

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

In what ways does professional identity affect the practice of art therapy?

Dr. Jan Allen

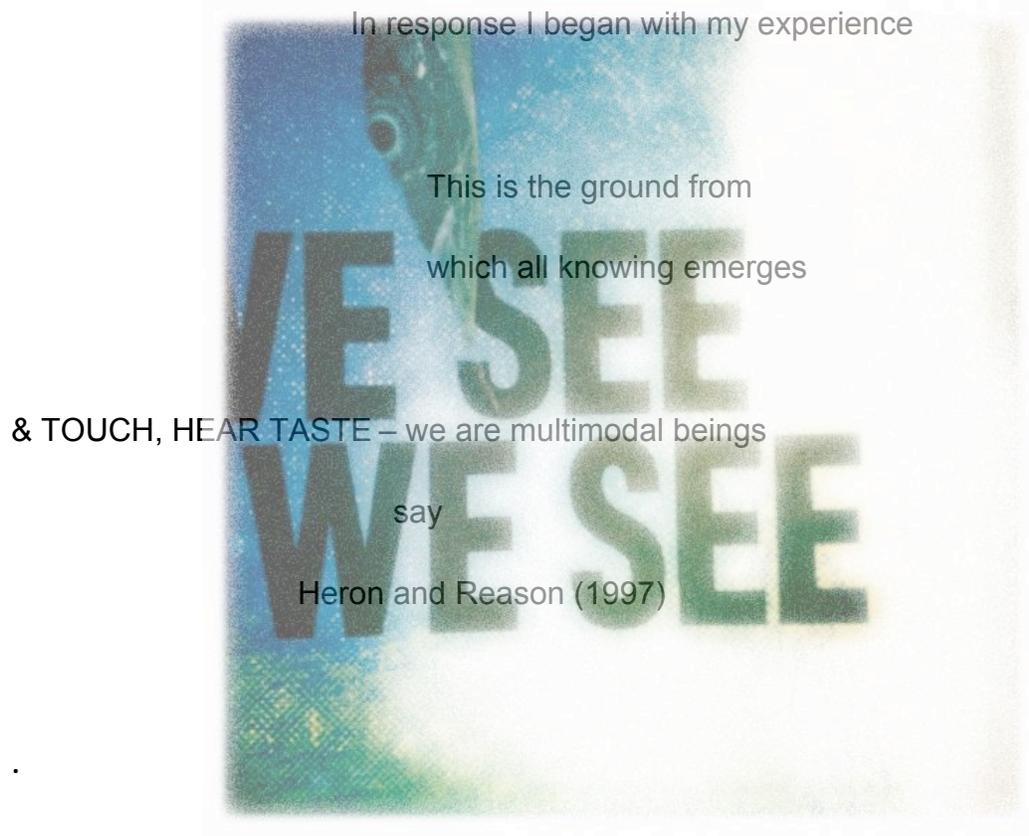
My presentation was both visual and verbal at the conference and so I wanted to find a way to recreate something of the multi-modality of that presentation, here in the conference proceedings. My process was to edit my written text and select some images from the movie and interpose the two, thus a kind of poetic summary, alongside some more conventional text.

At the outset I pondered
what do I mean by professional identity?

How does this then impact
on art therapy?

&

What is art therapy in 2013 and beyond?



And so to answer the questions

I engage in direct encounters,

face-to-face

meetings

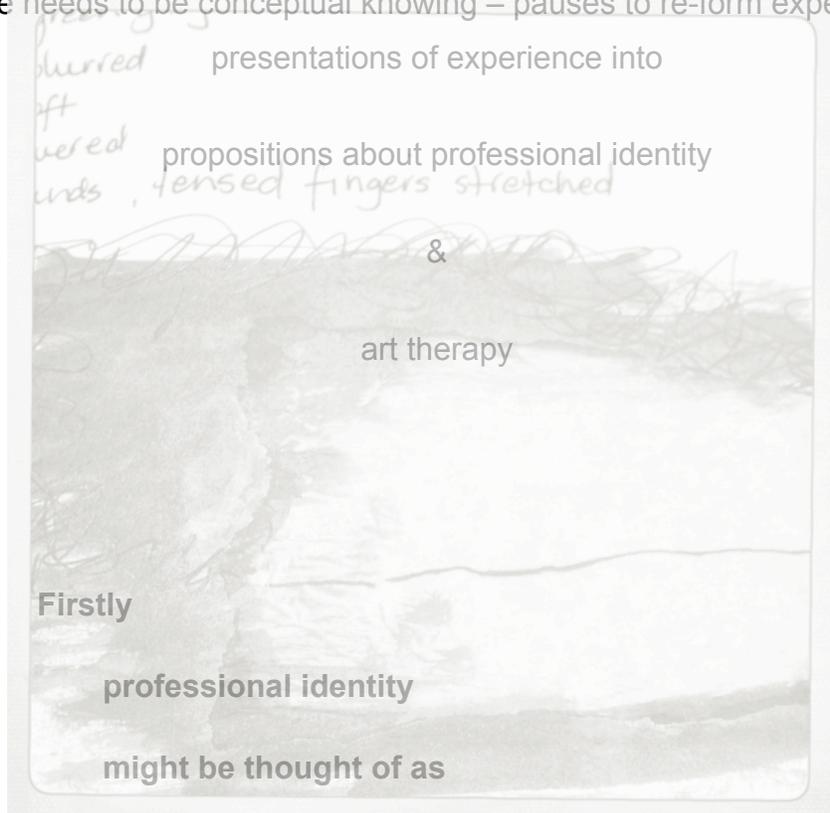
feeling and imagining the presence of my work

