

Building research capacity: scaffolding the process through arts-based pedagogy

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Research into arts-based interventions is complex as art cannot be directly translated into words. Increasingly, there has been a global incessant call for research into using the arts in a range of mental health disciplines. Ongoing debates over methodology, primarily quantitative and qualitative, persist and this just may affect one's decision to engage in research. However, research is needed for a range of reasons including providing evidence of the integrity of a discipline, asserting core competencies of practitioners, for third party and stakeholder purposes including advocacy, the formation of relevant laws, protections, and access to services, and, of course, to highlight emerging trends and contemporary best practices to effectively address a plethora of the complex needs of clients.

As such, arts-based practitioners are uniquely situated to make significant contributions to the research base given their direct engagement with the arts with individuals, families, communities, and society at large (McNiff, 2013; Thomas et al., 2020). Art is rich with metaphor and symbol, and often can be accessed and applied when answers to questions are not easily obtained nor addressed through words alone, even if the art may seem abstract at first (McNiff, 2013; Chilton et al., 2015; Boden et al., 2019; Potash, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020). Indeed, art is not the opposite of research as in the dichotomic paradigm of arts versus science, but rather art, and art making, are a type of research in and of themselves, just as research can also involve creativity and nonlinear engagement (McNiff, 2013; Kapitan, 2018).

The question is how to bridge the divide between practice and research, and arts and science, within the minds of arts-based practitioners. This chapter aims to strategically step back several paces and consider how best to encourage mental health practitioners-in-training to engage in arts-based research practices that are user-friendly, non-threatening, creative, meaningful, and aligned to their discipline. Through a purposefully scaffolded pedagogical approach, arts-based social practitioners can come to terms

with their understanding of research and engage in research activity that contributes to larger contexts overall. Arts-based research strategies are gaining increasing acceptance by professional disciplines through research discourse and activity (McNiff, 2013; Boden et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2020), and are being integrated within training programmes as part of the curriculum. The discourse is both consolidated from and informed by the underpinnings of mental health, social practice, art psychotherapy, and arts-based research. This chapter is structured into three main sections: (1) arts-based methodologies and pedagogies within higher education; (2) examples of arts-based strategies utilised in an art psychotherapy training programme in Singapore to scaffold research capacity; and (3) implications for trainees and practitioners on using arts-based research. Each of these areas is quite rich and layered on its own; however, for the purpose of this chapter, an overarching overview is provided with links to examples from within this particular context. It is these links that I hope will offer threads of similarity and relevance to a range of social practice disciplines that engage with the arts in both practice and research.

Arts-based methodologies and pedagogies: research in higher education

Working with others is rewarding, exhilarating, demanding, challenging, and even exhausting. As mental health practitioners and trainees of the discipline, we encounter complex interrelationships and experiences of attitudes, behaviour, trauma, and all things related to the human condition through relational and organisational structures and systems. All of this requires specialist competencies, resources, stamina, resilience, and problem-solving; communication typically transpires through consultation, assessment, documentation, evaluation, reports, and the like. Research into arts-based practices, or arts-based research is another intensely communicative form of dissemination and communication of the impacts of an intervention, that elevates the phenomena experienced from practice into larger spheres wherein it can be dissected, examined, and unpacked with the aim to illuminate insight, understanding, and new knowledge (McNiff, 2013; Chilton et al., 2015; Kapitan, 2018; Boden et al., 2019; Potash, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020).

