

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

Spring 5-21-2022

Redefining Connection and Meaning-Making through Virtual Artistic Community Amidst Persistent Adversity: A Community Engagement Project

Gwendolyn Healy
ghealy3@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses



Part of the [Music Therapy Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Healy, Gwendolyn, "Redefining Connection and Meaning-Making through Virtual Artistic Community Amidst Persistent Adversity: A Community Engagement Project" (2022). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 513.

https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/513

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

Redefining Connection and Meaning-Making through Virtual Artistic Community Amidst
Persistent Adversity: A Community Engagement Project.

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

June 5, 2021

Gwendolyn Healy

Music Therapy

Dr. Elizabeth Kellogg

Abstract

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the meaning of community drastically shifted across the world. Many groups and individuals were forced to alter their professional, academic, and personal lives in order to persevere through this collective, global health crisis. During a time in history where so much changed in a short period of time, community and peer supports became more important than ever. Specifically for students involved in arts or expressive arts programs, the process of collective art making serves as a means of communication, connection, and emotional and mental processing. Without these connections and critical supports, feelings of disconnect, disinterest, loss and isolation increased across many student groups. To address the needs of this community, the following Community Engagement Project, called “Expressive Arts Community Care,” was offered through a series of virtual, expressive arts community group meetings, in collaboration with Lesley University Mutual Aid, and Lesley’s Office of Community Service Art.For.Change project in April of 2021. The project sought to explore, examine, and potentially redefine what artistic community spaces can look like and feel like through virtual platforms, while providing a supportive space to members of the defined community as they continued to persist through indefinite adversity. The results of this project indicate that through greater accessible spaces to share in artistic experiences, a ripple effect of community, growth, and healing can unfold.

Keywords: community, virtual spaces, expressive arts, COVID-19, peer support, connection, adversity and trauma

Redefining Connection and Meaning-Making through Virtual Artistic Community
Amidst Persistent Adversity: A Community Engagement Project.

Introduction

In the year of 2020, the world was suddenly faced with an unprecedented obstacle for which no one was prepared. As global leaders scrambled to set appropriate guidelines and make decisions that would help curb the spread of COVID-19, civilians across the world faced the brunt of the impact of these decisions. Though the journey of adapting and coping was different for every country, community, and individual, the subset of the population attending colleges and universities faced unique challenges. The shift to online and virtual learning proved difficult for many; not only were the new expectations of academic learning completely foreign, but critical social connections were greatly disrupted and displaced (Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan, & Davi, 2020).

For students involved in programs centered around artistic/creative topics, these disruptions perhaps proved even more impactful (Kaufman, Brodeur, & McGlone, 2020). Musicians could no longer play in person or in groups, such as choir or orchestra. Dance and theatre majors practiced in isolation, no longer able to physically perform, connect, and share their expression in the same way. Those who held jobs in drama related studies suddenly lost all employment opportunities with no determined re-opening date. The connections that manifest through in-person collaboration is critical and meaningful to an artist's development, both personally and in a greater community. Without these pathways, many individuals were left with a myriad of emotions: loneliness, disconnect, exhaustion, lack of motivation or inspiration, anger, sadness, and above all, uncertainty (Plevin & Zhou, 2020).

As the pandemic persisted, there was an imminent need for accessible, artistic community spaces that could be held virtually for students undergoing sudden, potentially distressing life changes resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. Though it may be true that some students were successfully able to adapt to the virtual model of learning and socializing and did not feel the negative effects as deeply, offering an environment for connection and collaboration for those who *were* struggling was still needed. In this thesis, I drew from resource-oriented theory, relational theory, and various expressive arts approaches to support my community-centered project and developed an open, supportive community group for artists and art students.

There is much evidence to support the notion that being a member of a group or community can result in better mental health outcomes, such as decreased symptoms of depression and anxiety, increased feelings of self-worth, and post-traumatic growth (Decosimo, Hanson, Quinn, Badu, & Smith, 2019; Gombert, Eckhaus, Kuehn, Nelson, & Lee, 2017). Social support can act as a kind of buffer to adverse or traumatic events, and even help build resilience over time (Saltzman, Hansel, & Bordnick, 2020). A resource-oriented perspective focuses on the development of resources, or strengths, that a person already possesses, rather than try to cure their problems or pathology, then harnesses the power of those resources to encourage growth and change (Rolvsjord, 2010). While navigating the global pandemic, it was crucial that students learned how to harness internal *and* external resources to persevere. While each person possesses unique intrinsic strengths, it is important to recognize that people can concurrently draw strength from external sources, such as direct or indirect communities (Rolvsjord, 2010). It is important that these communities remain accessible during times of trauma and adversity, and that people have opportunities to facilitate and maintain these connections.

Being a part of a community can be a valuable resource and source of strength.

Communities can form in many ways, one of them being through art. There are many configurations that community can take within artistic communities, because there are many mediums and modalities of art. A community of visual artists is different than a community of musicians, dancers, and so forth, yet they all serve an equally important purpose for the individuals within. Through common interests and passions, there follows peer support through shared experiences. This outcome of community development can serve as a source of strength and provides potential coping mechanisms for an individual going through difficult times.

Though the nature of the spaces and environments in which artists previously gathered may have changed, community/group leaders could continue to provide them through virtual means while the pandemic endured.

