

Self-experience Workshops as an Important Factor in the Academic Education of Students of Pedagogy in Times of (in)authenticity of Relationships and Bonds

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Abstract

In the proposed paper, I would like to draw attention to the workshop on self-experience in academic education, and especially in the education of students of humanities. The subject matter of the undertaken research was the experiences related to the participation of art therapy students in self-experience workshops, which constitute an important element of personal development on the path of preparation for a professional role. A practical goal was established. It was important to show the effects of emotional work, shaping self-awareness, and analyzing the functioning of the students in a relationship with another human being. An important part of the article are the narratives of the students, which were subjected to qualitative analysis. These self-reflections of students clearly show the correlated stages: insightful self-development, thanks to which students acquire interpersonal skills and, as a result, learn how to work using art therapy with an individual and a group.

Key words: self-experience, academic education, self-reflection, intrapersonal and interpersonal competences

Introduction

Each day, the world we live in reveals new phenomena and situations which we are not prepared for. In the assessment of Ewa Wysocka, it has become inhospitable (Wysocka, 2012), which means that we, young people in particular, are determined by groups of factors which make the self-creation abilities weaker. In order to cope with the arising requirements, what one needs is personal maturity, consciousness and resistance. The students of the first years, who are starting their higher education, are currently facing such a challenge, and their intrapersonal and interpersonal competences need perfecting in order to be able to reach full maturity. Good communication skills, being aware of the goals, emotional maturity and empathy, seem to be the sine qua non of being a teacher, an educator, a psychologist, or a therapist. This is because such roles may – in the future – be taken by the students of pedagogical fields of study. Therefore, having in mind the highest quality of the preparation for the professions which are being handled, and in particular to such professional roles which are focusing on working with a human, it is advisable to initiate self-development work and to take a good look at one's own experiences.

The Delphic maxim “*gnothi seauton*” which means getting to know oneself, is a determinant of the deep process of obtaining knowledge of oneself. This is a self-creation factor, owing to which it is possible to have a look inside oneself, which in result leads to an expansion of the intrapersonal competences, and thus translates into the building of relations with others. At the workshop, these relations are also applicable to the contact with the teacher who is conducting exercises. Such a regularity of the experiences resembles an emotional practice, the presence of which in academic teaching is highlighted by Andy Hargreaves (1998). He formulated the arguments he propagated on the basis of the concept of emotional understanding by Norman K. Denzin, on which both teaching and learning are based (1984). Professor Hargreaves highlights the importance of the cognitive processes. However, he does stress the fact that these are not more important than the emotional processes. During the course of education, we get new experiences, including emotional ones, both our own, as well as those of other people. What is important is the interpretation of one's own emotional experiences, as well as those of others, as it has an influence on emotional understanding, and even on empathic understanding, which are the conditions for an authentic and committed relation and presence. Hargreaves is an opponent of building a distance as – in his assessment – it threatens the basic forms of emotional understanding, on which the high quality of teaching and learning depends (Hargreaves A., 2000).

Therefore, emotional practice takes place not only between the participants, but also between the teacher and the group co-creating the classes.

On the other hand, the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2012) applies the term of “emotional work” and highlights that the “emotional work” is significant for those professions in which there are interactions and interpersonal relations, and therefore, it is also applicable to the profession of the art therapist. The sociologist’s concept focuses on the coherence between what an individual feels, perceives, and what they must do. If one cannot express genuine feelings, human feelings stop mattering to people, and in consequence, falsification and an experience of a false awareness of who they really are appears (Turner, Stets, 2005). Thus, a false appearance arises, stifling what is real, often necessary, important and beautiful, and destroys the humanistic ideas of a meeting with oneself and with The Other One.

I was curious to know what students think about the value of the workshop classes. The research part of the following article focuses exactly on the feelings and perception of the students taking part in the self-experience workshops, on their self-reflection consisting of their own potential, impediments and limitations.

Methodology of Research

The empirical part aims at presenting the opinions of third year students of art therapy regarding the workshops in which they participated during their studies, both those being within the basic scope and being an obligatory element of the education, as well as regarding those which they have undertaken independently and which have been recognized as self-improvement. This is an intimate and carefully recruited group of young people who want to use art, multimodal solutions, for the purposes of therapy, as well as for improving and communicating with others. Art therapy has an interdisciplinary, inter-university nature, as it is co-created by three important academic institutions: the University of Silesia in Katowice, the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice. Due to the unique concept of education, the students are in contact with a wide scope of knowledge and – due to the large number of practical modules – a broad spectrum of expression, favoring internal enrichment, taking a look at oneself, the formulation of creative attitudes and acquiring social competences and responsibility for any future work with people.

