

Art Therapy Meets Digital Art and Social Multimedia

Art therapy goes digital in the 21st century...well maybe.

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"Head Together" by Liabelh Lannbar, Art Therapy Student

Traditional materials of 20th century visual arts--drawing, painting, sculpture, and collage or mixed media--have defined the field of art therapy for the past 50 years. In fact, most educational programs that offer art therapy coursework or related degrees require applicants to demonstrate proficiency in drawing, painting, and sculpture as part of prerequisites. But as digital technology has become more accessible and straight-forward, practitioners of art therapy are gradually including digital media as a method and means for client self-expression. Well, maybe...

A decade before the explosion of social multimedia [YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Skype, and the like] and availability of digital art making programs via one's home computer or Internet, I wrote a short text on the topic of computers and art therapy, *Art Therapy and Computer Technology: A Virtual Studio of Possibilities*. First, please don't buy it [my publisher will surely gasp now] unless you want to have a good laugh. It published was 1999 when I had no clue about where digital media was headed, although some of my guesses at where things might go turned out to be accurate. For example, the use of

video [now digital] to capture and play back portions of sessions to clients is more common; this medium has proven to be particularly useful in the treatment of trauma-related symptoms such as avoidance and dissociation in children and adults. Telemedicine and the possibility of Internet art therapy sessions were mentioned in the book; both areas continue to expand, and in tandem with numerous ethical, legal, and best practice issues still undecided by state licensure boards and professional associations. Art therapists have, of course, capitalized on the visual elements in the digital age. Some receive client artwork via electronic means between sessions, use web cams or Skype with individuals in rural or remote locations, and use digital art making programs to stimulate creative exploration.

In that particular text, I also cited computer art dinosaurs such as MacPaint and its limited counterparts of the time period. Admittedly, I had no psychic vision about the explosion of media possibilities that now emerge on Mashable everyday of the week in this early 21st century. Even today's reigning social media czar Twitter can be used to power virtual art. Tweets are being created and "mashed up" with other content make online art; you can make "portwiture," "twitterfountain," and "twyric" [a mashup of Flickr and Twitter] on your iPhone. There are also accessible film animation programs like Animoto and image manipulation sites like Polyvore [which you can read more about in my next blog] readily available to anyone on the Internet.

How does the move from using one's hands to hold a brush or pencil or to glue, cut, shape, or manipulate materials impact the outcome and benefits of art therapy in practice? As I noted last year in "[Drawing on the Effort-Driven Rewards Circuit to Chase the Blues Away](#)," using our hands to create meaningful images or objects may mediate depression as a result of stimulating specific parts of our brains simultaneously. The verdict [research] is not in yet about the impact of digital media on emotions or overall mental health when used in therapy. Creating with the available digital art programs is a somewhat different experience because it generally involves a keyboard or a digital tablet as the points of contact with the medium and a computer screen. So what's the impact of creating digital images as a form of art therapy? There is only anecdotal comment from art therapists themselves, but there are a few studies from outside the field that underscore some of the benefits of computer-based media. [Project Sketch-Up/Project Spectrum](#) is one such program that has been researched for use with children with autism; here's a short film on how it is used:

The results of Sketch-Up impress me because they not only underscore that people with autism tend to respond through visual and/or spatial intelligence, but also that using a computer drawing program is actually much more gratifying than a pencil on paper for most participants. In fact, many of the children reported that, "drawing was painful" and clearly not pleasurable. The added bonus of the Sketch-Up program is the skill set it apparently imparts; children learn how to perform and excel at tasks that form a foundation for more advanced computer skills in engineering and tech fields as an adult. In my current work with returning military and the Polyvore program, I am hearing similar comments about accessibility, skill-building, and most importantly, gratification with the imagery created and process of creating it.

Ironically, art therapy as a field is a slow adopter of new ideas; in a recent special art therapy journal issue on technology, there was no reference to the well-known Project Sketch-up and many of the very commonplace digital and social multimedia advancements. Art therapy has been hesitant to even recognize photography as an important medium in treatment and intervention; art therapists tend to remain loyal to traditions, even when those traditions are not proven to be best practices. Meanwhile, younger generations of potential clientele have grown up on digital and social multimedia and are more attuned to them than pencil or paintbrush. In the case of people with autism spectrum disorders, there are some emerging trends that beg the field to reconsider its best practices with this population; drawing or painting may simply not be the best strategy for everyone.

How will the exponential growth of digital art platforms and social media play out in terms of their impact on self-expression and visual creativity as therapy? First, the field of art therapy will have to catch up with fast-moving changes in digital and social media as well as develop research studies to evaluate the benefits of these media with the hands-on activities such as drawing, painting, modeling, constructing, and assembling. In the interim, [Art Therapy, Digital Technology and Social Media](#) provides an ongoing discussion via the social networking service LinkedIn .

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