ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Congruence of Professional Values: An Exploration of the Reciprocity between Art Teaching and Art Therapy.

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Abstract

This study explores the overlapping paradigms that exist within the professional disciplines of both art therapy and teaching. The vehicle deployed to articulate these issues is the "Critical Incident Technique" which has been developed as a training tool for teachers. Different approaches to reflective practice, supervision, and experiential learning are explored. In addition the article probes the artistic identity of the art teacher/art therapist and how this impacts on experiential work, in addition to its validity in the teaching arena. This creative identity is omnipresent in both the art teaching and art therapy context and needs to be openly examined. It is argued that different professional values exist particularly in relation to pragmatic issues in art, such as participation, demonstration or collaboration where the creative input of the professional is involved. It concludes that these values can exist in parallel and adapt according to the context and experience. This eclectic approach should be welcomed. These issues are at the core of our professional practice and to encourage debate in the professional arena will lead to more informed practice.

Keywords

teaching, experiential, learning, professional values, critical incident.

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

My interest in learning to teach art began during my work as an art therapist working with addicts and patients with eating disorders. The art therapy department practised a non-directive, psychodynamic patient led approach in both group and individual sessions. Although the art therapy methodology deployed remained consistent, the broader treatment programmes for addictions and eating disorders embraced different ideologies and practical constraints, which impacted on the dynamic of the art therapy groups. Frequently patients from the addictions unit had not encountered art materials since school days. Sometimes this had been a negative experience when they had felt shamed by their abilities. As a result, they were unwilling to attend art therapy. It was very gratifying in this instance, when patients overcame this reluctance and became enthusiastic about the experience. These patients often expressed a wish to continue art making after discharge. It could provide a bridge towards more creative and productive life choices. They were ready to shift the focus of their art from therapy to a more pragmatic and aesthetic experience and expressed an interest in developing technical skills they had never acquired previously. Enthused by this aspect of art making, I decided to extend my skill base, so I could teach art for its own sake. I was lucky enough to be accepted on the TQFE (Teaching Qualification in Further Education) course. It seemed a natural progression with useful overlap between professions.

Most professionals engage in reflective practice. It is a requirement set by the Health Professions Council for art therapists to engage in regular supervision in order to practice. Supervisor and therapist meet regularly to explore both the art work and the issues arising in therapy. Art therapy supervision focusses on the transferential dynamics of the triangular relationship between patient, therapist and art work. The purpose of supervision is similar to that of formal “reflective conversations,” described by Ghaye and Ghaye when teaching practitioners work together to reach “jointly constructed interpretations.” (1998, p22) These foster a broader understanding of events and thus enable better and more informed professional practice.

It was the result of my first formal experience of this sort of reflective conversation as a teacher with my TF (teacher fellow) that highlighted key areas of reciprocity and conflict

between art therapy and teaching. It was only my second lesson teaching solo with an HNC visual communication class. For all concerned it was a new beginning, of my teaching, of our work together, and it was the introduction of the new cycle of the unit. I was introducing the brief for the next cycle of a developmental drawing unit. I was excited by the prospect, and enthusiastic about the topic, for which I had put together a presentation of images to suggest different ways the brief could be approached. The lesson went to plan and the feedback from my teacher fellow was positive.

Listening to her observations I was initially struck by the practical, simplicity of some of her comments, which when put into practice had immediate effect. For example when addressing the class as a group, step back and stand apart from them in order to gain their attention. We were engaged in "reflection on action" exploring events in hindsight. Ultimately this type of dialogue underpinned by theoretical learning and experience, results in practice becoming the instinctive "knowing in action," forming a reflective loop of improvement (Schön 1987, p25).

