Art Therapy 
and Computer Technology 
A Virtual Studio of Possibilities 

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Advent of the internet

Arts therapists on the Net

After Canter's work, there was surprisingly little written about computers and art therapy except for the occasional reference or prediction about the impact computers might have on therapeutic work in the field. The turning point came in the mid-1990s when a new dimension was brought to home computer use: the availability and growth of Internet service providers and the possibility for anyone with a computer and a telephone line to send and receive electronic mail. This area of communication fascinated me as soon as I heard about it and I became one of the very first subscribers to what was then a new Internet provider called America Online (AOL). It was through AOL that I began to communicate regularly with another art therapist and fellow cyberspace traveler, Barbara Levy, who was extremely interested in computer technology, especially online communication and distance learning. Barbara started a creative arts therapies bulletin board initially with an Internet service provider called Delphi and then later expanded to AOL's health and medicine section (called Better Health at the time) with what became an extremely active bulletin board during the mid-1990s.

I believe that Levy's commitment to computer communication rekindled interest in computers and art therapy among at least US art therapists. As a result of this growing interest, Barbara Levy and I presented 'Online Art Therapy Communication' at the 26th annual conference of the American Art Therapy Association in 1995 to provide information on our experiences with computers and communication. To our surprise the room was packed with attendees who were taking copious notes on everything we had to say about the Internet, the creative arts therapies bulletin board Barbara had created, and live online art therapy chats we conducted during that time. We emphasized the Internet as a way for art therapists to network and establish a national and global community, but our real agenda for promoting the idea of computer technology as a tool for art therapists was obvious: we were both cyber-addicts who simply loved the stuff.

Our presentation also included a live demonstration of online message boards and chat rooms for creative arts therapists on AOL. As far as I can recall, this was the first, and possibly only, live online demonstration of cyberspace for art therapists at a national art therapy conference. While I
do not recall the exact content of what we presented during that hour, I do vividly remember the trauma I experienced trying to talk the hotel staff into giving us a phone connection so we could provide a real-time example of cyberspace to conference attendees. Somehow, I was convincing (or appropriately hysterical) and they agreed to run a phone line into the session. We managed to get online by using Barbara's powerbook (a portable laptop computer), able to show on a projected screen just how and where art therapists could use an Internet provider to have live online discussions and post messages to others through bulletin boards and other venues.

At around the same time Barbara and I also hosted the first national online chat for art therapists through AOL. It was an interesting experience of several people trying to talk to each other through words alone typed on the screen. It was cumbersome at best, but exciting to see that it could be accomplished and that a group of people could communicate to each other in the cyberspace simultaneously. Following that event there was a very active message board established and facilitated by Barbara, one of the first international forums where art therapy was discussed, debated, and promoted to anyone in the world who cared to join in.

These events took place only a few years ago, and what seemed novel to attendees then is part and parcel of what we take for granted today with the advent of better, cheaper home computers, laser and inkjet printers, faster and more sophisticated Internet providers, and digital technology. Levy was way ahead of her time and on the cutting edge of the current technology with regard to the Internet and online communication. On the other hand, I was more like most people, barely keeping up with what seemed like endless new developments, still learning e-mail, and yet to truly 'surf the Net' at that point.

By the end of the 1990s art therapy was beginning to see more art therapists explore and expand the possibilities of computer technology for communication, creativity, and therapeutic intervention. For example, in the area of online communications there is a weekly 'Arts in Therapy' chat on AOL hosted by art therapist Chriss Berk. Canadian art therapist Petrea Hansen-Adamidis [http://home.ican.net/~phansen/index.html] has established a website with art therapy literature and resources, and regional, national, and international art therapy associations have created websites
because I am located in a geographically isolated part of the US, e-mail (along with telephone and fax) has made communication both easy and efficient. Being able to access my e-mail from any computer has also made it possible for me to stay in touch with student supervisees when I am on extended trips away from my office. E-mail has made it much easier to keep an ongoing relationship with students and saves the expense of long telephone calls for items that can be best handled through written exchange. I also use e-mail quite frequently to conduct distance learning courses and in supervising independent studies and theses. The electronic format also serves as a record of progress and deadlines for task completion.

Although the Internet has become a popular way to communicate, it is still probably not the most frequently used form of communication between art therapists. Admittedly, many art therapists are still not online, but in the next few years that will change as electronic communications become standard to business and personal exchanges. The impact of the Net on publication, education, research, and professional enrichment is only beginning to be embraced and incorporated into art therapists' lives, and obviously has unlimited potential in these and other areas.

