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Expressive Music Therapy: Empowering Engaged Citizens and Communities

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Abstract

With foundations in deep ecology and ecopsychology, ecological expressive arts therapy offers individuals and communities support to give voice to disenfranchised concerns about issues such as the environment and reconciliation. Expressive music therapy can reconnect voices to hearts, and hands to drums, and words to the powerfully authentic songs of change. This paper describes the theoretical underpinnings of Ecological Expressive Arts Therapy, within a community arts context. The second section of the paper describes the experiential processes of a workshop presented at the Education and Social Change Conference held at University of Technology Sydney in December 2000.



Introduction

Imagine... ..it is a cool spring evening by the ocean; watched by hundreds who have gathered on the slopes, a group of people whose faces are illuminated by the flames of torches are standing on the rocks beating out a galloping rhythm on their drums. Male and female voices are alternating in chanting these words:



Pacific People	We're coming together
Pacific People	We're pulling together
To save the Earth	We're pulling together
To save the Earth	What can I do?
To save our planet	What can I do?
To save our planet	It's in our hands
We can do it	It's in our hands
We can do it	Each in our own way
Earth lovers	Each in our own way
Earth lovers	We're coming home
Hold on Gaia	We're coming home
Hold on Gaia	We're coming together
Pacific People	We're coming together...

This is a scene, recorded on video (Henkel & Canin, 1992, 1994), of a community arts event on the Central Coast of New South Wales: "*Homage*", which exemplifies the power of music and rhythm to mobilise and energise the caring of individuals and communities. Experiences such as the one described above give participants the opportunity to find a larger identity, as part of a caring human community, and beyond that, in the form of an "*ecological self*" embedded in and connected with all life (Bragg, 1996).

Arts therapists and community artists inspired by deep ecology have begun to describe their work as *environmental community arts* (see Faire, "[Environmental Community Arts: Refinding Natural Connections](#)") and *ecological expressive therapies* (Kellen-Taylor, 1998).

A foundational premise of these approaches to community wellness is the belief that, by giving voice to their deep concerns, individuals can move through the paralysis caused by despair (Macy, 1983) and thereby mobilise their resources toward influencing change. Art processes offer potent vehicles for such expression through music, poetry, drama, dance and visual art, and by sharing their art-works, people can find a commonality which empowers and inspires them.

Current approaches to community arts can be limited by a predominant focus on the outcome. The Homage events were an example in which the emphasis on the final performance and "getting-it-right" sometimes hijacked the process to the extent that participants worried about whether they were "doing it properly" and community artists flirted with burnout in late-night meetings. The "therapy" or community wellness focus of expressive arts therapy shifts the emphasis away from the performance event and towards the process and inner experience of the participants.

In expressive music therapy, [1] participants are encouraged to move through the self-limiting introjections such as "I can't sing" by actually voicing the "I can't sing" as part of a song! (Knill, Barba & Fuchs, 1995). Once they realise that it doesn't matter so much whether it "sounds nice", but that we all have a right to use our unique voice, people can begin to "be visited" by songs that need to be sung. Expressive music therapy is a vehicle through which participants discover that we are all potential and potent song creators, and singers, and drummers.

Most activists [2] have been inspired at some time by a chant or song which expresses the need for change and solidarity with like-minded people. However, the difference between an activist chant and expressive music therapy is that in the latter process there is the opportunity to delve deeper than the simple "us" vs. "them" framework which so often creates activists who become fundamentalists and who burn out very rapidly. This does not mean that our dissatisfaction with the status quo is psychotherapized away as our own pathology (Wessan, 1994). The "therapy" in ecological expressive therapy seeks a middle ground between "blaming them" and "taking full responsibility" - it seeks to tease out the reactive element of activism to produce a centred, long-term sustainable approach to social change work.

Thus the inner process focus is not an end in itself but a means toward healthy individuals and communities that can respond to social injustice and ecological irresponsibility with appropriate action, and lead the way to more humane practices.

Imagination is a key element of the power of the arts therapies. Through the arts process, we can enter into an "alternative experience of worlding" (Knill, 2000), where the logic of imagination and the space to play can bring fresh perspectives on difficult, perhaps even soul-destroying realities. The tangible art-form/process then serves as a vehicle to transport new insights across the bridge back into the everyday world.

Joanna Macy's "Work that Reconnects" (Macy & Brown, 1998), and Seed and Macy's "Council of All Beings" workshop (Seed et al, 1988), offer models for group experiences in which the expressive arts therapies complement verbal sharing and dialogue. These experiential workshops can be adapted to suit the issues confronting a community. For example, the theme of "reconciliation" was approached in this way at a recent Sydney creative arts therapy (NECTA) conference (Faire et al, 2000). The workshop described below was also based on these models, although its short duration necessitated abbreviation of Macy's cycle of processes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Joanna Macy's "work that reconnects" stages (adapted from Macy & Brown, 1998)

<i>Gratitude</i> - ritual provides the container for opening to trust and potential
<i>Feelings work</i> - giving voice to disenfranchised emotions and being heard
<i>The Shift</i> - surrendering to not knowing, letting imagination flow and evolve, creating possibilities...
<i>Going Forth</i> - forming intentions, group empowerment and connections

The Workshop

In this section of the paper we will describe the process of leading a workshop at the Education and Social Change Conference held at University of Technology Sydney in December 2000).