Literature Review

For a majority of people living in the United States, persevering through a pandemic is unknown, uncharted territory. There is little to no research on how to implement pre-existing community supports and resources into the new, virtual framework that was forced upon the world. This next section will discuss the available literature and research that supports the need for accessible and authentic expressive arts community spaces for students enduring adversity and grief. Though there are distinct sub-topics, each contributes and relates to the overall need for exploration and redefinition of artistic community spaces on virtual platforms. First, the aspect of community and community development will be explored in order to unpack what is needed to facilitate appropriate community spaces. Second, the relationship between art and community will be addressed. Third, the specific idea of holding space will be explored in relation to virtual platforms and expressive arts. Lastly, the adversity and potential trauma experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic will be addressed through the use of art and/or expressive arts as a means of coping and healing.

Community Development

The importance of community and the development, facilitation, and maintenance of community has existed and persisted throughout time. Human beings are naturally social, connection-seeking creatures that strive to find like-minded individuals to form bonds (Trondalen, 2016). History has shown that people tend to form groups, communities, tribes, civilizations, to organize themselves into a functional society and form critical bonds crucial to mental and physical survival (Simon, 2002). There are many different types and definitions of community that may not always be agreed upon- it could be a direct familial unit, related to geographical location, oriented to race, gender, or sexuality, or perhaps a broader community

with no physical constraints, where the individuals within simply share common interests, such as cooking or sports. “A common definition of community has emerged as a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings” (MacQueen, McLellan, Metzger, Kegeles, Strauss, et al., 2001, p. 1929). This 2001 study sought to analyze the following question in relation to public health through qualitative methods: ‘what does the word community mean to you?’

The researchers found four clusters of themes through hierarchical analysis. In the core cluster, five core tenants of community were given by more than 20% of the total 118 participants: locus (sense of place), sharing (common interests and perspectives), joint action (source of cohesion and identity), social ties (the foundation for any community), and diversity (social complexity within communities). It should be noted that all five elements reflected some kind of face-to-face interaction. In the second cluster, four group-based elements of community were identified: divisiveness (lack of unity within a community), leverage (potential ways in which community members can bring about consequences or change to the community), pluralism (existence of mindset differences between coexisting groups), and responsibility (accountability for individual actions/behavior and its impact on both the person *and* the rest of the community). These elements reflected group cohesion and community aspects that directly involved and effected the entire community. The results also indicated that the tenant of joint action was seen as the natural facilitator to the creation of community (MacQueen et al., 2001).

Considering these results, it is clear that community can come about in many ways because the word ‘community’ can hold many different meanings, depending on who is being asked. Culture is an incredibly relevant factor when considering the definition and meaning of

community. Therefore, when completing research or a community project, it is important to examine the aspects of community that *are* important to that given group of people. It can be both a feeling and/or a physical entity that can lead to greater social change (MacQueen et al., 2001).

One way in which community changed over the year 2020 was the shift to virtual spaces and platforms. Virtual spaces, of course, existed prior to the pandemic, however, they quickly became the primary way to maintain working, learning, and creating (Saltzman, Hansel, & Bordnick, 2020). This is one unique aspect to the pandemic that has not been a factor in previous disasters or crises. With the current culture's growing access to technology and online resources, loneliness and isolation may be curbed in some ways by offering alternative ways to connect and socialize (Smith, Smith & Knighton, 2018). Some communities were still able to thrive during the pandemic, however, they may have looked and felt different. Some communities were not able to thrive or were eradicated altogether. Many people lost their jobs and/or businesses. Many people lost their own lives or experienced the loss of loved ones. For these individuals, their direct and indirect communities drastically changed and/or dwindled. Despite all this, they were expected to push onward and figure out ways to succeed. Yet there still was – and is – the intrinsic, human need for support and connection, and when this need is not met, the negative effects may overflow into other domains of life.

Art & Community

When artists are involved in the process of community development, it can reshape the way in which the community/organization operates by shifting the leadership goals, overall culture, and future direction of the group (Rubin, 2019). The involvement of artists can contribute to more personal, creative solutions to problems in both development and overall

organization. Research has shown that engaging with the arts, whether that be visual art, music, poetry, dance, drama, or some combination, can be a very compelling way to form and facilitate community connections (Pavlicevic, 2003; Nathan 2016; Plevin & Zhou, 2020). For those who dwell within communities founded on shared passion of the arts, these two concepts almost seem inseparable. Research also shows that the arts/expressive arts can be a powerful way to form community among parties with conflicting points of view (Nathan, 2016). Through artistic expression, creativity and curiosity can pave the way to deeper connections and community. By using artistic form and medium to build/foster relationships, a person may notice their relationship with themselves change as well. This may be because the process of art-making can act as a means of externalizing inner thoughts, feelings, or experiences of stress and distress (Nathan, 2016). During the COVID-19 crisis, involvement in the arts and/or expressive arts may help to build or strengthen both individual and community bonds.

