

Gary Nash, University of Hertfordshire

INNOVATION IN THE ARTS IN THERAPY: A special issue 14.1 2023

Abstract

The editorial overview provides the background and rationale for this special issue. Collaboration, innovation, and integration are themes that are introduced and developed to provide the context in which the contributors to this collection of articles have worked together to bring a shared vision to fruition. This special issue is a collaboration between practitioners and researchers, supervisors, and peers, who describe how the processes of creativity, imagination and healing can galvanise individual ideas and take our collective creative vision forward.

Keywords Art-based practice, art-based supervision, art-based research, creativity, ecological-self, response art

This special issue of the *Journal of Applied Arts & Health* marks a significant milestone in the history of the development of the arts therapies in the UK. Fifty years ago, during the 1971-72 academic year, Edward Adamson and John Evans launched what was to become the first art therapy training course at St Albans School of Art in Britain. The course was validated at diploma level in 1975 and as an MA in 1995 whilst also being absorbed into the University of Hertfordshire. The School of Creative Arts continue to deliver the Foundation in Arts Therapies, the Master's in Art Therapy, as well as ongoing courses for graduates. The 50th year is celebrated in this journal by colleagues and practitioners who have contributed to the teaching, practice development, and research of the arts therapies in Britain and by pioneers in art therapy, art-based supervision, and research internationally.

The issue consists of research articles, notes from the field, a visual essay and reviews from colleagues who work primarily with the visual arts in therapy in Britain, North America, and Europe. All contributing authors have submitted articles that intersect with three themes that have developed during the collation of this issue. Firstly, art-based practice which focuses on how art informs what we do in the many different contexts and settings in which therapy has developed. Secondly, art-based supervision which provides a reflective pause in which practitioners share what they do and deepen a creative dialogue with others, and thirdly, art-based research which supports practitioners to develop and publish their

learning and knowledge within an art-based paradigm. As guest editor I have also invited authors to focus on an aspect of innovation in relation to these three overlapping areas of art-based practice, supervision, and research.

Innovation and integration: A personal learning journey

When I trained 30 years ago, at both Goldsmiths' College, University of London and St Albans School of Art, the epistemological discourse was rooted in psychiatry and psychoanalytic theory. As a student with a passion for art, creativity, and healing we were taught about the psychotherapeutic relationship and how to apply the arts within medical and psychiatric settings. The study of art and (psycho)therapy became fault lines here in the UK, with both art and psychotherapy being two fields molded by the surrounding cultures of science, academic privileging of certain forms of knowledge, and reductive thinking that were seen as essential to practice, teaching, and research in this new and growing profession.

The problematic dichotomies that erupt from the institutional environments in which the arts therapies continue to be taught derive from the splitting effect of separating the subject of inquiry into contradictory or conflicting paradigms such as: art and therapy; creativity and human relationships; visual arts and verbal interpretation; the creative process and the art object. An underlying difficulty with teaching and learning within a Higher Education framework is that it tends to be reflective of historic legacies in which logic, cognition, rationalizing, and linear thinking are privileged over creative flow, intuition, expansive thinking, feeling and form. In contrast, the therapeutic relationship is infused with subjective human qualities of feeling, empathy, attunement, and compassion. The arts therapies are also defined by emotional intelligences including intuition, imagination, creativity, and soulfulness, and they are central to the ways in which we view, value, research, and teach the work that we do as creative arts therapists.

Over the past ten years a change in perspective has enabled us to see the links, the overlaps, and synergies between different points of view, and we now talk about a spectrum of arts therapies with different approaches positioned on an arts continuum (Hogan 2009). We now consider how the therapist's understanding of creative process and creative product will vary depending on context and setting. The expressive arts continuum described by Lisa Hinz (2009, 2019) will also vary depending on the changing needs and demographic variables of client groups and will be influenced by the social, political, and cultural context in which therapy occurs. The academic discourse is more likely to integrate imaginative and artistic process whilst encouraging us to value and understand the continuities between

human experience, as well as the cyclical nature of creativity and the therapeutic relationship (Nash 2022).

