

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

## **The Art Therapy Large Group**

### **Dr Sally Skaife and Kevin Jones**

We decided to have an Art Therapy Large Group (ATLG) on the three days of the conference to create a place where all those participating in the conference could come together to engage in a reflective space. The aim was for the group to explore the interplay between 'Finding a Voice and Making a Mark' and through doing so, gain a sense of their own experiential learning in relation to the conference as a whole. We hoped that participants would be able to recognise the dynamics, as they were represented and enacted in the ATLG, which shape the international profession of art therapy. The idea was that participants might experience the similarities and differences in the use of art in therapy around the world, with the purpose of harnessing these towards the development and progression of the practice of art therapy internationally.

In putting on an ATLG at the conference we learnt from our experiences running ATLGs at other conferences, namely at a Politics and Psychotherapy Conference for mainly verbal counsellors and psychotherapists, and at The European Consortium of Arts Therapies Educators' (ECArTE) conference for art, music, drama and dance movement therapists. The groups that we had run at these conferences were for all participants but they were only held for one session. The Goldsmiths conference gave us the opportunity to run three groups on three of the four days of the conference. This gave a

possibility for experiencing the phases of group development and for processing thinking and feeling over the time of the conference. Our model for the ATLG was a psychodynamic one and, as such, had no agenda and an important boundary that anything that was said in the group had to be said to the group as a whole. We also asked that people be respectful of the work made and sensitive to each other's personal space. We suggested that people should stay in the room for the whole of each session and come to them all. We told group members that they could take away anything that they had made and what was left would either be recycled for use in the group or disposed of respectfully. We described our role as one where we facilitated the objectives of the group and held the boundaries. This model is that of the ATLG on the Masters in Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths. This group has been running on the programme for 15 years now and is a place where we have found that the students (as well as other objectives) are able to learn about the process of becoming an art psychotherapist from being part of a reflective group with students from all years.

Our experience of the Goldsmiths ATLG and of previous ATLGs at conferences was that the size of the group and the large space affected the kind of art materials that needed to be offered. We were limited by the conference space to using only dry materials and we provided drawing materials (charcoal, felt pens, pencils, a variety of plain and coloured papers ), construction materials (scissors, Stanley knives, string, masking tape). We had previously found that a variety of found materials such as cardboard boxes, cardboard tubes, yarns and a variety of textiles allowed the construction of large-scale structures within the space. We had realized that it was possible to have 250 people making art together if there are a lot of found materials and so a process of collecting went on in the days before the conference. We set these materials out in the middle of the room and placed three rows of chairs around the edge leaving enough room for people to come into the middle.

It is part of the nature of the large group that no one person can give an overview of what happens in the group. We would like to offer some reflections on what we made of our experience of the ATLG.

Sally remembers there being a lot of activity in the group such as using the string to link people together, throwing a paper ball, and other activity that seemed to her to be an attempt to overcome the feelings of alienation and paranoia that large groups can engender. Other people collaborated in making structures on the floor. Kevin was struck by how group members began to use the group as a performance space, moving, clapping, singing, while others made work quietly in the centre of the space or took art work back to their seats. There was frustration with the difficulty in hearing each other in the large echoing space which became more difficult when the art-making became noisy. We felt that there seemed to be a split between those that had been in the ATLG on the MA in Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths and others who had not. On the one hand this was helpful as the students and ex-students had experience in how the ATLG could be used, and therefore could help in establishing the group culture, on the other hand, we feared that those who were new to the ATLG might feel excluded in some way. The issue of the ATLG's availability to disabled delegates came to our attention with a group member using a wheelchair. Following discussion with the group member, in the second group we widened the access aisles that ran between the blocks of chairs and provided tables at various points around the seating and in the central space. This allowed the group member to make more use of the art materials and space. However, this did not address the issue of delegates with hearing problems. There was some debate about the difference between everyone's inability to hear one another and the particular problem in the group for people with a specific hearing difficulty.

The second group began with far less people than the first. Kevin remembers this seemed to allow people to make their voices heard, leading to a space in which some personal feeling was expressed; Sally remembers there was a question about mess. After the first group there was a lot of silver pastel left on the floor, which the student ambassadors had had a job to remove. At the beginning of this group she recalls asking people to be careful of making mess that would be difficult to remove and mentioned, in particular, the silver pastel. This made some people feel angry in the group and also express anger about only dry materials being available in the conference as a whole.

Kevin remembers the boundaries being tested, with group members wandering out of the circle and going over to the materials store which was set in one corner of the room and playing with the idea of bringing materials over into the main group. Kevin remembers that feelings of exclusion and doubt about the usefulness of the group were expressed. He felt that this discussion held something of the differences between the psychodynamic, humanistic and structured ways of group working.

The attendance for the third session increased again and seemed to hold nearly as many as the first group. Sally has a much better memory of the last session than the first two; she remembers a discussion on gender with a lot of textural, interwoven pieces being made on the floor. There was a woman belly-dancing, a cross-dressed man dancing, and an art piece that someone said looked like a woman making a pair of balls. The theme of gender had been around during the day in other groups she had attended. Sally asked herself what does this mean for art therapists and how was it being performed and enacted in the group.

