

Brief Reports

Open Studio Process as a Model of Social Action: A Program for At-Risk Youth

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Abstract

The Open Studio Project (OSP) is a nonprofit arts and social service organization. This report presents the OSP process as a model of social action. It describes how the model was implemented in a particular community to address a need for arts programs for at-risk youth. "Art & Action," an outreach program of OSP, became a unique year-round afterschool and summer program that catered to the diverse needs of the participating youth. The advocacy efforts that emerged from the OSP method of using intention, artmaking, witness-writing, and sharing, along with no commenting and no forced participation, are presented. Its relevance to the field of art therapy and the implications for practice are also considered.

Introduction: History

In 1991, the Open Studio Project (OSP) began with the intention to make art and to be of service. Three Chicago-area art therapists, all of whom were also exhibiting artists, created the OSP. They were as committed to the artmaking process as they were to their clients. After many years of clinical experience, these art therapists realized that to be truly effective in teaching clients to use artmaking for personal transformation, they would need to engage in their own creative process alongside their clients (Malchiodi, 1998). Over the next 9 years, a unique creative art and writing process was developed and refined in an art studio in Chicago. This process has been used with a variety of people in many settings. Besides running programs in the studio, OSP facilitators and trainees have led programs at community mental health centers, schools, residential homes, shelters, hospitals, and many social service agencies. The

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process has been presented at universities and conferences around the country.

In 1999, the founders decided to work in their own respective communities. The original Chicago studio was closed and a new studio was opened in Evanston, Illinois, in June of 2000. Evanston is a university town with a diverse population of over 70,000 people. Situated just north of Chicago on Lake Michigan, it is comprised of various neighborhoods where people of different races, religions, and income levels live. "It is a community in which residents come together to identify and solve problems. Evanstonians are passionate about changes that could affect the ambiance, culture, and values of their community" (League of Women Voters of Evanston, 2000, p. 2).

The first and third authors of the Evanston studio have ties to the community—one having been raised there and the other living there with her family for over 10 years. To our original intent of "making art and being of service," we added "in the community." With a goal of greater outreach to underserved populations, OSP began collaborating with a variety of social service agencies in order to bring to their constituents the benefits of these encounters with the creative process.

Method

After spending a year working in the community, it became apparent that there was a strong need for arts programming for at-risk youth. We had met with several leaders of youth service agencies who expressed interest in our programming. Art therapy was clearly a draw for them. According to an *Evanston United Way Community Assessment Report* (United Way of Evanston, 2002, p. 16), "After-school programming is a great need and is an area of concern. A gap in services for middle-school children (10, 11, and 12 years old) is a need that must be addressed. This is a top priority." To address this need, we developed "Art & Action," our most extensive year-round outreach program (Search Institute Lutheran Brotherhood, 1997; Timm-Bottos, 2000). We began with a pilot project funded by our local arts council during the summer. We have since collaborated with and run year-round programming for our local police department's youth services division, an afterschool



Figure 1 Artmaking

drop-in and counseling center for at-risk youth, an after-school program for pregnant and teenage mothers, a legal defenders office for teen offenders, and a teen substance abuse outpatient program.

The OSP Process

The OSP process, which includes intention, artmaking, witness-writing, and sharing, as well as no commenting and no forced participation, is versatile enough to nurture people within their own respective circumstances. Our afterschool programs cater to the needs of our participating youth. Our strategy is to expose at-risk youth to an artistic process that can serve both as an outlet for feelings (positive and negative) and as a means for self-expression. Once a week for 9 to 12 weeks, the selected youth are given the chance to express themselves in an atmosphere free of criticism or comment, thus freeing each of them to use the materials to develop their own images and insights. The OSP philosophy is about allowing people to tap into their own knowledge and inner knowing through art (Malchiodi, 1998).

Intention

Activities begin with each young person formulating and writing what we call an “intention” for the session. This intention is recorded in the journal that each participant is given to use at the studio for the duration of the entire 9-12 week series. The intention cultivates a sense of ownership and responsibility for action. Some examples of



Figure 2 Witness Writing

intentions that participating youth have come up with are “I relax and have fun,” “I figure out why I was so mad at my brother this morning,” “I stay sober,” and “I express my anger in my artwork.”

