

Creative arts by artist educators: An intensive creative program for injured and ill military personnel in Australia

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Abstract

This paper reports on a residential creative-arts program for wounded, injured and ill Australian Defence Force personnel. The program aims to assist in recovery, build resilience, and help participants forge an identity beyond their ill or injured status, to assist with either reintegration into the military or transition into civilian life. The paper describes the practical and creative elements of the program, which is run by a multidisciplinary team, but where creative mentorship is provided by creative professionals rather than by art therapists. The authors discuss the benefits and challenges of using artist educators, and of allowing participants to choose whether they wish to work with material related to their injury or illness or with more neutral content, as well as the implications for other arts-based research with military groups.

Keywords

Military, creative writing, arts, expressive writing, artist educators, post-traumatic stress disorder

Introduction

Participants in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) Arts for Recovery, Resilience, Teamwork and Skills (ARRTS) program are currently serving male or female Australian Defence Force personnel from across the nation. All have been wounded, injured or become ill while in service and have come to the program from one of Australia's three services – Royal Australian Navy, Australian Army, and Royal Australian Air Force – with the most recent program also including two local emergency services personnel. Attending personnel have been medically downgraded and are at various stages along their personal rehabilitation journey. Being medically downgraded has serious implications, since it can result in being deemed non-deployable and, depending on the level of the downgrade, can also mean no longer employable. All are voluntary participants who nominate themselves, often at the suggestion of the rehabilitation provider, and have been approved to attend by their commanding officer, a medical officer and their attending specialist. A maximum of 30 participants are accepted into each program, following assessment and discussion with an ARRTS medical officer.

The ARRTS program is free from the constructed boundaries of rank and uniforms generally associated with military life. Participants interact on a first-name basis, and support staff are also referred to in this way. This provides opportunities for participants to be free to explore personal expression and perspectives, and creates a climate where participants are encouraged to speak/write/perform openly and honestly. This egalitarian environment is also conducive to creating empathic workshop spaces, where understanding and tolerance are encouraged as a foundation to re-finding one's own purpose.

All participants live on a military base in Canberra for the four weeks of ARRTS, and travel to the program venue at the University of Canberra (UC) campus together each morning, returning to base together at the end of the day. Staff and participants report informally that this travel time, around 30 minutes each way, and the common living areas participants share during the evenings, help stimulate conversations around commonalities, especially feelings of isolation they all experience through their injuries and illnesses. The quiet barracks environment serves to provide a safe and familiar place for participants to rebuild

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