

Open Art Therapy Studios on Campus: A Case Study

Duanita G Eleniak PhD Sarah Canning BA Demill Keevil BFA Raman Samra BFA

Adler University, Vancouver BC Canada

Submission # 1168

deleniak@adler.edu scanning@my.adler.edu akeevil@my.adler.edu rsamra@my.adler.edu

Abstract: *A case study of Open Art Therapy Studios at Adler University, Vancouver BC Canada campus demonstrates the effectiveness of creating community and connection to increase Well-being of students, staff, faculty, alumni and community partners. Open Studios, their background and rationale are described in the paper, as is the story of one way that the University realizes its mission of training socially responsible practitioners. New ways of evaluating educational programs teaching meta-verbal skills whose curriculum is based on relating with creativity and imagination are encouraged within a new Worldview which allows subjectivity its rightful place and which honors the illogical and irrational as valid and critical elements.*

INTRODUCTION

Alfred Adler's key ideas about maintaining healthy functioning center around the ideas that fundamentally humans all have a need to belong (Ferguson, 2010) and that a sense of cohesive community is crucial to Well-Being (King & Shelley, 2008). Thus the importance of a positive community atmosphere on campus has always been valued at Adler University.

When the Masters of Counselling Psychology:Art Therapy (MCP:AT) program began on the Vancouver, British Columbia Canada campus in 2014 it was decided that the value of 'community' would be enhanced by exploring the role of art making in campus community development.

Studio One, the new classroom for the counselling art therapy program, was opened during non-class times to students from all programs, staff, faculty, Alumni and community partners. The MCP: Art Therapy students were trained to provide Open Art Therapy Studios and shifts in community feeling and connectedness began to be realized almost immediately.

In this paper the Open Art Therapy Studios held on campus will be described. Following will be a description of the key positive results experienced. Finally, areas for exploration and further research will be identified.

OPEN ART THERAPY STUDIOS ON CAMPUS

For MCP: Art Therapy Students at Adler University in Vancouver, Canada training begins 'at home' in Studio One, the classroom that became an art studio for students in the dual degree graduate program in counseling and art therapy.

As part of their initial training, students in the program learn to serve the community by doing a Social Justice Practicum (SJP). They go into agencies and countries in need and provide whatever help is necessary. When the MCP: Art Therapy program began, the Dean, Dr. Larry

Axelrod, thought it would be a good idea to offer a SJP and service to our very own school community by opening Studio One to our staff, faculty, alumni and students from all of the programs. And thus began our commitment to community service and community building on campus. Little did we know when we began what absolute wonders this idea would bring to our school and to the field of art therapy education.

An Atmosphere of Peace: I will always remember walking into Studio One during the winter holiday Season the very first year it opened when the students created [‘Winter White’](#) (Eleniak, 2014). My heart overflowed with joy when I realized that these incredible students had worked with aesthetics – line, shape and color- in order to create an environment which induced a feeling of PEACE that was palpable to the experience of all who entered the space. It was a rainy Vancouver day and the light coming through the floor to ceiling windows was minimal at best. Everything inside the room was white. The tablecloths were white, the art materials were white; even all of the food on the side buffet was white.

As I relaxed into the vibration that the students and their brilliant site supervisor had set, I realized that I was getting the same feeling that I got when I walked at night in the moonlight in fresh fallen snow. There was a pregnant hush in the air. There was a softening and stillness in the world they had created which gave me the feeling of pure peace! Love coursed through me as I realized (as only a proud teacher can) that my students had “got it”. They had deeply integrated all of the teachings on the importance of creating a therapeutic environment to a profound level. My work as teacher felt complete. They were becoming ‘healers’.

A Place of Refuge: I will never forget another miracle I witnessed during those magical hours at Winter White which happened when a student who had just experienced a powerful event in her personal life wandered into the Open Studio in shock. It was as if she had been hit by a truck, and it was just moments before she had to write her final exams. I watched the beauty in action (wishing I could record it for Youtube) as the MCP: Art Therapy students sat the student down and began a dance behind and to the side of her. As the student sat and spoke of her woes, the MCP: Art Therapy students placed by her hand a cup of tea, in front of her some paper, by the other side of her some pens and paints. They placed her in a healing bubble with everything that she needed to calm and ground herself literally at her fingertips. I watched the MCP: Art Therapy students move in silent knowing providing the tools of relief. I saw the color come back into the student’s face as she talked and created and allowed the healing energy of Winter White to soothe her very being. As the student left, now ready to take her final exams, I marveled at this profound scene of community and connection that I had been honored to witness.

