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Translating the Essence of Dance: Rendering Meaning in Artistic Inquiry of the Creative Arts Therapies

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Abstract

The authors used artistic inquiry to study intersubjectivity in a weekly, stimulated creative arts therapy studio experience for one year. They found that the conversion of meaning from the meta-verbal, imaginal, aesthetic language of dance and visual art into verbal and textual discourse required complex translational processes. Personal narratives are presented which identify some challenges faced in translation and related data analysis. Strategies for building skills for translation of aesthetic material are provided to assist those conducting future artistic inquiries.

Introduction

Throughout history, art making has provided an essential purveyor of knowledge about both the self and others (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Gerber, Templeton, Chilton, Liebman, Manders, & Shim,., 2012; Knowles & Cole, 2008). The creative arts therapies are mental health professions that have harnessed this quality of the arts to aid healing and promote flourishing (Malchiodi, 2005). Creative arts therapies such as art therapy, dance/movement therapy, music therapy, and drama therapy use art forms within the context of a helping relationship to increase well-being for clients of all ages. While clients report powerfully transformative experiences, the creative arts therapies suffer from a lack of research (Cruz & Berrol, 2012; Kapitan, 2010; Slayton, D'Archer, & Kaplan, 2010). In this article, the authors, Elizabeth Manders, a dance movement therapist, and Gioia Chilton, an art therapist, explore how artistic knowledge might be employed, not as a therapeutic activity, but as a methodological tool for creative arts therapies research.

We see a particular opportunity for the creative arts therapies in the area of *artistic inquiry*, a term that has been credited to expressive arts therapist McNiff (1986, 1998) and dance/movement therapist Hervey (2000). Like creative arts therapy, artistic inquiry utilizes the power of the arts to communicate and transform knowledge. It is a part of the broader continuum of arts-informed research, which employs art-making practices to lead from the intimate to the universal; to invoke and provoke questions and ideas; and to engage the researcher and audience through its participative and experiential methods (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Knowles & Cole, 2008). In such research, meaning emerges through metaphors and symbols found in multi-sensorial art making and art viewing experiences. These aesthetic forms educe multiple, emergent meanings that inspire life, movement, and openness (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Kenny, 2002; Neilsen, 2004).

More formally termed *arts-based research*; artistic inquiry can include the systematic use of visual, performing and/or literary artistic practices in the data collection, data analysis, and/or presentation of research findings for the purpose of contributing to a useful body of knowledge (Hervey, 2000; Leavy, 2008; McNiff, 1998). Arts-based research has burgeoned over the last 20 years with new terminology, definitions, and practices in the social sciences (Finley, 2003; Fraser & al Sayah, 2011; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2008; McNiff, 2011). Yet there are only a few examples of this work being done in the creative arts therapies, notably by Brown, (2008), Hervey (2000, 2004), Kapitan (2003) and Spaniol (2005). Arts-based research methods and artistic ways of knowing were recently identified as essential components of doctoral-level education in the creative arts therapies (Gerber, 2006).

 Of major significance to arts-based research is the complexity of translation, or the conversion of meaning from the meta-verbal, imaginal aesthetic "language" of dance and

visual art to verbal and written language (Gerber et al., 2012). In this article, we aim to explore the challenge of *translation*. We identified this phenomenon, among others, in a previous article (Gerber, et al., 2012). By translation, we mean the conversion of meaning from the meta-verbal, imaginal aesthetic "language" of dance and visual art to verbal and written language.

Translation

The need for translation of raw data into a suitable form for analysis and dissemination is not unique to artistic inquiry. Translation from raw data into a form usable for analysis also happens in both qualitative and quantitative research with the translation of ideas, behaviors, and experiences into numbers and the transcription of texts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). However, translating artistic material is not straightforward. For us, "the challenge was translating the infinite coexistent forms of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, written and oral data, which are inherently a part of multidimensional artistic enquiry, into linear verbal language without compromising the essence of the experience" (Gerber, et al., 2012, p. 46). Panhofer and Payne (2011) found that even experienced dance/movement therapists, trained in a technical language to describe movement, had difficulty expressing the meaning of the embodied experience. They wrote less after a movement experience than before it and made little use of the technical language, preferring metaphor and poetry.