When I was conceptualizing the research, I wanted to obtain an individualized perspective of the students within the scope of the experiences and the interac-

tions which have been created, as preparation for the further professional path, that is why I have developed a tool – the open interview survey. Steinar Kvale (2008:19–20) defines the interview as a specific form of a conversation, during which knowledge is created in an interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. However, due to the pandemic we are currently facing, I have decided to resign from interviews handled in direct contact. An argument in favour of such a choice is also the willingness to ensure comfort and anonymity, which can be ensured by unfettered narratives. The applied data collection technique is located within the qualitative research pattern, which allows for a freedom in the scope of the expression and the developed open question formula required some auto-analysis and self-reflection, thus it seemed advisable to provide the answers in written form. The subject of the research were the experiences related to the participation of the students in self-experience workshops as an element of work development during their academic education.

Two practical goals of a two-dimensional nature were established:

- an intrapersonal dimension, and here, getting familiar with the meaning the self-experience workshops have for the students is of particular interest. Next, I was also interested in the opinion of the respondents on the potential influence of the workshop experiences on their own emotions.
- a prospective and interpersonal dimension, meaning cognition, to what extent working on oneself allows one to get prepared for one's professional role.

The scope of the completed empirical analyses is determined by the three following research problems:

1. How do the participants of the workshops perceive them with regard to fulfilling their own needs, strengthening their intrapersonal resources?
2. In what scope do the participants of the workshops consider them as favorable with regard to the group process?
3. To what extent does the participation in the workshop determine one's self-perception in the role of an art therapist?

The students who have proceeded with self-reflection have in fact performed an analysis of the subjective evaluation and understanding of reality, they have given thought to their own activity, manner of decoding and emotional perception of the world, as well as their attitude towards themselves in their relations with other people, and themselves in the role of an art therapist. Thus, they relate to their self-awareness, self-esteem, self-realization, motivational mechanisms and aspirations.

Results of Research

The students' statements constitute the axis of this discussion and the essence of this study; they pertain to their authenticity, agency and relations, and therefore I will cite some of those (due to the limited space).

I have been interested in whether workshop learning stands out from other major subjects. In their evaluation, the students have used a 0–10 scale. The average score has been 9.5. Half of the participants have awarded 9 points and the other half have awarded 10 points. The uniqueness of the experiences is undoubtedly a fascinating factor, as expressed by this statement: "Workshop activities are generally the most efficient form of learning. No two experiences are ever going to be the same." This activity is examined from the didactic aspect, for students learn how to implicate and implement a given method or technique, but also ascribe a personal meaning with a self-therapeutic value to it: "I could activate my self-reflection and have my own individual insight into what attracts me and what doesn't about further self-therapy and art therapy work."

However, the core of this statement is expressed in the following words: "This method is crucial and fundamental in learning and obtainment of experience, as during a workshop, we learn the most – relations between each other and about ourselves."

The students learn art therapy techniques and how to use multimodal approaches, thus drawing on various art genres and forms of expression. They have listed the types of expression most familiar to them. Some have also noted the benefits enjoyed by them due to their artistic activities "Writing, movement, painting, making music, photography – one can just kind of feel it; it is like enchanting one's own emotions into the work one is creating." The author of that statement is aware that activities through art activate one's subconsciousness.

"I love movement and music expression, as well as movement and facial expression. When I am moving, I can relieve my internal tensions. Apparently, I cannot hide much, as everything is 'written' on my face. Perhaps I unconsciously use my facial expressions in a desire to avoid a verbal comment." This statement has noted verbalisation, which is incredibly important and involves attribution of personal meaning to works: "Writing, drawing, painting and speaking have purifying effect on me".

Self-experience workshops are usually innovative and eye-opening. The students have shared their opinions which exercise and experience have allowed them to see themselves differently: "Bibliotherapeutic experiences combined with impressing my face and hands to the accompaniment of music." Music can be a strong inductive material, and the resulting works have a very symbolic aspect

to them and can have strong emotional connotations. The resulting works involve ourselves or our friends and family, with whom we form relationships; we can examine how much they mean to us and what feelings are evoked by thinking about them: "Drawing myself now and in the future, drawing my family. That experience has allowed me to get to know myself better through confrontation with my fears."