In a 2019 study, a group of clinicians from several different disciplines in human services developed a community-based, psychosocial expressive arts program for children who had endured the Ebola epidemic in Liberia (Decosimo et al., 2019). The focus of the program was to involve the community in decreasing symptoms of stress and preventing long term effects of trauma in children all throughout Liberia, while simultaneously providing supports and resources for families. The expressive arts activities combined approaches from play therapy, art therapy, yoga therapy, and child life specialization. Adult members of the community who had also survived the Ebola epidemic were trained to facilitate two expressive arts programs, one that would last three months and one for five months. There were important elements of cultural support and community engagement that aided in achieving the goals of this program. The results showed a significant difference between pre and post symptoms of psychological stress in

both the three-month program and the five-month program, which indicates that it was not the length of the program that mattered, but the supports and resources provided within the program. It is supported by this research that the positive mental health outcomes would not have been as significant if members of the community had not been involved, combined with the positive effects of expressive arts interventions such as increased expression, creativity, and healing (Decosimo et al., 2019). The results also indicated that there was an increase in community knowledge and involvement in trauma and mental health, which is beneficial to all members of the community going forward. Resources for program development can be severely limited during a trauma or crisis, which is why it is crucial to investigate low-cost methods in building these supports and making sure it can be sustained for post-crisis intervention.

In a study involving creative arts and creative movement in China, researchers highlighted how embodied connection can be made through digital media to create a strong sense of belonging and emotional support (Plevin & Zhou, 2020). Though technology and the arts have not always gone hand in hand, this research posits that by harnessing the benefits of digital media and technology, such as the almost unlimited expanse of knowledge and resources, further exploration can be made regarding their relationship (Plevin & Zhou, 2020). Conversely, by maximizing the benefits of the arts and expressive arts, the concurrent use and implementation of digital resources could potentially be improved. This next subsection will explore the nuances of virtual environments, or space, relating to expressive arts and music therapy.

Holding Space, Virtually

The concept of virtual communities and spaces is certainly not a new one, given that technological advancements in the past few decades have paved the way for those with common interests and passions to form online groups. There exists a large, essentially unlimited online

realm where anyone can be a part of their community of choice. There were many virtual communities that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, they quickly became the primary way of connecting and communicating, and now online communities are more prevalent than ever (Allen, 2020). How does that then affect the individuals that relied on (or simply preferred) in person connection and communication? How could group leaders hold space in a way that still felt authentic? “In this digital age, our life is accelerated in such a way that there is a huge gap between how we feel and live as an embodied and emotional person and the virtual world we are building” (Plevin & Zhou, 2020, p. 62).

One of the most important components to consider when exploring virtual community is the space. “Space” is a term that can be imagined in a myriad of ways, but it will be defined in this paper as a frame, or container, of being that is both physical and abstract. The space can be considered the environment in which one may find community. In music therapy, the physical and psychological/emotional space is one of the most crucial elements of the musical process, because it is not only the direct, physical environment - it is the energy that the therapist creates (Bruscia, 2014). It can allow the client to feel safe and open or cause them to shut down completely. In the work of the late music therapist Carolyn Kenny, she describes the space as being heavily influenced by aesthetics. The client and therapist, in this context, a music therapist, create the nature of the music space together, emphasizing the importance of safety and openness. There still exists the concept of boundaries and containment, but within that lies flexibility and freedom (Kenny, 2014).

Kenny defined the power of the space as the interplay between creativity and being. Only through an open, playful space can true creativity and meaning flow (Kenny, 2014). When the element of music is implemented appropriately, the music acts as this container of safety. It is the

position of the music therapist to provide the initial space in which the client walks in, and then the space grows and evolves with the progression of the session. With these ideas in mind, one can conceptualize how different spaces can look and feel depending on the persons involved, even if it is held within the same physical environment.

In the time of COVID-19, the idea of “space” became completely different, as the factor of physical space was no longer a controlled or manipulatable variable. Essentially all interactions had to be done over virtual platforms, which means the individual was in their own physical space, wherever that may have been. The facilitator, leader, therapist, etc. no longer had control over what type of physical environment was available for that individual. So how could one optimize what *can* be controlled? How could a safe ‘container’ still be offered? There are several factors to consider.

First, the aspect of creativity is one that is not lost or compromised due to the nature of virtual platforms. People still have an intrinsic capability to tap into the creative side of their personality or identity. The group facilitator can use this to their advantage. Second, it is crucial to acknowledge screen fatigue as a legitimate limitation of virtual and online methods, as many individuals continue to work/operate from home (Skylar, 2020). To keep oneself feeling healthy and supported, more frequent mental breaks may be needed throughout the day. Thirdly, physical resources could still be offered to give people more specific support based on their needs. If a person struggled finding a quiet place in their home, perhaps a white noise machine, added captions, or better headphones could provide a more accessible and sufficient virtual experience. However, it is inevitable that it may not be possible to offer a safe, supportive space for everyone that exists solely online. We as group leaders, or ‘holders of the space’, must accept this as a

natural barrier of virtual working and/or learning. Within this subset of the population, there are still opportunities for community building and development while acknowledging these barriers.

Addressing Present Adversity and Collective Grief-Inducing Experiences

After certain traumatic or adverse events, the neurological wiring of the brain can literally be shifted, meaning that person may never act or think in the same way again, constantly perceiving the world around them as a threat (Swart, 2014). Collective trauma is defined as a large group of people negatively impacted by a particular distressing or traumatic event. In the case of COVID-19, it is perhaps the largest collective trauma ever faced by the world (Plevin & Zhou, 2020). However, it is unique in that each individual will feel the post-effects differently, and in turn, each have a different response to the events that have transpired. Some people have watched their family members die due to the virus. Some people have enjoyed the shift to virtual work and have been able to thrive during this time. Some people, like frontline healthcare workers, witnessed an enormous amount of death and secondary trauma every day for over a year. It is without saying that each person's reactions and experiences of the pandemic will not be the same, but it is undeniable that the effects have been felt on *some* level by every person on the planet.

