

# Brief Report

## Ethical Responsibilities: Preparing Students for the Real Art Therapy World

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### Abstract

*This report addresses several educators' attempts to prepare their students for entering the "real" art therapy world. Two important components necessary to prepare students for entering the professional arenas are introduced: the need to translate theory into practice and the ability to communicate and negotiate with other helping professionals. A summary of a course project designed by art therapy professors to prepare art therapy students for job interviews is outlined. A survey was initiated to determine the effectiveness of this project with students who had participated. The results revealed that the students who responded thought that the exercise was indeed helpful in obtaining positions. This report concludes with a summary and discussion of the results and with a "call to arms" to all art therapy educators.*

### Introduction

In 2000, Bobbi Stoll wrote a letter to the editor of this journal in which she implored the art therapy education community to better prepare graduates for their professional futures. She indicated that in order for students to be ready to enter the professional world, they must be able to do three things: (a) understand employment opportunities; (b) know the business community and what to expect in various types of employment; and (c) expect, in some cases, to investigate and take initiative to create employment opportunities. At the end of this letter, Stoll asked, "If you know about the real world of business in art therapy, how are you imparting this essential knowledge and skill to art therapy students as a prerequisite to graduate?" (p. 81). We concur with Stoll's concerns and believe that it is educators' ethical responsibility to prepare their students for the art therapy world.

This report will address several art therapy educators' attempts to heed Stoll's warnings. It will begin by introduc-

ing two important components necessary to prepare students for entering the professional arenas: the need to translate theory into practice and the ability to communicate and negotiate with other helping professionals. It will then present course requirements designed to address these concerns and components and the results of a survey administered to assess the effectiveness of these requirements. This brief report will culminate in a "call to arms" to continue the focus on preparing properly our future professionals.

### Literature Review

Preparing students to enter the professional arena is not a simple task. Before they can negotiate their way into the real art therapy world, they need to know how to translate the theories they learn into the practice they will perform. The transitional leap from theory to practice is a large one for the student who is preparing for graduation. Gussak (2001), as part of the extensive qualitative research project he conducted for his dissertation, observed and interviewed a number of art therapists to make sense of the work of the art therapist. One finding was that the majority of participants believed they were not fully prepared to make the transition from the theories of the educational setting to the practice of the workplace, despite practicum training. This finding should not be surprising since it is not easy to translate theory into practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Bolan, 1980) or to explain how this can be done in a pragmatic and clear manner. For example, when one art therapy educator who was interviewed for Gussak's study was asked how she worked with students to make the transition from theory to practice, she responded that although she herself had a strong theoretical belief and was able to access this in her own work, she had "difficulty translating this to her students" (p. 96). According to other art therapy educators spoken to at art therapy national conferences, many seem to be grappling with this issue.

It is fundamental to ethical practice that art therapists know how to communicate with other helping professionals. "Art therapists sometimes find themselves having to explain and defend their discipline to other health professions.... Art therapists need to develop interpersonal communication skills in order to translate art therapy...into

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therapeutic concepts understandable to other disciplines” (Moon, 2000, p. 115). Many art therapists find themselves in positions that require them to take on responsibilities other than art therapy or to work under different professional titles. Berkowitz and Gussak (2000), upon interviewing a number of art therapists, discovered that “few of the facilities that hired the interviewees knew what art therapy was” (p. 9). It is the art therapist who is able to negotiate who becomes successful in entering the professional arena.

According to many of the participants in Gussak’s (2001) study, art therapists constantly need to negotiate with other professionals. According to Strauss (1975), negotiation occurs when a social order is developed in an organization or work system in which participants work out shared agreements in response to daily events. Individuals are subjected to and are a part of negotiations either because of ambiguity or conflict (Hall, 1987). Even when agreement on professional roles is reached, negotiation and renegotiation continue as an ongoing process (Strauss, 1975, 1978). This ability to negotiate may begin in the job-seeking process, but not all art therapists felt fully prepared to do so when beginning their job search (Gussak, 2001). It is educators’ responsibility to prepare their students to enter the professional arena by teaching them how to communicate and negotiate with other helping professionals. The expectations for such preparations are that students will be able to explain and defend how their work and their theoretical foundations will fit into another mental health professional’s system, especially when applying for a position.

## Course Expectations

Several art therapy faculty members responded to Stoll’s (2000) rallying call by focusing a portion of the required ethics course on discussing employment and business opportunities. While at Emporia State University, Gussak established a course that required students to research a potential job or business opportunity. Students were given three options: (a) research an open position and (through role play) “apply” for it; (b) research a facility that had an art therapist in the past but is not currently seeking one and apply for that position; or (c) research a facility that has not had an art therapist and apply for a closely related position (i.e., a counseling, education, or art facilitator position). According to the requirements listed in the syllabus, students were expected to collect all data that would give them a “fighting chance” for their chosen position. This included potential job descriptions, the policies and procedures of the facility, the prospective position, and the population served by the facility. They were also required to fill out all necessary applications, complete a resume or curriculum vita, seek actual references and ask for letters of recommendation, and make personal contacts at the facility. All of this information was to be formally collected and given to faculty 1 week prior to mock interviews with two faculty members.

The “interview panel” then met with each student and role-played a job interview. The interviews were formatted

specifically for the positions for which students were applying. Part of each interview required students to articulate what they would do as art therapists (translating theory into practice) and how art therapy would fit into the system to which they were applying (negotiation). Students were graded and provided immediate feedback on their professional appearance, their knowledge of the position, state and federal requirements for that particular post, and their ability to answer questions about their knowledge of the field. After the interview, students were expected to complete a paper on their experience researching the position, interviewing for the position, and their reaction to the feedback given by the mock panel. However, aside from the end-of-semester evaluation forms, which focused on the entire class and not just this project, there was little documented feedback on how effective this assignment was for students for the long-term.

