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brief report

Art Therapy in Prisons Program Exhibition: Implementation and Benefits

Evie Soape, Casey Barlow, Michelle Torrech Pérez, Marissa Hart, David E. Gussak, Anna Schubarth, and Cameron Sumner

Abstract

The Florida State University (FSU)/Florida Department of Corrections (FDC) Art Therapy in Prisons Program is contractually required to conduct an annual art exhibition of the participants' work. Originally to be held inside the institutions, it evolved into a single art exhibition at an annual state-wide conference for prison educators. This report demonstrates, through survey data and discussions, that the exhibition and an accompanying experiential in which its attendees and prison inmates contributed provided an opportunity for the participants to feel that they were being seen and heard by those on the outside. In addition, the exhibition provided learning experiences about the program, assuring that there is continuous support, appreciation for the art created, and collaboration to meet the needs of those participating.

Keywords: *Art therapy in prison; prison art exhibition; ethics; art exhibition*

The Florida State University (FSU)/Florida Department of Corrections (FDC) Art Therapy in Prisons Program was established in February 2020. Funded through an Individuals with Disabilities Education Act grant, its mission is to bring art therapy to those in select Florida prisons to mitigate obstacles that interfere with their education (Soape et al., 2021). The program was expanded in the summer of 2021 after it demonstrated marked success (Barlow et al., 2022). The four art therapists work alongside the special education staff within nine institutions to address behavioral, psychological, and emotional challenges that impede the learning processes (Soape et al., 2021).

The contract included measurable goals to determine its effectiveness (Barlow et al., 2022). In addition, an annual art exhibition of the participants' work was expected. Originally intended to be held inside each institution, it evolved into a single art exhibition from all participating prisons at an annual state-wide conference for prison educators.

As those inside prison are considered a vulnerable population, the oversight required by institutional review boards (IRBs) is extensive. As such, the clinical team remained vigilant that the exhibition would not become exploitative. Recognizing the various perspectives on the efficacy of exhibiting art therapy client work, this brief report provides the steps the clinical team took implementing it. Responses from viewers and participants support how and why this exhibition served as a bridge between those inside and outside (Gussak, 2019).

Prisoners as a Vulnerable Population

Imprisoned people have "(h)istorically… been considered an ideal population on which to conduct research because they are readily accessible and in a controlled environment" (McDermott, 2013, p. 8), making them vulnerable to coercion and exploitation (Pont, 2008). Required to follow institutional rules and often challenged by cognitive and intellectual difficulties, illiteracy, and language barriers, inmates are often chosen for potentially dangerous experiments (Branson, 1977). As public awareness of these studies spread, "a committee [was convened] to determine the conditions under which prisoners could serve as subjects in … experiments" (McDermott, 2013, p. 9). Consequently, prison inmates

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were eventually designated a vulnerable population, and protective criteria were established. However, as potentially harmful research continued, the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research was developed to implement ethical standards (Deaver, 2011). This led to the formation of IRBs to oversee this ethical conduct of research. In particular, stringent requirements were established for correctional populations.

There continue to be debates and qualifiers for what might be considered safe and ethical research on prison inmates—considerations far too complicated to detail here—but our prison art therapy program team takes such oversight seriously. Considering the sensitivity of potential coercion, the team has been careful to ensure that the program's procedures, including the exhibition, would benefit the participants by giving a voice to those who participate and providing a bridge between the "outside" and "inside" cultures while educating the system on the benefits of art therapy.

Considerations for Art Therapists Who Display Art

Art therapists work hard to maintain participants' confidentiality. Practitioners ensure artists' names are covered even when showing the work to their supervisor. Many clinicians rely on clients' art to support their own work, but only after consent forms are signed. Still, it is recognized that this might not be enough. If the art therapists do their job well, then the "artwork is as unique and individual as a fingerprint" (Agell et al., 1995, p. 100). Thus, exhibiting the work of art therapy participants has risks.

