

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Unifying Multiple Roles during Lockdown

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This reflection highlights my experiences navigating through a lockdown in Singapore, which we analogously termed as a “circuit breaker”. Ironically, it was a time where many of our daily functions had to continue over electronic means. We also had to spend most of our time at home because of the social distancing measures. The use of devices and teleconferencing tools surged during the circuit breaker and people remained connected, if not more so than before. Like many others, I had to be acquainted with Zoom to carry out my roles and responsibilities, and spent most of my days in my room, on my computer, switching between these roles. The following discussion is a reflection on the discoveries I made during this new routine.

Converging My Different Roles

Carl Rogers believed that “the organism has one basic tendency and striving to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism” (Rogers, 1951, p. 487). Congruence, one of Roger’s three core conditions, is the overlap between the self-image and the ideal self and a key factor in achieving self-actualisation (Rogers, 1959).

In our professional and personal lives we adapt ourselves to the roles that we play. In my life, I play the roles of an art therapy trainee, a teacher, a daughter, a friend, just to name a few. Due to my many different roles it may not always be easy to achieve congruence. Rogers, Gendlin, Kiesler, and Truax (1967) explained that congruence involves not hiding behind our professional roles and not holding back feelings that are obvious in a professional encounter. As an art therapy trainee there are boundaries to be aware of and considerations to self-disclosure that I am still navigating amidst the aim to achieve congruence. Thus, self-awareness becomes crucial to recognise and integrate my authentic self in all the roles that I play.

Due to the accessible nature of Zoom many of us jumped at the opportunity to make use of its functions to host webinars, art-making sessions, meetings, game nights, and so on. Compared to when we could travel from place to place before the lockdown, meeting different people became as simple as leaving one meeting and hopping on to another. I started each day deciding on one outfit that would unify all my roles professional and personal I had to play within that particular day.

Seeing myself being on the same screen in different settings reminded me about how my roles and identities are not dependent on the physical space I am in, or what I am wearing, but why I am there. Caza et al. (2018) studied authenticity in professional contexts and found that individuals feel most authentic when they can fulfil their purposes in life through multiple means. The consistency from seeing the same “me” in all the roles that I play through one platform allowed me to see how I connected to my roles and they became clearer to me. This allowed me to be more affirmed about my purposes and priorities in life.

Maximising My Inner Resources

As I spent more time in my room I was more aware about the things I owned and had laying around in my room. I started to notice art materials I bought during a sale that were still unopened, and various skincare products that I had accumulated over the months for moments I would pamper myself. I opened them up and there was a sense of comfort when I realised how stocked up my room was, and a sense of hope that the circuit breaker would be bearable. I related this experience to the task of self-care and the need to utilise my resources for the benefit of my clients. As a result of this awareness I became motivated to look at how I would expand and maximise my inner resources to cope with the demands of the day and my work as an art therapy trainee.

There was also a realisation that I had to organise and build systems in my room to allow me to perform my daily roles better. On top of noticing what I could use more of I also noticed how there were many things that were no longer useful to me. I went through a phase of decluttering and also began to spend more time beautifying my room and making it more comfortable for myself. I also realised how this act of organising and deciding what was useful or not useful for me allowed me a space to restructure my life and to build more sustainable self-care systems. Being an art therapy trainee during these uncertain times reinforces a self-care routine that is more essential as it provides a secure base to fall back on during difficult times, and also helps me to reset and remain creative when working with my clients.

Although this discussion refers to mostly positive outcomes of the lockdown there were many unsaid challenges when my many roles moved to an online platform. This was

particularly difficult in my work with my clients and raised questions for me about my capacity for congruence. Aligning different aspects of myself and my roles also prompted me to remain curious about the therapeutic potential of unification and solitude when, as an art therapy trainee I am conducting art therapy sessions online with many different clients. To support me I checked regularly for the latest ethical guidelines and discussed my therapeutic work with my supervisor, which helped me to not feel alone. Through reading articles online I became much more aware of how art therapy globally was adapting online and how others were making changes to their personal and professional roles.



Fig. 1: *Reaching out or reaching in?*

The artwork above in Fig. 1 was created in response to my experiences mentioned in this discussion. It symbolises the process of connecting with others and connecting with ourselves during the pandemic. The painted wooden box with a transparent plastic sheet attached on the lid represents my computer screen that I look so much at these days. The photograph of the box reflected an image of my hand that was reaching out to the box as I was taking the photograph. The illusion of a hand reaching out from the inside of

the box portrays a sense of being trapped, and at the same time a sense of acknowledgement and comfort that it can still be seen.

When I reflect on my image I think of my clients and their process of art-making where they find empowerment and ways of communicating virtually with the resources they have internally and externally. Rogers, N. (2011) and her work in person-centred expressive arts therapy recognised that stimulating experiences in the art-making process facilitate creativity, which is another innate need of human beings. I am excited and hopeful that my clients will also gain empowerment through attending sessions virtually, where they get to experience novel ways of communicating and problem-solving by working with and around the challenges posed by this pandemic. The lessons we learn through navigating online platforms might translate to more creative and meaningful ways of being even after this pandemic is over.

This experience of the circuit breaker allowed me to achieve more congruence because of the time and space I had to connect with myself and my roles. The challenges I faced also allowed me to build more empathy towards others and recognise that everyone, even before the pandemic, have their own challenges to work with and their own processes in managing them. This reflection enhanced my understanding of Carl and Natalie Roger's work in person-centred therapy, and encouraged me to continuously remain introspective and self-aware to be genuine, congruent, and empathetic in my work as an art therapy trainee and beyond.

About the Author

Yap Rae Yi is a final year student in the MA Art Therapy programme at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. In line with her professional interests in promoting caregiver well-being, she has been conducting individual and group art therapy sessions with formal and informal caregivers as part of her supervised training.

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