

A Galaxy Project Initiative

Meeting the ‘Other You’s’

An exploration through objects, modelling clay and shadow puppetry as vehicles to developing mental well-being. An early intervention and prevention approach to dealing with drug and alcohol abuse

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‘Meeting the Other You’s’, came out of the Galaxy project, a Community Partnerships Initiative that was Federally funded. The auspice body was the Salvation Army Crossroads. The tender directives were basically about art outcomes in relation to drug and alcohol abuse and creating robust communities. For my part in the project, I chose to work with groups of young people focusing on core or root issues likely to catalyse drug/alcohol abuse. The focus of the work centred on mental wellbeing, rather than the symptomatic nature of drug/alcohol abuse itself, and drawing upon the robustness that can be encountered within group work at a micro community level. Focusing on mental well being was inspired by research showing a high correlation between a lack of sense of wellbeing and increase in mental illness, and the consequent abuse of drug and alcohol (Patton, 1997).

Factors Informing Model of Practice

Personal background

It is pertinent to say something about my background before introducing the project since this will give some idea of what informs me in my work.

In the earlier part of my career I was attached to the Education department for nine years, teaching Drama and English. I then pursued a career in theatre whilst completing a diploma in writing and editing.

Through my career in working with art mediums, the one thing that has always fuelled my attraction to them was the incidental therapeutic side effects catalysed by creative processes, and the opportunities for reframing offered through metaphor and symbolism.

Training

After studying psychology for a short period of time, I felt the approach to dealing with the human personality was from an analysing and pathologising perspective, so I transferred into a Grad. Dip. in counselling and human services. In this course I was able to follow up on my interest in Jung, Gestalt, Narrative, Solution focused and strength based practices, and Humanistic approaches to counselling.

After completing my Graduate Diploma, I undertook a Master of Arts in art therapy- a counselling modality that offered a way of being able to externalise and objectify the problem in order to find imaginative ways to renegotiate one's relationship with it through creative expression, symbol and metaphor.

Philosophical stance

The idea of actually listening to a client's story without the need to put them in a neat category is essential to my practice- a client centred approach, in which the client gets to own and explore and interpret their own story rather than a therapist imposed one. In doing this I am kept mindful that we are all grappling with our own personal stories and may have insights, but not answers to another's predicament. We, as therapists, can only guide or offer containment to a client in their journey to finding their own answers- our role essentially being as witness and facilitator towards self empowerment or expertise.

Current practice

In the practice of my work, even to this day, something of my teaching background still sneaks in- I use visual and written word resources as stimuli and often use an interventionist approach in terms of creating a structured environment when it comes to group work. To this end I might use specific media for exploring themes pertinent to the particular group of people I'm working with. A structured environment was particularly

relevant in terms of working with these young people, due to the lack of internal and external structure incumbent in mental illness, homelessness, and drug and alcohol abuse.

The Group

The young people that participated in this particular project named 'Finding Your Feet' were between 16 and 27. The participants had past or present issues with drug and alcohol, and/or mental illness, and homelessness. They were referred through mental health agencies, refuges and J Pet (an employment and training program).

The group ran over three terms, some members attending all three terms, some two, others a few weeks here and there. For the term that has just been completed, I had seven participants. It was important to have the group running with no more than eight to create as personalised and safe atmosphere as possible in order for people to feel a sense of trust in the process- an environment that people would feel free to open up and share. In this way the robustness that can be found in small groups could be tapped into in order to create maximum effectiveness in relation to developing mental wellbeing. The work that will be discussed in this paper gradually developed over this period of time.

In the previous terms, I started out with different subjects from week to week that the group elected that I come up with. We, the young participants and myself, decided in the previous term, that it would be easier to focus on an ongoing project. The shadow puppets had been started in this term and participants had felt the work to be quite powerful. It was obvious, however, and this was further reinforced by the participants, that going straight into making the puppets in relation to working with their shadow sides was sometimes a little too confronting, especially as I had introduced the idea as 'meeting one's inner demons'- this was particularly confronting for some of the participants who experience mental illness. For this particular term I had to find a way of slowing down the entry into this work.

Model of Practice

Soul, spirit and connection:

Understanding the motivating factors and framework underpinning the project are necessary before enlarging on a detailed description of the project itself. The essence of my work could, to some extent, be described as being informed by a sense of soul and spirit. In part, this is an acknowledgement of a connection with something greater,

whatever that may mean to the individual. The young people, as a result, often referred to God or a sense of spirituality that they drew upon in times of stress, and that they were comfortable about acknowledging out aloud within the group. This sense of connection, I feel, also covers the idea of a sense of community. Time and again, loneliness and isolation emerged within the group context as themes that catalysed real distress. This sense of disconnection was not only about being disconnected from their world and the wider community, but also from themselves. This had manifested practically as a fear of, or inability to socialise, work or apply for courses in order to increase their skill or knowledge base. These factors were either further complicating the effects of their mental illness and/or exacerbating drug/alcohol abuse.