Wadeson (2010) argued that all artwork is to be protected by the standards of confidentiality, and is a "visual form of privileged communication … (I)f the purpose of the art sessions is a form of psychotherapy, exhibits of the work are not appropriate" (p. 45). Alter-Muri (1994) stressed that while successful in some cases, "exhibiting art is not appropriate for all clients" (p. 223). Others stress that careful consideration should be made between the right to privacy against a desire for exhibitions (Garlock, 2019; Reyes, 2019).

However, others underscore the value of putting such work on display. "Art therapists have to consider their obligations to protect clients and artworks from exploitation, sensationalism and abuse. At the same time, there are potential emotional gains made possible … through the empowering aspects of publicly displaying artworks" (Moon, 2000, p. 67). Spaniol (1990) relied on three guiding principles—opportunity, safeguards and empowerment—to shape the process of exhibiting the work of those with mental illness. The resulting exhibitions provided agency and enfranchisement for those who exhibited, breaking through biases and stereotypes held by exhibitors and viewers. Vick (2011) argued that with proper guidelines, exhibiting the art of vulnerable populations can be a valuable experience, provided the "art therapist (fulfills) the role of consultant and liaison to help navigate this" balance between empowerment and exploitation (p. 158). Ho et al. (2017) and Potash et al. (2013) demonstrated the empathic connections created when viewers see art created by those with mental illnesses, reducing stigma and promoting social change.

The Art Therapy Credentials Board's (2021) *Code of Ethics, Conduct, and Disciplinary Procedures* provides conciliatory language on the public display of art, not necessarily taking a position either way. Meanwhile, the *Ethical Principles for Art Therapists* of the American Art Therapy Association (2013) recognizes the benefits that exhibitions have in informing "the public and empower (ing) the clients, while decreasing stigma and preconceptions" (p. 6). Still, it further underscores the necessary steps and considerations prior to exhibiting the work of the client.

Preparing and Implementing the Exhibition

Artwork completed by those who are imprisoned seems to hold a particular fascination. Likened to a sense of "virtual rubbernecking" (Gussak, 2013), people often become fascinated by drawings completed by those imprisoned or considered dangerous. Societal fascination with murderabilia (Gussak, 2022) has evolved into an industry for the procurement and selling of prison art. This is not to be confused by efforts of well-meaning and ethically established artist facilitators who exhibit and sell work to promote and provide opportunities for those inside, including restitution and success on parole (Gussak, 2019). Still, the clinicians of the FSU/FDC Art Therapy in Prisons Program recognized these distinctions between art done by imprisoned artists and work completed by those in an art therapy program. As such, they carefully developed procedures and guidelines to meet the contractual expectations while best protecting and benefiting the program participants. Once considerations were satisfied, the first annual FSU/FDC Art Therapy in Prisons Program was planned, developed, and held at a state-wide conference in a central atrium, visible to all attendees and visitors.

The exhibition relied on the efforts from the art therapists, department representatives, personnel and participants from all nine institutions. The exhibited pieces were selected from participants who agreed to have their artwork displayed. The art therapists discussed the exhibition with clients and their option to be included or not, and clearly outlined its purpose as well as potential benefits and risks. Those interested in having their artwork displayed signed a consent form with the option to revoke permission at any time without penalty; to avoid coercion, it was clearly stated that their participation in the art therapy program was not affected by this decision. Although many clients agreed to have their artwork displayed, further considerations were necessary to decide which pieces were included. For example, the work of

some skilled participants with artistic reputations may be recognized at their respective institutions, making it impossible to maintain confidentiality; thus, their work was excluded.

Additional considerations were taken to protect the exhibiting participants' confidentiality. First, the decision was made to display the artwork at a single locale as opposed to each institution, as originally intended, which increased client anonymity. Artists' names, their correctional identification numbers, or both were covered or removed and a colored sticker was affixed to the back of each piece with a designated number assigned to each artist. A legend that assigned each artist with a designated number(s) was created and protected by each clinician. To further limit recognition, the displayed artwork was not organized by institution but by categories and themes. For example, one section focused on the "check-in" drawings each art therapist might have prompted participants to create to begin their respective sessions.

