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ARTS-INSPIRED PRACTICE: FUELLING THE IMAGINATION

Samantha Wehbi

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Article abstract

As we continue to contend with complex social problems, social work practice has witnessed the need to continue to grow in seemingly unfamiliar territory. Indeed, we have seen the rise in scholarship bridging between professional disciplines such as social work and the creative arts. As we begin to understand in more depth the links and potential cross-pollination between these seemingly divergent fields, it is important to begin to crystallize our approaches in ways that help guide our community practice. The article begins by summarizing the purpose of using the arts in professional practice and proceeds to proposing a typology to conceptualize arts-inspired approaches to practice. Specifically, I propose understanding the role of art as a potential catalyst, connector, and communicator. I also propose a methodology to guide interventions by examining the modes, means, and mediums that can take our theoretical understandings of the role of art to practical application. The paper ends with an invocation to heed our anxieties about taking creative risks in our practice, not by shunning them, but by welcoming them as a way to continually grow and evolve as practitioners.

ARTS-INSPIRED PRACTICE: FUELLING THE IMAGINATION

Samantha Wehbi

Abstract: As we continue to contend with complex social problems, social work practice has witnessed the need to continue to grow in seemingly unfamiliar territory. Indeed, we have seen the rise in scholarship bridging between professional disciplines such as social work and the creative arts. As we begin to understand in more depth the links and potential cross-pollination between these seemingly divergent fields, it is important to begin to crystallize our approaches in ways that help guide our community practice. The article begins by summarizing the purpose of using the arts in professional practice and proceeds to proposing a typology to conceptualize arts-inspired approaches to practice. Specifically, I propose understanding the role of art as a potential catalyst, connector, and communicator. I also propose a methodology to guide interventions by examining the modes, means, and mediums that can take our theoretical understandings of the role of art to practical application. The paper ends with an invocation to heed our anxieties about taking creative risks in our practice, not by shunning them, but by welcoming them as a way to continually grow and evolve as practitioners.

Keywords: arts, creativity, practice, social work, community practice

Abrégé : Alors que nous continuons à faire face à des problèmes sociaux complexes, la nécessité pour le travail social de continuer à se développer est évidente, et ce même en territoire apparemment peu familier. En effet, nous constatons une hausse des recherches s'intéressant au lien entre des disciplines professionnelles telles que le travail social et les arts créatifs. Alors que nous commençons à mieux comprendre les liens et l'influence potentielle entre ces domaines apparemment divergents, il est important de commencer à cristalliser nos approches de manière à guider nos interventions. L'article commence en résumant l'objectif de

Samantha Wehbi is a professor in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University.

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l'utilisation des arts dans la pratique professionnelle et propose ensuite une typologie pour conceptualiser les approches d'interventions inspirées par les arts. Plus précisément, je propose d'examiner le rôle de l'art en tant que catalyseur, connecteur, et communicateur potentiel. Je propose également une méthodologie pour guider les interventions en examinant les modes, les moyens, et les médiums qui peuvent amener notre compréhension théorique du rôle de l'art à une application pratique. L'article se termine par une invocation à tenir compte de nos inquiétudes quant à la prise de risques créatifs dans notre pratique, non pas en les rejetant, mais en les accueillant plutôt comme un moyen de s'épanouir et d'évoluer continuellement en tant que praticiens.nes.

Mots-clés : arts, créativité, pratique, travail social, pratique communautaire

RECENT YEARS HAVE SEEN THE RISE in articles and books bridging professional disciplines such as social work and the creative arts. Considering the growing interconnection between these fields of practice, it is important to begin to solidify our understanding and approaches to guide community practice. In this article, I begin with a brief summary of the purpose of using the arts in community practice and then go further to proposing a typology that has been helpful for me to better conceptualize practice and lead community interventions. In approaching this topic, I rely on examples from scholarship, from community practice, and from my own practice experiences to illustrate the ideas proposed in this article.

To start the conversation, I propose that we depart from the usual dichotomous way of thinking about the arts in professional practice; specifically, I contend that “arts-informed” and “arts-based” approaches, which are at times used interchangeably, keep us locked in boxes that do not adequately reflect our practice and have the potential to limit our scope. Arts-based approaches refer to practices focusing primarily on art itself and its potential to contribute to new understandings of society; in these approaches, art is the focus or the centre of the experience (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Knowles & Cole, 2008). On the other hand, arts-informed approaches are those in which art figures in the experience, but the work is not really about the art created per se (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Leavy, 2015).