**List serves, web forums, and e-groups**

*Global electronic communication networks*

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, art therapist Barbara Levy and I experimented with establishing an online community of art therapists in the mid-1990s. Since that time many others have established channels of electronic exchange for other art therapists, students, and related professionals around the globe. There is now a variety of list serves (also referred to as web forums, e-groups, and many other names) available to art therapists, creative arts therapists, and those just beginning their exploration of the field. This type of electronic communication distributes e-mail sent by list serve participants to all members of the group. In other words, you will receive all the responses and entries made by others and your replies will be distributed to all other members of the list serve.

In order to participate in a list serve you first must subscribe to the service. This is accomplished by visiting a website and completing an application. Most list serves are free, but you must abide by the e-group's
rules and follow basic 'netiquette' (see below). If you decide later that you
do not want to be part of a particular list serve, you have to formally
'unsubscribe' to it in order to remove your name from the group.

With most active list serves, be prepared to receive daily e-mails from
members of the discussion. While you are not required to respond to each
and every e-post, if you do not like to receive copious amounts of e-mail, a
list serve may not be for you. Fortunately, many list serves offer the
opportunity to select what is known as a daily digest of e-mails to the
group; in other words, each day you receive a summary of all e-mails, and
an archive of the text of e-mails sent that day. This is a particularly useful
time-saving option when one is busy or away from one's office on business
or vacation.

Lastly, some e-groups are facilitated by an experienced leader who
guides the exchange, initiates themes for discussion, and sometimes even
settles squabbles among respondents. Other groups are less well organized
and you may receive numerous posts of a more general nature or
repeatedly asking basic questions (How do I get an art therapy job? Which
is the best art therapy graduate school?). So be forewarned; staying with a
list serve may require some patience and will add to the amount of mail in
your e-box.

Specific online groups and forums for art therapists
and related professionals

The following are three popular e-groups for art therapists and related
professionals.

- Web Forum for Professional Arts Therapists and Students
  [art_therapy-owner@egroups.com]

In response to the need for a more focused and professional
e-group for arts therapists, related professionals, and students,
Francine Lévesque created the Arts in Therapy web-based
discussion forum, open exclusively to professionals and students
(graduate level) of the arts in therapy. This forum provides the
opportunity to network, discuss relevant therapeutic issues, and
related material of professional interest. According to Lévesque, 'It
was born out of the expressed needs of a number of practicing art
therapists scattered around the world, who wanted to discuss the
"business" of arts in therapy, share their insights, challenges, and further the profession by pursuing their thinking and learning on the subject.'

To apply to become part of this forum, be prepared to receive daily e-mails from members of the discussion. While you are not required to respond to each and every e-post, if you do not like to receive copious amounts of e-mail you may not have the time to enjoy the amount of information and discussions that this forum has to offer. On the other hand, if you are a seasoned professional and like e-exchange, you will enjoy the diversity and depth this forum has to offer. Lévesque is a lively, informed and articulate e-group facilitator who lends her skills in electronic communication and keeps this forum engaging and timely.

- **Art Therapy in Canada** [http://home.ican.net/~phansen/index.html]

A very detailed website, Art Therapy in Canada, was developed by Petrea Hansen-Adamidis several years ago in response to the need for detailed information on art therapy. Part of this site includes a web forum, the Art Therapy Email List Group, that is delivered directly to your e-mailbox. To join, go to address listed above and follow instructions. Once you become a member of the group you may e-mail your messages to art_therapy@listbot.com and it will be sent to every person in the group. In contrast to the forum for professionals, this e-group delivers more general content because it is frequented by people curious about art therapy, newcomers to the field, and those with basic questions about jobs, education, and practice. However, despite the elementary nature of some of the posts, many professionals subscribe to this forum for networking purposes and to communicate with others throughout the world.

- **art-tx@eGroups.com**

In early 2000 US art therapist Bruce Moon started an informal e-discussion group with art therapy educators in the USA and throughout the world. The forum grew quickly and it was obvious that it needed to be formalized into a list serve to simplify communications. At that point another US art therapist, Carol Lark, with experience in developing and maintaining e-groups, set up an official list serve for this forum. The group currently has
over 100 participants and is growing as more art therapists come online.

Discussions have focused on the following topics: art therapy education theory, practice, and professional issues; current actions by the Board of Directors of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA); and various e-petitions on topics mostly related to the practice of art therapy in the US or issues before the AATA. To subscribe, go to eGroups.com and following instructions for locating and registering for the art-tx@eGroup.com discussion group. An archive of past discussions can be accessed there, as well as any current e-polls of topics and issues.

**Online message centers and live chats**

There are also possibilities for public communication online through message centers and bulletin boards (places where you can post messages for everyone who visits the site to read) and live online chats (areas where many people can meet online at a given time and type in responses on screen, a kind of ‘text’ conversation).

