

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Open Studio Group

Reflections by Dr. Robin Tipple and Christopher Brown

Robin volunteered to run the open studio group because, in part, he felt that in open groups it could be easier for members and the conductor to manage anxiety, the situation was less anxiety provoking. He remembered open groups that he had been a part of, in learning disability settings, where the numbers ranged from 15 to 20 clients, depending on the demand that day. There were usually two therapists and a helper. Here clients came and used the space and materials as they felt inclined to do. There was not a lot of pressure to interact with others, other members of the group or the therapists. Many of the clients returned to the same part of the room each day, personalising the space in some way. Anxiety levels were lower in this environment and a culture of respect was inculcated over time, respect in relation to personal space and the work that others produced. Significant exchanges did take place in this group but they were not generated through any overt structures, rather they represented spontaneous communications, sharing of work, thought, emotions, and wishes. Robin wanted something like this in the conference, but without the territorial element, a space where individuals could access a range of art materials and work quietly, or sit quietly as they wished. Interaction, sharing and exchanges with others would be, of course, permitted but there would be no obligation in this respect.

Getting a description for the conference advertisement was anxiety provoking. Robin worried whether the description would be what was required, would it reflect what others

thought an open group should be? Sally Skaife helped Robin through three drafts before they got it right. They agreed that the group should last for 1.5hrs, that it should be a space that would give the delegates the opportunity to participate in art making, enabling experiences of the conference to be processed. The group would have a starting time and end time but delegates would be free to enter and leave the studio space as they wish. Delegates would be free to speak or to remain absorbed in their art making. The setting for the group was the largest room available, known as the Great Hall, which was also to be used for the conference Art Therapy Large Group. A selection of dry art materials had been ordered for all the groups.

As the conference date drew nearer Robin began to get an idea of numbers. Robin initially thought that maybe there would be about 50 people and that he could perhaps manage this number working on his own. However, numbers increased to about 120 delegates. At this point Chris Brown volunteered to co-facilitate the group with him. Robin knew that Chris had extensive experience in providing studio groups in adult mental health settings – and both had worked together on editing a book, so this was very reassuring in that it was anticipated that there would be no difficulty in communicating openly with each other. Both agreed not to make art during the group. The first task was how to organise the space in the Great Hall. It was some time before Chris and Robin could be sure of exactly what furniture would be available and when and how to organise the space. The Great Hall, as the title suggests, is a large hall with a high arched ceiling, a balcony on one side and stage surmounted by an organ. The interior walls have arched recesses. This hall is used for large choirs and symphony orchestra concerts, exams and degree awarding ceremonies.

There were only a few screens available to mark out the space for the group and a limited number of large tables. Robin and Chris were mostly reliant on using small exam tables. There was plenty of these and plenty of chairs. Both Chris and Robin did some frantic pacing out of the space to measure it in relation to the furniture – at one time Robin was pacing along the corridor to get a sense of size and people were looking at him strangely! Then they hit upon the idea of using string to link the screens to make a boundary and to cross some of the archways in the interior wall to make a place for

display. Pegs were placed on the string to allow work to be hung. A plan for the porters was drawn up to help in the arrangement of the furniture but this communication was misunderstood. Chris and Robin wanted something that would appear organic and spontaneous, which would leave some open space for delegates to work on the floor if they wished, but the porters arranged the furniture in lines – reminiscent of exams perhaps.

There were two student ambassador helpers to assist Chris and Robin in the setting up and putting away, and on the morning of the first day of the conference they helped to re-arrange things. The space then began to come alive. However, it was thought that the amount of materials available looked sparse, perhaps the right word here is Spartan. Chris and Robin started to feel anxious that what was provided would be seen as inadequate. On the second and third day they found a way to enlarge the store a little, gaining more cardboard and finding things that they were short of, for example, rubbers.