In our group, we found the process of moving from the embodied, sensorial and imaginal ways of knowing in our creative processes to verbal language was difficult, but important, as we wanted to be able to communicate specific meanings we discovered. We also felt strongly that if we could learn how, we might help others—such as our creative arts therapies clients—to do the same (Gerber, et al., 2012). Additionally, in order to promote creative arts therapies, therapists need to be able to articulate what happens during non-verbal artistic and therapeutic moments.

The translation from art to words is important for both creative arts therapists and arts-based researchers to communicate findings and share the knowledge that arises through the arts. However, like all translations, it is an imperfect process, without any one-to-one correspondence of meaning. In recent art therapy research, Bird cautioned that translation between the visual and spoken involves interpretation (as cited in Pink, Hogan, & Bird, 2011). His study found that:

> a process of translation exists as much between the spoken word and the visual image as it does between spoken languages…the use of the visual should not then be considered a short-cut to direct communication that is free from interpretation, translation or representation, nor should it be considered as providing unmediated

access to some interior reality or universal collective visual vocabulary (Pink, et al., 2011, p. 15).

Likewise, we knew that dance as well as visual art needed translation in order to interpret meaning in the cultural context of the creative arts therapies research.

Artistic Inquiry of Intersubjectivity in the Creative Arts Therapies

As part of the core curriculum in an innovative new Ph.D. Program in the Creative Arts Therapies, we took a year-long artistic inquiry course to explore the meaning of our emergent artistic expressions. This experience was designed to parallel the self-exploration and interpersonal context of an arts therapies clinical treatment session—as much as possible within the ethical limits of an educational experience. The goal was to explore how an artistic process of inquiry can lead to self-knowledge and knowledge of others within an intersubjective arts environment. As student-researchers, we wanted to cultivate our ability to articulate this knowledge in artistic, oral, and written language. As scholars, we needed to be able to define and communicate the knowledge learned from the arts and the artistic process before we could use it for theory building and advocacy in the creative arts therapies (Gerber & Templeton, 2010; Gerber, et al., 2012).

We explored our experience, in the course, through visual arts, dance, movement, poetry and music; for an hour or more each week as we worked alongside each other on separate projects or collaboratively on joint artistic endeavors (Figure 1). As part of the research process, we needed to translate the artistic processes and products in order to identify distinct—though still shifting and indeterminate—meanings, about which we could write and share with others. After finishing the artistic explorations, we engaged in a half hour of journal writing and then a half hour group discussion to reflect upon both internal thoughts and feelings and our intersubjective group process. We each continued this investigation and analysis in quarterly reviews of our artistic processes. This stage demanded clear translation into words as we as students were each required to document our findings in the form of several formal academic papers.

Within our small group of two professors and four students, the artistic inquiry process led to meaningful, intense experiences. The extended experience gave us the opportunity to discover a variety of challenges within artistic inquiry including the difficulties of translation from art into a verbal form for discussion.

Translating Artistic Data

Translation mediated through artistic processes utilizes "a dialectic that employs a dynamic interaction between thematic analysis and artistic response to the data that emerge from art-

based research" (Gerber, et al., 2012, p. 46). This method of coming to know meaning links or bridges multiple ways of knowing, synthesizing knowledge within complex systems (Fraser & al Sayah, 2011; Sullivan, 2009). The purpose of art making in the data analysis stage of research is then to "evoke and amplify meaning" (Kapitan, 2010, p. 170). Translation through other arts forms is a kind of interpretation; a form of arts-based data analysis unique to artistic inquiry.

If the researcher chooses to analyze the data through another metaverbal or nonverbal art form, they may need more than one stage of aesthetic analysis to develop a synthesis of findings. These processes support both the generation of findings to the researchers and the communication of the findings to consumers of the research. The multiple translations involved can increase trustworthiness, as they act as form of triangulation (Patton, 2002). Inconsistencies and differences as well as patterns and themes found in this analysis can lead to eventual synthesis, although the path is not always clear. As Patton (2002) notes, "understanding inconsistencies in findings across different kinds of data can be illuminative and important…offering opportunities for deeper insight" (p.556). In artistic inquiry, synthesizing is an aporetic translation, shifting, emergent, "a moment of ontological uncertainty" (Hogan & Pink, 2010, p. 160) with commiserate slippery semiotic meaning. The "fluid, dialectic way of thinking and being…ultimately transforms the knowledge and the individual" (Gerber, et al., 2012, p. 46). While arts-based knowledge is aporetic and we may doubt the accuracy of our translations, these multiple meanings can ring of truth in an irreplaceable way.