I would like to shift the conversation to talk about “arts-inspired” practice approaches and to specifically focus on community practice. These are approaches to practice that infuse the creative process in the transformation of social issues and approaches to working with communities. Thinking in this way allows for more inclusive practice, not just for those who self-define or self-identify as artists. In a sense, we are creating unique trans-practice approaches that can no longer be classified under one umbrella as either community practice or art. In doing so,

we aim to activate our imagination and creativity to find new ways to tackle social issues and enhance our practice. Hence, in this article, I will be referring to arts-inspired practice and will provide examples as I propose a conceptualization of these community practice approaches that ultimately aim to help us transcend current realities to contribute to building a better future.

A key conversation in the scholarship has focused on the aims of arts-inspired approaches. Moffatt (2009), in a special issue of this journal focusing on the creative arts and social work, notes the power of art to challenge existing social conditions and to celebrate diversity and resistance. Two recent additions to the social work scholarly landscape, “Art in Social Work Practice: Theory and Practice: International Perspectives” (Huss & Bos, 2018) and “Social Work Artfully: Beyond Borders and Boundaries” (Sinding & Barnes, 2015), explore the uses of arts in practice. These texts distill key points related to the reasons for infusing the arts in social work practice; the ideas in these books are also supported by other extant scholarship on the topic, be it in social work-specific articles related to community practice or in connected disciplines. While there are multiple purposes for infusing arts-inspired approaches in social work practice, I highlight the following purposes that have resonated most with my own experiences as a practitioner and educator: activating the senses, opening lines of communication, and tapping into emotionality (Huss & Bos, 2018; Sinding & Barnes, 2015; Travis, 2019). These aims reflect well art’s ability to lead us into experiential processes that could potentially allow us to unite thought with action through active learning and participatory processes (Bonnycastle & Bonnycastle, 2015; McPherson & Cheatham, 2015; Wiebe, 2015).

Arts-inspired approaches activate our senses in that they allow us to work with multi-sensory experiences (Huss & Bos, 2018; Olco & Beno, 2016). To understand an experience fully, to truly reach a depth of knowing, we need to seize it with as many senses as possible. Our senses hold their own intelligence, allowing us to grasp an experience in its multiple facets. Speaking about arts-inspired interventions, and music specifically, Olco and Beno (2016), note that “[m]usical interventions can be especially important because cognitive, linear processing, and expression through verbal language may not be as universal as we assume” (p. 129). The arts allow us to access an experience from multiple vantage points, bypassing our routine ways of knowing; or, as Eisner (2008) contends, the arts provide access to a “fresh perspective so that our old habits of mind do not dominate our reactions with stock responses” (p. 10).

In my own experience as an educator, I have used music to demonstrate to students and to fully engage them in understanding how harmony and a sense of connection can be built through musical

interventions. In an activity I undertake to teach the role that music has played in resistance movements, I ask students to create individual music notes that are gradually combined with others' in the classroom. As students "tune" into each other's notes, they grasp the importance of listening to and harmonizing with each other without me asking them to do so. In this example, music not only serves as a metaphor for building connection, but also as a concrete tool that can be used to engage multiple senses in bringing people together.

Importantly, facilitating this type of engagement through the arts has the potential to allow us to open lines of communication with communities we may not be able to communicate with otherwise. Examples include working with some communities of people with disabilities or people who do not speak English or any other language used predominantly in our practice, depending on context (Alaggia et al., 2017; Prynall-Jones et al., 2018). The arts could facilitate the building of bridges across some of these communication diversities. In my community practice with people with disabilities in the Global South who may not have had access to formal education or literacy, textual forms of communication (writing, reading reports, engaging with written presentations, etc.) have had limited effectiveness. Instead, relying on methods such as drawing and performance have been instrumental in bridging communication modes and allowing for a more inclusive conversation to take place. Clover (2014) argues that the arts can enhance communication as they provide the means "to 'voice' what often cannot be articulated through mere words" (p. 142).

Furthermore, the arts allow us to tap into our emotions or emotionality (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2012; Moffatt, 2019; Sinding et al., 2014). The arts evoke an emotional response that could help us set aside an over-emphasis on the "excesses" of rationality so prevalent in our neoliberally dominated practice approaches (Moffatt, 2019). As Sinding et al. (2014) contend in their scholarly review of writings on the arts and social work practice, "art does not merely allow difficult feelings to 'get out'; rather, art 'gets in'—actively reaching (and sometimes evading or removing barriers to) something more meaningful in the jumble of feelings and thought" (p. 190). Brann-Barrett (2013) contends that the emotional responses evoked by engaging with artistic forms such as photography can trigger critical thinking processes as participants begin to "feel" the impacts of social issues on themselves and their communities (p. 76). Indeed, in their discussion of what the "visual" can bring to social work, Clark & Morriss (2015) contend that "visual methodologies can be seen to provide insight into difficult, emotional or otherwise sensitive issues and experiences" (p. 37).

