

Presentations that look and feel like the arts in therapy: Keeping creative tension with psychology

Professor Shaun McNiff *University Professor, Lesley University*

Abstract

Given that forms and structures of communication shape thought and professional identity, questions arise regarding, firstly, the extent to which presentations of research and descriptions of practice in the arts therapies ‘look and feel’ like the work they describe. And, secondly, what are the implications of the increasing use of social science formats for enquiry, publication, and documentation of outcomes? Reflecting on arts-led practice in Australia and New Zealand, it is proposed that while respecting the interdisciplinary partnership with psychology and maintaining creative tension, the field will be advanced by presentations allowing the arts to speak for themselves.

Keywords

Arts-based research, artistic enquiry, publication, arts-led practice, presentation, Australia and New Zealand, arts therapy and psychology

One of the most compelling issues regarding the identity and future of the arts therapies is how we show what we do to the public, in professional and scholarly journals, conferences, and academic settings. Forms of communication in turn reveal and project the values informing our thinking. They display the structures, methods, and beliefs of underlying paradigms and ultimately shape thought and experience. The arts therapies expand the limits of discursive language and logical thought; they

bring to health and well-being the full spectrum of aesthetic expression and knowing, enlivening energies and transformative forces. This article looks at the extent to which presentations of the work look and feel like the work itself, and at the impact of this on the trustworthiness and persuasiveness of communication.

Rudolf Arnheim in the introduction to his classic volume *Art and visual perception* said, “No one has ever discussed the processes of creating or experiencing art without talking



Figure 1. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy*, From left: Vol.3 No.1, 2008; Vol.7 No.1, 2012; Vol.8 No.1, 2013.