistic reflects the 34% increase in technology use by the general public over the same time period. This would indicate that art therapists are advancing in their technology use for their practices at the same rate as the general public. The average increase in technology as an artistic media with clients during sessions has increased by 68%, which is much higher, but such use started at a much lower rate in 2004. This points to the fact that art therapists are increasing their use of digital media in art therapy practice with clients; however, 56% of art therapists still do not use technology at all with clients. The question then becomes, Why is there a large group of art therapists who are using technology in the management of their practices (93/96), but do not often use technology as a digital art media (56/96) with their clients, and why is there a small group of art therapists who are rapidly adopting the use of digital art media (36/96)?

In Survey 1, the respondents indicated that the main reasons they do not use technology were lack of training, the high cost of equipment, a lack of value for technology use by the art therapists in their agencies, limited time for use, not being comfortable with the media, and feeling that technology does not meet the sensory needs of clients (Orr, 2006). Respondents in the open-ended section of Survey 1 indicated that they thought that technology-based art making was cold, isolating, and non-sensory oriented. Some held doubts about whether or not art made with technology-based tools was actually art, or whether it had therapeutic qualities. In Survey 2, the cost of technology and the value within the agency were not noted as barriers to using technology. The main reasons indicated for not using technology in art therapy with clients included lack of training, concerns about ethical and privacy issues, the fact that clients are already technologically overwhelmed, that it is distracting to the art process, and that the traditional art process provides sensory input that technology-based media cannot.

The differences in replies between the two surveys indicate some interesting changes over the past 7 years. First, technology seems to be more accessible to art therapists today and more supported in its use within agencies, which is supported in the higher percentage who are using technology in the management of their practices. Art therapists over the years have gained a better understanding of the ethical and privacy issues that the use of technology-based interfaces may present. The awareness of this issue was not at the forefront for art therapists 7 years ago. The phrasing of comments in Survey 2 also indicates that art therapists are realizing that *how* the technology is used – rather than whether it is used at all – is responsible for negative issues, such as it becoming a distraction, being isolating, or being overwhelming. This deeper understanding and questioning of technology by art therapists indicates that we are looking more closely at this media and are learning more about it.

A consistent response between Survey 1 and Survey 2 is that art therapists believe that there is a sensory aspect to traditional media that is missing in technology-based media; however, even with this feeling, art therapists are exploring the issue more deeply. One participant wrote:

It [digital media] uses different parts of the brain than the kinesthetic activity stimulated by actual art making. Fine motor vs. gross motor, etc. There is a disconnect between the client and the wet, noisy, textural, scented, overall sensory experience one gets from manipulating actual art materials (response #25).

This comment shows that there is still a belief by some art therapists that digital media is not an actual art material, and that working with digital media is not actual art making. It is interesting to note this bias in art therapy when eight of the top ten fine-arts schools as ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* (2011) have digital art/multimedia majors. This comment also shows that there

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