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An extended reflection for the case study issue by ATOL board member

On the Difficulty of Writing Anything about Anybody: navigating alternative forms of writing in a therapeutic art studio community

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I am going to briefly describe some of the tangle of issues I encounter when I consider writing about people I have worked with. These issues need unpicking as they are about ethics, power and hierarchy. They are about relationships, and as such are also emotional. These complex considerations are part of any writing by therapists about clients, as evidenced in this current issue of ATOL on case studies. I have found versions of these dynamics exist in a particular way in the therapeutic community type setting where I work. In this brief reflection I will introduce the dynamics of my setting, and then present three of my attempts to navigate writing about my setting. These involved finding ways of writing with rather than about the members of this community. The writing took the form of interviews and editing artist statements (Omand 2022b), co-authoring (Omand 2022a), and reflective writing on my own art practice (Omand 2022c).

My setting is a therapeutic art studio setting steeped in the ethos of therapeutic communities, the radical ideas of antipsychiatry, and R.D Laing. The studio is open all

day for people to come and go and staffed by two art therapists called studio managers. People using the studio are artists or 'members' to reflect they are members of the community, rather than clients or service users. Studio members and staff make artwork in the shared space as artists and exhibit together. The studio was started in the early 1980s by art therapists Douglas Gill, Claire Manson and Jo Hill. They aimed to challenge some of the power dynamics inherent in therapy and the set position of 'sane' or 'mad' and the 'helper' and 'helped'. Claire writes

'It was very purposefully a studio in an arts centre and a deliberate side- step away from art therapy – people were not in treatment. We worked hard to keep ideas alive by questioning entrenched language that keeps people in their role and were very thoughtful about the language we used. For example, never using the word clinical and using 'studio manager' not therapist, which was perhaps a bit clumsy, but we wanted to try to deconstruct the expectation of the patient/therapist – a very powerful dyad. We wanted to open it up, to keep questioning.' (Manson, Gill and Fried 2022).

This non-clinical ethos has remained central to the studio's functioning. We don't write regular notes for example, and do not store information about people other than necessary membership and safeguarding details. As such, what members' choose to say about their personal biographies are held in the relationships with the studio manager team. I wonder if our ethos of not writing things down permeates to other areas. Over the years I have noticed a fairly consistent absence of any sort of writing about the unique and valuable work that happens at the studio. The culture of publicly exhibiting artwork is strong, but any accompanying written material is very brief or non-existent. In academic writing, there exists an account of the founding of the studio and its principles (Manson, Gill and Fried 2022) and a more general exploration of the frame (Gill 2017). Despite continued interest from others in the profession, there are no studies, or descriptions of art processes, or accounts of therapeutic work in this setting.

I have questioned this myself and why it is so difficult to write about the rich encounters, long term relationships, and surprising therapeutic shifts that can happen at the studio, which are most often thought about through the art. There is also the humdrum of everyday community matters, the times of stuck-ness and inevitable conflicts and

challenges. In part, the long-term nature of work means many relationships with members are ongoing. Entering into writing may not be in best interest of the relationship. It may also be that the early ethos of stepping away from 'therapy' has meant traditional forms of writing by therapists, like case studies, did not grow as a practice in this studio's culture. With its history of rejecting aspects of psychotherapy, the principle of a traditional case study being by a therapist about a client, seems to embody ideas that the studio rebels against.

In response to these difficulties, I have attempted to navigate alternative types of writing about facets of the studio with the involvement of studio members to greater or lesser extent. I will briefly summarise some helpful, and some more problematic, aspects of these as I found them.

Recording and editing

In the chapter 'Protested Space: artworks made in a therapeutic art studio under threat from cuts' I felt strongly twith their artworks needed to be their own. I audio recorded conversations with members as we looked at their images together. These were informal semi-structured interviews in a way, as I asked questions and we also let the conversation flow. Studio artists generously talked to me about their artworks, and I later transcribed their responses. We then underwent a back-and-forth process of selecting text that artists were satisfied with. These became somewhat like artist's 'statements' about their work. It involving printing or emailing sections of the transcripts, and then members responding with edits (Omand 2022b).

There are potentials and difficulties with this as a method. It meant members had agency over their words. In this it worked, in that it directly represented what members wanted to say about their work. A difficulty that I wrestled with however, was that the chapter overall was a mixture between members' words and my words. As my words were the surrounding ideas and context, this put me in a powerful position as chapter author. It involved much trust from members, and to honour this, I anxiously checked in with members throughout the process, the whole thing taking around three years with several people making small changes over this time. I described in detail what the chapter was to be about so that members knew what they were committing to, and

two people wanted to read the draft. However other members declined to read the full draft and only read the published chapter. Waiting for them to read it and respond was a ‘heart in my mouth’ moment. Members were invited to the book launch, and there was a celebratory feeling when copies were received.

Co-authoring

In another approach, studio member Patsy McMahon and I co-authored an account of managers and members making art side-by-side in the studio (Omand and McMahon 2022a). The potentials but also difficulties in this process are not written about enough in art therapy writing and it is a rich area for discussion. Being co-authors solved some of the problems of author power I describe above. We both had joint responsibility for the contents of the chapter, although we agreed I was to have additional responsibility for the literature review and submitting the drafts. It was a relief to co-design our method, so that we were both committed to the process.

As a way to work together we decided to record ourselves talking and looking at our artwork. We discovered the studio across the corridor was empty, waiting to be demolished and refurbished and we made it our meeting place. Sitting in the space, talking about our work felt out of the ordinary and enjoyable, like we were co-conspirators, something we discussed later. Here the tensions within the ethos of the studio inevitably shaped our process. For example, when we looked at earlier drafts Patsy felt some of the language of ‘therapy’ itself could be patronising, and not in keeping with studio ethos of us both being artists in the space. We found an alternative language through talking about our experiences making art. For me it required letting go of the control over what shape the chapter would take, a learning process in itself.

Personal artwork

One further way in to writing about the setting I found was to write about my own process of making art in the therapeutic studio group. This provided a way to write about my experience and feelings in the group but keep the focus on the studio manger ‘lens’, rather than on the members. This may have felt more possible because I was writing about the new experience of working online due to the pandemic. The group work on zoom seemed new and strange which brought me to notice and observe my own art practice in the setting more intensely than I would have previously (Omand

2022c). In a way, this approach to writing was more straightforward, as I was focused on writing about my own art process rather than negotiating writing with other people. However, I still needed to ask permission from people in the group to anonymously describe the general nature of the groups and occurrences in them so that my artwork could be understood in this context. More considerations arose in how much detail to give in my descriptions of the group and working out what was mine to describe and what belonged to group members.

More questions arose about how much of my emotional responses to give in writing about my art practice. I have always valued personal accounts by other art therapists writing about their art processes, for example Rogers (2002), the Winnicott Wednesdays Collective (Hoyes et al 2017) or Cavaliero (2021) and I was influenced by these. The pandemic meant that we were thrown into a discontinuation as life as usual, and everything became unusual and challenging, for members and studio managers alike. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic perhaps made this kind of personal writing seem more possible, and my wish to record something of my new experiences more urgent. This way of writing finds an echo in the ATOL special issue during the pandemic ‘Open Dialogue: Covid-19, Creativity or Collapse?’ (2021) where art therapists shared their artwork and personal reflections about working during Covid.

To conclude, I have scratched the surface of some of the issues that arose when I have attempted to write about working in a therapeutic arts community. My examples are alternatives to traditional style case studies, which may feel more approachable in some settings. However, these alternatives are imperfect; by no means to be idealised, or problem free. Like case studies, they also involve holding relationships and trust over long periods of time.

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