Introducing Concept Of The Critical Incident

The event that I have selected to examine, which acted as a traditional "turning point" critical incident (Tripp 1993, p106) was a direct result of a visit from my Teacher Fellow observing a lesson with the group of HNC visual communications students detailed above. In addition to meeting the unit outcome requirements, I had designed the brief to inspire and stretch the students' skills and imagination. I gave a presentation of images, which demonstrated the concept of developmental drawing showing the work of the Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher. They were exciting images intended to stimulate the students' creativity. The class consisted of thirteen students a highly motivated class, with a keen eye on the future, most were applying for further courses in art and design at Scottish art schools and other colleges.

The lesson went well. In the debriefing with my Teacher Fellow (TF) we explored how in addition to my artistic credentials validating my position as teacher, my previous professional identities as art therapist, and picture librarian could also be brought into the teaching arena. She suggested that I speak to the students about my own work and work experience, feeling that this would earn the confidence and respect of the learners.

There were three main components involved in presenting my work, which we explored.

- My own art work, drawing, painting and photography seen in aesthetic terms
- The technical expertise involved in the work, photographic collage, techniques of watercolour, life painting.
- The different fields of work in the creative industries I have worked in, photographic picture libraries, theatre photo-calls, and art therapy.

All topics relate directly to the curriculum for art and design. To present any artist's work from these perspectives would be a sound suggestion for a teaching resource. However her suggestion related to other factors which she thought this presentation would address. In order to unpack the critical incident from the perspective of a reflective practitioner I have found Brookfield's model of the four critical lenses invaluable. In addition to our own viewpoint, the practitioner is advised to refer to the learner's standpoint, our colleague's, and that informed by theoretical literature (Hillier 2005, p7).

Analysis of the Critical Incident - Reflective Practice

The debriefing with my TF is an example of the sort of "reflective conversations" described by Ghaye and Ghaye whereby colleagues construct meaningful interpretations of events in order to improve practice (1998, p22). Reflective practice is considered to be a vital part of professional development and can include peer or collaborative mentoring, and reflective journals. These often use critical incidents as a focus for discourse. In our evaluation session the TF gave me practical suggestions to tackle what she considered to be the main issue which required attention. This was my tentative approach. She advised to speak louder, slower, and make definite statements. Although the students appeared positively disposed towards me as a new teacher, perhaps as a result of my unassuming manner, the TF sensed that the students needed evidence that their trust was merited. She also identified my doubts about presenting my own work and work experience as a learning tool for learners. Spenceley refers to a commonly held notion reported by learner teachers that they are "masquerading as educators" and not yet congruent with the teaching role (2007, p91). In order to shift the

class dynamic forward the TF suggested that I speak to the students about my own work and work experience.

Tripp describes how incidents "only become critical because someone sees them as such" (1993, p27). I was alerted to the import of her suggestion, initially by my own horror at the idea! Showing my work to this highly talented group of students seemed very risky. She also suggested that I give practical demonstrations and experiential workshops whenever possible to the students. She was trying to encourage me to teach by example and get out of what had already become my comfort zone - sitting behind a projector showing examples of other artists' work. It appears that an element of risk taking is essential to maintain good practice. Hillier describes this need to challenge teaching routines - "Thinking reflectively seems to be quite a dangerous undertaking. We are actively challenging the comfortable, taken for granted parts of our professional practice." (2005, p17). The logical consequences of failing to challenge practice is taken forward by Eraut, describing how teachers can become "prisoners of their early …experience, perhaps the competent teachers of today, almost certainly the ossified teachers of tomorrow" (Huddleston 1997, p149).

This feeling of alarm I describe in response to the idea of presenting my work and experience to a class also highlighted a conflict of professional practice. It was not simply a lack of confidence in my work, but presenting my work and experience in this way went against my former art therapy training. Patients were often curious about my own work as an artist. However professional practice in the art therapy context would be to deflect attempts made by patients to bring my artistic identity to the table. This ensures that the patient is able to engage exclusively with their own imagery, thus precluding the raft of possible responses to showing my work, which could evoke feelings of jealousy, competition, inadequacy, or mimicry, any of which would sully the therapeutic relationship and process.

