

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Workshop: Working with Conflict through Visual Mediation

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Abstract

Conflict is an emotive subject, currently occupying much space. This workshop was about finding new ways to look at it, using arts media. It started with an exercise on people's first reaction to the word 'conflict'. The main exercise asked participants to draw/paint a conflict in their lives or well-known to them and share these with a partner. Participants then made another picture for their partner, based on the same elements, but making slight changes that might suggest a different way of looking at things. This was based on the idea of mediation, in which a third party helps two parties in conflict to see things in a different way, without changing the situation materially, but emphasizing elements that may have escaped the notice of the parties in conflict. Partners then gave each other the picture they have done for them, and discussed the differences.

Keywords: animal metaphors, communication (all the relevant words are in the title – conflict, mediation, visual)

Introduction

A mixed group of twelve participants arrived in the studio on the edge of the campus, having found their way there by a variety of routes. They included art

therapists, students from the Goldsmiths' art therapy course, artists and researchers.

This short article describes the exercises we did and the general feeling in the group, but does not include personal details or pictures from the group, as these were confidential and I did not ask their permission to disclose anything. I have included material from other workshops to amplify some points.

Responses to the word 'conflict'

Conflict is an emotive subject, currently occupying much space in the media. This workshop was about finding new ways to look at it, using arts media. The workshop started by asking participants to draw their first reaction to the word 'conflict' – these were mostly negative, reflecting the difficulties we have in dealing with conflict.

Metaphors people sometimes use include explosions, closed doors, diagonal lines for 'division', or separation; or bodies in conflict, e.g. fists flailing or jagged teeth facing each other; or animal metaphors such as a spider's web (signifying stickiness and entrapment) or snakes (signifying sneaky underhand conflicts) (Liebmann 1996, pp. 159, 163).

Participants were then asked to reflect on positive aspects of conflict, e.g. highlighting things that need to change. We could all see that life without any conflict could perpetuate unjust situations, prevent change – and be boring! However, there is a need to work with conflict constructively, otherwise it can be a very destructive force, as is evident every day in world news.

An exercise in an African Community Mediation Manual provides pictures of well-known animals, described negatively, e.g. a stubborn donkey, a tortoise that withdraws from everything, a mouse too timid to say anything, a snake that bites, a peacock that shows off. Small groups then have the task of discussing the positive attributes of these animals (Kiconco Sirrah and Liebmann 2011).

Visual mediation exercise

The main workshop exercise asked participants to draw/paint a conflict in their lives or well known to them. This could be an external interpersonal or inter-

group conflict, or an internal conflict involving conflicting emotions. The aim was to facilitate dialogue between these. Participants then shared their conflict pictures with a partner.

Sometimes just drawing a conflict is enough to help people get a different perspective on their issues. In a workshop in the USA, a participant said, 'Thank you for this exercise. I can now see what to do'. Another said, 'When I drew my conflict, I saw that it wasn't my conflict at all!' Sharing the picture with a partner (or in a small group) can bring further insights, as partners may pick up aspects of the picture unnoticed by the artist (Liebmann 1996, p.157). However, I have found that there is another stage that can be helpful – to ask each person to make another picture for their partner, based on the same elements, but making slight changes that might suggest a different way of looking at things. This was based on the idea of mediation, in which a third party helps two (or more) parties in conflict to see things in a different way, without changing the situation materially, but emphasizing elements that may have escaped the notice of the parties in conflict. This may involve using the space on the paper in a different way.

Partners then gave each other the picture they had done for them, and pairs discussed how this helped them to see things differently – in some cases this pointed to a solution previously not considered. Elements to discuss included relative sizes of objects and people, and the spatial arrangements on the page.

In a workshop for mediators, one person's partner replaced a barrier with a large see-through lens suggesting a better way of communication. Another used her pictures to take home and start a conversation with her son, the object of her conflict. A third depicted an internal struggle between security and freedom, which was resolved pictorially by her partner re-working the colours and shapes (Liebmann 2004, pp.141-5).

In the Goldsmiths workshop there was deep engagement throughout the workshop, and people left clutching their paintings to go and put into practice the new insights and solutions they had gained. They all said how using visual means had added a dimension to their processes of working through a conflict, and that receiving a gift of another picture from their partner had been a moving experience.

Biography

Marian Liebmann has worked in art therapy with offenders, with women's groups and community groups, and for 19 years in the Inner City Mental Health Team in Bristol. She teaches, lectures and runs art therapy workshops at centres and universities in the UK, Europe and Africa. She also works in restorative justice, mediation and conflict resolution. She is an Honorary Research Fellow at Bristol University. She has written/edited twelve books, mostly on art therapy.

References

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