On the first day both spoke briefly about boundaries. Delegates were asked not to use cameras in the group and to respect the space and privacy of others. However, some delegates wanted to keep a record of the progress of their work over the three days, some took their work to another part of the hall to do this; others took a picture in the group. The following day the original boundary was moderated by suggesting that photography of work in progress was permitted but the privacy of others must be respected and no photographs of others could be taken without their explicit permission. This was acceptable. Delegates were naturally careful in relation to the personal space of others and the atmosphere of industrious concentration became the norm pretty quickly. Occasionally there was a request for material items that were not immediately available and some delegates sought to take cardboard from a pile in another part of the hall that had been laid aside for the large group in the afternoon. Mostly people were happy to work with what was available and were very willing to share items and material. On the second day Chris and Robin made more cardboard available.

At the end of the first day some delegates began to hang work on to the string that had been provided, but this was very near to the closing time of the group so there was little

opportunity for others to spend time looking at this work or to have any conversation about it. Perhaps, though, the main purpose of the string was to enable individuals to see what they themselves had done. During the second day Chris and Robin reflected on their role. Should they approach delegates at all to look at work or to seek comment? Both were curious and could feel a desire to know more about what could be seen at a distance. Also they began to gain some view of the work when storing and helping some delegates to retrieve it the next day and this fed their curiosity further. Chris had felt a strong desire to make art on the first day, which he thought was in response to the powerful atmosphere of creativity that had quickly formed. Chris and Robin settled into a somewhat meditative state of mind where thoughts came and went. Some of these were disturbing, such as when Chris suddenly thought that a delegate's gestures with a pencil in the air might be because he was responding to hallucinations! Spending such long periods of time, essentially as a non-active observer, with so many people, placed demands on their capacity to contain both the anxiety and desire evoked.

Robin had a request from one delegate, who he knew in other situations, to place his table and chair in the position it was on the first day, and masking tape was placed on the floor but this was removed by cleaners. This delegate was attempting to draw the space and the position and attitude of people in the space, delegates were working on tables, on the floor, hanging paper to the string, looking at work and so on (see figs 1,2,3 & 4). There was an intrusion from the head porter who warned us not to get mess or use fluids like glue on the wooden floor. Faces occasionally peered into the space through the small glass panels in the door and there was some outside interest in what was going on.

The delegate who did the picture illustrated in Figs 1,2,3 & 4 told Robin that he appreciated the space as one in which he could engage the right side of his brain in a demanding visual task, in an activity that differed from the verbal processing that other parts of the conference demanded. In this way, he commented, it was refreshing and it provided a proper balance to his experience of the conference. He also wanted to appreciate the space and the activity that filled the space.