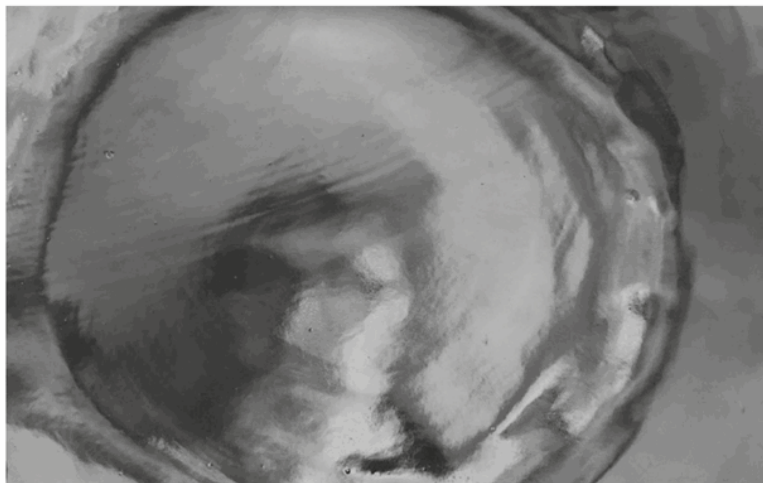
Practitioners and trainees hold a wealth of information through engagement in their own practice, which is invaluable to the larger discipline and to all those they provide services to (McNiff, 2013). It becomes necessary, even essential, for practitioners and trainees to engage in research processes to expand their communication to the larger practitioner community and other audiences. Mental health practice and research both require creativity, problem-solving, ingenuity, and systematic approaches. As such,

integrating art and arts-based methodologies into research, and examining art and artefacts whether created by the researcher and/or by clients within therapeutic contexts, are just some viable options available to practitioners and trainees (McNiff, 2013; Chilton et al., 2015; Kapitan, 2018; Potash, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020).

Research within mental health disciplines often requires a process of reflexivity given the interrelationships that are examined between theory and the existing research base as well as between the practice and phenomena that we are investigating. This can be daunting and, at times, confrontational. Throughout my own doctoral research journey, on the topic of experiential learning, I turned to art and art making as a way to challenge, progress, and stimulate reflexive and reflective processes (Figure 15.1).

This allowed me to sit with my ideas when I needed to contemplate the dynamics of teaching and learning, it allowed me to express the struggles and triumphs I was experiencing as I gathered and made sense of my data, it served as documented evidence of the various stages and milestones of research I had achieved, it allowed me to nonverbally and creatively work through complicated and frustrating aspects of my experience while researching, and it provided a series of outputs or artefacts that could be used for a range of other purposes such as exhibition and/or for further research. An important function for researchers creating art is that the process leads to wisdom as part of the explorative and excavating processes inherent in research (McNiff, 2013; Potash, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020).

Figure 15.1: R. Lay, 2019, *Self-Reflections and Experiential Learning: Research as a Doctor of Education Student*, digital photograph from handphone (cropped), dimensions variable



The benefits of using arts-based approaches within my own doctoral research inspired me to integrate arts-based strategies and approaches into the curriculum and pedagogies utilised within the postgraduate art therapy programme that I lead. Having this first-hand experience further led me to an informed stance while providing postgraduate thesis supervision and research mentorship to the students, alumni, and the professional mental health communities locally and abroad. The next section provides a brief account of how the practice of research was demystified by a particular postgraduate art therapy training programme in southeast Asia.

Arts-based strategies: creatively scaffolding research capacity

Experiential learning that blends theory with arts activity can enhance one's relationship to research and can even shift one's perspective on how research can be executed in ways that are creative, stimulating, enriching, and meaningful while also ensuring core skill set development as needed by the professional. There is no better way to illustrate this point than to highlight examples from practice – for this context, examples from a postgraduate art therapy training programme in Singapore. Illustrative examples and visuals created by teaching staff and students are presented throughout this section.

This training prioritises the art in art therapy and arts-based strategies were purposefully integrated into the two research modules. The intentions were: (1) to introduce arts-based methodologies into the research component of the training, which lead to the consolidation of clinical material from practice into a substantial written thesis; (2) to trace students' initial understanding of research by having them create artwork that confronted their anxiety and perceptions; (3) to develop their appreciation of complex processes during their research activity; and (4) to celebrate the completion of their training by means of a final group art exhibition that included a published exhibition catalogue in both hardcopy and online versions.