An Opportunity to Share: And finally, I love to remember when the Admissions staff came through Winter White with a group of prospective students and their families who were on a tour of the school after attending the Open House. I watched as the MCP: Art Therapy students (who had been prepared that such a tour was going to happen) worked as a team to

make these people feel welcome. The MCP: Art Therapy student who had been elected prior to the tour coming in to act as ‘leader’ for the experience got up out of her seat and encouraged the group forward to have all of them totally enter the space. Very often people will simply stand at the door or come in only a little way and gentle encouragement is needed to bring them forward into the experience. In her “Winter White” fur hat (and with the large gestures that only a counselor interested in movement and art therapy can do), Leanne Bird directed the groups attention to the 2014 Cohort Mandala which the students created on their very first day of their program only months earlier. With ease and in the spirit of fun, the MCP: Art Therapy students shared their experience of the program with these newcomers who were ‘peeking’ into this world of Adler University and art therapy. These prospective students gained valuable answers to their questions of what life was like as a student in the MCP: Art Therapy program. Even more importantly, just by being in that Open Studio environment they gained a full body experience of what our students are capable of doing and what our Adler community in the school is all about!

Open Studio Description: For Open Studio MCP: AT students create a space where art materials are available for the Campus community to engage in art-making. The student facilitators are there to provide inspiration and assist participants in their creative process. The facilitators strive to ensure the Studio remains a safe and positive space for all who enter. Whenever the Studio is open, simple art materials are available and student counselling/art therapists serve as artists in residence greeting everyone who enters with an attitude of “radical hospitality.” There may also be special events in the studio, such as classes, workshops, and guest speakers.

Open Studios are accessible to students across all programs, staff, faculty, alumni, and community partners. The groups are drop-in. Participants can come and go and make as much or as little use of the time, support, and art materials offered as they like. New participants are welcomed warmly to have an experience of therapeutic art.

The Approach: The Open Studio approach is based on the Adlerian values of cooperation, compassion for others, and contribution to the good of society. It is grounded in Adler’s concept of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, which can be roughly translated into two separate terms: community feeling and social interest. Community feeling refers to “the warm, empathic bond people have with one another and with the world they live in—the *feeling* of being connected to others” (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999, p. 113). Social interest is action-based and refers to “what individuals are driven to do by the sense of community and belonging they feel” (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999, p. 113). In Open Studio, both community feeling and social interest are emphasized. Action is taken by the MCP:AT students to ensure an environment where community feeling is present.

The Focus on Environment: MCP: AT students are trained in the philosophy of Dr. Marie-Jose Dhaese (2011) who asserts that the environment contributes to 80% of healing. The Open Studio environment is intentionally focused on acceptance. Student facilitators are trained to create an atmosphere that promotes a sense of peace and safety. Many participants view the Open Studio as a safe haven on campus where they can go to relax and rejuvenate.

There is a focus on esthetics every time MCP:AT students set up an Open Studio. Lighting is intentionally adjusted to set the mood and tone for the day. Shape is considered in the positioning

of desks, easels, and display of materials. Sound is emphasized by either creating an atmosphere in which silence is honored or by playing soft non-lyrical music. Attention is given to smell through light aromatherapy scents. The temperature in the room is adjusted if it feels too hot or cool. Every sense is given careful thought.

The Tea and Cookies: In Open Studio, there is a tradition of “breaking bread together.” Tea and cookies draw people into the studio and facilitate conversation. This is often how the creative process starts. Participants sit down and are immediately offered a cup of tea and something to eat. They can sit and relax over a cup of tea while they consider what art materials are calling out to them that day. The array of delicate china teacups with mismatched patterns is a signature element of the Open Studio at Adler University.