Artmaking

Simple artmaking techniques are then introduced. We work with drawing, painting, collage, and basic sculpture. All art supplies are provided and very accessible. We use oil pastels, tempera paints, found objects, tin foil, and masking tape for use in a sculptural method developed by Don Seiden (2001), and many other assorted materials. The art materials are set up in an inviting array: colors in spectral order, a variety of brushes, and paper ready and waiting for clients. The storefront studio has walls covered with brushstrokes. It is a space where it is okay to get paint on the walls and floor. It is a safe, open place to be creative (Figure 1).

Witness

After creating, each participant writes about his or her work in a process we call “witness-writing.” Witnessing is not only about seeing and watching, visually sitting with one’s artwork, but also about being attentive and respectful of the art image (Figure 2). Witnessing allows participants to be nonjudgmental and noncritical. We do not evaluate, reject, or appraise (Malchiodi, 1998). Participants use their artwork as a springboard to get started with the writing. They can describe their image, dialogue with it, or write a story or poem. Whatever words come are welcomed; par-

ticipants write quickly and spontaneously without censoring themselves (McNiff, 1992).

Writing can be difficult for the more than 20 percent of the youth in our school district who have learning disabilities (M. Casey, *Answers for Special Kids* [online], personal communication, December 2003). We carefully explain that the writing is not going to be graded and does not have to be shared. If the writing process seems too daunting for some youth, we offer to have them dictate to us while we serve as scribes. We have the youth tell us about their artwork by using storytelling and open-ended questions. This also helps the youth who need more individualized attention.

Sharing

At the end of each session, the group comes together to share. Each participant chooses whether to read all, part, or none of what he or she wrote. In all of our groups, during the sharing part of the session, everyone gains greater appreciation and empathy for the other members of the group by witnessing their images and listening to their words. There are two crucial elements of the OSP process beside intention, artmaking, witness-writing, and sharing. First, workshop facilitators create alongside clients in an artist-in-residence model. Second, no one—not even facilitators—ever comments on anyone else's artwork or writing. These two elements differentiate the OSP process from most art classes and art therapy practices.

Artist-in-Residence Model

Our artist-in-residence art therapy model originated with Deborah Gadiel (1992). During her master's work at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she came to understand that the most useful asset she could offer her clients was her own artistic energy—her ability to use artmaking for self-discovery, problem-solving, and personal growth. Her thesis and her model became a basis for the OSP process (Gadiel, 1992). In this model, the client and facilitator work alongside each other as fellow artists from the start.

The facilitator's ability to navigate the process becomes an essential tool for the client. Observing a fellow artist participate in the creative process and truly benefit from it, clients gain the faith they need to try out things for themselves. During the artmaking session, clients can observe the facilitator experimenting, exploring, and problem-solving using art and writing. As an artist-in-residence, the facilitator models a willingness to take risks and demonstrates confidence in the benefits of the creative process. The fact that facilitator and client work together as coartists has important repercussions for the authority-neophyte relationships of teacher-student and therapist-client. Clients have a chance to view the facilitator as a fellow human being with similar struggles rather than as an authority figure. A critical element of this model is the rule that neither facilitator nor client comments on each other's artwork.

No Commenting on or Critiquing the Art

The OSP method takes as its basis a fundamental concept gained from years of working on art: A person's creative process will give him or her the therapeutic insight and help needed in its own time and its own way, as each person gains the ability to be open to it. We have learned that people have inherent wisdom and answers inside themselves. OSP's creative process provides an effective way for individuals to access their own help, their own answers, and their own wisdom.

Comments can interfere with people's perceptions of their work. Clients are not always ready to take in every insight. Comments from outside take the client away from being present, out of the realm of what the process itself is providing in the moment. If someone with authority gives a comment, clients often give him or her more weight. The facilitator at OSP is not in a place of authority or power and offers no comments. Michelle Cassou (1995) eloquently explains about the effects of comments on people's artwork. "Any comment, good or bad will hurt the process. People may praise what is dead and reject what is alive. Protect the fragile seed of your artistic freedom until you become solid in your creation. If you look at somebody else's work, or have someone look at yours, silence and respect are the greatest gifts. Look upon paintings with eyes of mystery rather than judgment. Support the need to enter into the sacred space beyond evaluation" (p. 157).

