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Portraits of Social Strangers

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Abstract: This paper discusses the use of art forms, as a way of Ateaching and preparing@ people experiencing life transitions. The study describes how a gay male graduate student experiences his own recent life shift alongside those explored by two recent immigrant women from Australia and Taiwan to Vancouver, Canada.

Introduction

As we pass by someone we do not know on the street, we imagine. We look at them, their clothes, their skin, their eyes, their walk...and we imagine. We construct a holistic sense of others based upon our prior experience. Generally, we are not accurate, yet, we take our senses as our guide. This is particularly true when some of that difference can be hidden from view. However, there is a way of uncovering the hidden "strangeness" between or among people. One such instance can be explored during the learning process and our role as teachers/facilitators.

Art as Adult Education

Identities, reflected by an individual's lifeworld, is unique to that person. Yet, these perspectives do not remain fixed, rather shifting dramatically as in the case of "culture shock". The source of this shock is when an individual realized he/she is not having their identity validated - their new sense of self (Ishiyama, 1995). This study is designed to remedy this limitation.

A basic assumption supporting art therapy is that it is a kind of "safety net" for projections and that these images hold meaning and value not only for the person but, potentially, for the art counselling group (Zinker, 1978). Another presupposition which reinforces the art-as-pedagogy process is that each person constructs his/her own, individual inner world and because of their self and unique perception creates their own version of "reality" or "truth". Perception is reality within this interpretivist paradigm of being-in-the-world (Boshier, 1994; Zinker, 1978). Within art therapy, the participant gradually realizes how inner assumptions determine how one's interaction patterns develop (Fryrear & Corbit, 1989). Gestalt, like art therapy, is an educaive counselling technique based upon humanistic and existential phenomenological philosophies (Waller, 1993). Both these therapeutic interventions hold five similar beliefs as being central: human actions are not predetermined; there is an importance of choice within human living; it is essential to take responsibility for one's actions; death is inevitable and the fact that everyone dies gives meaning to our life projects of living (Fischer, 1973; Hogan, 1997; Lindauer, 1998; Zinker, 1978).

The imagery left behind after the painting sessions provided value for the group members to reflect back upon themselves through their work at fixed moments in time (Case & Dalley, 1992;

Waller, 1993; Zinker, 1978). The use of concrete imagery and pictures is a language more universal than abstract letters and words. Across cultures, symbols often convey similar messages (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). In addition to painting I also incorporate music because this encourages participants to remain focused in the present moment of painting and less on what the painting "should" look like (Gawain, 1995; McNiff, 1998). Music plays upon creative, intuitive, and emotive mental processing while minimizing the logical, verbal, and censoring aspect (Csikszentimihalyi, 1996; Gawain, 1995).

The Study

This study took place within a community centre attached to a Vancouver neighbourhood. This site was selected because of its centrality within the city, its accessibility, and the availability of rooms for the anticipated study period. The participants were drawn from Vancouver, British Columbia and had to fit certain "criteria". Each person had to have arrived in Canada on a permanent basis within the preceding six to nine months of the study taking place. This was done to capture, according to cross cultural counselling literature, the deepest phase of the culture shock transition - a period when deep and transitory emotions were most profound and evident. Each immigrant had to be prepared to take part in a ten week art therapy/"education" program which met twice a week for a period of four hours per session. Also, each person had to willingly interpret their own works of art orally (removing the requirement for fluency in written English) as well as a willingness to share with the art group their very personal experiences, emotions, thoughts and stories primarily on a one-to-one basis with me, although some group sharing was done as well.

My role as the originator of the study was as co-participant, rather than as "leader." In order to achieve independent functioning I established the overall structure of the group and then allowed the group to take itself where it most needed to explore. The research process included the following:

- Initial contact with the research site to determine availability and costs.

- Posted advertisements in community newspapers for participants, distributed flyers to all the immigrant settlement houses, multicultural organizations, and ethnic media outlets and drew from these responses for the final cohort.

- Met with each participant informally and then with all participants as a group. Determined access into each person's private lives. As part of this familiarization of the participants with me and vice versa, I carried out an informal, casual, half day painting workshop.