Introduction to the articles

This special issue's focus on art-based practice, supervision, and research has grown from my work with Shaun McNiff who has spent over 50 years supporting world communities of integrative and expressive arts therapies. McNiff's reflective writing about his own creative process in *Art as Medicine* (1992) and *Art Heals* (2004) shifted the paradigm in which an art therapist utilizes artistic expression to deepen understanding and perfect practice with others, all of which has generated a more complete sense of art therapy and art therapists' identities. I have developed a close collegial relationship with Shaun over the past seven years which began with a series of interviews wherein I examine, question, and gain a deeper understanding of his work (Nash 2019). The drive behind my questions was to understand how the arts move through us, and how integration of the various arts media, methods, and forms, are available to us and widen the possibilities for creative communication in therapy.

The full integration of artistic expression in professional identity, together with practice in therapy and teaching, has been historically obstructed by the paradigm conflict which assumes that efficacy can only be documented through research in privileged scientific disciplines. McNiff's *Art-Based Research* (1998) offers an alternative paradigm that places art at the centre of our practice and research inquiries in keeping with the mission of this journal. The term 'art-based research' is defined by McNiff as: 'the use of artistic expression by the researcher, either alone or with others, as a primary mode of inquiry' (McNiff 2018: xi). He provides a framework for research design that supports practitioners and educators in considering how creative acts generate art-based evidence that may contribute to developments in therapeutic method, approach, technique, and teaching.

In his article in the first section of this issue, 'An integral community of art and healing: Transcending silos in the ecological era', McNiff argues for the importance of revisiting language, concepts, and organisational structures that underpin the development of the arts therapies. He reflects on how, as the instigators of change trigger new ideas, we inevitably reconsider the dominant models and paradigms that the arts therapies professions have used to establish and maintain positions of authority and knowledge. He asks us to question the demarcations and separations that exist within and between the arts in both educational institutions and healthcare settings. The emergence of an ecological theory of creativity is developed further in this article on creativity, community, and arts integration

and enables us to look forward with the knowledge that the arts continue to contribute to healing the world's most pressing concerns.

The article, 'Embodied and arts approaches to research', by Helen Payne and Helen Seaman describes how an embodied approach to theory and practice in the arts therapies has developed and contributes to research design. The underlying principle of using an embodied arts approach is the awareness that expression of human experience is contained within the body of the client or research participant. The research examples demonstrate how the body is always a participant in our encounters with others either in therapy or research. Helen Seaman provides a description of the use of non-stick collage in research, showing how the fluid artmaking process interacted with the more rigid structure of pre-set questionnaires, enabling a reflective narrative to develop which allows spontaneity and metaphoric responses to emerge.

Abbe Miller reflects on her research journey in the third article in this section, 'The innovative essence of the el duende one-canvas method', showing how the one-canvas painting process intersects with practice, teaching, and supervision. A shift in perspective is described in her art-based research as she documents the formation of an approach to understanding the movement and transition states inherent in painting. Her work focuses on the movement, flow, blocks, choices, and changes that underpin creative fluidity. Her article demonstrates how innovation began as a new idea that caught hold and shaped her journey as an artist-practitioner-researcher, as she describes how the method evolved over a twelve-year period. Her published research shows how working with process painting contributes towards reflective practice and art-based supervision (2012, 2018, 2020).

In the fourth article, 'Social action art therapy and the enhancement of political imagination', the art-based research described by Jamie Bird, Lor Bird and Gemma Collard Stokes draws on Jamie Bird's previously documented accounts (2017, 2022) that locate research and creativity within the social and political lives of research participants. In *Social Action Art Therapy* (2022), Bird develops art-based research in the context of the current existential threat of climate change, providing a practice-oriented approach that demonstrates how art can contribute to defining problems, visualizing resistance, activating social conscience, and mobilizing political imagination. In this issue's article, the use of art to connect, engage, communicate, and contribute to creating change are described using imagery and transcripts taken from an art-based research project. These themes are developed further in the context of art and social action in relation to times of crisis, change and the environmental emergency.

The research articles written by Payne and Seaman, Miller and Bird et al. show us how human creativity and human relationships are embedded in subjectivity and can find expression through various art forms. The process of art-based response and articulation of creative experience is reflected in research design and extended into the realm of political imagination.