Encouragement: One of Adler’s key concepts is encouragement, and this is given great weight by MCP: AT students in their facilitation of Open Studios. Watts and Pietrzak (2000) note several important elements of the emphasis on encouragement in Adlerian therapy:

The encouragement-focused process helps build hope and the expectancy of success in clients by demonstrating concern, active listening, and empathy; communicating respect and confidence; focusing on strengths, assets, and resources; helping clients generate perceptual and behavioral alternatives; focusing on efforts and progress; and helping clients see the humor in life experiences. (as cited in Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006, p. 39)

In Open Studio, this may take the form of encouraging a community member in distress from issues in his or her personal life, encouraging a student who is highly stressed because of academic expectations or encouraging hesitant artists as they delve into the creative process. There are endless ways one can encourage another, and Open Studio is an environment in which MCP:AT students do just that.

Attitude: Attitude is everything. MCP:AT students are trained to maintain a positive and productive space for every person who enters. As mentioned previously, Open Studios operate with an attitude of “radical hospitality.” MCP:AT students are there to enthusiastically serve the community, whether this means providing support, offering instruction in various forms of art-making, or simply pouring a hot cup of tea. When people walk by the studio, it is common for MCP: AT students to usher them in and simply offer them five minutes to sip some tea and unwind. Participants may pick up a pencil and begin to draw, or they may leave when their teacup is empty. Either way, radical hospitality has been offered and a welcoming space has been experienced creating an effect on community.

Location: Open Studios at Adler University’s Vancouver campus take place in Studio One, the classroom for the MCP: AT program. Studio One is a space that was designed with the creation of art and community in mind. Tabletops and easels are available to work on and the cupboards are full of art supplies. There are also shelves for art storage. Each MCP: AT student has their own labelled space. The uncarpeted floors can easily be cleaned, and there is a sink in the room. There is ample natural light with an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. Studio One is located next to the student lounge, so students often pass by Studio One on their breaks from class.

Format. Open Studios are held during weekdays when students, staff and faculty are on campus. The schedule is subject to change based on student availability and requests from community members.

Number of MCP: AT Students Co-facilitators: This number is dependent on the number of participants. Two to four students facilitate the majority of Open Studios. This number may be lower on slow days and higher on busy days.

Supervision: MCP: AT students are supervised while learning how to facilitate Open Studios. Students are required one hour of supervision for every five hours of direct work with participants in Open Studios. Weekly group supervision and individual supervision is provided. Group supervision is an opportunity for MCP:AT students to gather and enhance their learning with the valuable input of a qualified supervisor. Students may work in this time to run ideas by the group, as well as to talk about the benefits and rewards of hosting Open Studios.

Required reading: In preparation for running Open Studios, students are required to read Cathy Moon's (2002) book, *Studio Art Therapy: Cultivating the Artist Identity in the Art Therapist*. Moon (2002) writes of a model rooted in the studio environment and delves into several key topics, including: the importance of the art therapist cultivating his or her identity as an artist; envisioning and constructing the studio space; the relational aesthetic; and the social responsibility entailed in being an art therapist. According to Moon (2002), "to consider our work environments as works of art brings an intentional focus to the creation of therapeutic space and engages our artist identity in the process" (p. 83).

Pat Allen's (2001) chapter in *Approaches to Art Therapy: Theory and Technique* (2nd ed.) is also a useful source for information regarding an Open Studio approach. Allen (2001) discusses the spiritual elements involved in the Open Studio process.

KEY POSITIVE IMPACTS ON THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

Providing a community art space on campus has resulted in the following key positive impacts:

1. **Social Support:** Open Studios provided campus community members a place where they could go to get to know each other. They could share their common experiences as graduate students. They could enjoy getting to know each other outside of their formal roles as faculty, staff and students made art together. The social support experienced allowed for enhanced Well-Being on campus.
2. **Emotional Support:** The enhanced engagement between students, staff, faculty, alumni and community partners allowed a sense of community belonging to evolve: *"This sense of belonging ... can only be won by being involved, by cooperating, and experiencing, and being useful to others. Out of this emerges a lasting, genuine feeling of worthiness."* (Adler, 1926)

Promotion of Relaxation: Having a community art space where MCP:AT students consciously created a physical environment promoting relaxation impacted outcomes such as reduction of student anxiety. Students would come before their exams to color a quick mandala, have a cup of tea and center. They reported doing better on their exams because they took a moment to be still, breathe and relax before going in. They also

reported enjoying having a place to go to to debrief during particularly anxious times, after exams, during periods where lots of assignments were due or after particularly difficult experiences in the field.