my identity



And thus I can articulate through felt resonance
and I can and do clothe
my experiential knowing
of the world in the metaphors of aesthetic creation –

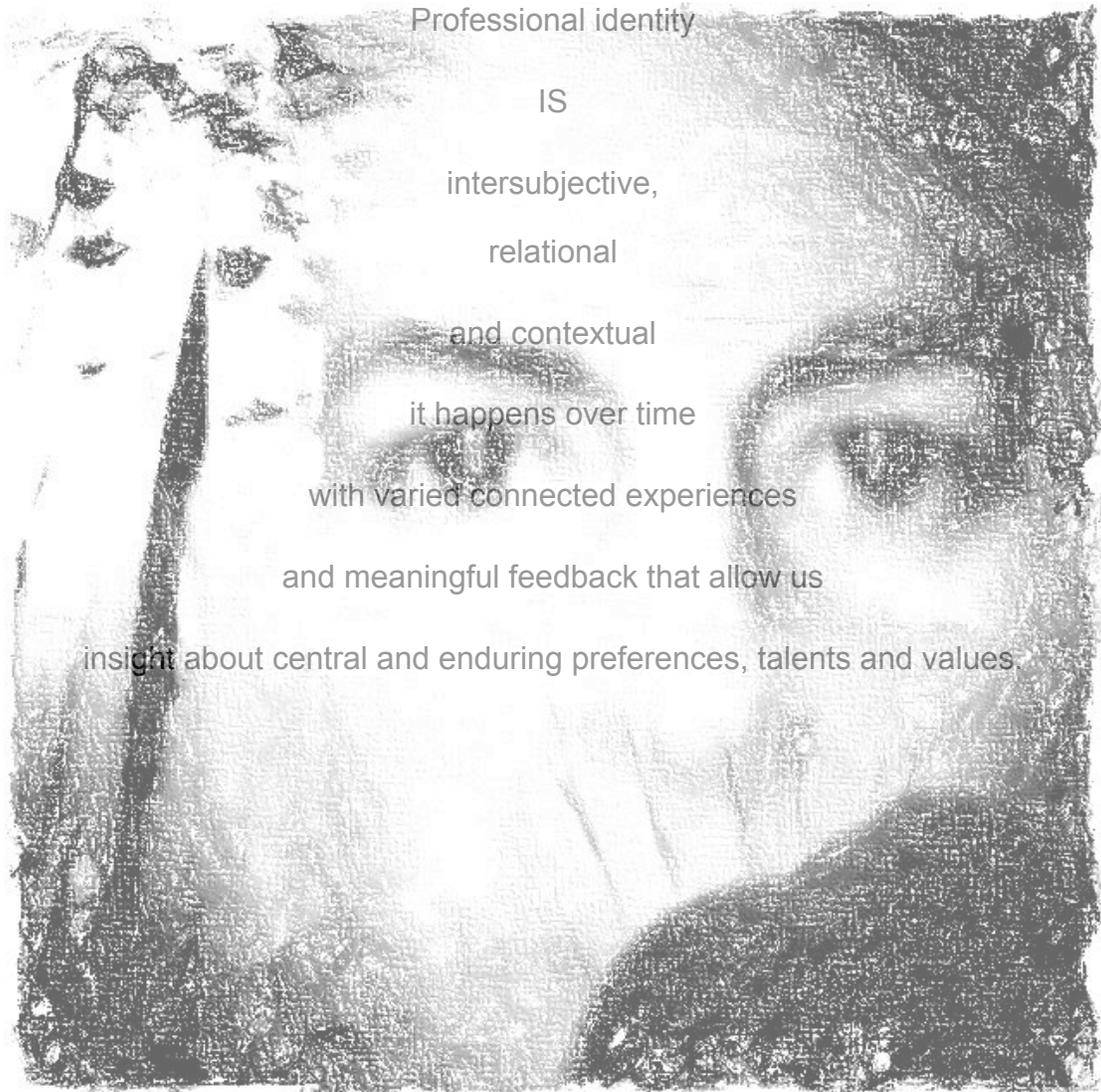
But there needs to be conceptual knowing – pauses to re-form experience and



