



Applying the ‘one-canvas’ method in experiential art psychotherapy training groups

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Experiential learning, individually and in groups, is an integral part of art therapy training in the UK; deemed essential in developing, cultivating, and maintaining creative, therapeutic, and clinical skills. Directed toward helping students develop personal, interpersonal, and professional reflexivity, experiential ‘training groups’ offer a ‘live’ experience that demonstrates the potency of group processes while also speaking to theory and future practice. These groups provide a carefully constructed opportunity for students to explore and experience the fundamentals and psychological/emotional impact of *being in, making art in, and expressing themselves in* a group setting.

Drawing on research material from a retrospective review undertaken by training group facilitators, this presentation reflects on the introduction of the El Duende ‘one-canvas’ technique to the experiential training groups on the Sheffield-based Masters programme in Art Psychotherapy Practice. It reflects on a powerful journey of encounter and transformation, the learning and insights gained, challenges encountered, and the implications for the use of this model in future art therapy education.

The review indicates that the canvas acted as both a living, evolving, containing, companion as well as a teacher; it’s consistent presence forcing sustained confrontation with personal and group dynamics as students repeatedly returned to rework emergent material on a single canvas over a twelve-week period. While there was variability in group engagement and considerable ambivalence toward the one-canvas process, most students rapidly transitioned from playful engagement with it to confronting complex emotional and therapeutic themes, showing significant learning gains. Documentation of process and journaling supported the development of therapeutic insights and theoretical links to practice with many students also expressing clearer professional identity formation.

In summary, while the intensity of the ‘one-canvas’ model presented challenges to both



students and facilitators, the process nonetheless offered a transformative learning experience for students over a relatively brief period of time.

Biography

Debbie Michaels, PhD, is a HCPC-registered art psychotherapist and associate lecturer on the Sheffield-based Masters programme in Art Psychotherapy Practice (UK). Her clinical practice has mainly involved working with adults and supervising art therapists across a range of client groups and settings. She has contributed to the literature in psychoanalysis, art psychotherapy, applied arts in health, and practice-based research, and in 2022 completed an art-based doctorate. Her research interests lie with art as a research method and the psychosocial role of reflexive art practice in honing sensitivity to the affective dimensions of human situations and experience.

Andy West is a HCPC-registered art psychotherapist, senior lecturer, and placement co-ordinator on the Sheffield-based Masters programme in Art Psychotherapy Practice (UK). He has clinical experience of working with adults with complex mental illness and trauma in the National Health Service (NHS), where he has also been involved in delivering service evaluation and redesign projects. In 2023 he co-produced a presentation with a service user about the power of art therapy for the Royal College of Psychiatry's Annual Rehabilitation Conference. Prior to the NHS, he worked with young people in therapeutic education.

Recent Publications

Michaels, D. (2025). **When past meets present: transference, art, and affectivity in reflexive research.** *Reflective practice*, 1-13.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2025.2504093>

Michaels, D. (2024). **Mourning Lost Parts: An Art-Based Response to Experiences in/of a Neurorehabilitation Day Service.** *Journal of Applied Arts and Health*, 15(3).

https://doi.org/10.1386/jaah_00174_3

Michaels, D. (2022). *Organisational Encounters and Reflexive Undergoings: A Speculative Weaving in Three Transpositions* [PhD thesis, Sheffield Hallam University].

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/31989/>