Arts-based approaches, strategies, and methodologies invoke potentially rich and complex metaphors that can add further layers of depth, associations, and meaning making to experiences. A poignant example is with a sculpture that students create at the beginning of the research module in year one ([Figure 15.2](#)). Students are invited to create a creature to represent *research* using any art materials, media, and found objects that are collected from around the classroom. On a symbolic level, this mirrors the researcher's task of looking for, collecting, and systematically organising the material. The art directive further stipulates that the creature is to be constructed in such a way as to be held in the palm of the student's hand. The point here is to encourage students to reconsider research as a doable

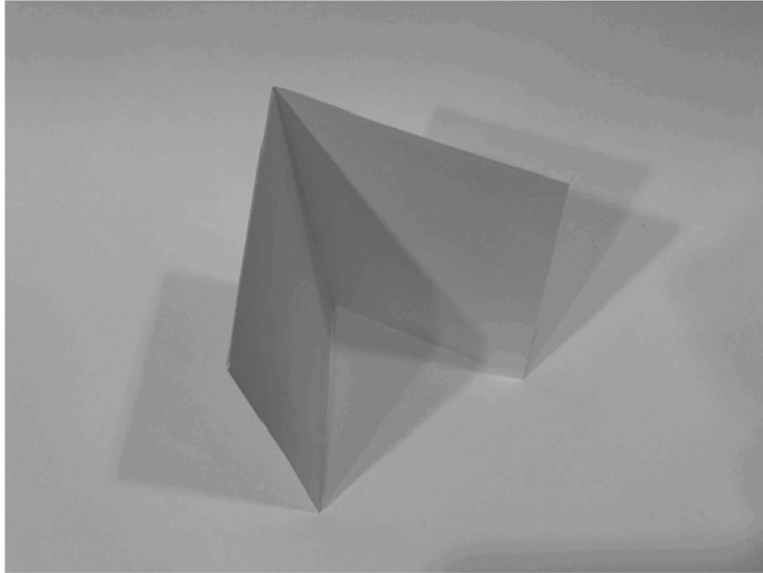
Figure 15.2: R. Lay, 2020, *RESEARCH as Creature*, beginner's exercise, mixed media (found objects: pencil shavings, glass container), dimensions variable



exercise and to do so within their current scope. Once completed, the student takes a photograph of the creature allowing them to figuratively reframe the initial anxiety and perspective on the seemingly insurmountable task of engaging in research. This experience generally places research in a positive light and students begin to become excited about the potential of research and of integrating the arts.

The senior research module is comprised of two distinct but complimentary components – theory and art – and are co-facilitated by an experienced

Figure 15.3: R. Lay, 2020, *Blank Greeting Card: Message to Me from My Thesis*, graduating student exercise prior to starting their thesis, pre-made greeting card, dimensions variable



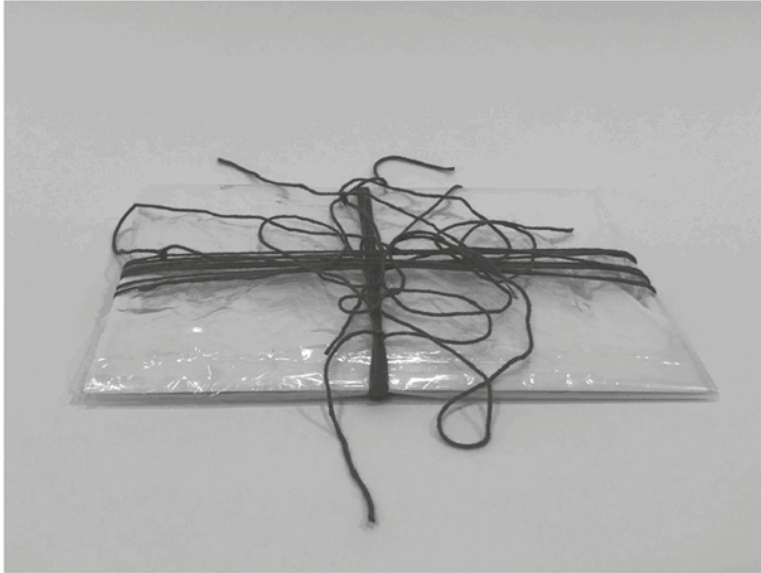
practitioner and an accomplished practising artist. The two outputs of this research module are a substantial written thesis and an artwork that is exhibited as part of a group exhibition. To begin their thesis process, students are provided a blank greeting card and an envelope with the instructions to create an artwork in the form of a letter to themselves from their thesis (Figures 15.3 & 15.4).

