

**Creative Arts Therapy Program  
1998-1999  
Report and Evaluation**

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**For the Province Of British Columbia  
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## • **Project Overview**

### **Objective**

The objective of the project was to provide a program of creative arts therapy to literacy students at the Victoria READ Society. The program was designed to offer students an opportunity to explore life issues through art in a group setting to facilitate awareness of behavior or emotional issues which may interfere with the student's access to further training and future employment. The program was initiated by teaching staff at Victoria READ Society who recognized that many students need support beyond literacy training in order to achieve their goals or make changes to their personal circumstances.

### **Background**

A pilot program of creative arts therapy was introduced to students at Victoria READ Society in May 1997. This program offered students an opportunity to attend a twice weekly group, situated at the McKenzie office of the Victoria READ Society. The success of the pilot program led to the application for cost shared funding to further evaluate the benefits of including arts based therapy as an integral part of a literacy program.

### **Statistical Breakdown of Participants**

Term One: 6 female, 9 male

Multi-cultural, including Arabic, First Nations, African & Caucasian

Term Two: 9 female, 6 male Multicultural (as above)

### **Measurement of Outcome and Success**

The method for evaluating the success of the program is qualitative, drawn from the response by staff at Victoria READ Society, students who took part and conclusions of the art therapists, external supervisors and practicum students facilitating the project.

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### **Program Facilitation**

A professional art therapist and student therapist from the B.C. School of Art Therapy led the groups. Term One was led by Liza Miles-Husain and supervised by Linda Lange. Term Two was led by Sharen Johnston (during Liza's maternity leave) and supervised by Liza Miles-Husain.

### **Staff Workshop**

The teaching staff from the Adult Basic Skills program at the Victoria READ Society were finding themselves increasingly drawn into the life issues of their students, beyond those issues generally covered in a literacy training class, due in part to the outcomes of the creative therapy group. The teachers found that their added responsibility as counsellor to their students was having a negative impact on classroom dynamics.

Victoria READ Society staff chose to address the problem by requesting an art therapy workshop for themselves in order to work out appropriate responses and set boundaries for themselves. Students and teaching staff involved in the second program clearly benefited from the staff workshop. The results were improved communication between teaching staff and therapists and increased staff awareness of potential manipulation by students to draw them into emotional conflict.

### **• Intake Procedure**

The therapist and co-therapist met with members of staff prior to commencement of the group, and it was agreed to follow intake procedure established for the pilot program in May 1997. Following a brief verbal presentation from the therapist and co-therapist at Linden and McKenzie sites, students were invited to take part in two "taster workshops". These workshops were designed to provide students with an opportunity to decide whether they wished to make a commitment to take part in the whole program. Staff supported and encouraged students to attend "taster workshops".

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Difficulties with the intake procedure became apparent during the second week of the program when students from the Linden site stated that they wanted to attend only with other members of their class. Other students from the McKenzie site who wished to continue with the group also had preference for certain group members. This meant that the dynamics of the group preferred by the facilitators – that is, a mixed group – could not be achieved, resulting in only one group running for the first half of the program. Though it was not the therapists' ideal, having only one group meant the therapists were available to offer weekly sessions of one-on-one therapy to participants who needed it. This was well-received by those students.

The intake procedure for the second half of the program included individual interviews. These interviews enabled the therapists to establish a weekly group at both the Linden and McKenzie sites. The dynamics of students at both sites were markedly different. Both groups benefited from the attendance of students from the first term of the program. The individual intake consultation established in the second term gave therapists information that enabled them to foresee particular needs of the client group in advance.

## • **Group Case Study**

### **Overview**

Each week participants were asked to share how they felt both physically and emotionally. The goal was to create more awareness around emotional issues and how emotional &/or physical health problems impact relationships with others and affect cognitive abilities.

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## • Individual Case Study – Facilitator: Sharen Johnston

T. was a 58 year old man with a severe and disabling back injury that prevented him from performing work requiring physical labor. T. therefore chose to access the Victoria READ Society's Adult Basic Skills class through Worker's Compensation to gain new employable skills. This change in profession also awoke in T. a desire to redefine his self-image. He had had no previous counseling or therapeutic experience.

This client attended one-to-one sessions from October 1998 through December 1998. His attendance was somewhat sporadic due to continual back pain. Presented issues included: exploration of who he was and where he was going, the impact of his lack of education on his present sense of self worth, his goals at Victoria READ Society, and grief and loss due to the recent deaths of neighbors and friends within his age group.

