

Reflections from the classroom: Research in art therapy – a photo essay

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Abstract

This photo essay describes insights from master's art therapy students at Florida State University about their personal views on undertaking research. The art-based inquiry was provided as a class activity to elicit students' individual responses about research after a semester of pedagogical instruction about quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method and art-based research. Art-based postcard representations prompted written responses demonstrating the relational and emotional investment required of those conducting a study within art therapy. Through this activity students demonstrated the need to be curious and courageous and to have a sense of wonder, as well as to be willing to take risks in order to discover whatever stirred within.

Keywords

Art therapy research, higher education learning, art-based inquiry.

With this current journal marking ten years of published research in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy*, I thought that reflections from the classroom of future art therapy researchers would be fitting.

As the instructor of a research methods class for graduate art therapy students at Florida State University, I frequently hear the reverberating murmurs that learning about research is irrelevant when one is trying to learn how to be a practitioner. The challenge for me is to ignite some excitement by showcasing the smorgasbord of quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method and art-based research methods available within the field of art therapy.

Towards the end of the semester, after learning about the theory and application of research, students are given an opportunity to reflect at a personal level. This previous semester, the students were asked to create an image on a piece of postcard-sized cardboard that reflected their experiences, thoughts and feelings towards research in art therapy. Upon completion they were encouraged to write a response to their image on the back of the postcard.

This process followed the postcard method of inquiry initiated by Allen and Rumbold (2004). During my doctoral studies at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, Dr Jean Rumbold convened a regular writing group and offered postcard reflections to assist in initiating alternative forms of knowing. These forms of inquiry helped us to see new ways forward and opened up possibilities for issues that we thought were otherwise in a state of predicament. For example, in our postcard reflection about learning spaces in academic settings, we came to appreciate how our relationship to university places afforded diverse knowledge growth at emotional, psychological, social and ecological levels (Varney et al., 2014). Additionally, our review through a postcard inquiry of personal associations with community revealed the constraining as well as sustaining elements that influence the creation of a community (Horsford et al., 2014).

Following the postcard inquiry method (Allen & Rumbold, 2004), the completed postcards were used to initiate a presentational form of knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997).