My initial response to online chats and bulletin boards was positive, imagining them as places for discussion and possibly even peer supervision (Malchiodi 1996b). However, after many years of observing both chats and bulletin boards, it seems that they are more useful as forums to disseminate basic information on the field rather than ways to debate or discuss advanced professional issues. Bulletin boards are great for those who are exploring the field of art therapy, but for the advanced professional they offer little new in the way of helpful information. The majority of entries on general art therapy bulletin boards and message centers are questions about where to obtain training, where to find work, and what to do with various client populations. Also, since what is entered onto a bulletin board or chat forum is permanent, many art therapists may be reluctant to submit an opinion that others will be able to read. Perhaps this is the nature of cyberspace itself: because one cannot see to whom one is talking in online forums and bulletin boards, body language and facial cues are not available as visual references. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations of messages frequently occur, often resulting in ruffled feathers and hurt feelings.
Both bulletin boards and online chats seem to go through phases where people are very active in the discussions to times when no one seems to be interested. For example, in 1994 and 1995, the Creative Arts Therapies folder in the health and medicine section of America Online (AOL) was very active, while currently it rarely receives a new entry. An Internet forum called CATCHAT, a bulletin board for creative arts therapists, professional colleagues, and those interested in art, music, dance and drama therapy created by Barbara Levy, ATR-BC, was also active during that time. It had daily entries, although many of those entries were, as previously mentioned, questions about training programs (where should I go to school?) or job opportunities (where do I find a job?).

When participating in either bulletin boards or live chat sessions there are some important factors to consider. For example, the chat host or discussion leader is not necessarily a qualified professional in the field or topic. I have attended quite a few chat sessions on America Online (AOL) in various health-care sections and have found the qualifications of the chat hosts to be uneven at best. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) do not necessarily pick the most qualified people for the job and qualifications seem to have little to do with selection of discussion leaders. The qualifications for facilitating group meetings are not based on clinical expertise, board certification, or any other medical credentials. Chat leaders are usually volunteers – individuals dedicated to a particular issue and interested in exchange with others on a specific topic. Although a facilitator may have a clinical background, their clinical profession is not always a qualification for facilitating a group online meeting because these types of communications are not intended for the provision of diagnostic or therapeutic recommendation. In some cases, such as cancer support groups or mental illness discussions, the chat may be facilitated by a layperson who has experienced a particular illness. Attending one of these online groups can be very helpful to professional development and personal education because it offers the opportunity to communicate directly with and learn from people with a physical disease or mental illness. The following are some fictitious examples of what you might see when visiting message centers or online bulletin boards.

*How Does Art Therapy Work? posted by WannabeAT: Hi, I am writing a paper about art therapy and I need some information. I am looking for a description of the process that an art therapist uses to do therapy.*
After the patient makes the art, what happens after that? Do you talk about the art? Is there more counseling after that? If anyone can post some information I would really appreciate it.

*Need Info on Art Therapy Right Away!* posted by *I-Love-Art*: Dear Readers: I am a fifteen-year-old high school student and am doing an independent research project for my psychology class. My research question is: Is there a relationship between the artist's picture and his childhood memories? I am asking volunteers to answer this question after they draw. Are there some other questions I should ask? Any suggestions? Please e-mail me.

*Interested in Art Therapy!* posted by *UndergradPsych*: Dear Sir: Hello and Greetings from the Philippines. I am an undergrad student in psychology with a minor in art. I recently heard about art therapy, and was wondering if you can provide me with more information. I think it sounds very interesting and it may be something I want to do. My parents want me to be a psychiatrist, but when I heard about art therapy, I was very interested, but I am really confused.

While these types of e-postings are sometimes very general, it is impressive that busy professionals take time to respond with helpful and detailed information. Often art therapy educators will respond, especially if the question comes from a potential art therapy student. At other times, clinicians may answer, taking time to 'e-mentor' an individual who has expressed an interest in knowing more about art therapy. Web forums where archives of postings are listed are generally monitored by a group facilitator who, on occasion, answers questions posted on the forum and may provide advice about how and what to post, where to find general information, or on using electronic communication in general.