In a recent professional development workshop on arts-inspired approaches that I facilitated for community practitioners, participants noted the importance of connecting emotionally to people with whom

they work and to communities, as this gave them greater insights into social issues and experiences. In doing so, we are able to better connect to peoples' emotions; we are also afforded the opportunity to examine the emotions evoked in us by issues facing the communities we are attempting to reach. Far from assuming the role of neutral observer or "helper," we are called upon to feel the impact of our interventions, thereby not distancing ourselves from our practice.

In short, the arts allow us to infuse our practice with better communication strategies—or, at least, more comprehensive communication avenues—that allow us to use our feelings, bodies, and minds all at once. Thinking of these potential purposes of using the arts in community practice leads us to contemplate the potential roles that art can play. In this regard, I offer a conceptualization of the role of art as a catalyst, connector, and communicator.

The “3 Cs”: Conceptualizing the Role of Art in Social Work Practice

In proposing a conceptualization of the role of art in social work as potentially a catalyst, connector, and communicator, I do not aim to draw strict boundaries between these roles. Instead, as with any typology, I delineate these roles in seemingly separate ways only in so much as to highlight the features and possibilities of each, while also being aware of the potential of the arts to play multiple roles simultaneously. The first potential role for the arts is that of catalyst, in which our interventions play a role to raise awareness but also to instigate change. The arts can also play the role of connector, bringing people together, bridging across differences and communities. Finally, the arts can also be a communicator, helping to spread a specific message or helping us to communicate with communities.

There is a rich history of socially engaged art in which the above-mentioned “3 Cs” roles have manifested, and in which the emphasis on the arts as a social process—leading to or engaging with community and social change—is the process and outcome of the experience (Clover, 2011; Helguera, 2011; Kester, 2011; Wulff et al., 2010). Socially engaged practices bridge the world of art with social work and connected disciplines. However, much of this work has been undertaken by artist-activists who are not aligned with social work but have stepped into the public engagement arena. As noted by Schubert and Gray (2015), “while social workers have been caught in managerial, risk-averse environments that have squeezed out room for creativity, artists have moved into spaces for community engagement, activism and advocacy” (p. 1351). Hence, for this article, I have chosen to highlight examples where social workers have played an active role; I discuss two such experiences below while illustrating the potential roles of the arts in social work practice.

The first example is a photovoice project, “Through the Eyes of Teens with Cancer,” which was led by social workers in the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada (Naylor, 2018). This project aimed to move beyond diagnosis such that art acted as a communicator to highlight the issues faced by teens through their own images and words. As part of this project, the teens met weekly over a seven-week period in a support group and worked together to create photography-based narratives of their experiences living with cancer. The project served as a connector between youth, as they worked together to share their stories and develop a group exhibit for the public. Ultimately, the project aimed to be a catalyst for change in perceptions of youth living with cancer. As one of the teens, James, explains:

You can always try to explain to someone what you’re going through and they will usually do their best to understand. But it can be hard to put yourself in someone else’s shoes, and the feelings that come with having cancer can be particularly difficult for others to grasp. There is no simpler way to show these unseen realities than through a picture. Photovoice allowed us to do that. (Naylor, 2018, para. 7)

Whether or not the project achieved its aim of communicating, connecting, and helping to change perspectives, this was an intended purpose that mobilized youth to share their unique experiences beyond the staid medical portrayals of disease and diagnosis. In the words of Sonia Luchetta, a social worker with the project, the use of photovoice acted as a way for youth “to better understand their lives and experiences and to explore opportunities for change that art and images can evoke” (Naylor, 2018, para. 5).

The second art and social work example is the “Safe at Home” project that was undertaken in Cessnock, New South Wales, Australia (2007–2011). The project was born out of a collaboration with local government, community organizations, and academics focusing on issues of safety and domestic violence (Shubert & Gray, 2015). The process was led by practitioners in collaboration with Leanne Schubert, who self-identifies as an artist and social worker on her personal website (<https://leanneschubert.wixsite.com/leanneschubert/social-art-practice>). In this research and intervention project, the aim was to highlight the issue of family violence through multiple community-based interventions that combined social work approaches and artistic approaches such as collage, drawing, and mosaic creation. As such, art served the role of communicator about the topics at hand. As a connector, art served as a common language among children, teens, and adults; art also bridged between community members and connected them to service providers. As importantly, the project aimed to examine the “effectiveness of art as an intervention in changing negative

community attitudes toward domestic and family violence” (Schubert, 2015, para 1). In other words, the project examined the role of art as a catalyst for change, moving the conversation from personal iterations and understandings of family violence to broader social engagement and change (Schubert & Gray, 2015). The project was successful in creating this shift, as it allowed service providers to engage with community members “outside the increasingly restrictive Australian health system, which limited staff from engaging in social action and change processes,” opening the door to “a more creative, politically engaged response” (p. 1353).