Witness-Writing and Sharing

As this process was being developed, it became clear that facilitators and clients most easily integrated the non-verbal insights provided by the artmaking by bringing these insights back to the verbal realm. At the same time, even commenting on one's *own* work sometimes seemed to rob the power of the artmaking process. Clients reverted to habitual intellectual patterns to explain and interpret what came up in their artmaking. A spontaneous writing method was introduced that provided a creative intermediary for moving from the preverbal to the verbal. Through writing in their journals, clients have dialogued with images; free associated words, poems, or songs; or simply described what they saw in the art and how it made them feel or what it reminded them of. Critically, the final element of the process is that the fellow artists come together and read aloud any of their writings that they wish—again, without comment.

As the writing and sharing element developed, amazing things began to happen. Participants and facilitators dealt with real-life struggles and found the practical solutions they needed through this process. Answers were waiting; insights came through. Traumas and loss lived in the same realm as joy and spirituality. One person could be making art and writing about God, the next person dealing with sexual abuse, and the next one about moving to a new apartment. Each person's art and words—the honesty, the struggle, and the privilege of witnessing each other's lives—moved us all. In this context and in all of the workshops

and classes that followed, a quiet sense of community emerged very quickly.

Though some of the OSP process may seem unfamiliar, the process clearly connects to basic therapeutic principles. Boundaries are demarcated and upheld in order to do deep therapeutic work. The process provides a sense of safety and a neutral space because of the no-commenting rule. It also provides containment because of the clearly defined structure of the process's stages. Finally, it promotes empathy as clients and facilitators learn to listen to others without evaluation. All this builds community and relieves the sense of isolation.

Results

Programs

Since June of 2001, we have served over 100 youth in more than 20 programs. Currently, we have more agencies requesting services than we can physically provide. To partially address this issue, we have started the "Art & Action Leadership Program," which is for students who already have taken a 9-12 week series and want to continue to work in the studio. They have opportunities to create their own projects within the structure of intention, artmaking, witnessing, and sharing.

Each of our collaborative partner organizations works with youth that are at-risk due to different factors. The drop-in center addresses the many needs of low-income youth and their families, who can't afford afterschool programming. The family center addresses the needs of teen mothers in danger of dropping out of school and of repeat pregnancy. The outpatient program addresses the needs of youth that are at-risk because of substance abuse. Our program with the police department addresses behavior that has brought youth or their families in contact with the law. The process used at OSP is flexible enough to help with many types of social risk factors. It works to support and empower people in a very wide range of circumstances. Our studio space is directly connected to the surrounding social issues facing youth in our community (Moon, 2002).

Each agency we serve differs in its population, needs, and expectations. The youth center is located down the street from us, as is the middle school that many of the youth attend. The proximity allows the students to walk to OSP. The program for these young people is voluntary and has a prevention philosophy as its mission. A youth worker who has an existing rapport with the kids usually walks over with them and participates in the process. This group requires the least amount of limit setting. They are able to work on projects independently and need little assistance.

As the director of the youth center stated, "Open Studio is taking a wonderful step in addressing a really important national issue" (D. Baker, personal communication, March 2003).

In the substance-abuse program, a counselor always accompanies the teens. They take public transportation from the treatment center and then head home by themselves after the session. Attending "Art & Action" is part of

their treatment plan. Most of these teens have been sent by a court for drug treatment, and they are often involved in gang activity. This group is older, so they can work independently. Some need more prompting than others and have certain individual needs that are attended to on a case-by-case basis. Even though they are required to be present, the OSP process does not force them to participate. This allows them to make a choice in regard to participation and diminishes the likelihood of power struggles. With this group, the parole officers often attend the exhibitions, which allow the officers and teens to meet in a new setting and see one another in a more positive light. The coordinator of the adolescent substance-abuse program said, "We believe that creative expression is a powerful and effective alternative to drug use and criminal involvement. The goals and program at OSP align with our treatment approach and philosophy" (M. Harrison, personal communication, November 2002).

In our program with the police department, the youth are picked up by a van at their homes. An agency worker does not accompany them. This group requires more limits and structure than our other "Art & Action" programs. They have the least consistency of services as compared with our other groups. They typically have been seeing a social worker for individual therapy and have not previously been seen in a group setting. We attend meetings with the youth-service social workers before and after sessions to improve the program and meet the clients' needs.

