

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

## **‘Gold goggles’: The myopia of institutional transference**

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This piece considers a myopia, which develops from professional identity and our relationships with institutions. Drawing from the experiences of facilitating a three day small experiential group at the 2016 Art Therapy Conference, I consider how ambivalence between institutional transference and training bias can lead to myopia, and I consider how this can be identified and be valued as part of a creative dialogue.

I played a small role in the conference organising committee - made up of the 12 person tutor group on the Goldsmith's MA art psychotherapy. I am speaking as a new member of the staff team, who trained at Goldsmith's and whose attendance at the last conference, in 2013, was as a delegate.

### **Conference overview - Containment and Discontent**

The conference was a charged environment in its cultural diversity, training, philosophical perspectives and the sheer dynamism of its participants. The program offered a consciously diverse programme of differing perspectives and professional orientations, from the wide international field of art therapy, of which my orientation, art psychotherapy, is part.

From my perspective, the conference was a creative, open and explorative encounter that gave room for a wide variety of voices. When discontent was

expressed, I see this both as a demonstration that containment was achieved and of a boldness and openness of the delegates. There is a risk when looking at technique and process that one can lose focus. One can be tempted to feel satisfied that voices of discontent find a forum and stop there. Such positions signify a change of primary function; whereby containment becomes the primary ambition of the encounter and the original focus is lost. Psychoanalyst Neville Symington (2013) considers his profession's preoccupation with transference - as if this phenomenon is the goal of analysis - as opposed to being a tool that can lead to greater understanding. He likens this to an astronomer spending all his time looking after his telescope, but not looking through it - failing to look at the beauty of the cosmos. Similarly, if the establishment of psychotherapeutic framework becomes a primary focus we may fail to look, understand or learn from each other.

One criticism, which was voiced in the large art therapy group, was of 'Not feeling welcomed by the institution'. This has stayed with me, leading me to consider the relationships between organisers, institution and delegates, and their relationship to this criticism. It led me to consider the unconscious processes that inhibit our ability to meet and welcome one another.

As explored by the large art therapy group convenors of the 2013 Art Therapy Conference, Skaife and Jones (2014) acknowledge tensions and splits between Goldsmith staff, students and alumni (the insider group) and those who did not study at the institution (the outsider group). I imagine there were delegates that felt welcome as well as those who didn't, just as there are those who inhabit the 'insider' position and those who inhabit the position of 'outsider.' It is clear that such lines of division may be impossible to avoid, yet I wonder how such divisions can be attended to? I consider how the relationship between the roles of tutor/organiser/art therapist/host and delegate/art therapist/guest inhibits our capacity to both *feel* welcoming and *feel* welcomed.

## **Dependence, professional identity and the total situation**

In a literature review of the challenges of analytic training Maroda (2009) identifies 'inauthentic training' and 'infantilization and dependency' as the two most significant themes. This dynamic risks impinging upon the function and creative potential of the relationship. She believes that dependency is promoted by training institutes, and expresses concern toward regression of students and the power dynamic maintained by training analysts. It is worth noting Maroda's (ibid) own consideration of her rejected application to train at the Chicago Institute as a transferential position of her critique of training institutions.

Infantilisation may be an inevitable aspect both of training and employment, and these dynamics are for consideration outside of this article - what is pertinent is how this dynamic can spill over into the conference arena.

Tubert & Oklander (2014) consider the role of professional identity being an impediment to the group's inquiring and thinking 'derived from the fact that most members were striving to participate not as individual human beings, but as group analysts' (ibid, p 427). I consider how hard we may work to form our professional identity, and it is something we can find reassurance from and find *refuge in*.

Drawing from both Maroda and Tubert & Oklander, and considering the energised atmosphere of the conference, I can see the temptation to remain in familiar positions; taking refuge in both professional identity (eg. art therapist) and positions of status (eg. tutor). In a perverse way, it is the person with status (eg. art therapist **and** tutor) who risks becoming dependent upon this position - for status evokes gratifying feelings. And it is this position can lead to a certain type of interaction - of emotional distance - that can be evocative of a sense of unwelcome.

Tubert & Oklander (ibid) suggest the importance of allowing the 'total situation' to be analysed as a way out of these positions. The 'total situation' represents a shift in the facilitator's approach, whereby they make themselves available to be analysed by the group, allowing 'the conducting team and the whole organisation of the conference as part of the group field'. (p 429, ibid)

The exploration of the 'total situation' can expose painful vulnerabilities, Tubert & Oklander acknowledge the difficulty of this, but it is an opportunity to free the group from becoming stuck in professional identity & status. It is in this spirit that I explore both institutional transferences in part 1 and my experience as a facilitator of a small experiential group in part 2.

### **1. The Goldsmiths Ambivalence**

A remarkable aspect of joining the team (2014) is discovering how evocative the word Goldsmiths can be. Reactions are usually provoked by another's discovery of my employment - and were typically split between hostility and admiration. I imagine this may have been further provoked by my pride in this newly found status. Hostilities – not always pointed, and conversations, would bring up vivid training experiences and difficult relationships with the institution. I would suggest that there is likely to be a transference toward Goldsmith's whether one is part of the 'inner group' or 'outer group'. Such is the power of reputation, literature and status.

This external position is not the total situation. Organisationally, the institution can be considered an ambivalent beast. Goldsmiths has strong progressive, left-wing, radical and political identity, which seems to be in a continual conflict with modern financial pressures and the resultant management style. There are visceral splits and conflicts, centred around ethics and resources. Discontent has been expressed by the student body in the shape of occupations and rent strikes (Rodham 2015, Pells 2016a) and in the staff group in the shape of rolling union strikes (UCU, 2016) and senior academic resignation over management 'failure to address the problem of sexual harassment' (Ahmed 2016, Pells 2016b).