At the end of the class session, the greeting cards are sealed and placed in a container, which is stored in the lecturer's desk for several months. The cards are returned to students at a critical point of bringing the thesis to a close and when the students seem to need encouragement the most. A majority of the students become emotional at this point and some have even forgotten about their card; this special delivery is well received and provides the essential boost to stamina to bring their thesis to completion. I am pleased to report that all students submit their signed and bound thesis on the last day of class. I am not sure if the greeting card from their thesis was responsible; however, I am convinced it played a crucial role.

Some students gravitate to art and art making, and have independently initiated arts-based strategies that have complimented their postgraduate research.

Julia Pasifull Oh for example, engaged in a weaving project in tandem with the writing of her thesis. She explains that:

Figure 15.4: R. Lay, 2020, *Message from My Thesis: Signed and Sealed*, graduating student exercise prior to starting their thesis, pre-made greeting card and found objects (string, cellophane), dimensions variable

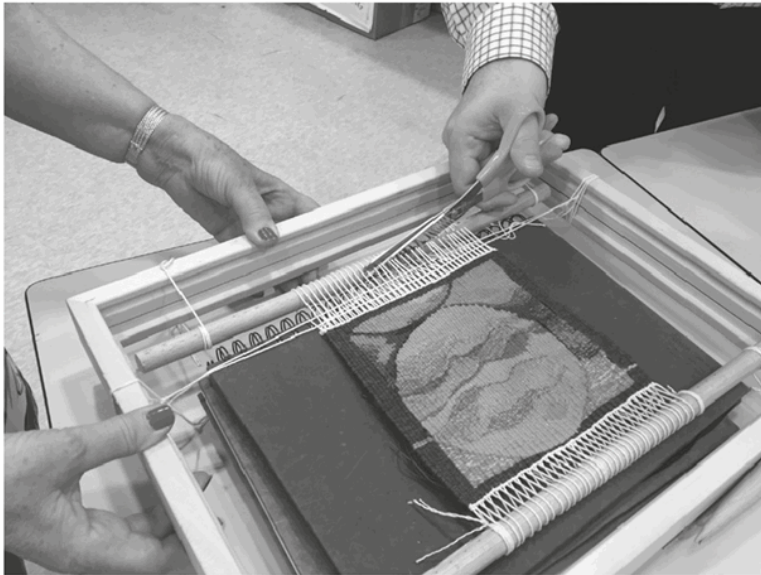


The act of weaving captivated me and I realised that with a small wooden picture frame, a couple of wooden dowels and a strong clamp, I could take my weaving with me as I travelled and could attach it to any table in order to start work...

It is not unusual to use the metaphor of weaving for research studies (Pitcher, 2012), and on returning to Singapore I plunged into our second year of study and the major project, a 10,000 word dissertation – the weaving became my response art, a mirror of the process. The strong wooden picture frame represented the Masters in Art Therapy Course and the college framework. The warp threads, strung in a continuous tensioned line over the suspended dowels became the reams of instructions and feedback about how we should work on our dissertation, with the weft threads representing the flow of ideas, articles, books and words as I tried to settle on a topic. I started with a knotted line, then a few rows of dark threads, and took the dark colour up the sides of the weaving. Inspired by a watercolour by Cezanne I slowly built a blended curve as I tried to understand what would work in the weaving, just as I tried to understand the demands of the dissertation...

Over the 7-month placement in the hospice I sporadically worked on the weaving, which grew as my dissertation took shape... There was just enough room to fill in the final few lines and I deliberately let

Figure 15.5: J.P. Oh, 2015, *Weaving the Dissertation*, graduating student's art-based initiative paralleling her research process, weaving, dimensions variable



the disk intrude on the top framework. All that was left was to tie off the piece and then, as part of my final review with my course leader, to ask him to cut the warp ties (Figure 15.5).

(J.P. Oh, personal communication, September 26, 2020)

Another student utilised arts-based methodology as part of her research thesis, and this extended beyond its completion (Figure 15.6). As detailed here, Ingrid Grace Tatham contends that:

My thesis topic involved the symbolic and metaphoric use of a fish.