Participant Statements

As an OSP participant recently stated:

At Open Studio Project I have learned not to criticize my creativity and to not critique others. To be utterly awed by the depth of others, deepening my respect for difference and my level of patience. Also to heal from anxiety, sadness, and even trauma, while satisfying what I now recognize as our primal need for communal creating.

A witness-writing by a youth in the "Art & Action" program states:

I don't really listen to the thought of my intention but I painted something that reminds me of the world mind. It's called "Double the World." This painting not only shows how the world's people should put their minds together, but it shows 'integrity,' something that I believe the world should have. Integrity stands for people; it stands for the community, the world. It stands for different races, sizes, weights, and heights. Something the world should stand up and be proud of. This is called "Double the World" because the world has so many things to offer: 'life,' etc., and so many things to take advantage of, and the world has more than one thing going for it.

Community Sharing: "Art & Action" Exhibitions

To advocate effectively for youth, we provide an art-and-writing show at the end of the 9-12 week sessions. The exhibition educates the public by displaying the youths'



Figure 3

Open Studio Project's Gallery: Art & Action Exhibit

experiences in their own voices in a highly direct and powerful way. Our experience with at-risk youth has shown us that these exhibits also increase the self-esteem of the participants because they are seen and appreciated by their families and community. They often receive attention for problems they have or difficulties they are experiencing. In this format, they receive attention for being an artist rather than a teen in trouble (e.g., for using substances, vandalism, pregnancy, or difficulties in school). In addition to the exhibit, we have a party on the last day of the session. This allows the teens to celebrate their artistic accomplishments even if their parents and caretakers are unable to attend or bring them to the exhibit. In being viewed as artists, participants are viewed as creative beings with opportunities for growth and change.

We also sponsor one large "Art & Action" exhibition each quarter (Figure 3). Through these community exhibits designed by the teens, we advocate for participants to be recognized for their individual strengths and challenges by presenting their artwork within the context of a positive, safe atmosphere. At the exhibition, the youth hand out a paper that states that the "Art & Action" policy is not to comment on the work. If viewers want to ask artists questions about the work, they are welcome to do so. Because many people attend this exhibit, it is less obvious who has a parent, caretaker, parole officer, counselor, or staff person attending on his or her behalf.

This gathering of people with diverse roles integrates the community and blurs the boundaries between client and staff person, exhibiting artist and gallery visitor. In fact, during these exhibits we provide materials and encourage visitors to make art in our studio space. People who do not frequent galleries or museums come to these exhibits. Many of these people have little or no exposure to the formal art world. Due to the way the art was created, the content of the show, and the nature of the artists, people are interested in the work and connected to it. These shows empower the community to see these kids as an asset

and to feel connected to the studio, the kids, and art in general. All of this is in line with our mission to create community through art.

Participant Examples

John is an example of what happens in our "Art & Action" program. He's an 11-year-old African-American boy. Although he is developmentally delayed due to a neurological disorder, at OSP he is truly a role model for the other teens and for the rest of us. He takes risks in his art and in his writing, which clearly inspires the other teens. Seeing his passion, the other young people give themselves permission to explore and express themselves more freely. He is appreciated, respected, and included. He fits. In this community, he is a leader.

Rosana is a 16-year-old Hispanic girl. She made a series of artworks about the death of her grandmother. She made paintings and sculptures of angels. "My grandmother is in a special place. I imagine her in heaven looking down on me. She's not in pain anymore, but I miss her." OSP became a place for Rosana to express her grief. She could celebrate her grandmother's life and reflect on her loss. Rosana now continues to come to our leadership groups and is self-directed in her artmaking. She is also a mentor and role model for other kids in the groups.

Funding

Local funding sources have enabled us to continue this work. Fortunately, our community funders have identified the need for this type of program. We receive support from our local community foundation, our local arts council, and our city's community development program. They have all helped us initiate, grow, and sustain this valuable program.

Conclusion

Objectives for "Art & Action"

A primary goal of "Art & Action" is to help young people find creative ways to help themselves. Our goal is to provide a safe space where young people who are faced with very real life challenges can learn to use the creative arts to uncover their own creative inner resources. We promote healthy decision making and healthy management of the turbulent emotional world of adolescence.