Demonstrating Translation

In the next section of this article, first Elizabeth Manders, a dance movement therapist, and then Gioia Chilton, an art therapist, share personal vignettes of experiences in the creative arts therapies artistic inquiry course. We share our struggles and our recommendations to assist others who may be experiencing something similar in the rather murky process of artistic inquiry. Over the year, we experienced many challenging yet illumining moments. As these discoveries did not come easily, we hope sharing the ways in which we navigated these challenges and the lessons we learned will help smooth the path for future researchers.

Difficulties In Translation

After finishing an hour or more of dancing or making art in class, I (Manders) would look at my journal, look at the clock, and then watch the half-hour of journaling time quickly disappear. I discovered that one challenge with translating my creative nonverbal experience into words was the sheer quantity of the material. Not only was it difficult to find the words to describe my experience of dancing, but there simply was not time to document everything. I

frequently wondered if I was trying to translate into my journal a description of my artwork, its meaning to me, my process in the moment, or the larger connections with my learning. As a group, we discovered how quickly the meaning of an artwork could change when, one day, we found that clay sculptures we created together appeared completely different when we moved them onto the table for discussion. Seeing them shift from yellow to gold with the change in lighting, new metaphors emerged, and our interpretation of their meaning changed. So, we then had to find words to translate both the meaning of the objects as we made them, and how their meaning shifted. At times, I doubted my ability to capture accurately any of these aspects, although I frequently found that writing helped me reflect on the details I wanted to document and remember more of the process.

Each week I decided what I wanted to document in my journal as I sat down to write. This led to a whole variety of approaches including narrative descriptions of my process; reflections on my internal experience; descriptions of interpersonal exchanges and the influence of others on my work; descriptions of the artistic product and its meaning for me; and meta-analysis of the purpose of translating these various aspects. The entries varied in clarity from lengthy descriptions to brief outlines or single words on a map of the room. I then had major difficulties when I tried to analyze my journal entries and wished I had a specific question or topic to focus my entries from the beginning.

Translation Through Fiction

It was often challenging to transition from the creative flow of dancing and painting. We sometimes used another creative format to reflect on the experience and document the session. On two occasions, I (Manders) wrote a story as a method of documentation, translation, and analysis of my dance and art making experience. In writing a story, I felt less pressure to capture everything precisely as it happened: a fairytale, by definition, is not supposed to be factual. Instead, I discovered a different type of truth in my story when it captured the group imagination in reflecting powerful aspects of the experience.

The first story I wrote was the tale of a group mural. Although I wrote it as a fairytale, it documented moments from the creation of the mural and several prominent symbols relevant to the group. Within the format of a fairytale, I found the freedom to go ahead and define a new term that someone had written on the mural. The group received this story and the new term with great joy.

When I wrote a story in response to a dance, I found it was at once translation and analysis. I decorated a corner of the room and then allowed images and emotions to arise as I danced through this stimulating new environment. Other group members visited and briefly joined in my dance, invoking responses from me. By the end of the session, I started to find a story in

the images and sensations of the dance. Once I conceived of the dance as a story about a fairy with long hair, the rest of the dance revolved around this plotline and I found meanings in the new images and sensations in relation to this character. When I started journaling, I turned the entire dance into a fairytale. From the opening line "once upon a time," I reviewed the dance experience with all the various sensations, interactions, images, and emotions from the point of view of this character. By turning this entire session into a single story, I found new meanings and connections between my emotional experience and interpersonal interactions. The story taught me about the character I invented and ultimately about myself as the dancer and creator of this character.

Both fairytales were fun to write and share with the group. I felt less constricted in documenting the dance when freed from the expectation of complete accuracy in my translation. To my surprise, the story then acted not only as a translation of the dance into language, but itself provided further insight into my experience. Subsequent discussions of both stories used interpretation of the symbolism and events to further translate the experience into the realities of everyday life. This translation in stages provided a bridge between the creative realm of art making and verbal interpretation.