Kevin felt the gendered performance embodied and reflected different cultural expressions of female sexuality and played with notions of masculinity and femininity. During a play of word association to references to the word 'Goldilocks' he had been drawn into a dialogue with a female member of the group which she described as an 'arm wrestle'. He thought that these performances hinted at struggles with ambivalence and conflict in relation to gender, sexuality and power in the conference as a whole. He also remembers that by this third session the group had found ways of creating spaces in which dialogue could be heard and in which the art work could be talked about. There was a real performance of the themes of ending through song, dance, chanting, movement, visual image and sculpture. The sheer amount of all the art materials and the presence of the group members within the central space brought home to him that the ATLG is a powerful kinaesthetic experience which highlights the process of art making and the power of the visual imagery. The group now seemed more able to allow a silence in which an individual could speak, show their art work and say what they thought the group experience had meant for them. Again there were differences of opinion on the usefulness of the group but now there were also acknowledgements of

the ending. There were expressions of excitement, of tiredness and a sense of people being ready to return to their various homes across the world.

At the plenary someone asked if the ATLG had met our expectations. We replied that it was too early to say as we were still full of the experience and had not yet processed it. Sally has thought about this question since. Although we had a clear rationale, as stated above, about the potential of the ATLG at the conference, it was very difficult prior to it to envisage how it would go with so many people never having had this experience before. In some ways, then, it surpassed our expectations in that it actually happened three days running and people came on all three days – though there were smaller numbers on the middle day. A psychodynamically-based large art therapy group had taken place of somewhere near 230 art therapists from around the world! In retrospect, Kevin felt that the group had allowed the playing out of several different varieties of art-making from performance through individual art-making to small sub-groupings collaborating together, with small scale intimate works alongside larger scale more public statements, which were all ‘held’ and made visible within the space. Tensions between different art therapeutic approaches and between different national approaches to art therapy were also played out in the verbal dialogue. There were also differing views on the usefulness of the group. . The group had seemed to make several people really angry – they felt it was a waste of time that could have better been given over to more paper presentations. Sally felt that the feelings of pointlessness, shame and competition that get stirred up in the ATLG are feelings we all have – clients and therapists – and in the ATLG they can be experienced, expressed and transformed through talking and art-making. In the ATLG, then, we experience the underbelly or our profession, together. We also have the experience of facing our own sense of personal value – we experience ourselves in relation to a vast range of others and interacting with them, we see who we are, and who we want to become, in relation to the social world.

Kevin thought that the group had developed over the time of the conference and had begun to create a culture of working together within the space. We both thought that the

group had made issues around disability, gender and sexuality and the differences between art therapy approaches visible. In clearing up the work at the end, the diversity and richness of imagery that was not commented on in the group was apparent and suggested that much seemed to be held in the art work. How far there was explicit reflection on these different themes is an interesting question, but the group as a whole made these tensions visible. We are not sure though whether readers of this who were in the ATLG will be convinced by our explanations. The splits in the conference group between Goldsmiths staff, students and graduates who had a common experience of the ATLG and those who did not, or were from a different therapeutic tradition in art therapy, highlight this question. It is a key question that has arisen out of our experience of running the group at Goldsmiths over many years: is the ATLG only possible when it is held within a context where its members share a similar psychodynamic view or can its approach be helpful in other kinds of context?

This was certainly the hope of large group theorists such as Kreeger (1975), Turquet (1975), De Mare (1991) and others. This point led Sally to think about something that Dick Blackwell said when describing the large verbal group – ‘dialogue in the large group is something that must be learned’ (Blackwell 2000:154). Large verbal groups at the end of each day, of now about 500 people, have been taking place in the three yearly Group Analytic Symposium for some time. These now have their own culture developed over time and dialogue continues to be developed. As Pat de Mare argued, the potential is that the large group can provide a forum which contributes toward the humanization of society. This seems to both Kevin and Sally to be indeed an exciting prospect to introduce into the profession of art therapy.

Dr. Sally Skaife is a group analyst and art therapist with a qualification in art teaching. Sally worked in adult psychiatry for many years before coming to work at Goldsmiths as a lecturer in art psychotherapy and group psychotherapy. She currently teaches on the MA art psychotherapy and supervises research students. Sally has run art psychotherapy groups both privately and within Freedom from Torture. Her research interests include the potential in the gap between art and words in art therapy groups, experiential learning, large groups and art therapy with victims of torture.

Kevin Jones. From starving artist involved in ragged street theatre to Dip Art Therapy Goldsmiths 1986-87, Art Psychotherapist in NHS 1987-2002, Dip Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy and MA Psychotherapy and Social Studies 1997-2001, private practice as member of Institute of Psychotherapy and Social Studies, UKCP Registered, 2001-present. Lecturer Art Psychotherapy Goldsmiths University of London, 2000 – present and currently Head of Therapeutic Studies at Goldsmiths. Interests include the relationship between art and psychoanalysis in the age of the neo-liberal drive toward death.

## References

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