A second goal is to work together to create a healthy community. We team with other youth-serving agencies to create high-quality, constructive, afterschool programming. Working together, we access one another's strengths and create a community environment that serves the whole adolescent. We also stay attuned to issues facing our youth by participating in our local network of youth-service organizations and in a community leadership program.

Finally, we provide an arts program that is accessible and relevant. We seek to make the deep benefits of art and writing available to youth whose circumstances or behaviors have brought them in contact with our social-service collaborative partners. We provide safe, engaging encoun-

ters with creative artmaking, and we tailor the program's focus to the special needs of each group of teens we serve.

Why the OSP Method Is So Effective with At-Risk Youth

The method employed by OSP offers more than just the opportunity to work with various art media. The OSP method is particularly well suited to at-risk youth who come from chaotic or violent environments. As one of the youth social workers remarked, "The innovative programming for youth provides a unique opportunity for our young adolescents to learn more adaptive and productive problem-solving strategies" (A. Jackson, personal communication, June 2002). OSP's process is extremely helpful to youth who might have trouble connecting with and expressing their more difficult emotions in a useful way. Also, the OSP method works well with people in transition. The youth that participate in the OSP "Art & Action" program are in constant transition between childhood and adulthood. Therefore, this experience is well suited to their age group.

The following elements of our programming also contribute to the success of this model. Adults work alongside teens as cocreators and role models (Allen, 1992; Moon, 2002). The instructors, creating alongside the youth, model how they themselves use art and writing to deal with their own emotions and difficult decisions. Seeing an instructor take an emotional risk often inspires the participants to do the same. "The special contributions of the arts to the out-of-school lives of young people come in the principles that lie beneath being an artist" (Heath & Soep, 1998, p. 16).

Though teens are encouraged to share what they write, they are not forced to do so, making the process safer as they decide how much to reveal. As there is much peer pressure at this age, they need to make their own choices about what is safe to share and what needs to be private. Freedom of choice brings an increasing sense of safety, confidence, and personal responsibility. There is no harsh criticism. Instead, youth are encouraged to listen to themselves, as well as to others. This gives the participants the responsibility of finding their own meaning for their art. Their story for their images is integral to their self-understanding and personal fulfillment (Malchiodi, 1998).

A crucial aspect of our sessions is that no one is allowed to comment in any way on the art or writing shared in the group. Participants are safe to explore and reveal truths in their own time and in their unique way. Adolescents have a desire to let the world know how screwed up they find it. They can communicate this through images as art is safe and under their control (Riley, 1999). In a safe atmosphere, with no expressions of judgment and no externally imposed images to live up to, teens soon go deeply into emotional territories where they might not otherwise be able to go and face their emotions with a creative energy that far outstrips their verbal abilities. They almost always surprise themselves. And when the setting is free of comments and it is safe to be completely honest,

they gain insight not only through their own images and words but also by listening to others in the group.

We recognize that there are areas in our program in need of further improvement. We need to address the expansion of the program to meet the demands of the agencies asking for our services. We are in the process of creating a policy book and manual to help others recreate the model we use. We also are in the process of analyzing our formal qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the program. A research and evaluation component for this program has been created to document and evaluate its efficacy (Kibel, 1999; McNiff, 1998; Riley, 1999). The OSP's experience with at-risk youth has shown us how adolescents take enthusiastically to working with their issues through art and through creative and often metaphorical stories. We have been very impressed with the concentration and emotional depth revealed by what these youths choose to share in this safe atmosphere.

There are several implications for how the OSP method can shift art therapy practice. Art therapy in a social action context combines art and therapy with a commitment to social responsibility. Exhibitions of teens' art and writing provide advocacy opportunities through exposure to the community; clients can practice voicing and externalizing their problems, experience a feeling of being "seen," and challenge the misconceived views of their problems so embedded in public perception. The OSP model supports the notion that creating art should not remain relegated to the art therapy session, as the richness of the creative process can impact the larger public. It also suggests that we consider artists, therapists, and clients as members of a larger community (Lloyd-Still, 2000). At the Open Studio Project, clients are viewed in a new light. Their troubles turn into positive experiences for them, their families, their clinical teams, and the community.

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