

Restoring ownership: How a multi-modal arts approach can facilitate agency

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Abstract

In this paper, I consider ways that a multi-modal arts approach can be used to help mental-health professionals and clients work together more effectively towards mental-health recovery. While on student placement in a residential facility managed by Mind Australia for individuals with a dual diagnosis, I used multi-modal arts practices in small group workshops to co-create understanding about what safety and wellness mean for residents. My aim was to be informed by the lived experience of the residents and the context of the organisation in a collaborative multi-modal process that considered the many ways in which knowledge is generated and shared. What emerged was recognition of the powerful way in which the arts help move us beyond the limits of verbal language and act as a vehicle to explore, engage and reflect on individuals' lived experience of mental illness. Finally, this paper considers how this co-constructed experience has shaped my emerging therapeutic identity, and emphasises client agency as a vital contribution to organisational process.

Human feeling is not a succession of discrete sensations; rather memory and anticipation are able to wield sensory impacts into a shifting stream of experience so that we may speak of a life of feeling as we do a life of thought. It is a common tendency to regard feeling and thought as opposed, the one registering subjective states, the other reporting on objective reality. In fact, they lie near the two ends of an experiential continuum, and both are ways of knowing. (Tuan, 2008, p.10)

Keywords

Mental health, arts therapy, recovery-orientated practice, multi-modal engagement, collaborative therapy, social justice

In 2018 I undertook a twelve-month placement at Mind Australia, working as a therapeutic arts practitioner with people with dual diagnosis, as part of the criteria for completing my Master in Therapeutic Arts Practice through The MIECAT Institute. My task was to identify, plan and develop an arts-based project that could contribute to the work that Mind does as an organisation, while representing the values and ways that multi-modal arts could be applied therapeutically in this setting.

Mind Australia's Brunswick facility is a Supported Independent Living (SIL) service for individuals whose capacity to live independently is diminished by long-term mental illness (Mind Australia, 2017). The property has 17 single-occupancy rooms for people who wish to live independently. Residents have 24/7 access to onsite staff who are there to assist them if

necessary. Individuals must be aged between 18 and 64 and have a personal interest in establishing and pursuing ways to develop the confidence to live independently and achieve self-initiated goals. Mind Australia adopts a recovery-orientated practice, which emphasises a person-centred, trauma-informed approach. The organisation values the residents' knowledge of their own stories and incorporates a collaborative approach to recovery.

My impetus for engaging therapeutically through the arts springs from my belief in the arts' capacity to move us beyond the limits of verbal language and cognition as a way to communicate or make sense of things. Engagement with the arts allows for the expression of many interpretations of the world simultaneously, and their processes offer a robust method of exploration for cumulative and emergent ways of knowing and understanding.

anzjat

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

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Full-length articles 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 14 were double anonymously peer-reviewed.



Published by the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association

ACN 63 072 954 388

PO Box 2391, North Brighton, VIC 3186, Australia

www.anzacata.org

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ISSN: 1833-9948

Design and production Vic Šegedin