When coping with adversity, it can be difficult to determine what method of healing will work best for each population, or in this case, each individual. It is argued that it is not possible for someone to heal from trauma that they are still currently enduring (van der Kolk, 2006). With this theoretical frame in mind, it is absolutely critical to have trauma and mental health supports in place now that the COVID-19 pandemic is beginning to subside. When conflict and tension arise, it is natural for humans to fall back on their support systems, their communities, peers, family, and loved ones, in order to survive (Nathan, 2016). However, throughout this unique

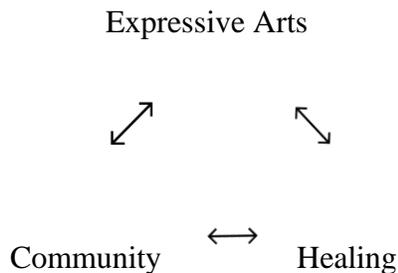
global trauma, many were unable to reach out and connect when needed most (Every-Palmer, Jenkins, Gendall, Hoek, Beaglehole, et al., 2020). An important question for researchers and clinicians alike is how human beings can learn to cope with the negative impacts this crisis has brought *and* address the basic human need for connection and companionship.

One way to do this is through implementation of the arts. Co-created artistic experiences help to foster connection and deeper relationships with the self and others (Nathan, 2016). During times of adversity, creating and maintaining relationships equals a form of strength. This is why the need for accessible artistic community is greater than ever. “This literature suggests that social support will not only be important for reducing negative symptomology but also for promoting positive adaptation following COVID-19.” (Saltzman, Hansel, & Bordnick, 2020, p. 55).

Art as Coping/Healing

Though the type, duration, and severity of mental health impact resulting from the pandemic will vary from person to person, there is much research to support the idea of art as a strategy for coping, building resilience and fostering posttraumatic growth. It can allow space for sensory, physical, and body-oriented exploration, as opposed to relying on verbal methods of expression and communication (van der Kolk, 2006; King-West & Hass-Cohen, 2008; Chapman, 2013). In a group setting, the process of artistic creation can foster a greater sense of community and group cohesion (Nathan, 2016). By harnessing the expressive power of the arts, aspects of resilience and community can be explored in a variety of contexts, even virtually! If the process of making and engaging with art can form community, then community itself can be a valuable coping tool. One can see how vital the support and connection from others would be in persevering and building resilience through hard times.

Many of the expressive arts, including art, poetry, dance and movement, music, have been well-researched as effective methods for healing and post-traumatic growth (King-West & Hass-Cohen, 2008; Mohr, 2014; Decosimo et al., 2019). As previously illustrated, involvement in the arts can foster deeper connection with the self and community, facilitate social or cultural change, and lead to growth and healing due to its highly creative and sensory nature (Nathan, 2016; van der Kolk 2006). Concurrently, finding and belonging to a community can lead to growth and healing, and being involved in the arts naturally puts one within the greater artistic community. This three-fold relationship can be demonstrated by this diagram.



Each tenant of this continuum can naturally lead to another. Both the arts and community can be invaluable tools in coping with various traumatic or adverse experiences.

In a 2014 study conducted in Peru (Mohr, 2014), a project with youth earthquake survivors was completed to explore feelings and perceptions of growth through their relationship to the creative outcomes, as opposed to demonstrating a positive effect of expressive arts therapies on posttraumatic growth. “Expressive arts therapies don’t seek to eliminate suffering but rather to transform it creatively. It proposes to do something with the lived experience, to grant it significance and value through the transformative act of poetic imagination” (TAE Peru, 2008, section 2). In other words, individuals or groups that have undergone difficult life events don’t suddenly become better or completely healed, even as much time passes. However, what

those groups or individuals *do* with those experiences speaks volumes about their character, intrinsic strengths, and ability to transform these experiences.

Post-traumatic growth can be a significant facet of coping and healing. Post-traumatic growth is defined as positive psychological changes that can occur following a traumatic or distressing event, such as improved relationships, a more open mind, greater appreciation of life, and enhanced intrinsic strengths (Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Andrea & Seligman, 2008). In a 2008 study by Peterson et al., researchers focused on measuring post-traumatic growth without explicitly stating that was what they were measuring. This is because it is often difficult to obtain valid, ethical results from participants when blatantly asking questions about their previous trauma(s) for an extended period of time. Not only is it difficult for the person to be forced to relive the trauma(s), but leading questions may prime the individual to respond in biased ways (Peterson et al., 2008). By asking questions that were related to participants' opinions of their strengths and their character as opposed to direct, leading questions, the researchers were able to gain a clearer view of how the person had adapted/changed since their traumatic event without jeopardizing the validity. The authors "...hypothesized that the strengths of character reflecting posttraumatic growth would be associated with the occurrence and extent of these events" (Peterson et al., 2008, p. 214).

Through this lens, one can see how the negative effects of the pandemic may be long lasting for some groups and individuals. In the United States, the worst of the COVID-19 crisis happened for a little over a year, in which many changes occurred in a relatively short timeframe. This uncertainty and lack of stability left many feeling hopeless without a clear end in sight. Involvement in the arts and art-making processes can provide that stability and connection with oneself when others may not be physically or emotionally accessible. After a thorough review of

the literature surrounding artistic community spaces in relation to virtual communities and the use of art as coping, the current community engagement project will be presented.