Schön terms the manner in which the TF intuitively responded to dynamics in the classroom as "professional artistry" (1987, p22). Her suggestion was the result of a tacit response, informed by "values, strategies, and assumptions that make up our 'theories' of action" (Schön 1987, p25). We were able to explore the validity of my TF's

observations and consider ways in which these might be taken forward in a positive manner. It was not a strategy without risk. However I took her advice and gave a presentation the following week showing my own art work and photography. I found the process unexpectedly rewarding, it made sense of what I had done, providing a useful teaching resource. The students also found the range of work presented informative and seemed pleasantly disposed towards my efforts. I felt I had survived a “trial by art” initiation ceremony! It had been an important milestone in my development as a teacher.

The following week I gave the students a presentation about my former work as an art therapist. On discharge hospital patients sometimes chose to leave their art work behind. Patients could ask for it to be destroyed or give written consent for it to be used for education purposes. When working with patients on an individual basis at the end of treatment I also asked permission to photograph and use their work in this way. Patients often appreciated the idea of their work enduring and benefitting others. As a result of this I have a body of permissioned work, which I have used as the basis for presentations to colleagues in the hospital and art therapy students. This is an invaluable resource, since by the very nature of therapy, the art work remains unseen and therefore other professionals have no way of understanding the process. These HNC students were a group of high achieving visual communication students, who were struck by the power of the imagery. Stripped of the sophisticated methods and techniques of artistry, the message could be conveyed by a single word or stick men. The images gave rise to useful discussion about eating disorders and addictions, in addition to giving insight into vocational opportunities.

After these presentations the learners seemed more disposed to discuss their work in a group setting, and were more inclined to ask me for both practical advice and aesthetic judgements. Consolidating and assessing my achievements validated my own self-worth. Without my critical incident I would have avoided showing my work and demonstrating techniques to students.

Taking forward the advice to engage in a more practical hands-on approach, I decided once again to break out of my comfort zone and demonstrate painting in order to

encourage students to do so. I was surprised to discover how many of them were quite unfamiliar with the practicalities of painting and I wanted to introduce them to the essentials of setting up. Tripp describes the sometimes challenging role that critical incidents and the resulting enquiry can have in leading to "critique and change of the autopilot routines." (Tripp 1993, p22). Although it might be early for me to have developed these, I was distinctly more comfortable behind a computer with a presentation running than I was in front of a class that day, wielding a paint brush. However it was a very gratifying experience. The students were very positive and after the initial horror I was able to enjoy it. Several of them did set up at easels for the first time. It was an important barrier to overcome, and I am much more comfortable about demonstrating to students, as a result of this intervention.

Although presenting my art work and actually painting in front of students were encouraged as teaching tools, in the psychodynamic art therapy context, either would be viewed as damaging to the therapeutic process. Ownership of art work is also seen as paramount. Literature relating to practical collaboration is scarce and tends to "guard against direct involvement" - actually making art work with clients - although there has been some discussion of instances where it has been useful with physically impaired or particularly damaged patients (Macintosh 2010, p38). Practical intervention is also a contentious issue in teaching where there seem to be no guidelines for teachers or pupils. Many art teachers demonstrate on pupils work, considering it to be a valid teaching tool, others falling foul of time pressures and performativity - with mixed reception. Some pupils are delighted with this intervention while others feel violated. It is a sensitive area, which requires mindfulness, where teacher and therapist alike must remain "the gatekeeper" to the professional boundaries (Macintosh 2010, p41).