When considering the role of art in social work practice through the lens of the 3 Cs, I propose some key considerations to further develop and enhance our community interventions. The first consideration is related to how we communicate our message. As Bishop (2012) notes, socially engaged or activist art has the tendency to be didactic in how its message is communicated, and this didacticism may not always produce the desired outcomes—especially if the message does not leave much to the imagination. As an educator, I have often noted that it is far better to activate critical thinking than to preach a specific line of thinking. As such, I would propose the importance of fostering creative ambiguity as a way to create that delicate balance between making something easy to understand and yet holding back an element of the message in order to generate engagement with the intervention. For example, the images produced by youth in the above-mentioned photovoice project included a photograph of a staircase. For Yasmine, a 17-year-old participant involved in the project, this symbolized the struggles she faced, especially after treatments (SickKids, 2017). As such, this image draws us into her world in a non-didactic way, engaging us to think about barriers she may have experienced.

A second important consideration when thinking through the 3 Cs is to target our arts-inspired intervention to a specific audience—especially to enhance the reach of art’s role as a connector. In the “Safe at Home” project, Schubert and her collaborators created multiple interventions targeted at specific groups in the neighbourhood community. As such, not only was the project targeted to a specific local context, but within that, it also targeted community members of all age groups, as well as service providers. Furthermore, thinking about our target audience is connected to how we communicate our message and the need for focus, as discussed next.

Thinking through the role of art as a communicator, the third consideration is related to focusing our message. When I teach about arts-inspired approaches to social work practice, I often ask students to think through an example of a community intervention that they would like to implement. Invariably, the most difficult aspect is focusing the message beyond a general treatment of the issue (e.g. family violence, homelessness). There is a belief that art presents a certain freedom from

focus, which is partly true—especially when seen through the lens of creative ambiguity, as noted earlier. However, arts-inspired approaches to practice imply a certain emphasis on a social issue and hence a need to focus the message if our interventions are to reach a desired outcome. There is a delicate balance to achieve between “readability” and “unreadability” (Bishop, 2012), and lack of focus should not be confused with creative ambiguity.

In “Through the Eyes of Teens with Cancer” photovoice project, the focus was on portraying the everyday experiences of teens living with cancer; in the “Safe at Home” project, the emphasis was on family violence and specifically on understandings of safety. Neither of these projects sacrificed creative ambiguity to focus on a specific message, but neither was so broad as to minimize potential impact on community and the participants in the interventions. This delicate balance between ambiguity and assertiveness, focus and freedom, allows us to fully reap the benefits of engaging with arts-inspired approaches to practice.

Methodology: Modes, Methods and Mediums

Moving from the theoretical understanding of the importance of arts-inspired approaches to practical application requires methodological inputs and considerations. In this section, I propose reliance on community organizing approaches to think through the modes, methods, and mediums that are encompassed in developing arts-inspired interventions.

Modes are the strategies we use when we are engaged in organizing practice. According to Gamble and Weil (2010), there are three main levels of strategy for community organizing and these are not mutually exclusive; the chosen strategy corresponds to the rationale or purpose of our intervention. The first mode is collaborative, in which we are trying to gain support, forge connections, or enhance communication about a specific issue. In the photovoice project, collaboration is a strategy used to bring the youth together to work on a common project and provide support to each other in the process. The project also relies on the collaborative mode in that there is an implicit assumption that the public would be interested in hearing the stories of youth living with cancer.

On the other hand, with a topic such as family violence, in which there may be greater resistance to hearing messages about the issue, the second community organizing strategy level of campaigning might be of greater effectiveness. In this mode, there is an effort to convince, bargain, and negotiate (Gamble & Weil, 2010). As such, the “Safe at Home” project relied on campaigning (in addition to collaboration), in that there was an effort to relay messages about

safety from violence in the home, while also creating connections between community members.