On completion of my thesis, I wanted to capture the experience of researching, writing, rewriting and receiving feedback from my supervisor. Creating a likeness of a fish felt like an ideal way to do this.

I drew the fish freehand onto cardboard; cut out two like pieces and holding them, stuffed crumpled pages of my final draft thesis in between, finally binding them together with masking tape to make a skeleton of my fish. After mixing a bowl of flour with water to make a paste, I tore the remaining 70 pages of my draft thesis into strips and began the very tactile and time-consuming task of dipping each page into the paste to mould the shape of my fish. It took five days to dry before I could paint it with acrylic paint and varnish.

Figure 15.6: I.G. Tatham, 2020, *The Fish*, graduating student's art-based initiative celebrating the completion of her thesis, papier mache, copy of draft thesis with supervisor comments, acrylic paint, dimensions variable



I gifted the fish to my supervisor because it represented much more than just a papier mache fish. This art piece represented not only my learning and emotion but more importantly my gratefulness for his valuable, if not always comfortable feedback, and support throughout the process.

(I.G. Tatham, personal communication, September 26, 2020)

Arts-based approaches, strategies, and methodologies offer creative ways to de-mystify research processes, while allowing educators, students, and practitioners to reframe their perspectives, scaffold skill sets, and engage in research meaningfully. Investigating and/or integrating art into research not only expands one's capacity to examine questions linked to mental health practice in ways that instigate understanding and knowledge, but that also honour the intricacies of one's lived experience (McNiff, 2013; Chilton et al., 2015; Kapitan, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020).

Implications for educators, trainees, and practitioners

If educators, students, and practitioners are making use of arts-based approaches, strategies, and methodologies as part of the research itself, special consideration must be taken into account for the art and artefacts that are created. Similar to the best practices, ethics, consent, and sensitivities utilised with research participants, data sets, and security for these, the art and artefacts must be systematically treated with respect, dignity, and ethics. For example, consent to use the artwork, the descriptions, and all other related data within the research must be obtained, and this also extends to the parameters of confidentiality, ownership of the artwork, and the storage of artwork and related material. It is the attention to these additional dimensions

that further adds credence and credibility to arts-based approaches, strategies, and methodologies.

The art media, materials, art, and artwork do not necessarily need to be complicated and can include what is readily available and/or easily expressed. For example, Figure 15.1 is a photograph taken from a mobile phone, and Figure 15.2 used found objects within a space, the postgraduate art therapy classroom. On other occasions, depending on the interests and skill level of the student, the artist, the participant, and/or the researcher the materials, the metaphors, the pragmatics of the artmaking, and the artwork itself may be more time-consuming and advanced (Figures 15.5 and 15.6). Just like any other methodology or therapeutic intervention, it is up to the researcher to delve deeper into the traditions, underpinnings, and practices of art, art making, art media, and materials as well as any related cultural aspects of these to effectively apply arts-based approaches, strategies, and methodologies to either research or practice.

Arts-based approaches, strategies, and methodologies in contemporary research acknowledge the complexities of the human condition, the human experience, and the myriad cultural and lived contexts of those to whom we provide services (McNiff, 2013, 2019). This is achieved by allowing multiple perspectives, lenses, and frameworks from which to uncover insight, understanding, and new knowledge. Arts-based methodologies advocate engagement with the arts, promote reflection, acknowledge that the lived experiences are difficult to put into words, and support new ways of looking at phenomena (McNiff, 2013, 2019; Chilton et al., 2015; Boden et al., 2019; Potash, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020). Expanding traditional research conventions to include and embrace arts-based methodologies appropriately adheres to the underlying essence of research in sophisticated and functional ways. The human condition and experience are complex and it is only befitting that additional methodologies are accessed in the attempt to make sense of these.

Acknowledgements

Conceptualisation of experience into text requires inspiration and for this I express my gratitude to the teaching team and postgraduate students at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, and in particular, to Julia Pasifull Oh and Ingrid Grace Tatham, MA, AThR for granting me their permission to include their artwork and descriptions in this chapter.

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