Professional Identity

Prior to teaching I practised as an art therapist, aspects of which hitherto I had not thought of introducing as a teaching resource to the class. Instead I was focusing on meeting curriculum requirements and trying to become an expert in all things technical

overnight. This type of stereotypical notion of teaching, and a difficulty in working “out of the box” is discussed by other teacher learners (Spenceley 2007, p92). Introducing other ways of working was enriching for the students and myself, and enabled me to feel more confident and comfortable in my role, bringing existing skills to my teaching. How former professional identities might augment or conflict with that of teaching is particularly pertinent in FE where teaching qualifications are not yet mandatory. Teachers recruited from a broad range of backgrounds may only recognise the validity of the values inherent with their prior profession (Clow 2001). These may not dovetail with those implicit in teaching.

One of the seven principal aims outlined in the arrangements for the Higher art and design is to “contribute to self- esteem, intellectual and personal enrichment, emotional social and cultural development” (SQA 2006). This highlights the extent to which professional values and ethical responsibilities are embedded into policy making and the educational curriculum. Many of these ideals are also congruent with art therapy where art is used as a therapeutic agent to bring about recovery, change and positive self- regard.

Presenting my own work to students accorded perfectly with the work I was encouraging the students with at the time. In order to get to know them and their work I was encouraging them to peer assess their work. At HNC level students are expected to present their work to others, articulating concepts and rationale as if to future clients. Although the group realised the need for this, in the feedback forms they completed at this time many described how difficult this was, largely because they were unused to working in this way. They were cliquey and uncomfortable sharing work other than with special friends. There was an element of competition and secrecy about their work, which was exacerbated by them competing for the same limited places at the art schools. By sharing my own work I was demonstrating the openness I was hoping to foster in the class. Similarities were evident with group art therapy work with eating disordered patients who tend to be fiercely competitive and lacking in confidence. In order for art therapy to be successful the patient needs to feel safe in the setting, in the knowledge that their work will not be subjected to criticism or ridicule. This is also true in the classroom. Art making can be a personal process and students need to feel safe

with other students and the tutor before they can speak openly about their work. Humanist precepts such as safety, and a sense of "positive regard" need to be encouraged to enable students to maximise creative potential (Wallace 2007, p35). Recreating these ground rules in the student art room is important, and students need to know that observations from peers and staff will be constructive, I consider it is my task to ensure that this is so.

Congruence of Professional Values

Criteria for Success in art and design in FE is based on results and not recovery as in art therapy. The focus on assessing art does create difficulties, since it is such a subjective subject to evaluate, often with investment of a very personal nature. Students do get crushed not only by results, but by omnipotent tutors. One of the key premises of art therapy is that the art work has no aesthetic value. It is a vessel for self-expression and creativity, there are no skills required. Paradoxically, by taking this pressure off participants are much more able to make use of it, and it often means that they enjoy it and produce good work. I have found this in my own work and it was something I stress in my teaching, the pleasure of art making for its own sake, and to revisit why learners have chosen to study art in the first place.

In order for students to maximise their potential for creative expression the teacher needs to create a safe and supporting environment. As Ferguson points out the teacher "like a good therapist…is a catalyst, a facilitator - an agent of learning but not the first cause" (Ferguson, 1982:320-1). At a time of assessment the pressure of producing good work can be counterproductive, leading to performance anxiety and a reluctance to take risks. Mindful of the stress of the on-going selection process, I also introduce some of the worthwhile vocations in the creative industries, which do not require top artistic achievement.

Gibbs (2004) argues that the process of learning is in conflict with the market led approach currently being endorsed in education. This also applies to current assessment criteria, the "prescription of higher learning based on known outcomes, which seems to us to be a contradiction in terms" (p118). Indeed the underlying premise of the experiential constructivist model of learning, which translates so well to

both teaching and creative subjects is that the outcome is undetermined. Clearly there are some conflicting values relating to the experiential exploratory nature of art making within the academic context of the specific learning outcomes of education.