Development of Community Engagement Project

As outlined in the literature review, holding and facilitating artistic community spaces can provide a myriad of benefits to the participants within, especially in times of high distress and adversity. There was a present, urgent need for more sufficient and accessible online community spaces through the ongoing turmoil that COVID-19 brought for students in the arts. The way(s) in which community was formed and fostered prior to the pandemic was no longer ideal for many students, due to circumstances outside their control. How could previous ways of connecting and building community be adapted to fit the climate of emotional, psychological, and physical distress? To address these needs, the following virtual community project, called “Expressive Arts Community Care”, was formed in December of 2020 as a way for art and expressive arts students in the direct Lesley community to meet and connect with other students and/or community members. The following section will outline the overall development of the group, its respective space and structure, and finally, describe the final collaborative art project facilitated by myself, the Expressive Arts Community Care (EACC) group members, Lesley University Mutual Aid (LUMA), and key figures in the Office of Community Service (OCS). Many groups and individuals contributed to this project in ways beyond what was originally envisioned. This increased involvement and expansion into a greater community was an unexpected positive outcome.

Engagement of the Community

In early December of 2020, I formulated an official proposal for the EACC group (see Appendix A) to one of the co-founders of LUMA as a way of keeping Lesley students artistically connected while continuing to navigate a new way of learning and living amidst an ongoing,

historic event unlike anyone had ever experienced. The reason I decided to collaborate with LUMA initially was because this mutual aid network was formed in response to the COVID-19 crisis and evolved to address the basic needs of the Lesley University community by providing emotional, community, and psychoeducational support during a period of increasing instability (LUMA Mission statement, 2020). In other words, this organization aligned with my goals and priorities for this new expressive arts group I was attempting to form and facilitate.

Through these combined efforts with LUMA, an official poster was formed for this group and posted to the LUMA Facebook page on December 21st, 2020 (see Appendix A). This first post sought to inform LUMA members (and the broader Lesley community) what this virtual space would look like/entail, when it would be offered, and how to become involved. My group would be held virtually through Zoom, approximately once every two weeks for one hour, serving as an open space to share art and informally engage in mutual support and connection. After I posted the poster with the group information, there appeared to be a lot of interest and engagement from various members of LUMA.

Facilitating the Group Process

Prior to the first meeting of EACC on December 28th at 3:00pm EST, I developed an overall structure including an introduction, the purpose and background information of the group, an invitation for members to share artwork of any medium, and I also wanted to provide links to various mental health resources in and around Lesley University. The purpose of providing these resources was to acknowledge that this group was in no way professional, clinical therapy; though it may have been therapeutic in nature, it could not serve as legitimate group therapy. At the first meeting, I opened the space by sharing the song “Hand in my Pocket” by Alanis Morissette. My intention behind sharing this song was in the message of the lyrics -one

may feel harsh, even contradicting emotions, but “What it all comes down to, is that everything’s gonna be fine, fine, fine.” I believed this message encapsulated a lot of feelings that I was having surrounding the pandemic and thought others would resonate as well. Because I was the one that opened the space with a sense of openness and vulnerability, all other members felt comfortable enough to share their artistic creations as well.

Four participants attended this first meeting and were quite eager to engage in the artistic elements. Each person shared something creative/artistic, whether that was a project they were working on for class, or simply an art activity they enjoyed, such as collaging or postcard making. A brief discussion was held after the artistic sharing in which feelings of gratitude, connection, and peace were expressed. Having a space to share without an ulterior assignment or motive and simply *be* among like-minded people seemed very meaningful.

Every 2-3 weeks, I posted a Zoom link to the LUMA page and extended the invitation for anyone that was interested and available to join the community space. The group was designed to be open and informal, almost like a studio space. To increase accessibility, I began including a poll with my posts so that people could vote on which day/time they were available. As a result, each meeting was held at a different time and different day of the week so that new or different members could attend when most convenient for them. I knew that having an open structure group would come with challenges, such as lack of group continuity, no opportunity to build upon previous weeks, and the potential of no one showing up. Although there were different people and varying numbers of participants each time, meaningful moments were still fostered out of our shared experiences, artistic or otherwise.

My preliminary idea for the final community project was to have the group brainstorm thoughts/ideas surrounding school, internships, jobs, the shift to online learning, or navigating

life in general throughout the pandemic. The basic idea would be to create an expressive arts project that encapsulated whatever was defined by the group as meaningful in addressing their current needs. Simply by offering and holding this space, I believe many of those needs for connection and community were met, based on the responses of the various group members. Some responses included feeling “warm fuzzies” when art was being shared, feeling glad that there was an opportunity to connect with people outside of class or one’s own modality, and a general sentiment of feeling better after having talked and shared with the group.

However, the group naturally developed over time to involve a larger piece of the Lesley community: The Office of Community Service. The connection was a simple one- I reached out in early spring of 2021 to become involved in the Office of Community Service’s annual Art.For.Change event (see Appendix A), and through a series of meetings, emails, and brainstorming sessions, our two projects became intertwined. This process will be described in more detail in the next section.

