

Group Art Experiential Reflection: Formless & Structure

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The “Formless & Structure” group art experiential was led by Ash Towry and Zoë Shulman (myself) and was *intended* to help clients discover symbolic language and meaning for integrating less conscious affective states. By moving through the Expressive Therapies Continuum’s (ETC) hierarchy from the sensory bottom to the symbolic top, we sought to fully engage our class in a multi-modal process that may access change and learning through many neurological pathways. “Formless & Structure” was divided into two ten-minute sections, in which our class would first use fluid dry media to move through the kinesthetic, sensory, and affective ETC components; then cross over to the perceptual, cognitive, and symbolic components using resistive dry media. Hass-Cohen & Finlay (2015) elaborate on the theoretical basis for our intention:

Research shows that effective change and learning must include hands-on experiential practices that address both emotional and intellectual aspects. Experiential learning theory defines learning as experiences that are transformed into knowledge. There are two dialectical forms of learning. One involves concrete, active experiences ... [while] the second form of learning involves abstract processing, mental conceptualization of information, and reflection on what the learning is. (p. 3)

After meeting and drafting an experiential outline, further preparation included gathering *materials* a few days in advance from the Art Studio on the Southwestern College campus. Together, Ash and I cut paper table covers from large rolls of butcher paper and then compiled twenty sheets of 12” X 18” white construction paper, several boxes of colorful soft pastels, a jar of charcoal powder, artist tape, glue sticks, Elmer’s glue, scissors, rulers, erasers, various colors

of construction paper, markers, colored pencils, and crayons. Because our fluid dry media choices were powdery and messy, we sent a Populi message on our class dashboard for everyone to bring either smocks or junk T-shirts to our experiential. A half-hour prior to the start of class, Ash and I laid down all the paper table covers, set out the materials for the first half of our experiential, and placed the rest of the materials on a small table in the back of the classroom.

To start, both of us introduced ourselves as co-facilitators and provided our pronouns. We went through *trauma-informed safety precautions* by designating ourselves as helpers and offering assistance if anyone felt triggered and needed grounding. We reminded the class that they would not be interrupting the group process if they needed help and encouraged them to raise their hands at any time. As Horovitz (2018) explains, “one has to think about the psychological fallout of (for example) deciding whether or not to have lit birthday candles to celebrate a [burn victim’s] birthday” (pp. 2-3). In my view, a therapist must be prepared by providing appropriate external resources to clients for managing trauma, as some triggers may arise from the most unsuspecting sources. Before providing our prompt, I advised those who brought smocks to wear them, as the next steps would undoubtedly be messy.

Next, we went over our two-part experiential activity and asked everyone to begin by utilizing each of their 12” X 18” sheets of white construction paper and either or both the charcoal powder and soft pastels to make a formless artwork. The class was advised to contemplate what the word formless meant to them and consider working in an abstract way with the powdery media. Through this *formless prompt*, our hope was to create the opportunity for a purely somatic (kinesthetic and sensory) engagement with affect. Providing fluid dry media also

“encouraged experimentation and [the likelihood of eliciting] emotional responses” (Hinz, 2020, p. 27). With regard to the *kinesthetic ETC component*, Hinz (2020) states:

Sometimes an identifiable art product is not produced using these methods, but a creative moment can still take place via the principle of isomorphism, as an internal state is expressed and matched in a corresponding external experience. In the case of kinesthetic expression, an internal state such as anger can be matched to the external experience of pounding clay. (p. 44)

Because the charcoal powder was loose in a single jar, I decided to offer any amount to whoever wished to use some in their process. As everyone got settled with their materials, I went around and dumped a few tablespoons worth of powder onto many classmates’ white paper. Then, the first ten-minute timer was set. A total of thirteen students began to engage with the materials. Some of them picked different colors of soft pastels to draw with, while others stuck with just the charcoal powder. A few students even combined the media to add tonal variations to their pastel color palettes.