Innovation in the visual arts: Response art

The arts continuum allows us to view different paradigms simultaneously, enabling one to gain a multi-dimensional view of the nature of creativity and how we encounter the creativity of others. Rather than isolate and systematically fragment human experience, today's art therapy teaching, practice, and research at Hertfordshire and across the international communities, supports us in examining the complexity of our human experiences of the arts, subjectivity, and healing. From this viewpoint the therapy relationship is understood as a dynamic human relationship in which the healing potential is activated, guided, and co-created in the intersubjective space between all participants.

The outcome has been a growing confidence in the recognition of the therapists' own creative responses towards different aspects of their work as reflected in the articles written for this issue. The term 'response art' defined by Barbara Fish (2006, 2012) provides a tangible example of innovation in practice. Response art has evolved over the past twenty years and is generating interest in the areas of clinical and educational supervision for therapists and trainees. The use of art to respond to clinical and teaching situations has been found to enhance participants' reflective thinking and the visual communication of ideas and experiences that ultimately benefit the work. Response art has also developed a sustained level of interest in art-based research (Fish 2017; Miller 2020; Nash 2019, 2022), and provides continued stimulus as a new area of discovery and knowledge building. The research carried out by Barbara Fish has enabled the emergence of *Art-Based Supervision* (2017) to grow into a mainstream approach now being used to underpin training and creative arts therapy supervision in Britain. In her article: 'Response art: A resource for practice and supervision', she describes how response art in the online supervisory relationship has developed over the past two years. Using her own response art, she reflects on the impact of the pandemic which introduced an enforced distance for art-based supervision and teaching. Her article describes how response art adapted to the online format and continues to provide a shared creative space in which to think and respond to practice with supervisees and trainees.

An ecological perspective

Innovation can help us think differently about the ways in which creativity and change are influenced by context, whether we work in clinical/medical environments, or in non-clinical and community settings, with elders, adults, adolescents, or children. Innovation is characterised by achieving a different viewpoint, one that can instigate the potential for change, or one that is shaped by wider societal change. Over the past three years humanity has suffered a species wide threat with challenges to life, health, and security. The pandemic has been followed by instability and uncertainty as we lurch from crisis to crisis in Britain, Europe, and globally. The seismic shifts and ongoing existential threats have changed our perspective of what is normal and what we consider to be the usual way of seeing and doing things. Part of the shift in viewpoint that we experience as trainees, therapists, teachers, and researchers is that we are all affected by conditions of suffering to varying degrees. During the global pandemic all of humanity collectively experienced similar threats and fears. Subsequently our empathy for others has shifted and developed a more personal quality as we awaken an understanding that we are experiencing a deepening and ongoing environmental and humanitarian crisis together.

Many of the changes affecting art therapy practice during this time have resulted from systemic changes in the way that conventional boundaries and relationships have been ruptured and reconnected using digital technology. There have also been relational, social, and economic stresses that continue to impact ongoing mental health needs in all age groups and across all communities, negatively affecting the support needs of therapists and those with whom we work.

The ecological concerns that are highlighted in the article by Bird et al. are reflected in my own practice when working outdoors or using natural materials in the studio (Nash 2020). My approach is informed by the effects of dislocation, displacement, and a growing understanding of our dependency upon natural ecosystems. The approaches used in 'environmental arts therapy' (Siddons Heginworth 2008; Siddons Heginworth and Nash 2020) work with disconnection both internally and externally and supports a deepening awareness of an 'ecological self' as described by Martin Jordan (2012: 133). I have found that the mirroring and attunement offered by outdoor environments give therapists the potential to work directly with the ruptures and separation between human nature and the world that sustains us.

Facing the reality of climate change and the part that art can play is given tangible form in the article by Bird et al. and is reflected in the visual essay, 'Walking alongside: An ecological visual essay', by Vanessa Jones. The use of the creative arts, working outdoors, and environment arts therapy are presented as a reflective art-based narrative taken from Vanessa's work with a female elder's therapy group. She uses extracts from her digital montage work to weave together the experience of movement through real and imagined landscapes, transition and change, aging, and the life cycle, by using the layering of visual form and motif.