Expansion and Navigation of the Group Process

The EACC group met a total of eight times, and through my observations and responses to the different activities and individuals present at each meeting, I was able to gauge what topics and activities were of the most interest. It should be noted that the same members were not present at every single meeting. This was intentional, as the group was meant to be open, in which people could come and go as they pleased. In this scenario, it was better to have this open system, so new members could flow in and out, promote inclusivity with no expectations, and have more variety in the group dynamics (Pavlicevic, 2003). A more exclusive group isn’t necessarily better! After each group meeting, I recorded my responses and reactions to what had occurred in the group process through journaling and artistic responses. There were several

meetings in which only one or two people attended, which made for quick and easy post-reflections. As a facilitator and a member, my position was unique. I too benefitted from the artistic community and connections made during these group meetings. It was interesting to facilitate a therapeutic group and not worry about things like countertransference, power dynamics, and creating boundaries like I would if this were a clinical therapy group.

In mid-February of 2021, I began brainstorming various ways I could expand this project/this group to have more participants and more outreach. Through collaboration and discussion within my music therapy cohort, I learned of the OCS's Art.For.Change event that would happen later in the spring and was curious if there was any way our two projects could intertwine. After all, the projects were quite similar – how could we use the arts to connect and be in community, while also use it as a call to social action? I became one of the four organizers of this event, and we came up with a prompt for the event relating to the different experiences we had endured at this time: The Personal Is Political. The rationale of creating the prompt was to provide something concrete to guide the artistic creations and the discussions that were to take place at the event in April. Individuals would reflect on the ways in which their personal lives intersect with the overall political landscape in the U.S. For example, a woman or woman-presenting individual might reflect on the ways that politics and government have attempted to seize control over reproductive and healthcare rights. A Black or African American individual might reflect on the many ways politics are intertwined with daily life, perhaps focusing on systemic racism or police brutality. The organizers wanted a prompt that was inclusive, accessible, and would produce many varied responses.

As plans began to solidify with OCS and Art.For.Change, it was decided that I would hold an EACC meeting one week before the Art.For.Change event, as an open workshop for

those who wanted to come and work on their art for the event or further discuss the prompt for the event. As facilitator of the EACC group, I offered it to be used as a space where individuals could work on their projects in a “studio” format, as opposed to its usual format of sharing art that wasn’t necessarily made for any purpose other than exploration and creativity. Although the Art.For.Change creations were made by everyone separately, the process of creating together almost acted as a kind of collage.

Although only one person attended the pre-Art.For.Change workshop, it still gave me an opportunity to connect with this person and hear their ‘personal is political’ idea for the event. This individual discussed their passion for photography and environmentalism, and how they planned to present the two as a combined project at the event. Being able to witness this individual’s personal relationship and passion to this sociocultural issue in a one-on-one setting was quite powerful.

The Space

As previously discussed in the literature review, the creation and facilitation of ‘space’ is one of the most important elements in any given community. In the present community project, the space was facilitated on Zoom and each member participated from their respective homes/apartments. Most members seemed indifferent toward or unaffected by their physical surroundings and were able to engage fully in the virtual space. An open, supportive environment was offered through the following mechanisms: validation and exploration of thoughts/feelings, free “studio” space, invitation to share previous art or projects that someone had created, and an open structure to share any lingering thoughts or feelings. This space was designed to be therapeutic and possibly healing, however, it did not serve as clinical therapy. Despite being held virtually, I felt comfortable that the merging of the EACC group and

Art.for.Change would succeed. Outreach and advocacy were a large component of preparing for the event. The organizers, including myself, wanted to reach a broader audience than just the direct Lesley community.

The results of this event and overall community project will be described in the following section.

Results

This community engagement project yielded extremely mixed results. It was hard to tell from one meeting to the next what the level of activity, excitement, and overall engagement would be. I must confess I began to get discouraged when less and less people began showing up to EACC each time I offered a meeting. The most people that ever came to a meeting was five, and I had two meetings where no one came at all. This was disappointing, and yet it taught me that community engagement can be one of the most difficult aspects of spearheading a group, especially amidst a global, collective health crisis. I believe there were several key factors that contributed to low attendance numbers: students experiencing screen fatigue from working, interning, and going to class all on Zoom; the nature of an open group means that attendance is voluntary and not mandatory; not everyone was available in the evenings which is primarily when the meetings were held; students did not have the mental, physical, or emotional capacity to be a part of another group. However, because the meetings *were* in the evening, I was able to connect with a member of the Lesley community who was not in the same time zone and lived in Hong Kong. There were pros and cons to every choice I made regarding the group. Even if no one showed up, many people expressed gratitude to me that there was an offering of a space like this to begin with.

Over the course of several months, this community engagement project evolved into an unexpected amalgamation of ideas and people. The present results illustrate how a simple idea for a small community can reach a greater audience and engage a greater community. This was a surprising outcome for the project, however, I think that the simple structure of the EACC group – an open, expressive and creative space – served as the perfect foundation for greater

community impact and involvement. Neither my group nor Art.For.Change would have amounted to the same without the support of the other.

The Art.For.Change event occurred on April 23rd and saw a total of 41 participants who either participated as an artist and shared their personal artistic creations, or simply attended the event and provided support as a witness to other members. This was a level of community I did not anticipate. The participants were made up of various community groups – students, staff and faculty, alumni – to form one large collective community as witnesses and active participants of this event. To offer increased accessibility, this event offered ASL interpreters and live captioning. The event brought together an incredible range of people that may have otherwise never met. A total of 15 artists shared their various artistic responses to the prompt, “the personal is political.” These responses ranged from music to poetry to creative movement to photography to cinematography.