Most students were comfortable using their fingers to smudge the powder, but others had noticeable tactile sensitivity and created adaptive tools out of chamois and paper towels to apply and manipulate the powder. As the class worked, the white sheets of construction paper filled up quickly with a range of unique color and value fields. In this kinesthetic and sensory process, Ash and I observed the rectangular boundaries of the white paper being surpassed and obscured by the powders, in addition to the subtraction of powder, finger drawing, reflective distance via standing, and water and brush application. The *sensory component of the ETC* was on full

display, adding another dimension to the students' affective engagement. According to Hinz (2020):

Sensory stimulation represents one way to focus attention, and the external focus on sensory stimuli can allow an interior shift that increases attention to internal sensations or emotions. Therefore, the emergent function of a sensory activity often is an affective experience. (p. 63)

Once the timer went off, we gave the class a few minutes to wash their hands and tidy up their spots before advising them of the *structure prompt*. After everyone got settled, Ash and I pointed to the rest of the materials on the back table and asked the class to incorporate any combination of artist tape, glue sticks, Elmer's glue, scissors, rulers, erasers, various colors of construction paper, markers, colored pencils, and crayons in order to add structure to their formless artwork. As the class circled the table and began picking their resistive dry media, most students gravitated toward the colored construction paper. I could already see the *cognitive ETC component* taking place as students scratched their heads and began evaluating their media choices based on the mental images they were generating. Hinz (2020) explains how during the cognitive component, "qualities of media properties are internalized in the form of mental images that can be manipulated to allow thinking through possible results before trying them" (p. 106). Maria began rummaging through other materials in the art cabinets, which spurred me to help her focus on the table where specific materials had been deliberately chosen for the structure prompt. I felt it was important to maintain this focus, because "resistive media encourage energy release ... and can facilitate a deeper experience with symbol formation" (Hinz, 2020, p. 129).

Lauren slipped by with a bottle of red acrylic paint, a brush, and water, and began to apply geometric structures on top of her charcoal ground. Ash and I decided not to interrupt Lauren's process and allow her to explore the media and structure prompt on her own terms. Our goal in providing only dry media was to have a material control group that could help us contrast and identify the differences between working fluidly and resistively. Although we tried to provide enough variety of resistive dry media, we realized that some students would be naturally drawn beyond those perimeters and ultimately decided to allow room for other meaningful media associations to take place. Indeed, Lauren found a lot of structure working with fluid wet media and the deviation ended up being a very teachable moment. While our theoretical framework supported our media choices, we realized that there will always be a degree of difference between expectations and reality when working in the field of art therapy.

Besides our two rebels, we observed a few students working in a highly detail-oriented fashion with markers and colored pencils. For example, Abbey used a black marker to draw intricate hieroglyphic-looking symbols on a warm pastel ground that had radial symmetry. Katherine worked sculpturally and cut her colorful pastel ground into three segments, folded and glued each piece into triangular prisms, cut slots on the ends, and then stacked them into an elaborate Jenga-style tower! Several of the students who had gravitated toward the colored construction paper used it as collage material, whether by cutting and gluing down hard-edged shapes or by tearing strips and emphasizing deckled edges. Of these collage pieces, Eli's involved strips of torn yellow construction paper that she had curled into sculptural ribbons and applied loosely to the artwork's surface. Marilyn's novel collage approach involved tearing green construction paper into organic shapes and then applying them to her artwork's border to

break its rectangular format. Overall, I noted a general trend of students defining the two-dimensional formless artworks into structured compositions with contrasting edges that often became sculptural. Many of the resulting artworks exhibited either vague or specific representational symbolism. Hinz (2020) describes how the *perceptual ETC component* relates to my observations of students transitioning from formless to structure:

Unfinished images [are] one way to invite clients with little experience in functioning perceptually into the world of form and structure... the push to form good gestalts contributed to a desire among clients to complete an interrupted picture or incomplete sculpture. (p. 81)

When the second ten-minute timer sounded, Ash and I announced our final five-minute cleanup time and had everyone clear their areas so we could remove the paper table covers and put all the materials away. After a second round of hand washing and resettling, we opened the floor to an invitational ten-minute popcorn discussion and encouraged participants to consider how the formless and structure prompts and materials affected their art experiential. To my surprise, this ten-minute discussion became more of a twenty-minute discussion and provided a surplus of *feedback and insight!*

