



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## Breaking Down Barriers

As community college faculty, many of us are aware that a significant number of students enrolled in our classes have emotional barriers to learning (EBTL).

I know that my discipline, art, often is the place where students with EBTL find sanctuary. Many bright students who are not achieving at their potential often select art classes to avoid the so-called "tough" courses. As an art educator, I have covertly addressed emotional barriers to learning throughout my career.

In 1988 I took direct action. I requested a sabbatical leave to pursue an additional master's degree for the training and credentials to address these barriers directly and to provide students with a vehicle that would help them help themselves.

Upon my return, I initiated a pilot program. Two years have passed, and my program is showing significant success.

### Innovation

With the support of the Hagerstown Junior College administration, I designed and implemented a model using art therapy to address EBTL.

As the art therapist/educator, I receive referrals from the Director of Counseling and the VSST Handicapped Program Coordinator. I interview these referrals and determine (1) their readiness to spend two to three hours a week in individual or group settings, and (2) their commitment to use art materials as the vehicles for confronting their EBTL.

The model uses the semester format and adheres to the strict confidentiality of therapy. The sessions are held weekly for one-and-one-half to three hours, depending on the number of participants. A maximum of six participants work with one art therapist/educator. Both directive and nondirective art experiences are provided during and between the sessions. Participants contract with the art therapist and/or the group as part of their commitment to work on issues that contribute to their EBTL. Using a visual/verbal model and a diagram with words that sometimes are modified to adapt to language skills, group members informally learn visual language skills. The art becomes a concrete tool (the record) to see how they move and develop

through their personal process in addressing EBTL. Both investment or potential for insight are essential in this model.

The group setting provides each participant with a nonthreatening environment in which to examine the implications of EBTL. Members are affirmed for their willingness to experiment with art materials, even though most of them have indicated that they "cannot draw a straight line" or "can barely draw a stick figure." Learning that one does not have to be a talented artist to express oneself visually and finding that self-expression builds self-esteem naturally contribute to overcoming or controlling EBTL.

Growth in self-esteem is accomplished by focusing on the process of creating, while not being overly concerned with the product. The setting is essential because success is limited and ordered, while creative actions are facilitated by the art therapist/educator.

The art therapy group members develop a visual record of the history of the group experience, and they have a supportive and contained setting in which to take responsibility for becoming educated. The participants receive peer support when they try new behavior. They are encouraged to develop and demonstrate honest communication—both positive and negative. As a result, they experience personal growth.

### Identifying Students

Potential participants for the individual or group art therapy experience are those students who have been told or sometimes believe that they can be achieving more and doing better in school. They generally have no difficulty understanding life-related concepts or new information, and they acknowledge their experienced inability to do well in school.

Participants have been varied. A sample list of participants includes (a) first-generation college students, (b) Vietnam veterans, (c) adult survivors of sexual assault and/or emotional and physical abuse, (d) people sent for vocational rehabilitation, (e) individuals currently in therapy off campus and in need of an anchor on campus, (f) adults with lifelong physical and emotional disabilities that previously limited and/or distorted their access to experiences in the formal school setting, and (g) students who express fear of education (such as taking tests, communicating with



instructors, speaking in front of others, interacting socially, and developing their own creativity). All of these individuals desire to overcome the barriers and do well in school.

#### Evaluation

As part of the assessment of our pilot program, the VSST Handicapped Program Coordinator sends an anonymous questionnaire to participants, asking them to evaluate the program. Consistently, the ratings are 9 or 10 on a scale of 0-10. All participants recommend its continuation, and more than half request that the program be expanded to include an additional semester. They say that they would participate again and that they have made significant changes in their school and personal lives.

I interpret the request for an expanded program to indicate that while the experience is positive, many students recognize that one semester is not enough time for a person to develop adequate self-confidence. Other students see the experience as valuable and do not feel a need to continue after one semester. This indicates that the nature of the program is not building dependency but, rather, is beginning to address the emotional issues that are barriers to learning.

#### Budget

Currently, HJC is not budgeted for an ongoing program using art therapy to address EBTL. But in fall 1990 I offered "Art as Introspection," through continuing education, and a three-credit course, "Art and Self" (with transfer credit potential). In this way, we are responding to the student/client request for expansion as we work within our budget.

The continuing education art therapy groups are intended to help students who are at risk of dropping out of school and need a forum in which to work on issues that block learning. We want the groups to be accessible but not free; therefore, students will be charged a minimum fee of five dollars to register. The college's VSST Handicapped Program will pay my professional fees for art therapy services. Students will initially self-select and then be interviewed.

In "Art and Self," students do not discuss personal emotional issues that get addressed in therapy. Instead, students are given an introduction to the structure of visual language and develop cognitive skills. Students contract to spend time doing art study on a course in which they want to do exceptionally well. The art time is in addition to the normal study time for the selected course. Students observe their patterns in the visual images and learn about their personal

process. [The course uses Rhy's research that addresses the visible structure and not the emotional or symbolic level of the visual language.]

Students are graded on their ability to observe their motivation process, their methods of processing information, and their ability to develop critical observation skills. They write a mid-term plan based on their critically observed process and then an end-term evaluation of the plan. This course format is for students who want to understand their personal learning process and who desire to improve their achievement through these insights.

In the winter and the spring, we will take an in-depth look at our modification, assess the impact of these two changes, and plan our next steps.

#### Proposition

My perception is that the significant success of this small number of students is not coincidental nor circumstantial and that my model will work with both homogeneous and heterogeneous populations. My plan is to continue using the art therapy model to gather information that will either confirm or modify my judgment. Our hope is that the modifications will evolve into a design for providing this service to *all* interested students.

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