"There have been many such moments, but what was innovative to me personally was how we worked with keywords and topics, which everyone had to filter through a given material or object, e.g. clay, and create something at a given workshop. I was surprised at what I wanted to talk about and how intimate the topics I wanted to discuss were." The mention of the intimacy resulting from the tasks is undoubtedly connected to the revelation of one's own truth about oneself and waiting for the reaction of approval and understanding from others, seeking a safe space for emotional exhibitionism, as it were. Such intimacy, revelation of what used to be hidden and reserved only to oneself may entail difficulties and limitations, which has also been mentioned by the participants: "Reluctance and lack of motivation. More things were often happening around me and I could not focus on my task." That opinion is very important; the participant notes her inability to concentrate, and focus on 'here and now' is an important aspect of workshops.

Sometimes, when we participate in something for the first time, we can be sceptical, feel some internal resistance. It appears to be a natural emotion that is possible to overcome. The students have described how they have felt about that and what factors facilitate disposal of negative feelings and barriers: "In moments of internal resistance, I try to think about how much I can gain by overcoming it. I am aware that if I do not leave my comfort zone, I will be missed out. That is not simple; sometimes I succeed, sometimes I unfortunately fail despite my best intentions. A significant factor is my curiosity and awareness that I can learn from every new experience." Shifting one's attention to the future and the prospect of the benefit resulting from learning through experience minimises one's objections.

The set of negative feelings and emotions has been broad in scope in some, and narrow in some others; in two participants, there have been no negative conditions. The experienced negative feelings have included: internal resistance, uncertainty, embarrassment, fear of failure, and lack of trust in a partner. Resistance, uncertainty, doubt and fear of failure have been the most common. Fear of failure appears to simultaneously imply unwillingness, lack of conviction and doubt. It is necessary to identify the factors making us feel discomfort, as this builds awareness, perhaps creates concern for ourselves or activates assertive behaviours, which also

serve protective functions. Positive emotions connected with the reception of the workshops have also been examined. All of these emotions appear to be significant and legitimate: openness; joy; motivation; curiosity; surprise; involvement; trust in the lecturer; trust in a partner; positive feelings toward the lecturer; positive feelings toward an exercise partner and toward the group; fulfilment; satisfaction; the need to create. The need to create is a very important factor, for it overcomes passivity and stagnation, and orientates one at the future and activity.

The experiences described are individual and characteristic of specific participants and their intrapersonal resources. The course and reception of the workshops in the context of group processes will be analysed next. The students have been asked which experience was innovative and allowed to view the group differently. No specific indication dominates the answers; everyone has named one's own element that reinforced one's bonds: "We have been brought together by rhythm therapy, shared vocal and instrumental classes."

"Dance therapy, movement and attentiveness have greatly integrated and supported us as a group. Creating our own non-verbal motion stories for a shared performance." The feeling of unity and community creates new transgressional strengths and heightens sensitivity and consent to eye contact and touch: "It was all of the paired activities. Experiences involving overcoming of one's communication barriers, establishment of a momentary close relationship with another, who is normally a stranger, are interesting. A peculiar bond is formed, often based on eye contact."

The co-creation of a stage performance, team activities during the classes, mutual conversations and fascinations affect the interpersonal communication and relations within a group. The workshop experiences have strengthened the group relations and enabled: strengthening of bonds; increase in kindness; recognition of the needs of others; cooperation skills; responsibility for others; increase in respect and trust; they have also enhanced the desire to spend time together. However, what the students have felt the strongest, was an increase in empathy, the understanding of their own and others' emotions; they have deepened their interpersonal relations and felt that they have been part of a group. The formation of safe relations within a group has also allowed them to overcome their resistance, which is evidenced by these words: "I often feel internal resistance. This is alleviated by the openness of the group and the lecturer, supportive attitudes, their acceptance of my expression, kindness and openness to questions."

The statement has stressed the significance of the person conducting the workshops. Usually, this is a person with exceptional interpersonal competences, sensitive to the creative process and group interaction as well as relations with

each participant, and aware of the selection of the materials and goals. If we operate within the field of didactics, it is important to impart the knowledge so that the lecturer provides information and demonstrates the broad capabilities of art therapy as well as they can.

Through self experience workshops, students not only build themselves, but also a set of their skills. Therefore, it has been asked whether the workshop has enhanced their professional competences, whether they can indicate their strongest points useful in the art therapist profession and in the independent conduct of group classes: "I think my strongest point is the feeling of responsibility for the group and provision of support whenever necessary. Responsibility and the feeling that I am here for them and watching over them is natural to me." Trust enables the formation of an authentic relationship, whilst also determining the acceptance of one's responsibility and care for the group: "Confidence and trust in myself and in the group – that is what calms me down. My confidence also stems a bit from the fact that I can quickly get out of a sudden situation; I immediately come up with a substitute solution. This is helped by working on myself, by knowing myself and my limits, and openness. I feel like I keep improving at that and am often tested with new workshop challenges (new groups and places)."