Signs were created that prohibited photographing the works to limit dissemination of the pieces out of context. It became necessary to intervene at times when some viewers failed to observe the signs. The team realized how important it was to remain vigilant when the artwork was displayed.

The art pieces were displayed on a series of partitions created by other prison inmates, under the voluntary direction of one of the institution's building-construction-trade instructors. Stanchions and frames were made of wood, with six-by-eight-foot bed sheets donated by several of the institutions stretched and attached to the frames' edges. They were built to be easily dismantled and transported, which allowed the team to erect the displays prior to the start of each day's sessions and move them to a secure location at the end of the day. The art was matted and attached to the fabric as seen in Figure 1. Each piece included a placard posting the title (if provided), date created, and materials used. Some placards included an artist statement, directive descriptions, or both. Figure 2 illustrates the layout of the partitions and Figure 3 provides a detail close-up of one piece with its accompanying information.

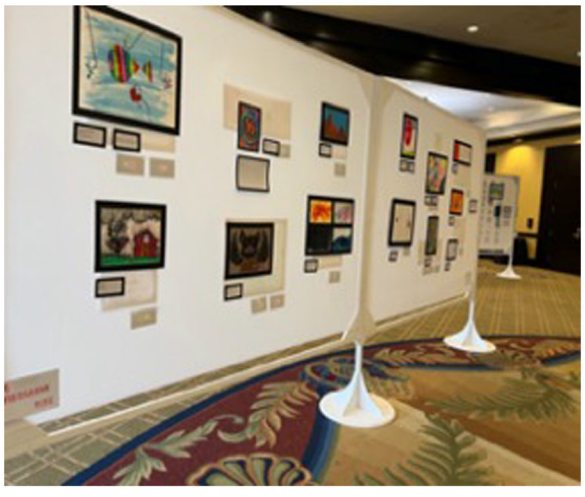

Figure 1. View of Exhibition Space

Interactive Experiential

Along with the exhibition, the team created an interactive experiential that would created a bridge between the participants and conference attendees. This process required weeks of discussion, planning, and execution. Participants from one of the institutions painted a tree with wide branches and deep roots on one of the donated bed sheets. They expressed great pride in its completion. One recognized that, for it to be successful, "a lot of patience and time was taken. It seems the slower we went the better the project was coming out to be." They found value in the group process, "working and learning how to communicate, and while asking for guidance was pretty challenging in the end, we've realized (how to) overcome those challenges."

Figure 2. Examples of Art on Exhibition

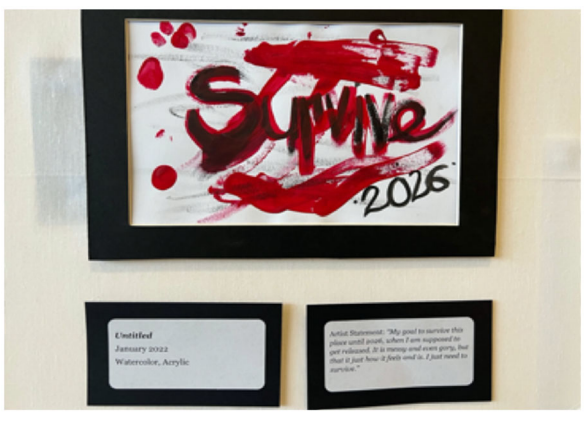

Figure 3. Example of Art with Identifying Placards

The painting was brought to the conference and erected on its own partition as the exhibition's centerpiece. Attendees at the conference—educators, managers, and administrators—were presented with a variety of precut leaves made from construction paper and invited to design a leaf using images and/or words that represent their work in correctional education with provided drawing materials. Many participated and affixed their completed leaf to the tree's branches (Figure 4). Some of them created simple designs, but many were intricate, often adding thoughtful, motivational, or thought-provoking messages (Figure 5). For example, some provided general advice: "Always give more than you ever expect to receive," for example. Some focused on their profession (e.g., "Education can help to grow wings"), and some chose to be a bit more lighthearted (e.g., "Be happy. Eat chocolate."). Regardless of how they responded, the exercise invited the attendees to be more attentive to the works on display.