## Data-gathering Method

Lovett (2003), the president of the American Association for Higher Education, wrote the following response to members’ concerns about addressing higher education’s changing needs, societal expectations, and student concerns.

To address new questions that are coming our way, we need help from colleagues who are less vested in the system we shaped, more capable of looking at it with fresh eyes. We need to listen to mature students now enrolled in our undergraduate programs and graduate schools and to younger colleagues just beginning their careers. (2003, para. 7)

Taking Lovett’s remarks into consideration, the authors contacted recent art therapy graduates of Florida State University (FSU) and Emporia State University (ESU) to find out what they thought about the “real world” approach used in our course and if and how it met their professional needs. Students in the art therapy ethics and professional issues classes from both ESU and FSU were asked to complete an e-mailed survey about their experiences with the mock job search and interview process. This included four classes (2000 to 2003), 22 students total. The sample included 21 women and 1 man; all were over 23 years old. The questions on the survey focused predominantly on where they had obtained employment after graduating, if this was the placement that they used for their mock interview project (or was closely related), and if completing the project prepared them for the process of applying for the position.

## Results and Discussion

Of the 22 evaluations e-mailed, nine were returned giving a return rate of 41%. Of these nine, four were from students who attended ESU, and five were from students who attended FSU. All of those who attended FSU currently work as art therapists or in related positions (i.e., have job titles of Therapist or Mental Health Therapist and are using art therapy with their respective populations). Of the four from ESU, one is working as an art therapist, two are work-

ing in other helping professions, and one has not yet graduated. All but one obtained their positions within 2 months of graduating; two received their positions before completing their respective programs. Seven of the participants applied for the same position that they researched or one similar to that position, and six received these positions. Most importantly, all of the students who participated in the process believed that the exercise was helpful, and many had suggestions on how to extend the assignment further.

Many of the suggestions about the structure of the task, such as videotaping the interviews, were clear and well thought out. What was interesting to note was that the majority of those who suggested that more depth be added to the assignment to better prepare them (e.g., more detailed explanations about how they might have improved the interview or how to work with employers different from those presented in the role play) were from ESU where the assignment was first designed. Many of those from FSU, who had experienced the assignment after it had been in use and refined for 2 years, seemed satisfied with the content of the mock interview. This may indicate that each class's feedback was heard and the assignment adjusted for the following year.

But some suggestions cannot be implemented as long as the assignment is folded into the ethics course, which contains other essential content. One student suggested, "I think it would be good for the students to find a [job] position every week of class. This makes students realize all their options." A similar suggestion was "I felt as if I expended too much energy on researching one job. I would have rather targeted a number of other potential employers." However, such assignments may overload students, especially in combination with other course expectations. This may indicate that a professional issues course should be developed that specifically focuses on the skills needed to adjust to and manage the business end of the art therapy field. Such a course might also address pertinent issues like politics, healthcare policy, and perhaps educating the public about art therapy.

Unfortunately, a few of the suggestions were unclear. For example, one participant responded, "If we had gotten some sort of certification or something, it might have helped to make us more qualified to get a job." Although we prepare students with a working knowledge of the type of credentials they may receive following their education, such a statement continues to reveal the anxiety our students have when entering the art therapy arena and suggests they would appreciate more concrete tools in their employment toolbox.

A limitation of this study was that due to the confidentiality of the survey responses, there was no way to determine why 59% did not respond. It may have been that they were not successful in obtaining a position in the field, they simply forgot to respond, or they just chose not to answer the questions. However, overall, the results were gratifying. Those who did respond generally believed that the project was valuable. One student commented:

The job research was extremely helpful because it gave me direction [on] how to look for a job. The mock interview was also helpful in preparing for the real interview. The mock interview helped me focus on weaknesses that need to be improved.

Another student focused on the interview's value in preparing her to negotiate with other helping professionals: "It helped me to prepare for the interview and market myself as an art therapist to a organization that did not offer art therapy as a job title/position." In one case, a former ESU student responded, "In my experience as a job seeker in general...the interviews have not been anywhere near as antagonistic as the interview in class, although I handled it fine. Trial by fire?" The interviewers did not intend to be antagonistic; however, emphasizing at times a tendency to put "the students on the spot" (as one student described it) to translate theory into practice and further explain art therapy to someone not familiar with the field, they could have certainly been perceived as such.

## Call to Arms

Williams (2002), in a commencement address for a graduating class of Vermont College Graduate Art Therapy Program, spoke about the many hurdles that art therapists encounter after graduation. She explained that in order to get hired, many art therapists must often get further credentialing; join national and state organizations; become informed about healthcare policy, politics, and business opportunities; and educate the public about art therapy. These are the issues we have tried to weave into the course assignment outlined above. According to the results, the process and project seem to have been beneficial for students. It may be safely assumed that educators hope they are indeed preparing future professionals to enter the world of art therapy. In contrast, Gussak's (2001) research suggested that at least some new members of the field believe they were ill-prepared to make the transition from student-intern to self-standing professional. Although almost impossible to bridge this gap completely, a pragmatic educational approach such as the one described here can assist in preparing art therapy graduates to enter the professional arena. As one participant stated, "This course gave me the direction necessary to find the kind of position that I wanted and the confidence to secure it." This was indeed a successful outcome.

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