In relation to my own professional values I must be mindful that students are not patients, and the context of their art making sits within the academic framework of the course for which they enrolled. My priorities need to shift accordingly. Ghaye and Ghaye describe how professional values can exist in "dynamic equilibrium," whereby they change according to context and experience (1998, p36). The ideal would be for all students to achieve academic excellence, at the same time fulfilling their creative potential. However compromises will have to be made. Inability to achieve this ideal may be the result of a myriad of circumstances over which the teacher may have no control. When views of practice are compromised in this manner, and practice "has the notion of a contradiction at its heart (it) is a 'tensioned' one and is called a 'dialectic view'" (Ghaye & Ghaye 1998, p51). The teaching goal must be to encourage students to reach their full potential, at the same time being supportive of their endeavours, and also give them permission not to be the best. Each student needs to be considered individually with a view to the range of options open to them.

Critical Incident in relation to Educational Theory

One of the defining factors of the critical incident was the timing. I was defining my role as a teacher, learning about educational theories and applying different teaching models to teaching practice. It highlighted the importance of presenting a range of teaching styles to students to keep the process alive and stimulating. Much of the creative work for students was ongoing and I felt it was crucial their work should be informed by formative peer assessment. The model I was introducing for peer review of work was that endorsed by Graham Gibbs. The students work in small groups before reporting back to the class as a whole. This effectively builds students' confidence in their ideas before they present them to a larger group. I was trying to break the pattern of students working in isolation, and consulting only with the tutor before final submission. Instead students are encouraged to use each other as learning resources, respect each other as critics, and peer evaluate the work in progress. Students need to

"trust their own learning" (Gibbs 1981, p4) and make judgements about their own work, particularly in this subject, at this level of learning. It was particularly important to reinforce this concept by presenting my own work and reinforcing the notion of openness. The need to "live out our values in every day teaching" by acting consistently with the values we are advocating is picked up by Ghaye and Ghaye (1998, p45).

When presenting my work to students and in my teaching I was trying to encourage an atmosphere of risk-taking and experimentation, consistent with the constructivist experiential learning models. Reflective processes are open ended. As Dewey observes, "to be genuinely thoughtful, we must be willing to sustain and protract that state of doubt which is the stimulus to thorough enquiry" (Hillier 2005, p17). Students are frequently paralysed by a fear of spoiling what they have already done. My advice is always to break through and push for improvement. However in the context of assessment and performativity this may be a privileged and cavalier approach. It may be hard to reconcile this idealism when it is my livelihood at stake in the real world, the "new culture of competitive perfomativity" (Ball 2003, p219).

Professional Learning and Online Discussion

One of the teaching tools that was introduced with respect to analysis of The Critical Incident was an online teaching forum where student teachers engaged in peer supervision. There were many different themes which emerged over the online discussions, one of these being the usefulness of this type of professional discourse. Several agreed with Cox who defined the staff room environment in Further Education as being unconducive to informal learning. It was felt to be lacking "a culture which encourages or even allows open discussion of teaching" (Cox, 1996: 41). The anachronistic structure of the dialogue enabled participants to spend time collating their posts, perhaps accounting for the exchange when we did meet face to face, concerning the quality of information shared. The sense of anonymity alluded to in Brosnan and Burgess (2003) allowed people to open up and risk making observations which might not always be easy to hear, enabling the type of professional honesty normally reserved for formal supervision or very close colleagues. There were many useful contributions in relation to my critical incident. One theme to emerge was the different viewpoints

regarding showing creative work or discussing personal achievements. It had also been pertinent to others whose contributions came from musical, photography and sports disciplines. An initial reluctance to share work stemmed from an array of different reasons, some of which resonate with art therapy.

1. It would take the focus away from student work
2. A reluctance to appear boastful or to make students feel inadequate
3. My own anxiety was that my work was not good enough to show.
4. However one music teacher had no compunctions about doing so. He felt it would inspire and demonstrate the high standards we aim to illicit from our students.