Reactions From Those Inside and Outside

Giving a Voice to Those Inside

This exhibition seemed to elicit positive and valuable experiences as reflected in participants and viewers alike. The participants were eager to display their work, one indicating, "I feel honored … there is some pride in being selected." Many recognized this as an opportunity to be "seen" by those outside as *people,* particularly as those who "want to change and are doing things better (for themselves)." They expressed genuine gratitude for the attention they were receiving. One "appreciated the fact that there are people trying to put things together and get us more help." One recognized the value in having others see their work, indicating "that in agreeing (to have artwork exhibited) … there has to be a curiosity to what people think or can gain from it." Many agreed and were excitedly curious about the reactions to their pieces, asking "Was there understanding?" and "Did it help someone?"

After the conference ended, an online survey was sent to the attendees. It consisted of nine questions about their reactions to the exhibition, the experiential, and the art therapy program as a whole. Each respondent was also encouraged to provide additional feedback.

Of the 58 attendees that completed the survey, 57 of them had seen the exhibition. More than 78% found it enjoyable and 82% found it educational. Fifty-one respondents provided additional feedback, the majority of which was positive and reflected the exhibition's objectives. In addition to providing a voice for those who are inside, the surveys revealed how effective the exhibition was in educating about the program, and providing a bridge between the "outside" and "inside" cultures.

Figure 4. The Completed Experiential

Figure 5. Detail of Completed Leaves on Experiential

Educating the System

Survey respondents indicated an increased awareness of the benefits of art making. First, they noted that the placards helped them understand the artists and their works better. As one person recognized, "Those who exhibited had some very deep thinking involved in their creations." They saw "so much talent displayed" and that the program was valuable, "allow(ing) students to express themselves in a unique way." By viewing the final product, they acknowledged the process.

More than half of respondents created a leaf for the experiential. When asked what it was like to participate, many underscored the power of creating art: "I was able to include and share where I was emotionally; (I felt) empowered… as well as ownership; very enlightening." One respondent conveyed the advantages of witnessing the experiential's evolution: "I went back to it daily and read and appreciated others' contributions; it was awesome!" Even those who believed "it might have been *too* revealing and powerful," and therefore did not participate, saw it as a positive exercise, fostering community and encouraging interaction between those that usually did not. One "saw many teachers meeting and talking to each other for the first time."

Bridging the Inside to the Outside

As indicated previously, the inmates who created the tree painting recognized this as a way to potentially connect with those outside. Some of the survey responses concurred. One saw the tree as "as a beautiful culmination of everyone's (participants *and* staff) interests, love and creativity." One reflected on the overall cooperation, "enjoy(ing) how it came together and to see all depts working together," and another saw it as "a great collaboration between educational staff and inmates."

Overall, most of the respondents were positive. This project helped them "break down silos and bridge gaps, not only for students, but also for staff." The work on display evoked empathy and connection among the viewers as emphasized by Ho et al. (2017) and Potash et al. (2013), furthering awareness of the participants' experiences and recognizing the humans and artists inside the inmates' uniforms. In turn, many of the participants were pleased when informed about the exhibition's reception and subsequent comments.

Conclusion

The advantages seem to outweigh any potential complications in exhibiting clients' work. Recognizing these inmates as creative beings further humanized them. It provided an opportunity for the participants to feel that they were seen and heard by those on the outside, serving as a potential bridge.

Providing an experiential at the exhibition reinforced this bridge. It gave those who observe the sessions a chance to experience the power of communally creating, viewing the exhibition through a more informed perspective. As well, the exhibition provided learning experiences about the value of the program, assuring that there is continuous support, appreciation for the art created, and collaboration to meet the needs of those participating.

Careful consideration allowed the team to place the participants first, assuring that the exhibition was provided for their benefit. Given the additional scrutiny for correctional settings by review boards overseeing ethical compliance, the clinicians were careful the participants felt neither coerced nor exploited. This continued to reinforce the hard-earned trust the clinicians developed with those to whom they provided services while still meeting the contractual deliverables. The resulting feedback and subsequent celebration of the program revealed just how valuable the exhibition was.

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