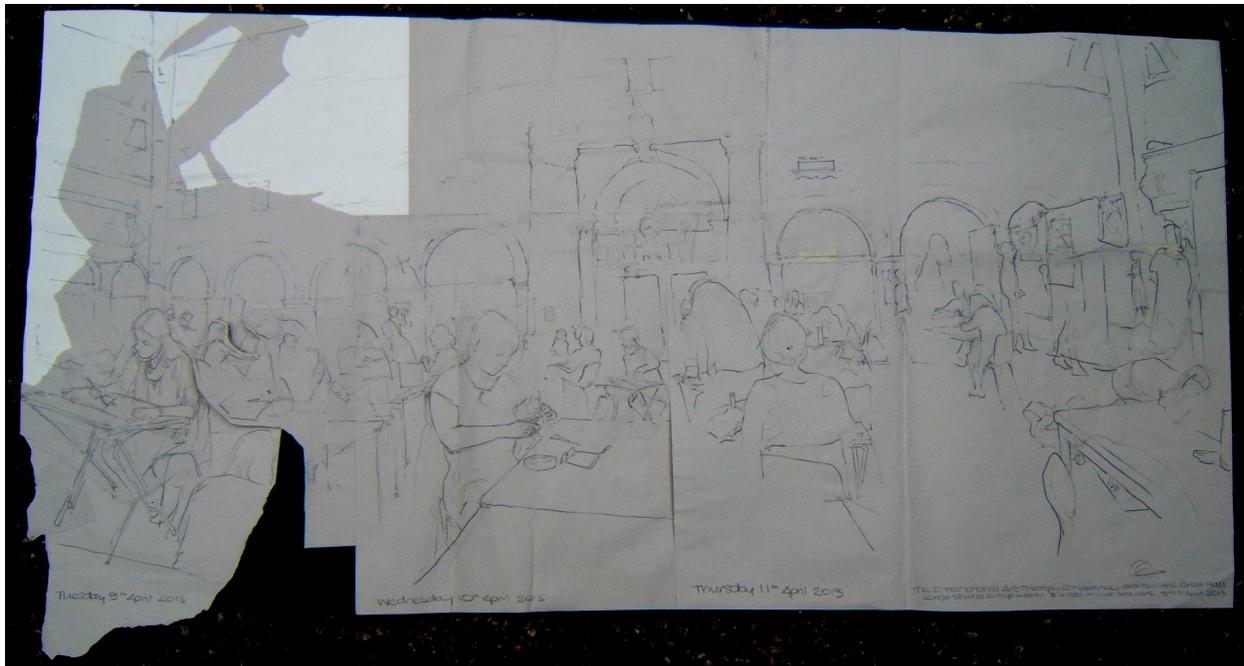


Figure 1

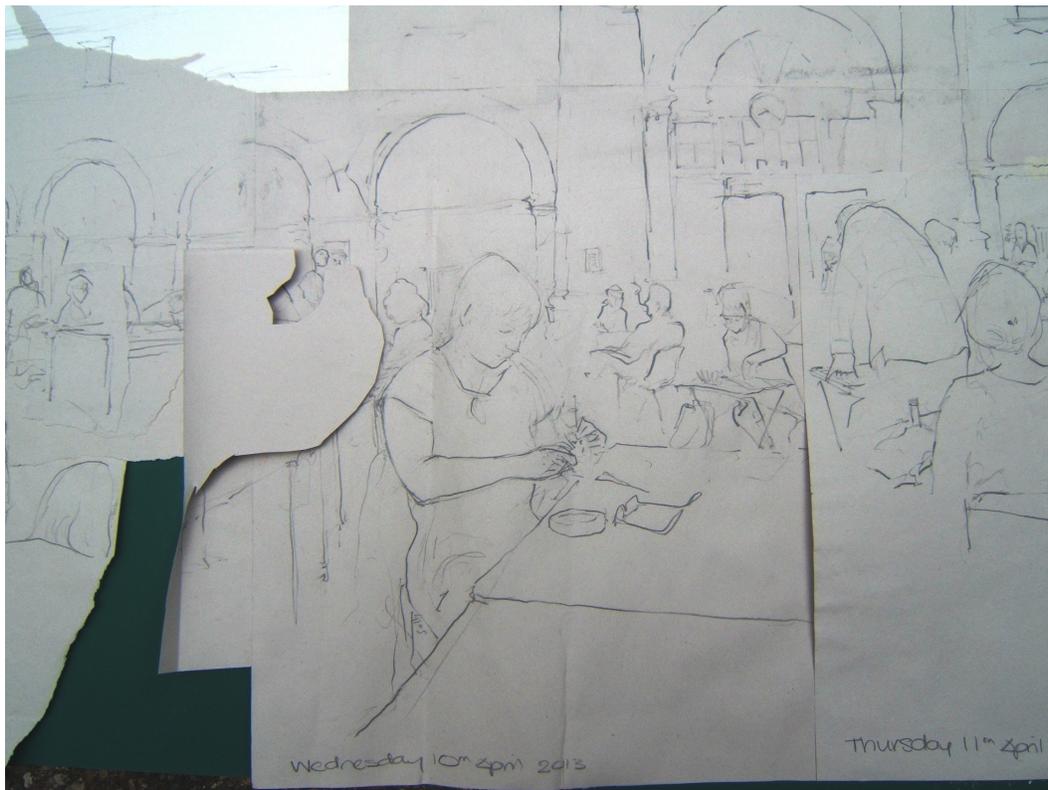


Figure 2



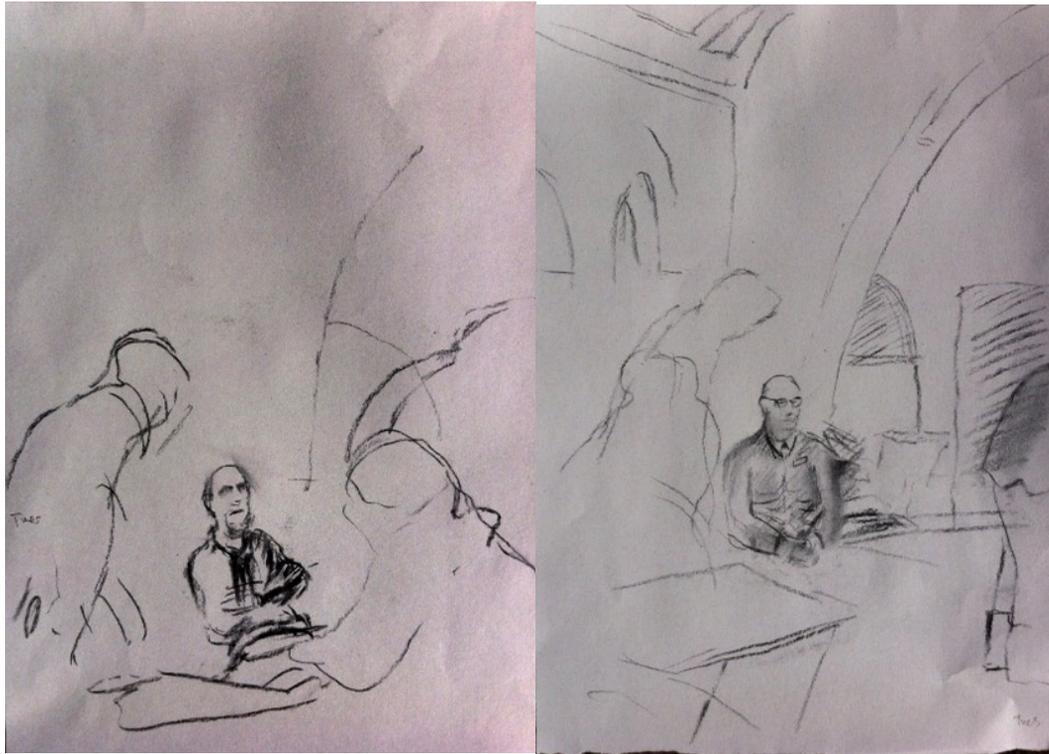
Figure 3



Figure 4

When facilitating the group Chris and Robin felt it important not to be intrusive, not to allow curiosity to get in the way of things, to prevent the quiet concentrated atmosphere from growing and the group developing its own momentum. It felt okay to move around in the group to get a different view from time to time – it was a very large group averaging around 100 delegates – and during the group Chris and Robin did occasionally meet and exchange a few words, checking on how they felt things were progressing. They mostly sat absorbed in the atmosphere generated by gesture, mark making and unconscious processes. Another delegate, who knew both Chris and Robin, sketched them (see figs 5 & 6). On the third day there seemed to be a little bit more conversation, hushed conversation, and perhaps more excitement about the work. Work was hung on the string earlier in the session and individuals, including the facilitators, took the opportunity of looking at what had been made. A long piece was laid out across the floor. Delegates came up to Chris and Robin and thanked them for facilitating the group. They reported finding the group enjoyable and stimulating. Robin was invited to look at some work and some conversation about the work did begin to develop between a few delegates. Robin at last had a moment in which he could explore his curiosity. He had a fantasy that we could tour the country and offer large open groups in village halls or community centres. This may reflect the fact that it was enjoyable to facilitate this group; there was quiet and it was possible to watch the variety of absorbed creativity while containing desire and curiosity. Both thought that they would not have wanted to do anything differently. Chris and Robin felt lucky in terms of the space – it seemed to work well. They were able to manage without an excess of art materials. They were also lucky in having a group of delegates who appreciated the value of a quiet reliable space, who were respectful of each other and who understood the importance of personal absorption in art production. It was a quite unique experience – for all.

Figs 5 & 6 are sketches made of the group conductors, Robin and Chris



Figures 5 & 6

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