The event wasn't simply about sharing art, though that was a key component: it was meant to activate deeper social/cultural action in a myriad of ways. After the event, a list of resources was shared on the various topics that were brought up through the art process, such as environmentalism, activism and mutual aid groups, allyship for those with disabilities, allyship for the LGBTQ+ community, and more. This follow-up call to action was a critical part of the mission of my group and Art.For.Change, and served to inspire the community to continue working and advocating for missions/projects that were close to their hearts. Another way in which the Art.For.Change event was commemorated was the creation of a virtual art gallery (see Appendix A). Anyone who wants to witness the artistic creations shared at the event can go to this website for years to come. The organizers, including myself, hope that this project/event will

have a long-lasting impact not only for the individuals who were present, but for the greater community.

Discussion

“Caring for oneself enables caring for others and then by extension to family, society, and the planet” (Plevin & Zhou, 2020, p. 64).

By meeting the needs of my direct community in context of the here and now, this community engagement project opened the doors to further opportunity for growth, artistic collaboration, and social connection. I believe this project will contribute to future research on creating accessible, artistic communities amid difficult or adverse, even traumatic events. This project illustrates how building and fostering community spaces for students are not only beneficial during this global trauma, but other potential traumas that may be endured in one’s lifetime. The value of community spaces is in fact *more* prevalent in times of adversity, and therefore, should be built and expanded upon to incorporate as many individuals and/or groups as possible. Changing internal systems to facilitate new strategies may be necessary, as has been observed and experienced by so many throughout the world.

If this project had not been completed through online and virtual means, it would have looked and felt completely different. Then again, without the COVID-19 crisis, it probably would not have happened in the first place, or at least would have had different objectives. I believe a critical piece of this project was the motions set forth once the event was over. In my opinion, inspiration and motivation only last for so long, so the virtual art gallery and compiled list of social action resources were key components of the event. In this way, the effects of this community space and forged connections can be preserved.

The implementation and incorporation of multiple artistic modalities increased the potential for greater community impact. The expressive arts component also contributed to this “ripple effect” of growth and social action. The metaphor of the ripple effect describes the art as the

figurative pebble that causes ripples of change, growth and healing (Gombert et al., 2017). If more community projects incorporated the arts or expressive arts, the potential for further growth and development would increase. It impacts not only the individual and their relationships, but their relationship to the greater community and potential for deeper connection and collaboration with others – it exhibits a reflexive relationship.

The resources and supports a community can provide are invaluable, however, the act of facilitating and maintaining access to community and social connection during extended periods of meeting virtually has yet to be explored. Through this community engagement project, I hope to have illustrated the power of community, support and connection in relationship to the arts and online/virtual spaces. There is much room for further research regarding the impact of virtual art groups during times of crisis and adversity.

References

- Allen, J. (2020, June 4). *Online communities in the time of COVID-19: More important than ever*. VERINT Connect. <https://community.verint.com/b/customer-engagement/posts/online-communities-in-the-time-of-covid-19-more-important-than-ever>.
- Decosimo, C.A., Hanson, J., Quinn, M., Badu, P., & Smith, E.G. (2019). Playing to live: outcome evaluation of a community-based psychosocial expressive arts program for children during the Liberian Ebola pandemic. *Global Mental Health*, 6, 1-12.
doi:10.1017/gmh.2019.1.
- Chapman, L. (2013). *Neurobiologically informed trauma therapy with children and adolescents: Understanding mechanisms of change*. Norton Publishing.
- Dutton, W.H, Cheong, P. H., & Park, A. (2004). An ecology of constraints on e-learning in higher education: The case of a virtual learning environment. *Prometheus*, 22(2), 131-149.
doi 10.1080/0810902042000218337.
- Every-Palmer, S., Jenkins, M., Gendall, P., Hoek, J., Beaglehole, B., et al. (2020). Psychological distress, anxiety, family violence, suicidality, and wellbeing in New Zealand during the COVID-19 lockdown: A cross-sectional study. *PLOS One*, 15(11).
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0241658>.
- Gombert, D.J., Eckhaus, R., Kuehn, D., Nelson, M.J.H, & Lee, C. (2017). The Ripple effect in the expressive therapies: A theory of change explored through case studies. *Reflections*, 23(4), 20-40.