**the
integration of professional training
with personal attributes
in the context of a professional community.**

professional identity includes:

self labeling	as a professional
integration	of skills and attitudes
perception of context	in a professional community.
congruence	between one's personal and work worlds



Professional identity

Is a process whereby we create,

test,

discard

or

revise our possible selves

through stories

I believe

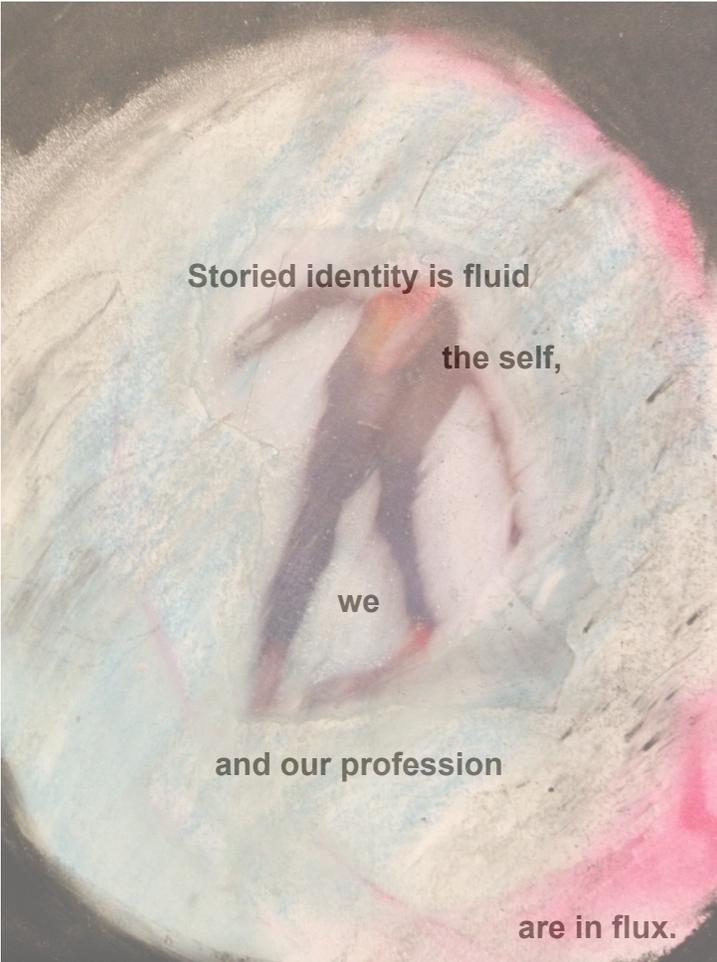
We are (in part) the stories we live by.

We are a narrative thread

We are albums of imaged experiences

We are shaped by our aspirations and future plans

We go way back and far forward in gathering experiences and creating meaning.



A propositional pause...

Delanty (2008), Taylor (2008) and Whitchurch (2008), describe ways in which individuals are not only describing their work selves more actively but suggest that we are now moving laterally across functional and organizational boundaries to create new professional spaces, knowledge and relationships

My story



The stories I/we tell and show are
shaped by threads
of our knowledge,
values,
feelings
purposes
and these interact
with collective stories of our profession,
shaped by our work environment

the broader environmental, social, cultural and historical within which our stories are
lived out

My mother
an art teacher,
my father a banker.
We were disciplined
ordered
ordinary and awkward –
high achievers
not really that “cool”
artistic – except for my father
who wasn’t at all

By the time I was 16

I knew I wanted something to do

with art, and

and people

BUT

there were no art therapy programs in Australia,

I would have enrolled in one

Had there been.

I could go to art school

or I could teach art

I thought

I'm not a good-enough-artist

Besides

My parents thought I'd become unhinged

Chaotic and impoverished

And I was

Someone who conformed

To their views

So I became a teacher – first with adolescents
then adults
and so education has been central to my identity formation

So I became a teacher – first with adolescents
then tertiary students –

The art making thread was barely visible

Even though I was teaching creativity,

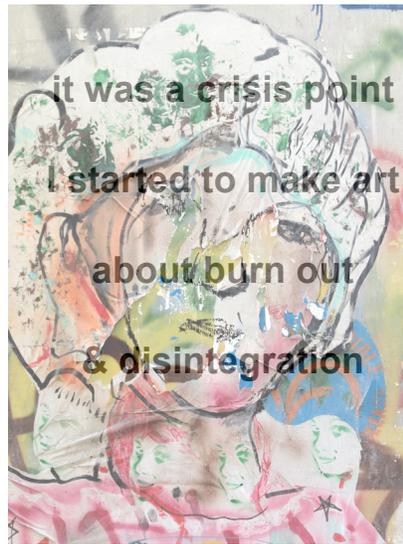
experiential learning

and arts processes

BUT

teaching in a university

challenged my wellbeing and my sense of identity



We met

(3 other colleagues and I

all educators- all feeling the same about our work place)

to paint,

draw converse

to inquire

into lived experience

using our collaboration and the arts as the primary mode of inquiry.