A quarterly review

At the end of every quarter, we spent a session creating artwork in order to review the arts experiences of the quarter. I first reviewed the process and interpersonal experiences through my journal writings. This had challenges as the weekly translation into my journal varied in style and method, topic, thoroughness and clarity. I then looked at the artwork and attempted to synthesize these. We analyzed this new artwork and the data from our weekly sessions to write about the intersubjective experience of art-making. This involved creating a question and selecting a systematic method for analysis as a form of arts-based research. In attempting to synthesize the class material each quarter, I (Manders) discovered that the method of translation from artistic material to written materials would need to vary with the question and form of analysis. While allowing for the possibility of new discoveries, having different types of written material in the weekly journal sessions complicated analysis.

One quarter, I struggled to do an artistic data analysis. I felt resistance, fear, and unrealistic expectations as I attempted make sense of the divergent topics in my journal. In our final class session, I displayed all my visual art pieces and read my notes from the days I had danced. I then attempted to create a dance summarizing my findings from the quarter. I spent most of the next half hour lying on the ground with my hood pulled over my face. The pressure to perform the task of summarizing seemed impossible and I hid, listened to others, and occasionally peeked out then pushed myself further away from the display of my artwork.

A few days later, I had to try again. This time, I slowed down and lowered my expectations: I no longer demanded of myself that the new creation solve the problem, produce a highly insightful synthesis, or add useful knowledge for the field. This allowed me to open up to my creativity and be willing to delve in without being paralyzed by overwhelming doubts that I could produce a meaningful synthesis or accurate translation into words. I then intuitively synthesized two themes as I envisioned a small closed box (a metaphor for my hiding) with pieces of colorful tissue paper bursting out the edges (visually similar to the colorful use of tissue paper and paint in several artworks) (Figure 2). This displayed the tension I felt between closing off and sharing with the group in explosive colors. Yet something was still missing. I sensed the piece was aesthetically incomplete, and returned to the raw artwork data for another element. There, I found a symbol, a clock, which I had used repeatedly in several of my art pieces. This represented both ideas of time and spiritual themes that I had struggled with sharing in the group. This once again reiterated the theme of hiding: For weeks, I had not fully communicated my interpretations of this symbol for fear of the group response. This fear of sharing limited my ability to translate the art process into words. The artistic synthesis of my material brought out this symbol that had previously defied translation.

The box now appeared aesthetically complete and presented a surprising synthesis of three important themes from the quarter. This linked the themes from two different types of data: I translated a theme from verbal data (journal and discussions) into a metaphor that I could visually represent with the themes from the visual data (artwork). One more stage of translation was needed: to write about the piece and verbally describe it to the class. Having already translated the art and dance material from weekly sessions into language, it was now easier to verbally describe the meaning of this final artistic synthesis.

Translation of Visual Art

Like Manders, I (Chilton) often struggled with both exiting the creative flow and trying to document my experience. I wrote of how frustrated I was, feeling pressure to write about that for which I had no words: "I always seem to dislike the journal writing process right after—I resist the words and want to stay in the images and non-verbal." (Chilton, personal communication, July 11, 2011). Like many artists, if I could have verbalized it in the first place, I would have done so. Faced with the demand to record what I had experienced, I just wanted my artistic work to speak for me. To express myself I painted large murals such as Figure 3, and was left, afterwards, stuck, staring at my notebook, drawing my painting in an effort to find the words to describe and reflect on my creative process. To push through this state, I created many concept maps (Figure 4). These small drawings helped me to distill themes and visually display relevant relationships. I found them useful, as Maxwell (2006) noted, to literally map out ideas and connections, identify gaps, and locate new areas for future analysis.