Internally, my critical transferences toward institutions and finance are enhanced by the organisational conflict, and direct experience of being part of the conference organising committee. This is in conflict with my sense of status, genuinely fed by the intellect and integrity of the teaching team, and further enhanced by the transferences put upon the institution, course and tutors. The preparation for the conference was fraught with setbacks and frustrations, as the ambivalent multi-departmental beast [a transference

position] of the institution spat out a surprising amount of setbacks, obstacles and misunderstandings, while management's financial focus seemed to be at odds with the tutor group's creative and professional desires.

The conference is a prism for these social, political and transference conflicts to meet yet its construction had led to heightened institutional ambivalence. The next section considers the effect of this ambivalence on the experiential environment.

## **2. Reflections of my small group.**

With respect to the boundary of confidentiality of the three groups I facilitated, I offer reflection from two moments in the small experiential group I convened. I would like to point out that these moments are used to explore a sense of unwelcome, they do not (and cannot) fairly represent the richness of the visual and verbal dialogue.

1. Early in the first group, a group member was quick to say to the group, and directed at me, how she didn't want the group to be an 'analytic' group. I did not make opportunity to explore what she meant by this.
2. During the second group, a member covered a set of clear plastic laboratory goggles in gold paper. The paper covered the view through the plastic, and made the goggle useless as eyewear. The piece was unexplored in this session, but was explored verbally by this member and the group during the final meeting.

I would like to consider the unconscious aspects of these moments, in relation to the themes of this article. What was lacking in my group was my response to these moments - and I now consider my heightened institutional transference inhibited a dialogue on the 'total situation'.

Number 1 leads me to consider my preference for Goldsmith's training orientation. I had silently assumed that this question was an expression of the delegate's anxiety. It is a typically defensive response to assume such a question is evidence of *someone else's* anxiety. Was I able to move away from the training model of Goldsmiths to offer something else? Was this an

opportunity to consider and learn from the different modalities in the room? At that moment, I was unable to hold a reflexive position, and took refuge in my training bias. Was she asking me to step out of my professional and institutional role? Could I have heard it as an invitation to meet and be met? And what could I have learnt about the shortcomings of 'analysis'?

It is interesting to consider why I would become stuck - especially as I am more able to modify my approach in clinical work, and wonder what it was about my role that led to a rigidity in thought. I now consider myself made inflexible by my conflicted position of being both protective of my training orientation and holding a critical institutional transference. What dialogue could have developed if I were able to share my ambivalence?

Number 2 seems to communicate with this unsaid transference. The 'goldsmith goggles' can be seen as an illustration of the consequence of institutional myopia. The goggles - if worn, both prevents the wearer seeing outside or the outside seeing the wearer's eyes. Both wearer and audience are blind to each other's experience. This artwork evokes Symington's (2013) astronomer. It extends the myopia beyond apparatus and technique to include a blindness that is evoked by one's relationship with institutions.

These moments have led me to consider an unconscious enactment of the limitations of the facilitator - an unconscious and perhaps futile desire to keep my institutional transference separate from the group consciousness. It is striking that, although I could avoid engaging with this on a verbal-conscious level, I felt strong connection through the visual-unconscious. At the moment of construction I was struck by feeling the goggles were an attack on the institution, training, and myself. The member used the final group to consider the feelings evoked by institutions, yet, as Tubert & Oklander (2014) suggest 'focussing exclusively on the patient's internal processes, is necessarily misleading' (p.429). Although not untrue, a richer dialogue could have been had if the connection had been made between organiser and delegate. The hostility I felt subjected to was also in keeping with my own feelings toward the institutional 'beast'. I suspect the combination of the external and internal hostility forced me into silence, for fear of my own hostility being exposed.

## **Conclusion: Creativity and Dialogue**

The practice of art therapy is fortunate in being able to give opportunity to process and put into physical form aspects of our interactions that are difficult to be put into words. These encounters leave us with objects (and memories of them), which embellish the creative dialogue within a group. The 'gold goggles' provoked conversation in the third group - and I wonder if this dialogue would have been made verbal without their presence. Images can have an impressive capacity to evoke and enrich dialogue, make visual the unsayable and transpose the transient nature of human experience into concrete form.

Skaife & Jones (2014) consider Dick Blackwell's (2000) statement: 'dialogue of the large group is something that must be learned'(p 154). Their consideration of a Large Art Therapy Group as an emerging culture could equally be applied to the conference-as-a-whole - and I look forward to seeing this dialogue and culture develop in successive conferences. I believe this culture is better developed if our differences and difficulties are given form and we are able to identify the refuge of professional identity. I am led to consider how to occupy a position that is not prescriptive - not of tutor, nor of art psychotherapist, but of host. As Tubert & Oklander (ibid) suggest, this is achieved by stepping away from our therapeutic positions, and offering oneself for the group's use. I find this both a daunting and appealing adjustment, but an adjustment that seems entirely suitable for the occasions when we meet as art therapists and peers.

There is a risk that the institution's language and culture can become a dominant force, spilling over from its established position in training, to become a culture that inhibits dialogue and reinforces outsider positions. Adaptations must be made by delegates and convenors alike to find a space in which we can meet and welcome one another - as we are all prone to becoming embedded in our roles and sanctuaries.

Experiential groups offer unique forums to explore such divisions, identities and differences. It was a rich experience being both large group participant and small group convenor. There were numerous exchanges that I hope to

carry with me. Such forums give rare opportunity for us to produce creative dialogue to learn what binds and divides us.

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