The spirit of humanism and involvement, and therefore the complexity of traits important in an art therapist can be observed in this narrative: "I feel like I have sensitivity and authenticity in me, as I truly desire to get to know the people I accompany; their problems are important to me, and a love for them, admiration and recognition of their potential truly awaken in my heart. Expressiveness that can rouse and inspire, call me to action. Kindness that is simply likeable."

The statements regarding the skills acquired during the workshops sometimes contain criticism, but also a form of humility; indeed, the students are at the beginning of their career path, so their doubt, inadequacies and clearly felt difficulties are understandable. They also mention their stress and fear of how they are going to be understood by the group and whether they will be able to fulfil their plans:

"I often feel a lot of stress at the very beginning, but it quickly disappears. Before the workshops, I always try to have a moment to myself and tell myself what I am here for and why, and what is my goal. I try to feel and trust myself, trust in what is going to happen." One's first independent classes during field practice with previously unfamiliar groups are a test of sorts: "I feel some uneasiness resulting from my not having a lot of experience and being aware that when I do something for the first time, I can, and even will, make mistakes. At those times, I experience a lack of confidence, which makes me worse as a lecturer, and I deal with that by simply allowing myself that and enjoying the fact that I have the opportunity and

privilege of being with others.” The students place their uncertainty above the wellbeing and comfort of the group; they have the best intentions, but are still accompanied by difficult emotions and doubts: “I try not to show any weakness during my classes. Inside me, joy and openness clash against fear, a feeling of pointlessness, ignorance, a fear that the participants will not like it and that I am doing something unprofessionally.”

As noted by Cathy A. Malchiodi (2012), it is the practice, awareness, responsibility and knowledge of their own competences that are intrinsic to the education of future art therapists. Independently conducted classes can reveal inadequacies, but more importantly, they can show new fields of development and areas for improving oneself and one’s interpersonal relations; they show one’s desires regarding self-improvement and betterment of one’s professional approach: “I would like to notice important symptoms of various phenomena of the human nature. I am aware that this is not a matter of learning rules, but a matter of time and open eyes.” The concern for the process and relations is crucial here, as it conditions the success of interactions. Cooperation is important in practice, which the students also learn: “I would like to work on cooperating with others, on trusting that everything is going to be ready on time, on trusting that everything is going to work and I am not going to let anyone down and that no one is going to let me down.”

As shown by the statements cited, training for the profession of art therapist is usually a long journey full of insightful work on oneself, empathic understanding, methodological skills, psychological and pedagogical knowledge and knowledge on the use of techniques, attentiveness, care, respect and responsibility.

Conclusions

Self experience workshops originate from psychological and psychotherapeutic practice. Each profession that has the word ‘therapy’ in its name assumes some specific professional skills, interdisciplinary training, as well as self-improvement. Therefore, the aim of self experience workshops is to develop self-awareness and analysis of one’s functioning in one’s relations with others. Having analysed all of the narratives, an answer arises naturally that self experience workshops are necessary in academic education with regard to the fields of pedagogy and liberal arts.

The self experience workshops have given the examined art therapy students group notable intrapersonal, self-creational and interpersonal benefits. They have allowed them to look into themselves, into what defines them, their past, present

and future. They have paved the way to their self-awareness of their own potential, but also limitations, doubts and fears. They have shown how important skills are, including those of an academic teacher, in order to draw on the standard solutions. They have demonstrated the importance of forming relations based upon kindness, respect, trust, care and authenticity. The factor of community and significance of bonds between humans, among whom we express ourselves through art, discover, purify and free ourselves of our difficulties, has been noticed. Their perception of themselves as art therapists has also changed. Their own workshop work has given the students insight into their traits and interpersonal skills, which can translate into their advantages and disadvantages when conducting classes on their own, and can determine success or failure of an activity. They have discovered the truth about themselves, and by learning about themselves, they have become more mature and prepared to meet others in a dialogue, artistic creation and shared activity. They have become attentive to group processes. The increase in their individual and professional competences has not deprived them of their reflectiveness and further desire to broaden their horizons and their need to develop, seek new things and enjoy assisting others in their self-expression.

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