As T. felt safer in the therapeutic relationships, the metaphoric and symbolic process of art therapy allowed T. to name and express feelings, which he did not have the language to talk about. Some positive gains this client made were as follows: using shape, color and form as descriptors; expanding his feeling vocabulary so that he could better communicate needs and wants within relationships; and the exploration of internalized negative and positive messages that got in the way of learning successes. We looked at the issues surrounding baldness, and how it can be seen as reminder of mortality, as well as his tendency to "clown around", and the stigmas attached to illiteracy. Through the process of illustrating incidents in which he used humor inappropriately, he discovered he used it to hide his illiteracy because he felt competent at work and "dumb" in social situations. T. wanted to be literate so that he could fit into social situations, which required some education. The effect of classmates invading emotional boundaries and the beginnings of boundary setting were also considered. Toward the end of our session, T. began to explore tentatively in his drawings his spiritual beliefs regarding his place in the world, his responsibility to protect the natural world, and what happens after death. T. attended the second group program at Linden during Term Two. An issue, which T. raised during one-to-one therapy, was deemed to be too serious for follow-up during the group program. It was recommended to T that he seek further one-to-one sessions outside of the school environment in order to explore this issue.

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## • Staff Observations and Responses

Four out of seven students in my class are taking part in the art therapy program, three men and one woman. There has been quite a lot of positive benefit as far as my classroom is concerned. The three men have been able to address some issues between them within the safety of the art therapy group. This has allowed the classroom atmosphere to be much less volatile. It has also freed me to teach instead of constantly having to monitor and address personal conflicts.

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The art therapy program has gone very well so far this term. The two students from my class who are attending appear to be very positive about the experience. Confidentiality, which was an issue last term, has been addressed. As a result students seem to trust the process, and teachers have felt comfortable being able to remain detached from all aspects of the program. I appreciate the enthusiasm and skill the therapists bring into the sessions, and I am sure the students do as well.

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I am glad we have at least two participants from each class. I think both of the students from my class are benefiting from the art program. One of them is more articulate about those benefits than the other. But I believe their ongoing participation and commitment to the group indicates their recognition of the value and purpose of the project. The students in my class are respecting the boundaries and confidential nature of the classes. They both seem to be happy with the process.

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Two of my students are entirely committed to the program. They are both going through a time of crisis in their lives. One positive affect for all the students was that the art therapy sessions increased the amount the students knew about each other. It helped them to be more open and communicative as well. I really enjoyed the opportunity to talk through my concerns and have another viewpoint on the students' issues and concerns. This supplied me with some valuable support and fresh ideas.

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## • Student Feedback

\* I am learning about my feelings. Where they come from and what they are as well as why I get them.

\* This group has helped me learn about myself and recognize where my anger comes from.

\* I am getting an understanding of how humans interact with one another in a confined place.

\* What I am getting out of the group is that everyone there has their own opinions. That I don't need to be an artist. How to openly express myself. Learning about myself in a different manner (like finding out I had caring hands from my image). I wouldn't have thought of it. I'm learning new ways to deal with situations, to be more assertive about my own boundaries.

\* I'm finding out how to communicate properly in and out of the classroom and at home and in the community. I'm finding out my fears which only I can control; and how to let myself relax, and to know that I'm a survivor.

\* I used to think one-on-one would be better but in my situation it's nicer with a group. I enjoyed the program and it can do a lot for someone who hides their feelings.

\* The short period of time that I attended this program did a lot for me. I thoroughly enjoyed the people I met in class. I did enjoy the discussion we had, the drawings we did together and the sketches we did on our own. It's amazing how the drawing can explain a lot and get rid of the cobwebs that have been hanging for some time. The art therapy did give me peace of mind and I draw how I am feeling at home now. I would love to be able to come back to the program in March.

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## • **Conclusions**

Three particular areas of benefit to students were observed:

- i. increased understanding of personal feelings and willingness to express those feelings within the group
- ii. awareness of emotional and physical boundaries as shown in their drawings
- iii. better management of conflict (external and internal). Group members learned how to express their needs and acknowledge the needs of others more respectfully. They were better able to contain any conflicts within the group, and did not break the confidence of the group by taking issues outside.