Like drawing concept maps, writing poems helped me to transition from artful, soulful, non-verbal levels of consciousness and knowledge to sequential and literary thought processes. I found poetry writing could sometimes distill the essence of the visual artwork and emotional and intersubjective experience; other times, I wrote poems about the impossibility of being able to distill any meanings without diluting the essential findings of our inquiry. My poetry did not come easy at times, as poetry is not the art form in which I feel most skilled. However, I was heartened to discover that like artistic production in therapy, the level of competence needed only to be good enough to express the essence of the inquiry (Finley, 2003; Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, Richard, & Schendel, 2010; Lahman, Rodriguez, Richard, Geist, Schendel, & Graglia, 2011). In other words, excellent poems were not needed; just good-enough poems to help me transition to a verbal state, with some inkling of significant aesthetic meanings:

<u>Self/other artist inquiry class</u>

What is going on here?

(I will never be the same, because I heard your story)

Fear:
of disaster, vulnerability (terror of exposure, inadequacy)
the dis-jointing of social relationships

Joy:
in seeing artwork which transforms

(I will never be the same, because I heard your story)

Awe:
of the power of art making to help us grow

Intensity:
--at times, too 'hot'
--at times, too 'much'

At times, heart-breaking, breaking, open

Intimacy:

In a social group
In an artistic inquiry

Builds new knowings about what we do

(because I heard your story and told my own)

-Gioia Chilton, 8/16/11

Another factor we discussed was that often, even if we understood meanings of the material we expressed through our artwork, we did not always feel comfortable in sharing these meanings with others. I often held back my thoughts and emotions, trying to translate them in such a way that I felt safe to share with others in the group. This was complicated by the fact that this material was made of half-formed ideas, urges and inchoate feelings. Not everything I discovered, felt/thought, or remembered was I able to—or even willing to—share with others. At times, I was not even willing to admit these feelings to myself. Even though I thought that I was very comfortable with self-disclosure among my professors and classmates, I am sure I must have heavily edited the emotional, intimate material for classroom consumption. The concept maps and poetry helped me to piece together my experiences in a form that remained coded and tentative. Here I could simultaneously code and uncover, reveal and conceal, starting to express meanings while maintaining the power to hide what felt unsafe to reveal.

I learned emotional safety is key to the artistic inquiry process, which requires creativity and personal vulnerability. Translation requires trust and a deep desire to share. Of course, this is not new information for creative arts therapists who often deal with resistance and fears in response to the tasks we ask of our clients (Robbins, 1994). Through this experiential learning experience, I discovered again just how hard it can be, to not only create, but to share with others what my creations meant to me. I felt particular pressure to perform such self-disclosure, while simultaneously being reluctant to disclose too much personal, intimate information. As students and emerging scholars, I wondered if our anxiety about our grades and our professional future limited our capacity to delve as deeply into the content of artistic symbols as we might have done, if free from such concerns. As creative arts therapists we valued self-exploration, yet we clearly censored ourselves at times in our discussions to avoid increasing conflict or discord amongst the group. Balancing upon this fine boundary line complicated the transition to words and translation of artistic meanings.

Lessons Learned

This intense, yearlong experience offered us the opportunity to practice artistic inquiry, discover its challenges, and explore possible solutions. From this experience, we developed the following practical recommendations. First, it can be useful to develop a clear research question. This will help the researcher focus their documentation given the vast amount of potential data in the process, product, interpersonal interactions, and the internal and external experience of artistic endeavors. Forming a question makes sense, given that having a specific research question is vital in all qualitative (or quantitative) research (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Next, the researcher should consider the benefits of a consistent method for the translation of the artistic material for ease of analysis versus the wealth of information that may arise from the use of a variety of forms of translation. The researcher should be sure to take sufficient time to transition from pre-verbal to verbal consciousness and fully document the desired information (Gerber, et al., 2012). This documentation may take the form of journal writing, audio journaling, or video journaling. Our journal-writing half hour often felt too long, but may have been too short; in any case, we learned that a definite transition period from art making to discussion and analysis was helpful.

We also recommend identifying and promoting personal or group norms to enhance emotional safely. Interpersonal psychological safety is important because learning involves interactions between comingled emotional and cognitive thought (Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001). We found it helpful to revisit concepts of confidentiality and safety frequently. This can involve developing working agreements on topics such as the freedom to make mistakes, the impact of working together on professional and personal relationships, and the boundaries of confidentiality. Creating emotionally supportive environments is key because emotional knowing is critical to some research topics, such as our focus on intersubjectivity, yet has not traditionally been honored in the academy (Jaggar, 1989). Therefore, generating welcoming interpersonal environments for this kind of aesthetic analysis needs particular attention. Feeling safe can increase one's willingness to be personally vulnerable and thus increase movement in the delicate dialectic between artistic knowing and analysis.