- Each participant was invited to use the painting process to create illustrations of how they perceived their cultural identity. Attached to this art was a brief written/oral interpretation, done by the creator of the art, of how this painting reflected how each within the group of three saw themselves. The outcome of this exercise was a life-size "body image" painting which reflected how they saw themselves in that particular moment.

A week before the study I met with each participant individually.

After each workshop, I took the paintings home to be photographed in order to be returned to the respective artist in time for the next workshop. After the second workshop each person took home their original painting from the previous session to tape record their interpretation of the work with two key thoughts in mind - What was going on in their minds while they were painting (process)?; and What did the painting, as it appeared at the end of the workshop, mean to them (product)? This process was repeated several times throughout the study period.

One month after the final workshop session, the study group met to complete a second "body image" to relay how they perceived themselves as being, culturally. Self-selected during this meeting was their singular most influential or pivotal painting which best illustrated their moment of greatest revelation or clarity.

Throughout the process I reflected upon my experiences and participated in the painting process as well with my own personal interpretations.

Themes Arising From The Art of Social Strangers

The first participant, **Jasmine**, was a single, female, "40-something", professional, recent émigré from Taiwan. There she had been employed as a magazine editor for one of that country's largest periodicals; in Canada she was working as a sales clerk at minimum wage and as a freelance newspaper for one of Vancouver's largest daily Chinese newspapers.

Green and magenta. Green is balanced on its own (Wills, 1993). The colour magenta symbolizes a "letting go" or of shedding one's personal aspects of our selves and is a symbol that we are growing in a different direction while letting go of where we have come from to some degree.

Black shadow figure. The shadow is considered an absence of light. Within Chinese cultures the shadow holds an equality equal to the yin aspect. To have a shadow, in this culture, is considered a lack of personal purity. A shadow is something that is without substance, being a signifier of one's existence.

Shadow images, circles, and dots to symbolize flowers and aspects of Jasmine's self - and body outlines. The flower, in Chinese societies was a symbol of the passive principle taught to women of those cultures. The flower is also a sign of love and harmony within a primeval state (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994).

Crowds - this symbolized how complicated her life had become as the result of her immigration to Canada. In part, she states this was why she sought out the large Chinese community in Vancouver. However, here, the Chinese culture was fraught with difficulty because of the strong animosity between mainland Chinese people and people from Taiwan.

Home. Jasmine sees a vision of home as being an oasis within and away from the larger culture. Yet, Jasmine saw herself as being locked out of the "house." She "seeks what she cannot get [and] gets what she does not seek."

Body images - which delineate the beginning and end points of our time together, were dramatically depicted by Jasmine. Jasmine's first painting, the body image done at the beginning, shows a body outline being painted over and virtually obliterated. The second body image showed Jasmine's body image in a dramatically different light. Her body outline is a bold, energetic red, filled in by solid, bright colours.

Pivotal Painting - The moment of greatest clarity, or inspiration was the painting entitled Just Do It. Her repeated and emphatic phrase of "Just do it", was captured in those red (denoting vital energy) hand prints, as well as within her interpretation of this painting, reflecting a sense of clarity and cohesion.

Zinnia was a "20-something," female, recently married, recent émigré, with a university education in industrial design, from Australia. Just prior to the study she was married to a Danish Canadian; near the end of the study she found her "dream job" working in a high end furniture design firm in Vancouver.

Orange, Zinnia identified as being both feminine energy and a symbol of her native Australia. Colour therapy points out orange as being the colour of femininity, as well as the colour symbolizing the energy associated with creation (Wills, 1993). Purple is always linked with orange in Zinnia's paintings. The colour purple has been said to symbolize self-respect, dignity, and a realm of spiritual awakening or awareness as connected to our sense of self (Wills, 1993).

Swirls, splatters, etchings, and roots as shown by thick lines. The swirl Zinnia saw as a symbol of her energy, without beginning or end, just constantly going. The swirl is seen to be a sign of the repetitiveness of life. Zinnia called the swirl her life energy. The image of roots, and putting down roots appeared in a few of her paintings as well. Splatters were used in a few of Zinnia's paintings as well to highlight the impression of chaos within a depicted scene.

Australian Bush Fires, like forest fires, are both a period of destruction - or of letting go - in order to allow new growth to occur - and so of rejuvenation.

Home. When she finds a new space to call "home", it is quickly transformed into a home; a private sanctuary she can create and make her own and be her self. Once this occurs it seems that roots of stability began to appear in her art work.