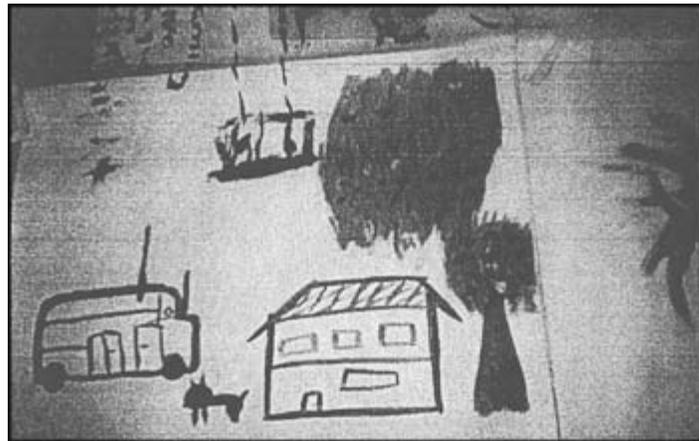
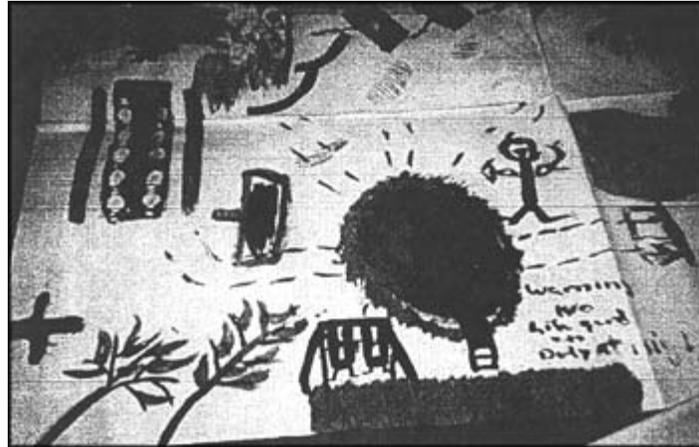
Two students received an award for literacy. Both of these students attributed this success, in part, to taking part in the art therapy program.

Reading the responses, taking note of the students' participation and verbal acknowledgements of change, we believe that each participant has taken some positive aspect of learning from the program and that this will benefit them as they continue the path of furthering their education, seeking employment and dealing with some particularly difficult day to day life situations.

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Figure 1



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### **Art Exercises**

The exercises included collage making (using magazine cut outs); storytelling followed by individual or group images; group and individual imagery of present feelings; boundary images; imagery as a response to physical awareness; image as a response to music; exploration of family patterns; image of a safe place (individual and group images were created); conflict resolution and images of historical conflict situations; images of how beginnings and endings were/are now; and images for giving and receiving a blessing.

### **Issues Raised by Participants**

The participants raised many issues during the sessions, including: the “Inner Critic” – doing things correctly or perfectly; inability to express and work with feeling; containment; trust (self and others); recognizing personal strengths; creating appropriate boundaries; interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict; self-parenting and acknowledging the ‘inner child’; teamwork; sibling rivalry (group dynamics); power and control; loss and bereavement; developing listening skills; abuse; educational anxiety; shyness; boredom; physical discomfort (injury); co-dependency; and confusion.

### **Group Strengths**

The following were identified by group members as their strengths: making a commitment; courage to face and explore painful emotional situations; listening to others; compassion; empathy; willingness to make changes that are possible; being available to learn the language of feelings and use them; sense of humor; cultural rituals; patience; and attention to the program.

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## •Session Four Term Two – Facilitator: Sharen Johnston

### **Art Exercise:** The Inner Critic (Figure 3 and 4)

Inside a protective circle, make an image of your critic. The critic is the inner voice that tells you negative things about yourself. Then draw an image you can use to help yourself when you feel criticized. Tame, befriend, disarm, or use your critic's power.

**Therapist Observations:** Five people completed the exercise. Images of the critic (figure 3 and 4) included a black widow representing a critical parent; monsters and a wasp with poisonous stingers representing critical intimate partners; and harsh chaotic colors representing feeling shamed by an in-law. The counters to the critics consisted of pulling off stingers; images of the positive skills and strengths held by the participant; statements about boundaries such as saying "no"; and organizing pleasant colors within a strong boundary.

The externalization of the critic into the artwork gave each person an awareness of his or her negative self-talk. While finding the counter to the critic they consciously acknowledged their own worth, strength, and abilities. Participants indicated they understood how their critics controlled their actions in the present. They learned that sometimes a person can react to past experiences during the present, triggering them to react inappropriately to the context at hand. When these emotional triggers are known, we can *choose* how to react to them instead of

just doing what we used to do. Most group members also worked through concerns about taking risks with ideas that were new to them. This understanding of risk taking is an important step in developing a general openness to learning new behaviors both in their external lives and in the classroom.

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## • **Individual Case Study – Facilitator: Liza Miles-Husain**

The client attended five sessions of one-to-one art therapy in addition to group sessions from October 1998 through December 1998.

The client found the use of image within a counseling relationship very helpful. His initial emotional position was despair. A family history of alcohol, drug, physical abuse and the suicide of a sibling had all impacted on this client's life as a young person. Now in his mid-forties, sober, and regularly attending an Alcoholic Anonymous program, the client was attempting to address his low self-image and a recent suicide attempt.

