ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Transformation: Training in the Pandemic,

an Emerging Art Psychotherapist's Perspective

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Covid-19 has changed every aspect of society (Unicef, 2020; Wellcome, 2020). In this essay, I hope to describe what it has been like for me to enter Art Psychotherapy training during the pandemic. I will highlight how the profession and the training providers have shifted to meet the needs of emerging Art Psychotherapists when everyone is faced with the challenges that this period brings. As a first year student at the University of South Wales, I explore some of the obstacles and benefits of training during this exceptional time. Is it possible to feel hopeful, experience transformation, and enjoy the changes in education at a time of great social upheaval?

On 23 March 2020, Prime Minister, Boris Johnson uttered the following words: "From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction - you must stay at home" (gov.uk, 2020). The next day, the United Kingdom went into 'Lockdown'. A week later, I had an interview for a place on the MA Art Psychotherapy at the University of South Wales. This was an extraordinary experience in itself; it was online and I was sat at home talking to two strangers through a computer screen, showing them years of artwork and personal journals to a soundtrack of my family life muffled by a bedroom door. We contended with unpredictable internet connections, framing and focus, and my nerves. Two days after my interview, I was awarded a place to start the training in October 2020.

At that time I did not foresee the impact of the pandemic, what it would bring, and what it would take away. I had waited to embark on the training for nearly fifteen years and – after two decades of work in the arts, community, education and public health, and a decade of mothering – I was finally doing it. It had been nearly twenty years since my last academic experience, where I had had access to a real library, paper assignments, a studio space, 3-dimensional teachers in 3-dimensional spaces, and a student cafe and bar where I could hang-out with my peers and discuss politics, art, and pop music.

In the summer months after the interview, it became apparent that life as we knew it was not going to 'go back to normal'; the world was facing a transformative experience. There was growing evidence that many students across the United Kingdom wished to defer their places (Fazackerley, 2020) and that universities may be faced with a devastating financial crisis (Adams, 2020). Places of Higher Education were scrambling to pull together systems that would support students and staff whilst returning or soon-to-be students, like myself, were attempting to understand what September 2020 would look

like. I wondered what I should do. Should I also defer?

I took my time to make my decision. I had limited my intake of current affairs, whilst keeping myself informed, just before the threat of a living-breathing dystopian nightmare (replete with pandemic, climate atrocity, and dictatorial world leadership) tipped me into mild panic. Like many, I countered the weight of worry with walks in nature, clambering around to find the horizon and a new way of seeing our new world. I did a good deal of darning too, fixing the stuff I could fix. Given the news reports, it became evident that there was, and would be, an urgent and overwhelming need for robust mental health services (World Health Organisation, 2020), which was also reflected in my own community. Surely there would be a need for more qualified art psychotherapists in the field? This gave me a sense of optimism and security about my chosen career.

In tandem, and out of a desire to understand the occupation I would be entering at a period in time that has seen some of the greatest social challenges since World War II, I watched as the art psychotherapy profession reflected and reimagined practice to serve the new outlook shaped by the pandemic (Carr, 2020). I felt anxious about working online, but I now began to see the opportunity to train – that is, to understand what it is to transform personally at a time of huge social transformation – as one that I needed to take. I enrolled.

At this point, it felt exciting to be a student pioneering a new framework that had yet to be tested. On the other hand, it was daunting to be the lab-rat, and frustrating to know that there would be elements of my training that would be held up or altered by the pandemic. However, these feelings were eclipsed by a sense of hopefulness and a desire to be part of a positive social change. I was eager to discover how shifts in arts-based health and social research could employ the power of creativity to support and sustain communities for the future, 'like invisible thread, holding liveable lives together' (Byrne et al, 2018). I had worked with vulnerable groups of people before, using art-making as a means to explore feelings, to promote wellbeing, to teach new skills, and to connect. But I had always been in-the-room. I was curious to find out if I could still be in-the-room, even if the door was closed temporarily.

Now, two terms into my training and I have yet to step foot inside the University of South Wales. I have yet to meet my teachers and peers in the physical world, and my education (encompassing group learning, lectures, trips to the library, and experiential work) and personal therapy, are confined to cyberspace (and a rejigged bedroom). Given that the training is notoriously, intensively self-reflective – one spends one's time watching oneself – it should also be noted that during the pandemic, we art psychotherapy students spend our time watching ourselves watching ourselves by virtue of the video conference call. That little animated self-portrait in the corner is distracting and tiresome, and I look forward to not seeing her when the University welcomes us through its doors.

Essential parts of my training have also been postponed until it is safe to meet in person, and there is a shared voice amongst my peer group that we are missing something that we have yet to experience, whilst fearing the threat of Covid-19 that a re-entry to real life may bring. Yet, I have been able to immerse myself in a variety of fascinating, transformative, and affordable online workshops and conferences, many of which I would not have been able to attend pre-pandemic. Furthermore, we art psychotherapy students have formed an online reading group, inviting music therapy trainees to join us for peer-to-peer support where face-to-face is not possible. I am also grateful to be training now because it is offering me a personal, emotional, and practical toolkit that I may have needed had I not have enrolled, reminding me that meaning-making (through art, writing, and movement) is my ally in this great systemic shift. I appear to be experiencing an educational paradox.

I cannot write that Art Psychotherapy training has shifted momentously due to Covid-19 because I am a first year student. However, at this time, I get the sense that we are experiencing something that is phenomenal, which in itself is transformative and adds a dynamism to our training that will serve us well into the future. I write this living through lockdown #3 and, like so many people, simultaneously attempting to maintain my own wellbeing with that of my family, whilst striking a balance between public/work and private life confined to the domestic sphere. It is hard. Sometimes, it is really hard. However, the University of South Wales and its staff have achieved an amazing feat of transporting the delivery of an incredibly well-considered and well-rounded course online, and I am

enjoying (nearly) every moment of this unique and demanding journey.

About the Author

Jess Baum is a first year MA Art Psychotherapy student at the University of South Wales, interested in working indoors and outdoors. She is an artist, potter, writer, curator, mother, and works as a doula and in end-of-life care in her community.

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