Some of us left mainstream education

and formed

MIECAT

and now

- we teach and supervise over 130 students
- we are not for profit
- we are not affiliated with any University
- we are an accredited higher education provider
- we offer A Graduate Certificate in Experiential and Creative Arts therapy through to a Professional Doctorate.

Some graduates describe themselves as arts therapists, but some do not, preferring
community arts practitioners,
educators
consultants
or arts health practitioners

Two key values guide us in all things

multi-modality of knowing
&
collaborative, intersubjective ways of being.

MIECAT is a not-for-profit higher education provider that offers accredited post-graduate courses in, and conducts research through, experiential and creative arts. Our approach seeks congruence between what is taught and how it is taught. The dynamic process of inquiry invites you to be curious, challenged and immersed in a community of co-learners.

MIECAT creates opportunities for you to reconstruct understandings of experience, values and meanings, to enrich professional practice and to contribute creatively to society.

Another propositional pause...

I mention this here as it introduces some of the issues inherent in my response to the third and last question – what is the practice of art therapy? What is significant in this statement of mission is that the word therapy does not exist – yet ANZATA (Australian and New Zealand Art therapy association and PACFA (Psychotherapy and Counseling Association of Australia) both professional organizations have approved/accredited MIECAT programs. What I think this indicates is that how art therapy might be defined is also a fluid and flexible process particularly in Australia where government licensing and professional registration does not exist for art therapists.

Whitchurch (2008) explores the shifting identities and blurring boundaries of professionals in higher education. I think what she argues also has relevance for art therapy. Her study described in *Education Quarterly* in 2008 was specifically focused

on contemporary professional staff in higher education in the UK, the USA and Australia and identifies categories of professionals she describes as bounded, cross bounded unbounded and blended. Professionals described as bounded were characterized by their concern for continuity, maintenance of processes and standards and by the performance of roles that were relatively proscribed. Individuals who actively used boundaries to build partnerships and negotiate professional activity were described as cross boundary professionals. Unbounded professionals were ones who displayed a disregard for boundaries, focusing on broad based projects and professional activity that might lead to changes in their professional tasks. Blended professionals were those who have mixed backgrounds and thus don't identify with any one particular professional group. Blended and unbounded professionals and the group previously mentioned as cross boundary professionals were all active in extending their roles beyond their given job description, valuing interdisciplinary activity. These professionals are not necessarily co-located geographically, but more commonly build communicative relationships and networks outside of, and in spite of, formal organizational and professional structures.

If boundaries mark the territory and the identity of a profession, then this conceptualization of cross and unbounded and blended professionals has significant impact on how we might answer the question what is the practice of art therapy? In short I am not sure how I would answer this except to say its complicated and it depends!

At the outset I suggested I might pose a few more questions related to the issues described here.

The fluid nature of identity espoused in this presentation has impact on our experience of belonging... Burkholder (2012) in his article "A model for professional identity

expression for mental health counselors” cites the vanguard principle of the American Counseling Association as a vision for the future of counseling that argues that sharing a common identity is immensely important for counselors. If we don't belong to a professional group that is clearly defined then there are implications for the credibility of individuals in their current roles and in future career paths. Within a cross bounded and unbounded environment that Whitchurch (2008) describes as a third space, credibility within a work place depends increasingly on building a local profile which is likely to be facilitated by gaining the support of key personal around, obtaining academic credentials such as PhD, finding safe spaces in which to experiment with new collaborations and forms of activity, being comfortable with organizational messiness, and being able to use ambiguity to advantage.

Biography

Dr Jan Allen is the academic director at MIECAT (the Melbourne Institute for Experiential and Creative Arts Therapy). She along with 3 others researched and subsequently developed the axiology and epistemology of the MIECAT program over 15 years ago. Since then Jan has taught in the graduate program and has supervised a number of doctoral students at MIECAT, as well as collaborated in a number of publications related to arts based research, postcard dialogues and intersubjectivity. As well as her academic interests Jan is a photographer and installation artist who is currently working on an “iphonography” exhibition of 600 smart phone images sent to recipients around the world.

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