

Reflection on the use of 'active imagination'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

‘ Active Imagination’ by Akira Zosens, 2014.

As ‘ Student Art Therapists’, we have experienced a variety of therapeutic techniques with the opportunity to receive valuable client feedback.

A particularly powerful session, for me as both client and therapist was a process that incorporated *Active Imagination* .

‘ Active Imagination’ was a method articulated by Carl Jung in 1935 (Stevens, 1994), which involves the exploration of the imagination through contemplation of one’s evolving mental images. Through Active Imagination the client is encouraged to reach what Jung referred to as a ‘ Transcendent Function’ (McNiff, 2004, p. 173)

The Process – Drawing From The Non-Dominant Hand

What lies upon the periphery of consciousness is invited forward through the process of drawing with the non-dominant hand, and closed eyes.

Afterwards, the client reflects on the image and allows their imagination to unfold from the sketches they have illustrated. This then gives shape to unconscious content, which enables the client to engage creatively with their illustration.

Art therapist, Lucia Capacchione “ infers that using the non-dominant hand may access parts of an individual’s personality that are previously unknown” (Malchiodi, 2007, p. 113). The client is invited to search for deeper meaning through a dialogue with their identified symbols.

Therapist's Experience

During the process we created a space that provides a ' safe container' for the client to explore themselves through creative arts therapies.

For this particular exercise, this step is crucial due to the vulnerable position of the client, who is venturing into ' unknown territory': both during the process (with eyes closed) and in revealing unconscious material. My client was a little nervous and fairly new to this process. By using the client's name, maintaining eye contact and gently easing them into the space, I relaxed the client into the session.

As therapist, I ensured that our workspace was neat and my presence was warm and inviting. Within the space was a large table, where the client could either sit or stand before a large blank sheet of paper and coloured pastels. I decided to use Soft Pastels, as they would give the client a sense of tactile control.

Working with Creative Arts Therapies, has really emphasised how the entire atmosphere impacts upon the therapeutic session. Although we were in an educational context, where each student had prior understanding of the exercise, I was consciously aware of the importance of explaining the process: " you will be closing your eyes and working with your non-dominant hand, which will guide your pastel over the page. Feel free to use other colours, and draw for as long as you wish." I wanted to give the client flexibility and for the process to come to a ' natural close'; but perhaps needed to be more direct in regards to time-constraints.

I noticed the client's gesture and motion as they began the process. They appeared assertive and purposeful in the way they created lines and scribbles upon the page, at times pausing whilst feeling into their body.

Opening their eyes, they looked amazed at the image beneath their eyes.

Afterwards, I asked the client to engage in Active Imagination as my client reflected on the image from a various angles, naming symbols and images that emerged from the page.

The client consciously illustrated around a chosen image (an 'arrow' which became a 'signpost'). This symbol was explored further through a series of questions, which guided the client to explore the significance of this image. From here, we were able to see how the image relates to their personal life experiences and the need for 'Direction'.

In retrospect, I feel that I should have emphasised that the illustrations were not intended for artistic critique or analysis. Another part of the exercise that I would have done differently would have been to stand at a reasonable distance from the client: enough to be present, for the client to hear my voice and for me to observe the process. I had taken a seat beside the client, which I felt restricted their ability to move whilst drawing and may have invaded their personal space.

This was a positive experience for me to witness the client's process unfold, as well as observing gestures, movement and how the client reflected upon the image's messages.

Client Reflection and Feedback

My client mentioned that they 'received answers to questions' through the process of Active Imagination. They were able to reflect insightfully upon patterns in their own life from the dialogue between 'unconscious image' and active imagination.

The client referred to me as having a "warm and welcoming presence" and that they "felt comfortable" in the space with me. They also mentioned that I could have been more thorough in explaining the process before we began.

"I felt unsure at times," was one response to my execution of the process, where I could have had more of a guiding role. I had made quite a few assumptions based on my own experience as being the client. For example, my client would have preferred a *verbal* dialogue with the image, as opposed to a *visual* dialogue. This feedback has allowed me to reflect on different approaches that could be used to assist a diverse range of clients.

Conclusion

During class discussion, we considered the types of people who would benefit from the process of Active Imagination and 'Drawing From The Unconscious'. This exercise would be beneficial for clients with neuroses, where they can explore different perspectives and receive insights enhancing their ability to access inner guidance.

Although I was quite nervous facilitating for the first time, I felt that applying Active Imagination to an image, which was created from an unconscious and visceral source, allowed the client to connect imagination with intuition.

I had also experienced this process as the client and was positively overwhelmed by the images I had produced from the unconscious, which served as significant messengers.

This process would certainly be something that I would take into my own work as a therapist in the future. My intrigue into Active Imagination lead me to also practise this technique with a sceptical friend, who told me how profound the outcome of this exercise was and how applicable their 'unconscious' images were to their present-day life.

References

* Malchiodi, Cathy A, 2007. *The Art Therapy Sourcebook* . McGraw Hill, USA.

*McNiff, Shaun. 2004. *Art Heals*. Shambhala, USA.

*Stevens, Anthony, 1994. *Jung: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, New York.