Debating the matter was useful. It demonstrated how we were using the forum to try to "frame and guide routine practices in the workplace" (Saunders cited in Brosnan and Burgess, p25.) In the teaching context it seems that we all discovered that demonstrating our work engaged the learners. Students often seemed to be invigorated and to show genuine interest when their concentration had been flagging. I found this to be the case when I suggested presenting my work or any type of demonstration. Students always welcomed it. Not only were they interested on a personal level but as Coffield describes, the value and enjoyment of "the old pattern of informal learning by watching" is particularly appropriate to practical learning (2000, p6). Many of us felt it brought the process to life and I now endeavour to incorporate this into my teaching practice whenever possible.

Conclusions

Exploring this critical incident has enabled me to reflect in depth on how the artistic identity of the professional might shift according to the different professional context. My perception was rooted in personal experience, then shaped by the professional perspectives of art therapy and art in education. For my teaching to progress I had to address uncertainty about my own worth as an artist and to validate my own life experience and achievements. The positive impact of incorporating this in my teaching practice reinforced the process and consolidated the learning loop. This cycle is

illustrated by The Lewinian Experiential learning model (figure 1.) This is a useful model for all of the experiential practices under discussion; art making, teaching, and art therapy.

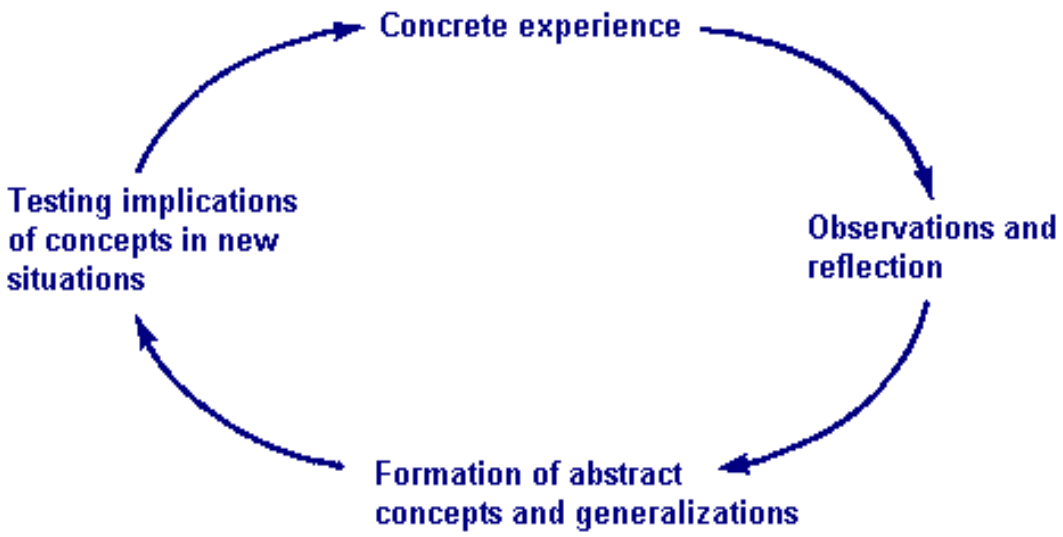

Figure 2.1 The Lewinian Experiental Learning Model

Figure 1

Kolb took this further using the work of Escher to illustrate the experiential process. Kolb describes how the lithograph “Liberation” can be interpreted as exemplifying the three different stages of experiential learning (figure 2). The bottom part of the drawing shows the birds emerging from the background “acquisition”, the central area shows birds tightly meshed in the environment, perhaps grappling with different solutions. The third shows the “freedom and self-direction of integrative development” (Kolb 1984, p160). His work embodies concepts of development and transformation in an uplifting image exemplifying integral features of art making, art therapy and art teaching.

Figure 2

Biography

Clare Dickson is an art therapist and art teacher. She studied painting at the Glasgow School of Art. Following her art therapy training at Queen Margaret University College she worked for several years with addicts and eating disordered patients. Clare then trained as a teacher in further education. She currently works in mainstream secondary education with children with additional learning support needs.

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