As we found a variety of creative strategies helpful to promote a transition period between artistic and verbal/textural processes, we offer a list of such techniques (Table 1). Playful strategies such as these allowed for flexible thinking, which helped us to transition from artistic cognition to a more verbal state. We noticed that these engaging activities took the pressure off, lowered our anxiety, increased positive emotions, and freed us up to think more clearly. These strategies are in part adapted from techniques such as free association (Freud, 1923/2000), creative dialoguing (McNiff, 1992), imaged-based narrative inquiry (Fish, 2007), use of metaphors (Panhofer & Payne, 2011), and art journaling (Cameron, 1995). Some of these creative tasks use words in a non-discursive manner, while others translate art into more

art, and dance into more dance. The selection of the techniques will depend on the question and research methods.

Table 1. Creative Strategies and Objectives for Artistic Inquiry Translation

Strategies	Objectives
Spill writing (free writing) Write as much as possible about the artistic experience without concern for grammar, form or style	To increase creative flow To document the process To identify emergent thoughts To reduce anxiety
Free association Verbalize the first thing you think of about the images, metaphors and symbols in the artistic inquiry	To explore and critique the products of artistic inquiry To access 'unconscious' material
Creative Dialogue Ask: If this dance/artwork could talk, what might it say? "Dance, what do your movements mean for me?" Or, "Artwork, what is important about you?" and so on	To explore the dialectic between the researcher and the art To play with interviewing the art directly to access unconscious knowledge
Poetry Write in free verse, use found words, or use standard poetic forms such as the pantoum, tanka or cento	To use words to discover meaning through creative textual/verbal thinking
Write a story or fairytale Use a traditional fairytale format, beginning with "once upon a time" or remake the storytelling form to fit the needs of the inquiry	To use imagination to unlock new insights
Concept map or diagram Link word and sentence fragments together to map central elements of the inquiry	To visually contextualize and locate the products of artistic inquiry To make disparate connections
Magazine collage Cut and paste using a mix of words and images	To use creative means to transition from visual to textural concepts
Use another art form Create using a different art form with the intention to seek meaning or translate the previous work, e.g., Dance the shapes found in the art Draw images from the dance Compose a song to identity rhythmic and lyrical elements	To generate new insights To clarify and expand on data To use an unfamiliar art form to deliberately destabilize pre-formed ideas To transition through another art form which may be easier to translate

Lost in Translation, Found in Translation

As shown by our experiences and recommendations, translation can be done by aesthetic forms of reflection—art, poetry, dance, story-telling, and so on—to help researchers "ponder

metaphoric connections, establish new relationships between one component in the image and another and heighten what is seen and felt in the experience of viewing the artworks" (Kapitan, 2010, p. 172).

The aesthetic act of creating artwork aided us in understanding and examining experience and forming meaning (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Finley, 2008; Grushka, 2005; Knowles & Cole, 2008; McNiff, 1986, 1998). Finding meaning through making patterns and connections from life events is a human need; a way through which we can create stability and coherence in ever-changing lives (Baumeister & Vohs, 2010). The question of how and if we generate and communicate meanings from our artistic products and processes will continue to be an important research topic for the creative arts therapist and arts-based researcher alike.

We close with a poem in the form of a pantoum, inspired by Furman's (2006) work in poetic inquiry and our own imagery and experiences:

> We dance with shifting hearts
> Write words on a map to show the path we moved
> Words only trace a whispering memory
> Fades and changes, translation transforms
>
> Words on a map show the path we moved
> Our data: sensory illumination
> It fades and changes, transformed by translation
> My quivering heart stills
>
> Our data: sensory illumination
> Are we leaving the essence behind?
> My quivering heart stills
> The dance is hidden and lost, fades and changes
>
> Did we leave the essence behind?
> Words whispering of a memory
> The dance of shadows appears, painted and changed
> We dance with hearts shifted

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