

Editorial

Art Therapists in Cyberspace

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Cyberspace is a familiar catch-all phrase for the infinite world of computer networks that include the Internet and the World Wide Web. The Internet or "the Net" is the mother of all computer networks and was originally developed for communications purposes by the US Department of Defense in the 1960s. Eventually, businesses, institutions, and the general public connected to the Internet, with the number of people using the Net skyrocketing in the 90s.

The World Wide Web (a.k.a. WWW or the Web) is generally considered to be the most popular spot of the Internet, an area in which individuals, organizations, institutions, and businesses have developed sites commonly known as Web pages. It is commonplace these days to hear someone speaking about his or her personal Web page, to notice more "www" addresses appearing on business cards and advertisements, and to encounter numerous Web sites during cyberspace travel. Currently, the AATA, several chapters, creative arts therapies associations, the National Creative Arts Therapies Association (NCATA), and a few enterprising art therapists have developed Web pages. The AATA Web page (www.arttherapy.org) has been up for more than a year and is currently devoted to governmental affairs and to providing the names of Board and Committee Chairs. Since mostly students travel the Internet, hopefully the AATA will include additional resources, more detailed information on membership, professional opportunities, education, and publications on its Web site in the near future.

Although the Internet and the Web have become popular ways to communicate, cyberspace may not be the most frequently used form of communication between art therapists. However, given its popularity and versatility, it is still one that every art therapist ought to experience at least once. Some believe that cyberspace is the ultimate form of networking with other art therapists. For example, Danny Sofer's Web page (<http://www.sofer.com/art-therapy/>) notes the following:

The Web offers many things that existing forms of communication (newsletters, magazines, conferences, meetings) offer, but it also offers many advantages: it is cheap; it is global; it is collaborative; it is democratic; it creates fast feedback loops; and it's becoming increasingly ubiquitous.

While the Internet and the WWW offer many opportunities for art therapists wishing to communicate with others both within and outside of the field, it is not always clear what the actual advantages are. For instance, it is difficult to say that online communications are "cheap"; in reality, the cost of using the Internet or online services that are necessary to surf the Net or browse the Web is quite variable. For students and educators at universities, luckily there is generally no cost or a very nominal fee for access to the Internet and the Web. But for the average art therapist,

access through a home computer is the most likely way to get to the Internet or browse the Web. This requires a considerable amount of capital, including a computer with adequate capacity to use an online program, and a way to get online (e.g., a service such as America Online, CompuServe, or other company for a monthly fee of anywhere from \$10/per month and up). Getting online also requires a modem and may require a separate phone line if you want to keep your main home or office line free to receive calls while online. If one really wants to fully experience cyberspace, manuals and magazine subscriptions to publications such as *NetGuide* may also be necessary.

Going online also requires that you have considerable free time to spend staring at your computer screen. Unfortunately, most online users have slow access speeds—in other words, they have modems that transmit data at 9600 bits per second or less. There are modems that transmit information at 14,400 bps (bits per second) and 28,800 bps, and some people at universities have direct cable access which can transmit data at very high speeds. Most art therapists who have a modem are likely to have one with a slower access speed which often means that online travel is sluggish and visiting Web pages which have many graphics to download can be extremely frustrating.

One clear advantage of online communication is the ability to be interactive with other art therapists and professionals, even around the world. Once one is online there are a variety of ways to communicate with other individuals and groups. The most popular way is probably e-mail (electronic mail). This is a direct form of communication similar to leaving a message on someone's phone answering machine, except that e-mail messages are sent as text and deposited at the address or mail box of the recipient. An amusing part of electronic mail is the use of online monikers; in most cases you are able to choose your online name and some art therapists have been quite inventive with their choices. I have interacted with a MrCrayon, Larkster, Cyanotype, BlueHer674, GO LIVE IT, CrowMother, Mystickona, PLAYMIKE, and PurpleArt, to name a few. There are some people I only remember by their cyberspace names, forgetting or, in some cases, never knowing their "Earth" names at all.

In the area of speed and convenience, communication via cyberspace, versus phone communication or snail mail, has many advantages. I now take for granted that I will receive e-mails each week from throughout the US, will regularly find notes from colleagues in Europe, Asia, and South America, and will be able to send a communication to someone on the other side of the world in seconds. For example, cyberspace has made it possible and easy to work on a manuscript with another art therapist in Scotland, to get information on what Asian art therapists are doing, and talk with a publisher in Brazil, all from my home computer.