In relation to drug and alcohol issues disconnection has been identified by research as a major contributing factor (Fuller, 1998). This was also a similar perception given by a group of young people last year, who were part of another project that Galaxy was operating focused on art images in relation to drug and alcohol abuse.

In setting up this particular Galaxy project and naming it 'Finding Your Feet', it was important to address this issue of disconnection. The arts in this context were used therapeutically, since they were employed as vehicles to explore the issues themselves, rather than being used as end products to illustrate the issues.

As already mentioned focusing on core issues catalysing drug and alcohol abuse and positive life skills, rather than the abuse itself was imperative, since research also indicates that those programs that don't mention drugs, and instead promote youth development and life skills are found to be more effective (Fuller, 1998). Acknowledging a sense of soul and spirit either through a community or individual context was important in terms of nurturing a sense of connection and belonging.

Pessimism and optimism:

Aside from the issue of disconnection, which emerged from the running of the group last year, as previously mentioned, art outcomes that focused on actual drug and alcohol abuse made the young people feel 'depressed and more likely to use'. Andrew Fuller, a social worker and author of "Thriving Not just Surviving", observed that 'adolescents often need to believe in things absolutely' (Fuller, 98, p.47), so that 'stories of woe and

despair are presented as if unconquerable'. The pessimism generated as result of a direct focus on drug and alcohol abuse seemed more likely to reinforce the cycle of abuse.

In running the groups this year a sense of optimism, not Pollyanna style where hardship is denied or ignored, but an optimism in terms of focusing on strengths was important.

'Seligman defines optimism in terms of how people explain themselves their successes and failures. People who are optimistic see a failure as due to something that can be changed so that they can succeed at something next time around, while pessimists take the blame for failure, ascribing it to some lasting characteristic they are helpless to change' (Goleman, 95, p.88).

A sense of empowerment or inner strength was therefore important, as well as a recognition of choice in terms of perception of a situation. To this end I chose to focus on resilience within my project's guidelines.

Resilience:

Resilience can be described as 'the happy knack of being able to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life. Even when hardship and adversity arise, it is as if the person has an elasticised rope around them to rebound when things get low and to maintain their sense of who they are as a person' (Fuller, 98, p.75).

Aside from the importance of creating a culture of connection, hope and optimism, the protective factors contributing towards resilience were woven into the groups operation-factors such as:

- The promotion of self esteem
- The development of a positive peer support group and a culture of cooperation
- The provision of a forum in which to express issues that have been otherwise difficult to express, in order to discover constructive and creative ways of communication
- The creation of good relationships with adults outside the family ie. The group facilitator and support worker
- The development of valued skills that may have been previously overlooked: strong empathic and intuitive abilities, sense of humour, communication skills, competence and creativity- factors that can be recognised and reinforced in a group situation

Narrative therapy:

Apart from an emphasis on developing resilience, narrative therapy was also employed as a method of enquiry to map out the dimensions of the 'other you's'. This will be further developed in the actual discussion on the 'other you's'.

As this paper is not focused on narrative therapy specifically however, I acknowledge that I'm not giving it the due attention it would normally deserve. Suffice to say it was an invaluable tool in furthering the process of making aspects of getting to know the 'other you's' more tangible, and went hand in glove with the use of the creative art therapies.

Creative art therapies:

As an art therapist, I felt that the creative arts would be very relevant to exploring the issues contributing to the erosion of mental wellbeing. They offer creative ways to perceive new angles, get fresh insights, gain back a sense of control, as well as a sense of tangibility in relation to emotional issues. Added to this a sense of upliftment of the spirit through the use of

colour and the sharing and discovery of common images or themes, can also be generated. In other words creative art therapies can help build on emotional intelligence in order to develop greater resilience and more positive living skills.

Some art therapists will observe I have chosen to employ a structured approach in the use of art therapy. This enabled me to create a safe and contained space for some participants who's own internal boundaries can be sometimes quite fragile or who's external environment had few boundaries, catalysed by homelessness, mental illness or past and present drug and alcohol use. This particular structure worked well in this situation and suited my particular way of operating. A looser structure may work for others and I am certainly not against this way of operating.

Media Used

The media employed in this project ranged from created art such as prose, poems and Leunig's cartoons; objects, creative writing, resource kits such as photographs, postcards and strength cards, and the use of modelling clay. Through these mediums I was able to offer a more staggered, safe and contained way in, before attempting the shadow puppetry.

The objects:

The objects I use are made up of different bits and pieces that I have gradually collected, ranging from small animals, figures, to sea sponges and fuses. I have collected these over the years, plus received many donations. I use them for their powerful metaphoric value in order to set the scene and find ways into this subject matter. In this case to get the young people thinking about their 'Other You's'.

Created art:

I begun the term with Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech and T.S. Eliot's seasons poems (*see appendix*) so as to create a strong platform from which to dive in, arming the warriors appropriately, so to speak, for the odyssey of meeting with themselves and each other. This took place over the next 9 weeks.