Notes from the field

All of the articles in the third section reflect how art therapists have responded to the ongoing social/political shifts that continue to affect different communities. These include using art to deepen attunement in a responsive empathic art process, practice adaptation to the online experience pre and post pandemic, and working with displacement, migration, and using art to build community and belonging.

The development of an interactive and improvisational response to the artworks produced by some clients in therapy is described as 'working alongside' or 'parallel artmaking' and is a direct form of response art as described by Harriet Wadeson (2003) and Fish (2012, 2017). In the article 'Working alongside: Communicating visual empathy within collaborative art therapy' Gary Nash and Michiyo Zentner examine this emerging area of practice within the art therapy relationship and explores visual attunement, ostensive communication, and contingent mirroring in response to meeting the client's creative presence in art therapy. The authors have found that the relational dynamics involved when working alongside with adults in individual art therapy requires a shift from the exclusive position of therapist as an attentive, observing witness, to one where the therapist uses the material qualities of visual arts media to connect and build a working alliance. The collaborative 'working alongside' described is a contribution to innovative practice whereby visual arts media can be used to engage, reflect, and interact with clients in art therapy. The authors' intention is to support practice in this area of dynamic collaboration and to develop greater alliance and empathy through the therapist's use of arts media, creative improvisation, and 'empathic artmaking' as described by Michael Franklin (2010).

The 'blended art therapy' approach used by Sophie Benoit pre-dates the pandemic by several years, developed at a time when online art therapy was seen as peripheral to mainstream practice. Benoit contributes an innovative approach in her article, 'Blended

online and face-to-face art therapy’, by a focusing on maximising the benefits of both studio and online art therapy when alternating between the two formats. She shows how the face-to-face work provides a safe, bounded experience in the art therapy studio in which to experiment with relational and embodied dynamic therapy, whilst the virtual work focuses on using the arts and home studio spaces to develop a graduated increase of autonomous art expression through the online experience. Benoit demonstrates how the two formats can interact as the therapist utilises the potential of creativity and relationship building with both dependency and autonomy explored as important aspects when alternating between studio art therapy and art therapy in the online studio.

Marian Liebmann’s article, ‘Art tables at refugee drop-in centres: From exclusion to belonging’, describes the development of a democratising process in her work with refugees and asylum seekers when using a studio group approach around the Art Table. The non-clinical environment coupled with an honouring of a shared experience of suffering, has shaped the use of Art Tables as a way of connecting human relationships and enhancing community building in her practice. The methods and approach are described and become a shared resource for therapists and non-therapists to take into communities and to provide a creative space for displaced members in our increasingly fragmenting and traumatised world. Liebmann draws on her many years of working with communities, displacement, conflict, and restorative justice and describes the capacity for art to provide safety and containment, and support people to challenge exclusion whilst developing a sense of belonging, community, and connection through art.

In the final section of this issue there are reviews of three new publications that connect with the themes of innovation, integration, and imagination. All three books were published in 2022 and were therefore written and collated during the pandemic. The book *Art Psychotherapy and Innovation: New Territories, Techniques and Technologies*, edited by Helen Jury and Ali Coles is reviewed by Jessie Holder, *Social Action Art Therapy in a Time of Crisis*, written by Jamie Bird, is reviewed by Catherine Stevens, and *Integrative Arts Psychotherapy: Using an Integrative Theoretical Frame and the Arts in Psychotherapy*, Claire Louise Vaculik and Gary Nash (eds) is reviewed by Colleen Steiner Westling.

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Contributor details

Gary Nash Dip AT, MAAT is a HCPC registered art therapist and co-founder of the London Art Therapy Centre (2009). Gary has developed a private practice since 1995 alongside his work in social services, the voluntary sector and mainstream education. He is a practitioner-researcher-educator providing individual and group art psychotherapy and delivering professional workshops in art-based practice and research. He is research lead in response art, counter-transference art, audio image recording, and the outcome and evaluation of art therapy research projects that he established in 2015. Gary is a visiting lecturer at the Institute for Arts in Therapy and Education (IATE) and is programme lead on the Foundation in the Arts Therapies course at the University of Hertfordshire.

Contact: University of Hertfordshire, School of Creative Arts, College Lane, Hatfield.

Hertfordshire. AL10 9AB

E-mail: gary.jnash@googlemail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4313-6082>