Social strangeness. Culturally she found herself being different those around her in Vancouver. And very importantly, she found her perspective of femininity and womanhood very different in comparison to her native Australia.

Collisions. Between her notion of femininity and women in Canada, between her sense of self and her new work world, between her brothers in Australia and her living in Canada - and of simply colliding with different energy levels.

Two body images. In the initial painting Zinnia appears as though free-floating touching neither Australia nor Canada as though flying on a trapeze waiting for someone to catch her. In the first painting the colours are quite vibrant and energetic, whereas in the second painting at the end, the colours have become muted, soften.

Pivotal painting was the Burning Bush Fires of Australia - the idea of destroying the old to make room for the new was most powerful for her.

Sunflower (researcher) is a 38 year old, gay White/Jamaican-Canadian male, in graduate school, of lower economic class than Zinnia or Jasmine. The transition that I was experiencing at the time of this study was beginning a same-sex long term relationship with someone I had recently met 3000 miles in Cape Breton away, via the Internet; without meeting him face to face. He arrived just prior to the study to begin a new life with me. I had moved from Toronto to Vancouver five years earlier.

Red and orange. Red is considered the symbol of masculinity and life energy. The colour orange prevalent in my paintings is the feminine energy which both my partner and I share. This is the hue of nurturing, gentleness and is seen as a complement to red.

Eye, vines, and the extensive use of water as washes. The symbol of the eye is considered to be that of intellectual perception - where the opening of one's eyes is likened to the opening up of knowledge. The second major theme is the shape of vines and heavy/thick lines - like vines. This shape remind me of growth. Many of the paintings are filled with "washes", which is the use of water (tears) to thin paints to give the colour a very light hue.

Social strangeness. As our circumstances change we can move from being accepted to that of rejection - simply because the dynamics of meaning attributed to attributes of our selves and our environments has shifted.

Two body images. My initial painting portrayed my body image being hidden from view because of various tensions around me. The initial colours were very neutral and unobtrusive. The later body image is much more vibrant with a very strong body outline evident.

Pivotal painting for me in the series I worked on was the one entitled Home. The concept of home - of being a space or state of mind where one can truly let go and be free from the outside world was a strong one for me.

Implications

When we, as teachers and adult educators work with learners from life worlds and frames of being different from our own. This study highlights that educators should not look at the most obvious sources of where barriers, issues, anxieties may be. We need to look deeper - for Zinnia and Jasmine the issues were not directly ethnicity differences (although indirectly ethnicity does play a role) but the construction of gender across ethnicity and the placement and meaning given to femininity and womanhood in Taiwan and Australia versus Canada which seems to be have a greater need for exploration and education.

Much of this study incorporated "still" art such as the paintings. Further study needs to include how we can use live or "performance" art (both spectator and participatory) as media for communicating and teaching. This study touched on identities primarily of sexuality and ethnicity as they undergo dramatic shifts - further study needs to be done to explore other forms of identity discontinuity, regeneration, or evolution in conjunction with art. Lastly, the environments within which this form of education takes place needs to be explored in order to allow for greatest exploration. This study took place within a non-formal adult education setting - other formats could be the formal, institutional (usually reserved for the medical model of art therapy) and informal community development settings. However, with the advent and competition of technology, the Internet, interactive computer programs, etc. the personal contact of art as medium for teaching has much work ahead of itself.

Summary

The paper describes, briefly in overview form, a Masters study carried out by a gay male graduate student with two recent female immigrants from Taiwan and Australia to explore profound life transitions withing people's lives. Through a sketch of some of the literature relied upon I assemble the frame within which the study begins, evolves, and eventually flourishes. We explore the key themes uncovered by the three participants through the workshops. Lastly, I look at the implications of this study for the process of art as pedagogy, taking the whole learner where they are at the present time in a more accurate manner, and how this process may work for other shifts in life people may experience. I am not suggesting that art as pedagogy is a panacea for every teaching situation - logic has its place. What I am suggesting is placing knowledge constructed from emotion, intuition, creativity, aesthetics, and reflexivity alongside the value of logic - and not in the more traditional discounted location often found within society, particularly the more "polite", an at times, unsafe atmosphere for "social strangers" within many Academic (institutional) environments.

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