Increased Caring for others: Boundaries between programs of study dissolved as people got to know each other. There was a perceived increase in harmony between students, faculty and staff that participated. A spirit of cooperation on campus was fostered.

Increased Sense of Hope and Positivity: The increased sense of belonging to an accepting community of shared experience focusing on positive interests assisted to help campus community members improve their sense of personal well-being, a quality that they reported flowed into their personal lives and their ability to do homework more effectively.

Empowerment: As the shared sense of community increased Open Studios became a safe space where members took ownership and created the kind of campus atmosphere of the University that they wanted to ‘belong’ to.

3. **Opportunity to Engage as Socially Responsible Practitioners:** The “home-like” environment created in Studio One fostered an atmosphere which drew people together in conversations, many of which focused around shared interests of social justice and social change. The atmosphere was conducive to contemplation as the campus community imagined new initiatives in the larger universal community. It became an arena of development in becoming a socially responsible practitioner. It is also important to note that the conscious creation of a connected community in the educational environment models the importance of self-care for students, a lesson that will hopefully flow over to their work when they graduate.
4. **Promotion of Creative Thought, Conversations and Community Art Making:** Having a “public home” space on campus allowed people to drop in, share, work, play and enjoy each other’s company. In the peace and sense of ease that ensued, community members opened to their creative life force and began to act from a place of inspiration. Enhanced creativity fostered inspiration on campus that effused the atmosphere and enhanced learning capacity.
5. **Integration of Adler University’s Strategic Plan:** On a larger organizational level, Adler University has a 2015-2020 Strategic Plan which “charts the direction for realizing our [mission and our vision](#) to be the leading academic institution advancing socially responsible practice, healthy communities, and a more just society.” With such a grand plan it becomes even more important that we begin by increasing Well-Being and health with our own community.

Innovation in Education and Community Engagement: Having Open Studios on campus integrates into one of the plans Key Strategies: “Create *Excellence* and innovation in education and community engagement”. The Open Art Therapy Studios are an innovative initiative which begins with community engagement at home, on our campus.

Wellness of Students and Improved Support of the Learning Environment: Open Art Therapy Studios integrates with the goals of Adler University Strategic Plan which includes “the development of Excellence Plans in ten areas, addressing the wellness of students and the improved support of the learning and work environment”. Open Studios allow us to maintain a healthy campus community ready to move into the community at large to continue the pioneering work of Alfred Adler.

Enhanced Adlerian Experience: While surrounded with an ‘Adlerian’ atmosphere amidst peers committed to social justice and social change, students at Adler University actually study all of the traditional theoretical approaches in psychology and are able to choose their personal theoretical orientation from among them. Students have only one course specifically dedicated to teaching Adlerian principles.

This has been identified as an area which needed to be fortified if we were to be able to ensure our commitment to training socially responsible practitioners. Open Art Therapy Studios are one of the ways that students are able to experience Adlerian values at a deeper level by working with art. They do this through our most popular Open Studio special workshop called *Cows Can Be Purple*. This is an 8-week experiential Adlerian art therapy group following the way of Sadie (Tee) Dreikurs, author of *Cows Can Be Purple* (1986). Participants learn tools for personal development and work with traditional Adlerian art therapy methods including early recollections, birth order, and lifestyle work.

A donation is requested to attend this special Open Art Therapy Studio. All the money collected is used to buy art supplies for community practicum sites who have no budget to buy their own. This element further reinforces the idea of social responsibility for our campus community and allows for direct community outreach.

The program has become very popular with students from the other counselling programs who express their appreciation of experiencing work with meta-verbal methods.

AREAS FOR FUTURE FOCUS/RESEARCH

1. Ferguson's (2010) research can be expanded upon if the connections between the enhancement of concern for campus community members and the strengthening of cognitive restructuring procedures were explored.
2. Reilly's (Flood & Coleman, 2015) research on arts-based learning in non-arts classrooms and creating multiple ways of knowing and increasing creative thinking in graduate education could be expanded upon particularly as teachers from other programs at Adler University continue to invite the MCP: Art Therapy students into their classrooms after experiencing the enhanced Well-being of community feeling in Open Studios.
3. The evaluation of education programs in which meta-verbal skills are taught require research paradigms which can allow for subjectivity and which appreciate the illogical and irrational components of creativity and imagination. We recommend that future research be focused on the creation and development of this type of program evaluation. We assert that these program evaluations need to be created outside of the current Newtonian Paradigm, the worldview which is sometimes referred to as "Scientific Materialism" (Mack, 2002). This worldview honors the "scientific method" which is based in the assumption of 'objectivity', a concept which quantum physics has disputed. The 'evidence' supporting such educational programs' efficacy would need to be based in the subjective experience and 'real life' differences that happen for all those involved in the transformative effects of an educational program whose curriculum is based in teaching relationship with creativity and imagination. This Open Studio story provides context:

Towards A New Vision of Program "Evaluation": As Program Director I was graced to be in the right place at the right time as two students from another program at Adler University poked their heads in the door during the special Open Studio held during the holiday season at the same time all of the final exams and projects are due for students on campus. I watched as the MCP: Art Therapy students moved into action. Working with their well honed Adlerian skills of encouragement, I witnessed them "draw" the two students into the space.

The students had been burning the midnight oil for days as they did their studying and completed their papers for semester end. They began as most people do, by saying why they could not come into the studio for even a moment. They had studying to do. They had too much work. They were too "stressed out". And as they resisted I watched the MCP: Art Therapy students work their "magic". They listened to them and their woes while at the same time moving with intentionality and sureness. It was their job in Open Studio to provide a moment's relief for these students and to assist them in self-care knowing how hard it is to remember to take care of oneself especially in "crunch times" like semester end in a graduate program!

It brought a tear to my eye to see these MCP: Art Therapy students take such gentle care of their campus colleagues. I thought, "It is at school where we must learn to take care of each other. It is at school where we must remember to teach ourselves and our colleagues to take care of ourselves. It is at school where we must have an experience of being reminded to take a moment for self-care."

I listened to the student's words and could hear them as mine especially at times when I have a mountain of work to accomplish. I heard them give all the good reasons why they had **no time**. No time for fun. For interesting conversation. For a cup of tea. To take care of themselves. To relax. To enjoy. To love life. To regenerate. To imagine. To be peaceful. **Just no time!**

I watched and participated as several of us stood up to match the students in their standing posture just inside the door of Studio One. They told us how their life was as students in their program and how they needed to just work and focus on getting back to their studies. We listened while we moved with our knowing that their studies were about to go so much better for them because they actually were taking 5 minutes to stand in the atmosphere of peace the MCP: Art Therapy students had consciously created in Studio One. They were at that very moment standing in, breathing in, relaxing in and absorbing the peace of Winter White.

We gave oranges and our "free range eggs" for them to take as they went back to the student lounge to study. We listened as they de-briefed about the lack of sleep they were getting and the level of pressure they were feeling as they moved through academia. As counselors we listened deeply. In a most natural way the MCP: Art Therapy students practiced the microskills of counseling and the students returned to their work refreshed.

Days later I bumped into these same two students by the elevators. I had just interviewed a prospective new MCP: Art Therapy student so I introduced them to her. I cannot even describe in words the love that welled up in my heart as these same two students told the prospective student how wonderful the MCP: Art Therapy program is and how much the Open Studios do for them and for their fellow students in the Adler U campus community. Then one of the students turned to look directly at me in the eye and she said with the utmost of conviction "Those Open Studios are a life-saver!" I was moved beyond words! How I appreciated that encounter. It affirmed all we were doing as faculty, staff and students in the brand new program. Who could ask for any better of a program evaluation?! (Now how do you capture that quantitatively?)

CONCLUSION

Having Open Studios on Adler University campus is an important component for training Masters in Counselling Psychology/Art Therapy in engagement skills, basic counselling micro-skills, the creation of healing physical environments, and to assist people to move through creative blocks. Having a public home space on campus for students from all programs, staff, faculty, Alumni and community partners assists to foster a strong sense of belonging which, according to Adler is essential to healthy functioning for human beings. Open Studios help to provide the campus community with social and emotional support as well the opportunity to explore becoming a socially responsible practitioner beginning in one's own community. Through community art making creativity among community members was enhanced. Open Studios are a living way that elements of Adler University's overall five year strategic plan are operationalized in order to remain a leading edge institution committed to walking its talk about the provision of innovative education within a supportive community committed to social justice.

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