Abbey, Katie, and Zoe H. enjoyed the formless prompt, citing chaos, freedom, and fun as part of their experiences. While Abbey felt calmness through the transition to structure, Zoe H. had an aversion to it, but eventually found her own sense of structure from patchy color contrasts rather than delineated space or hard edge qualities. Katherine and Clay's works evoked strong memories; Katherine's was of fond childhood art-making, while Clay's work reminded him of a popular film. Both Katie and Maria had aversions to the chalk pastels; however, Katie's aversion

stemmed from tactile sensitivity, while Maria's was more of a psychological block. Regarding physical sensitivity to the media, our professor made the noteworthy *safety suggestion* that Ash and I consider how powdered media might be inhaled and irritate clients with asthma or allergies. Similar to Abbey, Anna liked the transition from formless to structure and explored drawing geodesic triangles within the kinesthetic loops she created using charcoal powder. Further, Anna's geodesic triangles became *symbolic* as they began to remind her of a greenhouse where light enters and allows for inner growth. Symbolism also emerged in Maria's collaged doorway, and while she didn't specify her personal narrative, she explained that the resulting image held significant meaning. As a matter of fact, Hinz (2020) states:

Symbols provide access to intuitive functions and serve as reminders that experiences are not entirely conscious and fully understood ... externalizing symbolic material in the form of an image in art therapy is the easiest way to help a client take the first step toward symbol resolution and personal growth. (pp. 9-10, 125)

When Lauren asked about how the ETC specifically related to our two-part experiential, Ash explained how the transition from the kinesthetic to symbolic ETC components was aided by the shift from fluid to resistive dry media. Elaborating, I explained our intent to access unconscious affect through our formless approach to engaging the kinesthetic and sensory components. Then, by adding structure to that formless affect, the perceptual and cognitive components could allow for integration through symbolic meaning-making. While our intention was broad and covered the entire ETC, I acknowledged and agreed with Katie's point that any part of our experiential could be explored over a longer period of time.

Indeed, “Formless & Structure” was a forty-minute microcosm of a much longer and more detailed *integration process*. Ideally, this process would be spread out over weeks, months, or even years of hour-long art therapy sessions, where the transition from one ETC component to the other could occur naturally through the client’s own deep personal exploration. Ash and I considered the *possible application* of each component transition based on a client’s presenting affect or issue. For clients suffering from flat affect, dissociation, under-arousal, or depression, the somatic qualities of the formless prompt may help them to get back into their bodies and feel more energized (Hinz, 2020, pp. 48-49, 66). In addition, the formless prompt is more developmentally appropriate for younger clients, or if a client needs to experience a healthy adaptive regression within the ARISE process (A. Calisch, personal communication, January 17, 2023). However, for those with certain physical disabilities and sensory-motor challenges, the kinesthetic and sensory components of the formless prompt may be too challenging or inappropriate.

Conversely, the structure prompt may benefit clients who are dysregulated, have poor boundaries, or are over-aroused and need grounding. Hinz (2020) explains that:

As perceptual involvement increases, affective responding decreases ... [this may] help clients impose limits on overwhelming emotion. Art experiences that use highly structured materials and/or intentionally focus on the perceptual or form qualities of the expressive experience function in this way. (p. 75)

Such structure could help clients to distance themselves from difficult emotions and learn self-regulation techniques (Hinz, 2020, pp. 75, 91). While our experiential was developmentally appropriate for our class, I recognize that the structure prompt, which covers the perceptual,

cognitive, and symbolic ETC components, may not be reachable for younger or cognitively impaired clients (A. Calisch, personal communication, January 24, 2023). Further, art therapists must be diligent about interviewing and checking in with their clients to make sure their prompts are relevant to the client's presenting issues.

Altogether, "Formless & Structure" addresses the integration of unconscious affect through symbolic meaning-making. In the spirit of Carl Gustav Jung, I believe that discovering and integrating split-off parts of ourselves leads to greater wholeness and mental health (Neukrug & Hays, 2022, p. 70). Debilitating illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) stem from trauma being fragmented and stuck in the reptilian brain and limbic system (van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 54-57). One of the few ways trauma can be accessed is through somatic and non-verbal processes such as art therapy (Hinz, 2020, p. 56). By beginning at the lower somatic levels of the ETC and working up to non-verbal symbolism, I believe it may be possible to access, integrate, and regulate difficult affective states associated with mental illness.

References

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