- Kaufman, S., Brodeur, M. A., & McGlone, P. (2020, August 20). *Empty classrooms, studios and stages: In the COVID-19 era, an arts education requires an even greater leap of faith*. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/empty-classrooms-studios-and-stages-in-the-covid-19-era-an-arts-education-requires-an-even-greater-leap-of-faith/2020/08/19/b744b32c-de7c-11ea-b205-ff838e15a9a6_story.html
- Kecojevic, A., Basch C. H., Sullivan, M., & Davi, N. K. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on mental health of undergraduate students in New Jersey, cross-sectional study. *PLOS One*, 15(9). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239696>.
- Kenny, C. (2014). The field of play: An ecology of being in music therapy. *Voices: A world forum for music therapy*, 14(1). <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/2245/2000>.
- King-West, E., & Hass-Cohen, N. (2008). *Art therapy, neuroscience and complex PTSD*. In N. Hass-Cohen & R. Carr (Eds.), *Art therapy and clinical neuroscience*. Jessica Kingsley Publishing.
- Macqueen, K.M., McLellan, E., Metzger, D. S., Kegeles, S., Strauss, R.P., et al. (2001). What is community? An evidence-based definition for participatory public health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91, 1929-1938. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.91.12.1929>
- Nathan, D. (2016). Artsbridge: Conflict mitigation with Israeli and Palestinian youth. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health*, 7(2), 263-274. https://doiorg.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1386/jaah.7.2.263_1
- Pavlicevic, M. (2003). *Groups in Music: Strategies from Music Therapy*. New York, NY: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Plevin, M. & Yu Zhou, T. (2020). Creative movement with Te and Ch'i– Global virtual and embodied connection during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy*, 6(1), 61-71. doi: 10.15212/CAET/2020/6/17.
- Rolvjord, R. (2010). *Resource-oriented music therapy in mental health care*. Barcelona Publishers.
- Saltzman, L. Y., Hansel, T. C., & Bordnick, P. S. (2020). Loneliness, isolation, and social support factors in post-COVID-19 mental health. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(S1), S55-S57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000703>.
- Simon, H.A. (2002). We and they: the human urge to identify with groups. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 11(3), 607–610. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/11.3.607>.
- Skylar, J. (2020, April 24). 'Zoom fatigue' is taxing the brain: Here's why that happens. National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens>.
- Smith, B. G., Smith, S. B., & Knighton, D. (2018). Social media dialogues in a crisis: A mixed-methods approach to identifying publics on social media. *Public Relations Review*, 44, 562–573.
- Swart, I. (2014). Overcoming adversity: Trauma in the lives of music performers and composers. *Psychology of Music*, 42(3), 386-402. doi: 10.1177/0305735613475371.
- TAE Peru. (2008). Restaurando la capacidad de imaginar [Restoring the capacity to imagine]. Retrieved from www.taeperu.org/imaginar/huarango.htm.

Trondalen, G. (2016). *Relational music therapy: An intersubjective perspective*. Barcelona Publishers.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2006). Clinical implications of neuroscience in PTSD. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1070, 277–293. doi:10.1196/annals.1364.022.

Appendix A

1. Original proposal for EACC group presented to LUMA in Dec. 2020

[LUMA Proposal for Expressive Arts Group](#)

2. Original EACC poster created by myself in late Dec. 2020:

Expressive Arts-Based Community Care Group

Facilitators: Gwen Healy & Joshua Min
2nd year Music Therapy Graduate Students
Lesley University
Contact for Zoom link: ghealy3@lesley.edu



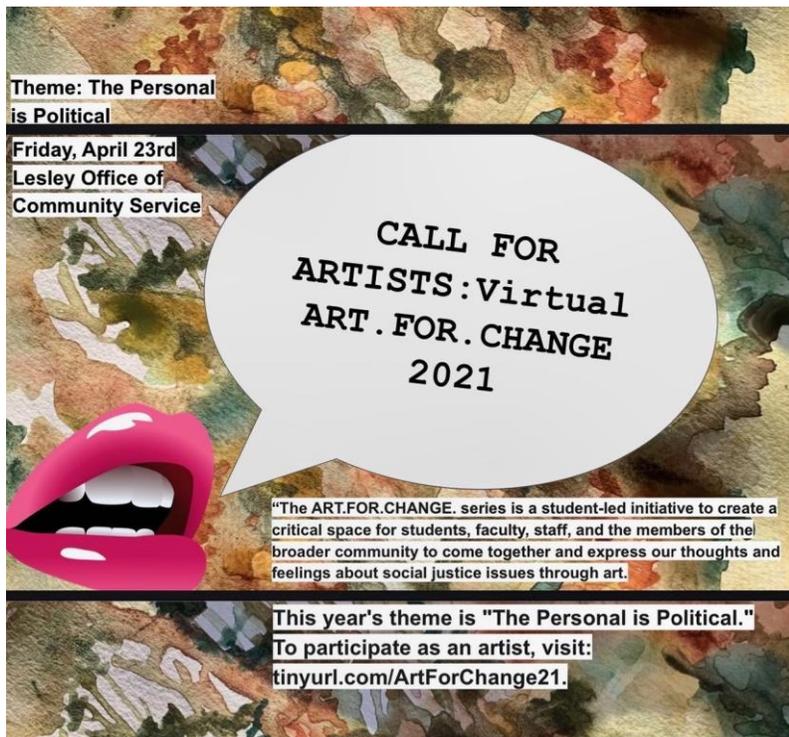
Overview

Lesley Community Members- Please join us for the FIRST ever meeting of LUMA's Art-Based Community Care Group on **DECEMBER 28th at 3:00pm**.

This idea came into fruition by recognizing the increasing need for support and connection for members of the Lesley community. Opportunities to create art in collaborative spaces have been widely inaccessible for many during the COVID-19 crisis, and we hope to offer an open "studio" space that explores the value of community care through collaborative artistic expression via Zoom. This group does not have a definitive ending date.

This is an INFORMAL, OPEN group – based on interest and availability. You do not need to attend the group each week if you do not wish to. Please contact the email above for the Zoom link on the day of the first meeting.

3. Art.For.Change Event poster:



4. Art.For.Change 2021 Virtual Gallery:

<https://sites.google.com/view/artforchange/home>

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Music Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: Gwendolyn Healy

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Redefining Connection and Meaning-Making through Virtual Artistic Community Amidst Persistent Adversity: A Community Engagement Project.

Date of Graduation: 5/21/22

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: E Kellogg, PhD