The final mode is one of contestation or conflict, in which there may be quite a bit of resistance about an issue. In this mode, the effort moves beyond attempting to convince and toward creating confrontational situations in which activism about an issue becomes necessary. As Helguera (2011), the artist-educator, notes in speaking about the intersection of art and social work and connected disciplines, artistic approaches can be used to create antagonism as a strategy to disrupt existing social conditions and create change; in such a strategy, intervention “rarely aspires for complete alienation but rather aims to create a line of discussion around a relevant issue, provoking reaction and debate and therefore justifying its extreme measures” (p. 64). Indeed, as Gamble and Weil (2010) note, our interventions may begin with collaboration, and escalate to campaigning. Eventually, our interventions may need to escalate to contest, depending on resistance to the message or the issue and our intervention efforts.

Within the overall modes of organizing, relying on arts-inspired approaches provides a new set of methods and mediums to achieve our organizing goals. In fact, the selected mode can guide our choice of appropriate methods, which in community organizing terms can translate into “tactics.” For example, holding support groups as part of the photovoice project was a way to activate a collaborative strategy. Similarly, holding community groups to work on the development of a mosaic in the “Safe at Home” project brought community members together on a shared goal or project.

In choosing methods, we are thinking about the aforementioned considerations of focusing our message and targeting a specific audience. Both of these considerations guide the selection of specific mediums or tools to use in arts-inspired approaches to practice. Specific mediums include photography, painting, dance, drama, yarnbombing, upcycling, puppetry, and graffiti. No specific medium is more suited to social work practice, even though there seems to have been an emphasis on photography and drama. But as Moffatt (2009) notes, a wide range of mediums lend themselves to critical social work practice that seeks to challenge or celebrate. I would encourage us to continue to expand our palette of available mediums, as these could further enrich our practice and expand our creative horizons.

Concluding Thoughts: On the Possibility of Fuelling the Imagination

Drawing on scholarship as well as my own practice experiences, this article has examined the interconnections between the creative arts and social work practice. While this interconnection is no longer a new topic

of examination, I have proposed a typology to assist in conceptualizing our interventions, paired with a methodology to move from theory to application. The greater connections between these forms of practice—art and social work—necessitate continued theorizing so that we can create conceptualizations that resonate with our professional values and ways of being in the world as social work practitioners (Wehbi, 2017). Indeed, arts-inspired approaches have the potential to fuel our imagination in ways that can transform our practice and inform our socially engaged scholarship (Etmanski et al., 2014); as Leonard et al. (2018) propose, based on their systematic review of the impact of art on social work education, “social work needs creative methods to find creative solutions” (p. 301).

In ending, I would like to offer a reflection on risk. In the words of Hanley (2013), writing about the potential of using the arts for social justice and critical pedagogy: “creativity is empowering; you take risks, test the world, shape media and meaning, and thereby change the world” (p. 3). Since my early days as an educator, when I brought into the classroom arts-inspired approaches that I had learned during my community practice, I have felt the anxieties and excitement of stepping out into what was unfamiliar territory at the time. My validation for the pedagogical risks were the short- and long-term impacts that I saw in my students’ learning and growth. In a recent study, our findings demonstrated similar trajectories and experiences for educators relying on arts-inspired approaches in social work education (Wehbi et al., 2018). Their discussion of risk is illustrated with examples of the anxieties they faced stepping out of institutional moulds as they tried to bring arts-inspired approaches to their classrooms.

Yet, these educators bravely took on the self-imposed task of advancing their teaching practice onto new paths. Some suggestions for how to do so while mitigating risk include implementing alternative assessments to give students the option to complete a creative assignment without the pressure to do so. Another suggestion is to include creative resources alongside required readings (e.g. links to videos or art projects illustrating similar themes as those covered in the readings). A final suggestion provided by Kirkendall and Krishen (2015) is to form interdisciplinary collaborations that can bring creativity into conversation with social work. In my own teaching practice, such collaborations have supported my foray into the arts and benefited my students’ learning by allowing me to form generative alliances with other colleagues across the institution, bringing new scholarship, assessment methods, and practice examples into my pedagogy.

I am compelled to mention risks and rewards for two reasons. First, for new educators and practitioners or those beginning to integrate the arts into their practice, I hope that this article has provided some structure to anchor creative interventions, as well as support to allay some of the potential reluctance to adopt arts-inspired approaches. Second, I

believe that the hallmark of arts-inspired practice is constant renewal. I am reminded of risk because I believe that we need to safeguard against routinizing our interventions. In the spirit of creativity, our practice needs to continue to evolve and find new ways to engage communities. As we reinvent and renew our interventions, arts-inspired approaches promise to fuel our imagination to create a new vision of what can be not only for society but also for our own creative spirits.

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