This client's artistic ability was made apparent by the images he created in group sessions; however, during one-to-one sessions he made quite poor imagery, reflective of a difficult inner journey and state of mind. As well as art therapy I used cognitive humanistic counseling (Transactional Analysis). The marriage of Transactional Analysis with art therapy is one I often use to help clients cope cognitively with crises or specific issues.

We began to address boundaries during the second session and the client drew two images, the first of a person in despair, and the second, following some recognition of the need to put personal boundaries in place, a self-image with the head up. The issue of boundaries was affecting the client's relationships within the school, specifically, inappropriate physical proximity had been raised as a concern by two of the teaching staff. It was appropriate to deal with this "here and now" situation, and this occurred during our last session together. The client attended group sessions sporadically afterwards. However, teaching staff reported the client had verbally expressed to them and to other students positive benefits from this session.

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## • Recommendations

1. An art therapy program benefits from students building on the therapeutic experience. Therefore, the program should be in place for the whole academic year.
  2. An art therapy program should be undertaken by qualified professional therapists only. The art exercises often engage participants in unresolved emotional conflict of a potentially explosive nature. Although presented to encourage a “safe” exploration of personal issues, clients often engage with these issues at an emotionally deep level, which could lead to being re-traumatized by the event if not handled properly. The therapeutic training the art therapist brings to a session is such that she or he can recognize those positions and handle them appropriately.
  3. The intake for a group should be by individual interview and include one experiential “taster” session with the pre-selected group. Individual interviews allow for evaluation of student needs. The “taster” session allows the student to determine the value of the program for them.
  4. Staff should be offered an awareness workshop at the beginning or midway through the program. The staff awareness workshop is important both as a support for students attending the program and as an experiential personal training to grasp the impact of art as a container in which to explore emotions. The workshop benefits staff because it offers an opportunity for any problems to be addressed in order to support the program and its participants.
  5. Both group and individual sessions should be available. Some students have emotional needs of a very personal nature which are not suitable for group exploration. i.e. bereavement.
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Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



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## • **Session Three, Term One – Facilitator: Liza Miles-Husain**

**Art Exercise:** group painting to create an island. (Figure 1)

This exercise was offered as an opportunity to create group cohesiveness and enable the students to experience teamwork. The exercise also highlighted the lack of boundaries the students experienced.

**Therapist Observations:** Some students expressed their “frustration” about sharing and expressing feelings. Within the group process, as a group begins to form and explore life issues, this feeling of resistance may occur. This will often be expressed by group members as boredom, anxiety, frustration or a misunderstanding about the program. Therefore the expressed frustration was seen as a healthy sign of the group maturing.

All the students were noticeably more focused in this session than in the previous two. A First Nation’s student read aloud a story, written by another in the group. Listening to another First Nation’s student’s educational experiences during the previous session had moved this student, and she acknowledged that learning to listen to others had impacted her and made some changes to her attitude. Another student said that the group was helping her to share her feelings, something she had always been uncomfortable doing because she had learned not to express them. One student could not participate in the painting but did take part in the discussion and remained attentive throughout the session. The painting energized students and those who had found it hard to begin initially expressed their enjoyment of the session

The photographs of the created island (figure 1) demonstrate the lack of containment that members of the group individually experience in their lives. As images became bolder the impact of what each was creating led to some interesting dialogue among the participants. One of the participants created a whirlpool, which other members found very dangerous and disturbing. As the dialogue continued, the creator of the whirlpool changed his place into a swimming area with a children’s play park. Several students wanted to visit each other’s “place” and worked out verbal solutions to overcoming difficulties, such as “too many bugs in your garden”, “is there enough food for all my family?”

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• **Session Twelve, Term One – Facilitator: Liza Miles-Husain**

**Art Exercise:** To create an image of a cohesive environment. (Figure 2)  
To enable students to reflect their experience of the group and to begin the process of closure.

**Therapist Observations:** By contrast to session three, the group was very relaxed and enthusiastic about making a group image. The group check-in at the beginning of the session was articulate and honest. Concerns were expressed for the three absent members dealing with sickness and a potential bereavement. The empathy the students felt for their group members, and their awareness of authentic feelings, had enabled them to trust and respect each other. They drew boundaries spontaneously, and the group facilitator noticed that participants used a much more respectful tone in addressing each other. The final discussion demonstrated that the group had reached a level of emotional maturity and an individually developed sense of personal boundaries.

All group members were able to participate in creating the image (figure 2) including the student from session three who had been unable to join in initially. This student created a very beautiful line/color piece in which the obvious movement and expression of feeling reflected his considerable growth.

It was noticeable that the members of the group were more able to express and establish a sense of place for themselves and to establish boundaries. This image was created mostly in silence. All group member were focused on the image they were creating and aware of, but less distracted, by what others were doing.

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