On some message centers and e-groups, a theme or issue is responded to in depth, with numerous postings to an initial question:

*Computer Art Therapy: Is There Such a Thing?* posted by *Artx GradStudent*: I am an art therapy student in France and am doing a research project on computers and art therapy. I am writing about computer-based art therapy in psychiatry and medicine. Are there any art therapists working with the computer as the focus of the session? If so, I would love to hear about your experiences. I am also looking for any possible information about this subject. Please help.
While this is a fictionalized example based on a real message, it is a good example of the kind of post that will yield numerous responses, due to its clarity. The actual posted message generated five very helpful responses, largely because the person took the time to fashion a specific question about an area of interest. Responses included two art therapists in the US and Canada who actually conducted computer art therapy sessions with a variety of populations; two names of art therapists to contact for advice; and a website containing thesis material on the subject of computer art therapy. If posting a question on a list serve or message center, it is helpful to be as specific as possible in one's request for information. This example is certainly an instance when electronic communication can be indispensable in locating hard-to-find information on a topic (in this case, computer art therapy) — information that by nature is not easily accessible through a standard library search, especially if a person lives in a remote area. While a response may not be instantaneous, chances are that someone will offer a suggestion or a lead as to where to look or whom to contact for more information.

**Art therapy online bulletin boards**

The following are examples of current websites where art therapists can post messages and questions online.

- *Creative Arts Therapies International [http://www.behavior.net]*

  This forum focuses on all the arts therapies and is a place where one can post ideas, thoughts, and questions relevant to the topic. The forum is open to anyone and can be accessed through Behavior Online (once you reach the main page, click on Creative Arts Therapies International), a well-respected site that has been in existence for many years and receives approximately 1000 hits per day. The forum has recently been updated and improved and is now hosted by Consulting Editors, Martin Perdoux, MAAT, ATR, and this book's author. Perdoux, the main host of the forum, hopes that the site will continue to represent the diversity of artistic modalities, approaches, and viewpoints. Topics include, but are not limited to: art-based research; art and the environment; art and spirituality; cultural dimensions of creative arts therapies; ethics of care; the relationship between visual arts, performance
and music; theoretical issues; treatment outcomes; therapists' own art making; the variety and scope of professional settings for practice; and the discussion of case vignettes. Dialogue is open to qualified professionals and students preparing for a professional role.

- **Art Therapy Student Networking Forum**
  [http://forums.delpbi.com/atstudents/start/]

This forum (Figure 3.1) provides discussion groups and website for art therapy undergraduate and graduate students to network, share ideas, and communicate with each other. The Art Therapy Student Networking Forum is divided into seven areas: General Discussions, Announcements, Art Therapy Links, Jobs/Internships/Networking, Arts, Events, and AATA Student Subcommittee News. Recent discussions have included starting out as an art therapy student; how to get paid for your work; general discussions on graduate programs in art therapy; studying art therapy in the US; and working with specific populations of interest to discussants.

Gretchen Miller, founder and coordinator of the forum, observes that most of the visitors have been students. At the site's inception in January 1999 many of the 'hits' were from graduate art therapy students enrolled in AT programs. She started the forum as a result of her work as the Chair of the AATA's Student Subcommittee, obtaining a large list of e-mail addresses from past national conferences from which she was able to encourage art therapy students to join the forum. In subsequent years word has spread about the forum through Internet searches and 'electronic' word of mouth.

Miller notes that recently more undergraduate students are posting, inquiring about art therapy graduate programs, how to apply to graduate schools, and what current art therapy students think about the programs in which they are enrolled. High school students and postgraduate professionals both in the US and abroad have also visited the forum. At the time of writing, over 200 people visit the forum per month. The forum also hosts live, online chats with art therapists and logs of these chats can be accessed through the site.
Online chats
There are 'real-time' ways to communicate with other art therapists over the Internet. They are known by several names, the most recognized being online 'chats,' where, at designated times, a group of people decides to meet at a specific location in cyberspace. Many Internet providers have designated 'chat rooms' where two or more people can meet and use their computer keyboard to type in text, having something like a conversation online. Currently, art therapist Chriss Berk (aka: LucyLu@aol.com) conducts a live chat for creative arts therapists and anyone interested in the arts therapies on America Online.

Netiquette: Behaving yourself online
There is a word, netiquette, that has been coined to define appropriate online communication between two or more people, whether it be in the form of e-mail, list serve posts, or online live chat sessions. Netiquette has evolved in response to the need for rules of courtesy and behavior when communicating with others through the Internet. The following section provides a general overview of netiquette and can be applied to any online communications with others.

Basic rules of netiquette
CHECK YOUR SPELLING
While the Internet and e-mail seem like informal places for communication, on the Net you are what you type. People come to know you through the messages you send. Use your spell-checker; although spell-checkers are not perfect, at least they can find some of your errors and will guarantee that your electronic messages have genuine words in them.

CAPITAL LETTERS
DO NOT SEND YOUR MESSAGES ENTIRELY IN CAPITAL LETTERS. On the Internet this is seen as shouting and is considered rude and undesirable. This is especially true in chat rooms where a group of people are having a live, online conversation.