There were approximately 20 participants in this workshop, who were drawn from the educators, activists and community members attending the conference. Our *workshop handout* summarised the aims of the workshop:

"Who needs Music Therapy? Music Therapy as a "paramedical" profession occurs mainly in an institutional context (hospitals, special schools, nursing homes). This workshop focuses on other possible contexts and applications for Music Therapy that at present remain relatively underdeveloped, but which offer potential for future creative expansion of the field to enrich society at large.

In this workshop, you will have the opportunity to:

- learn more about Music Therapy in theory and practice
- identify the issues that most concern you as a member of the broader community
- experience how Expressive Music Therapy could support you in sharing these concerns and empowering your change work."

In the following paragraphs the process of the workshop will be outlined, together with some reflections on possible outcomes.

The Introduction

Dianne began with a brief overview of the field of music therapy: definitions, methods and client types. She then led an exploration of music's expressive potential: A collection of mostly hand held percussion instruments were available for participants' involvement. Several volunteers chose instruments. With Dianne as facilitator, the group improvised a musical conversation. A discussion followed using the experience as an example of an alternative form of expressive exchange.

An *improvised flute performance* by Dianne followed to provide an experiential musical example and also to illustrate a contrasting music therapy method: receptive music therapy. Participants listened with eyes closed to Dianne's improvisation and let the music invite images or mood states, which were then shared by some with the group.

The question was raised: "*How could music therapy or creative arts therapies empower social action?*" Some of the theoretical background described above was then summarised by Rosemary:

- Macy's Despair and Empowerment work and her recent model (Table 1);
- Specific features of music therapy that lend themselves to this work (Table 2).
- Recent developments toward de-institutionalization of Music Therapy and community wellness were described (see Resources listed at the end of the references).

Table 2. Features of expressive music therapy that support change work.

- Restoring confidence in one's authentic voice reclaims the right to be heard, speak out, protest, make one's needs known;
- Through musical expression we connect to our feelings and share them;
- Rhythm calls forth movement, grounding us in bodily sensation, mobilising repressed energy and suppressed anger;
- Group music making fosters listening skills and empathy;
- To be heard and responded to is empowering;
- We draw inspiration from others' stories and authentic expression;
- In group music-making, everyone plays a part in the whole;
- Group song writing or music making has the power to unite people while validating each person's unique contribution;
- The group itself serves the role of a therapeutic relationship, witnessing, supporting, containing and giving feedback;
- Participants engaged in group improvisation learn that co-operation creates harmony;
- Community music making is an opportunity to develop tolerance of differences;
- In playing with the tension between group structure and individual freedom, we learn we can work toward having both;
- Rhythm and vocal call-and-response have long served communities in rituals connecting people to the living Earth and the Transcendent.

The *pathway we were about to take* was then outlined: ...from identifying our concerns through embodying a rhythm, then a movement, sound, vocal sound, words/phrases and finally into songs...

Identifying Issues and Feelings

The group then brainstormed:

- issues of concern
- the feelings that go with these
- what do we do with these feelings?

In order to feel safer about treading new creative ground, we mapped our Comfort Zones, Growing Edges and NoWay Zones (Faire, 2003). Participants had the opportunity to voice the barriers they experience to self expression. Self care during the following exploration was emphasised.

Expressive Music Therapy Experience

This experience was an opportunity for participants to use music for both self expression and social communication.

Warmup: with your issue of concern in mind, find a rhythm in your body as you stand and begin to move and let it evolve: into a larger body movement, into a percussive sound, a vocal sound, and finally into words or phrases that come spontaneously.

Song writing: time in one's own space to write down emerging words and phrases.

Sharing what came: A group rhythm was used to support individuals to voice their song if that felt safe and appropriate.

Final words: sharing personal meanings of this experience.

Outcomes of the Workshop

In Dianne's words: "The workshop participants responded immediately with musical and movement initiations. Participants engaged with the facilitating music (provided by the workshop leaders) at a sophisticated level. The group functioned with significant levels of cohesiveness."

The feedback we received at the end of the workshop was that participants found it informative and some were quite surprised at their own creativity and moved by the emotional depth of the songs that emerged. Themes that were voiced included:

- expression of concern about:
 - violence among men and the role of fathers and brothers;
 - the barriers to connecting with and trusting others;
- expression of feelings of being held and contained by the rhythmic movement.

We hope to continue exploring the uses of expressive music therapy to support those engaged in social change work.

The Future of Ecological Expressive Arts Therapy...

There is tremendous potential for expressive arts therapy in community empowerment. Some examples might be:

- supporting activists in danger of burnout and despair, especially when they feel they have failed to achieve their goals;
- inviting citizens to come out of political apathy and engage in creating healthier democracies;
- encouraging dialogue between communities / individuals with differing viewpoints or history of conflict;
- linking with community cultural development to give minority groups more opportunities to voice their concerns;
- using the improvisational arts to facilitate movement away from black-and-white thinking to validate states of questioning and not-knowing;

Many more examples are yet to manifest.

...imagine them!

See also the personal history by Rosemary Faire published in the current issue of Voices:

"Environmental Community Arts: Refinding Natural Connections."

Notes

[1] "Expressive music therapy" is distinguished from "receptive music therapy" in a broad sense: in the former, music is actively created by participants, whereas in the latter, participants listen to music created by others (often prerecorded music).

[2] "Activist" here is used in the broad (Moyer et al., 2001) sense to mean not only those on the front line of protest, but also concerned citizens making changes in their lives, those working within existing institutions to effect change, and those pioneering new ways of doing things.

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Resources for Information about Arts Therapies in Social Change Work

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Comments to this essay:

- [Linda Thieneman](#), May 10, 2005.

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