These pieces of writing were explored both through image and prose- the season's poem to address the idea and importance of meeting dark places, and Mandela's speech to set the stage for the participants tapping into their own wealth of strengths and personal power.

The idea of the 'other you's' was inspired specifically by Leunig's cartoons (*see appendix*). He created two of them, the first one dealing with what Jung would call the shadow side, those sides of us that we'd rather not know about; sides of ourselves with which we tend to have rather tenuous relationships, given the discomfort they can cause, but from which we can derive strength and wisdom. The second 'other you' portrays our more redeeming, nurturing side, the side that can be our saving grace that reminds us of those aspects of ourselves that make our relationship with life and ourselves more solid and confident.

In order to identify and help define their shadow 'other you's' I used a narrative therapy approach whereby I asked the group to actually name them. Descriptions such as: 'scared other you', 'isolated other you' etc. were used to this end. Having done this, I asked them to name the friends of this 'other you' in terms of qualities such as, lack of confidence, anxiety, self-criticism etc., but also what stood up to this other you- qualities such as: self confidence, joy and spontaneity.

Once having gone through this process, I introduced the redeeming 'other you'. We followed the same process as we'd done for the first 'other you': objects, modelling them

and the friend's and enemies. I also asked them to identify situations the shadow 'other you's' were most likely to be apparent, and which enemies they could draw upon to support them in standing up to their 'shadow other you's', eg. confidence, conviction, tenacity etc.

Modelling clay:

Having picked objects to represent their 'other you's', I asked the participants to pick a colour in the modelling clay and endow it with the attributes of these particular 'other you's', and record the thoughts, feelings and observations that arose out of this process. The metaphoric significance of the modelling clay came out of the fact then when you first start working with it, it is very resistant- very much like our shadow 'other you's'. The more you work with it however, warming it up and familiarising yourself with it, the more malleable it becomes, a similar notion to the shadow 'other you'- the more you warm to it and familiarise yourself with it the more manageable it can become.

Shadow puppetry:

After going through the above process, I asked the participants to pick one object that somehow incorporated both their 'other you's'. I then asked them to create shadow puppets that combined these 'other you's' and to write an ode for their 'you'.

The metaphor of using shadow puppetry is probably self evident- utilising something that reflects the shadowy qualities of the 'other you's'. Jung observed that not just those of our negative traits could be hidden in our shadows but also our 'so called' more positive traits. By having the shadows literally brought out of the shadow and made transparent so to speak, we get to be privy to what we have hidden away. The process of making the shadow puppets is actually about cutting into areas of the cardboard in order to let light through to perceive shape and colour within the dark areas. In order to see the light however, it is necessary to have the dark parts that don't let through light. In this way the metaphor of the two being necessary to create a whole and therefore an effective shadow puppet was significant to the process of bringing together the 'other you's'.

After having gone through this process, participants spoke of not being able to have one without the other and that both were part of a whole, in reference to their 'other you's'.

In showing the shadow puppets some participants chose just to display the images without using words and without trying to explain them. This was important that they felt

able to do this. They not only could feel in control of the process, but also be allowed to familiarise themselves with their particular shadows in their own time. There can often be good reasons for keeping things in the shadow and letting them emerge more visibly in their own time if they've helped contribute to an individual's defence and survival system. Outing them too quickly, so to speak, can possibly do more harm than good. I, in fact had one participant who felt safer observing others shadow puppets rather than making his own.

Outcomes

Through the employment of these various art media, participants were learning a new language with which to express their emotions and concerns- the media catalysing the discovery of a verbal language that for some of the participants, had been previously unavailable. It could be surmised therefore that this process not only contributed to building greater connections with one's self but also with others. A side effect of the process also included the seeds of personal resilience and optimism for future development. This summation is leant evidence by responses given by participants interviewed in the evaluation of the project (interviews taped on video). Four of the seven participants have now gone on to enrol in courses for next year, which they attributed directly to the confidence gained from being involved with 'Finding your Feet'. In the words of one participant- 'I now feel confidence in my creativity and to be able to meet my dark spaces without the fear of getting lost... that there is wisdom and strength to be found' (Carla).

I will finish with a quote from John Tarrant's (1999) book pertinently titled 'The Light Inside the Dark' :

"The dark clings like lice in a schoolboy's hair- it grows fond; it doesn't want to leave our warm bodies; it hinders and assaults us. Just when we are starting to relax, night will reassert itself. One way it returns is through our painful moods. Perhaps these moods are a visitation from the soul, which has begun to feel neglected; perhaps they are just a feature of the landscape, like the frightening paths that Psyche must walk. We can't do much about them, just wield the sword and return to the road. By struggling with them we build confidence and our sense of worthiness. Even if we are again overcome by the

darkness, if we have offered a sincere struggle, then we are fortified, we are stronger when the wheel turns once more' (p.92).

Through an understanding of this journey, perhaps the young people I have worked with will continue to get to know and recognise their dark places as a part of life and growth, and embrace it rather than escape from it through drug and alcohol abuse- the path of mental wellbeing becoming one that is a familiar landscape, where their feet can find traction.