There are also possibilities for public communication online through 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, 1996). However, after three years of observing both chats and bulletin boards, it seems that they are more useful as support groups for art therapists rather than ways to debate or discuss professional issues. The majority of entries on bulletin boards and folders are questions about where to obtain training, where to find work, and what to do with various client populations. Perhaps this is the nature of cyberspace itself: since one cannot see who one is talking to 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. 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.

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 Better Health & Medical Network of America Online (AOL) was very active, while currently it rarely receives new entries. Similarly, the Creative Arts Therapist's online chats on AOL were once well-attended, while the current chats attract little participation. Perhaps that will change as more art therapists come online.

On the other hand, an Internet forum created by Barbara Levy, ATR-BC, called CATCHAT™ (<http://plaza.interport.net/cats>) is a very active bulletin board for creative arts therapists, professional colleagues, and those interested in art, music, dance, and drama therapy. I visited the art therapy section while writing this editorial and at that time it had daily entries, although those entries are generally questions about training programs (where should I go to school?) or job opportunities (where do I find a job?). For the seasoned professional there is little advanced material; however, these cyber-forums for art therapists are helpful for students or novice therapists who are asking basic questions and looking for information on how and where art therapists practice.

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. AOL does not necessarily pick the most qualified people for the job; according to Elin Silveous, co-coordinator of the Better Health & Medical Network/AOL, qualifications seem to have little to do with selection of discussion leaders:

The qualifications for facilitating group meetings in the Better Health & Medical Network are not based on clinical expertise, board certification, nor any other medical credentials. Although a facilitator may have a clinical background, their clinical profession is not a qualification for facilitating a group meeting in the Better Health & Medical Network. As you know, our group meetings are

not intended for the provision of diagnostic nor therapeutic recommendation. Our selection of facilitators for start-up group meetings in the Better Health & Medical Network is based on numerous factors, but health care background is not one of them. (online communication)

This lack of quality control is not limited to live online chats. Web pages are generally not subject to any critical review; whoever creates them may use them to present select information, generate business, or promote oneself or one's services, just as one would create an advertisement for a newspaper or a highway billboard. What you may read on a Web page is not necessarily the truth or the best information, and is only as accurate as the person who wrote or compiled it.

There is indeed a democracy involved in the Internet as Sofer noted; no one controls or owns the Net or what goes onto it. The downside of the situation is no one controls what information is placed in cyberspace, thus quality control is almost nonexistent. However, the upside is cyberspace does allow for free expression of thoughts and ideas, a welcome concept in this day and age.

There are numerous pros and cons of venturing into cyberspace and it certainly may not be for every art therapist. Cybertravel is intriguing, but it does take patience and a lot of time, even with the fastest modem or direct cable access. Like many individuals, I was initially excited about the Net and the Web, but I eventually found that I did not have the time to devote to wading through it. E-mail—like snail mail, phone messages, and faxes—has become one more item that I have to attend and respond to on a regular basis. Live online chats, which interested me at the outset, now seem to be a tedious way of communicating with others and have the missing element of hearing a voice or seeing a face. Bulletin boards are great for those who are exploring the field of art therapy, but for the advanced professional offer little new in the way of helpful information. Also, there is currently so much information on the Net and the Web that one would need to be either retired from active practice or unemployed to pursue reading even a fraction of it.

However, would I give up traveling cyberspace? No, I would not. I enjoy the ability to quickly communicate with people around the world, an impossible notion only a few years ago. I also have come to take for granted that I can search the Web for research data in areas such as Medline and ERIC from the comfort of my home office. Most of all, I like the idea of being able to travel through "space" that is still largely undefined and often uncharted, somewhat like the field of art therapy. Perhaps this is one characteristic that makes cyberspace attractive to those art therapists who want to boldly go where few have gone before.

Reference

- Malchiodi, C. A. (1996). Peer supervision. In C. Malchiodi & S. Riley, *Supervision & related issues: A handbook for professionals* (pp. 116-123). Chicago, IL: Magnolia Street Publishers.

Editor's Note: Another interesting art therapy Web page is one constructed by Petrea Hansen, Art Therapy in Canada (<http://www.io.org/~phansen/index.html>). Hansen has compiled a series of bibliographies that are well worth a visit if you are conducting a literature search or simply browsing the Web for information on art therapy.