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CREATIVE ART THERAPY PROGRAM: CASE STUDY ON MALAY MUSLIM INMATES AT SUNGAI UDANG PRISON IN MELAKA

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study on Malay Muslim inmates at Sungai Udang Prison in Melaka. By referring to a Triangular Relationship concept founded by art therapists, a new model, which complies with the teaching of Islam, is developed. Basically it encompasses the Client, the Artwork, the Therapist and Allah (the Almighty). From this model two measurement stages (Pre Test and Post Test) were also established. In the Pre Test stage, the inmates were instructed to complete four drawing modules that include Contour Drawing (CD), Self Reflection Drawing (SRD), Memory Drawing (MD) and Visual Diary (VD). In the Post Test stage, the inmates were given a task to produce freestyle art on canvas (3' x 4'). In addition a survey was also conducted to assess the outcome of the program. Based on our observation, it shows that majority of the Malay Muslim inmates were able to demonstrate artistic ability despite limited resources and strict prison rules. Even more interesting is the fact that they were able to visualize inner feelings, emotions and spiritual sense through creative art. We conclude that the creative art therapy program conducted at the Sungai Udang Prison in Melaka has opened a new paradigm for researcher to explore the therapeutic value of creative art in Malaysian prison. The outcome of the study in a way has helped the inmates to divert their negative emotion (angry, anxiety, fear, frustration) and find pleasure in creative art.

Keywords: Creative Art Therapy, Malaysian Prison, Triangular Relationship

Introduction

Many prisons especially in the western countries have been employing creative art as an alternative therapy on incarcerated law offenders. According to a scholar, Art therapy is a pragmatic approach in the sense that it allows the client (inmates) to discover new connection involving the discovery of new connections, relationships and meanings in a safe and non-judgmental atmosphere, which in turn provides the client with alternative perspectives on life and relationships with others. Thus, art therapy can work in multifaceted ways involving the whole person including sensory-motor, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, physical, social and spiritual aspects. Growth through art is seen as a sign of growth through the whole person (Karkou and Sanderson 2006).

Background of the study

On April 2nd-2014, a research group comprising lecturers from the Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Melaka participated in a unique creative art program at the Sungai Udang Prison in Melaka. The project, which is classified under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Knowledge Transfer Program (KTP) intends to share the experience of art and design lecturers with prison communities

Problem Statement

Malaysian prison authorities have been using multiple rehabilitation approaches to help inmates change their mind, attitude and behavior. Among the common ones are vocational training, counseling services and spiritual care. Despite all the efforts, surprisingly creative art has not been fully utilized. According to a prison counselor at the Sungai Udang Prison in Melaka, creative art is not considered as part of the rehabilitation program. Nevertheless, he adds that the prison authorities of Sungai Udang Prison have recognized few talented inmates and allow them to create mural paintings as a way to beautify the prison complex. Most of these inmates possess positive attitude as compared to other inmates. The counselor notices that majority of the inmates who love to do painting are passionate, respectful, non-aggressive and enthusiastic. Actually the relationship between creative art and prison communities is not uncommon. Consider the demolished Puduraya Prison in Kuala Lumpur. This iconic prison complex was once admired by local and foreign tourists for its beautiful tropical landscape painting and was dubbed as the longest mural painting by the Guinness Book of Record. Hence the following questions are posed. How do Malaysian inmates respond to creative art? How effective does creative art in changing their mind, attitude and behavior? Can creative art dilute stress and elevate self-esteem? In this regards an empirical study is needed to establish understanding regarding the effectiveness of creative art therapy in Malaysian prison.

Literature Review

With rugged image of tall concrete wall, iron bars, state of the art security system and armed guards, surely this is not a place where you want to end up living in. Victoria R. DeRosia (1998) states that the common vision that most of us have regarding prison life can not match the real atmosphere setting. She claims that law offenders who are sentenced to prison will experience not only physical torture but the effect of dehumanization. They will be "stripped off" from their identity, pride, dignity, freedom and hope. What is left for them is only the memory of the past. Ironically though, there are cases where inmates are reluctant to return to be released. Instead they regard prisons as safe heavens.

Zelma Weston-Henriques and Delores D. Jones Brown (2000, p.267) claim that there are evidences that some societies view prisons as places of relative comfort and stability, places of where the government is mandated to protect the individual and places of employment. Watterson (1996, cited in Weston-Henriques & Jones Brown, 2000, p. 269) states that some female inmates feel comfortable living in a prison due to their relationship with other inmates. Hence it is not surprising why many ex-inmates who had been released would purposely commit another crime so that they can return to prison. According to Larry Segal (2010), prisons should be regarded as "total institution" where freedom and comfort do not exists. The rationale behind this concept is to convince inmates that being incarcerated is a form of punishment and that the idea or intention to return after being released should be discarded totally.

James Gilligan (2012), a clinical professor of psychiatry and adjunct professor of law at New York University asserts that more than two third of inmates in the united states reoffend within three years of leaving prison. This phenomenon thus leaves a question regarding the effectiveness of prison system. Apparently the "punishment" program has somewhat cause inmates to become aggressive and violent. He believes that the solution to the problem is by treating inmates with exactly the same degree of respect and kindness so that when they return to the community, they would show to others. Therefore it is important for authority to have an effective treatment program while the inmates are incarcerated.

Creative Art in Prison

Despite many arguments about the effectiveness of the rehabilitation program, it is still uncertain as to what extent does prison life affect inmates. In this sense perhaps it is appropriate for local community to view prison as a correctional institution rather than just a place for punishing law offenders. Many prisons particularly in the western countries have adopted an alternative therapy method called Art Therapy (AT) on incarcerated law offenders. Scholars assert that AT is a humanistic approach because it enables inmates to discover "new connections, relationships and meanings in a safe and non-judgmental atmosphere". Furthermore, AT can be utilized in multiple ways involving the whole person including sensory-motor, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, physical, social and spiritual aspects. In this regards the achievement through art is a significant one which is also comparable to the achievement of the whole person (Karkou and Sanderson 2006).

In Creating Wellness in Correctional Populations Through the Arts: An Interdisplinary Model, David E. Gussak and Evelyn Ploumis-Devick (2004, p.35) states that creative and interpretive art can "provide individuals with a type of transformational bridge to personal awareness and development". With the ability to create good art, inmates can earn respect and self satisfaction. Actually the ability of creating artwork among inmates is not a new phenomenon but has started since ancient times. One scholar gives an example that during the Roman era, gladiators who are enslaved and incarcerated would be scratching graffiti on the wall of the prison barrack (Kornfeld, 1997). During Napoleanic Wars dated 1795 -1815, inmates exchanged handmade handicrafts with jailers for food and clothing. All these evidences show that art is a tradition practiced in prison. So why do inmates create art? Gussak (2004) claims that one of the reason is due to the primitive instinctual impulses. Figuratively speaking, by creating art, inmates can liberate themselves for a few moments into his or hers creative realm and forget the harsh environment of prison. For prison authorities, this act is acceptable since it does not harm themselves or other inmates. The famous artist, Vincent Van Gogh for instance created hundreds of painting while being confined in an Asylum at Saint –Remy, France.

Triangular Relationship

To carry out the program, the study approached a concept called Triangular Relationship (TR) which was introduced by therapists (Case, 1990; Wood, 1990; Schaverien, 1990). Initially it comprises of the artwork, the client and the therapist. According to Catherine Wood (1990) TR can be seen as 'mirroring process' in which its effect is similar when a person has a reflection from artwork and the therapist. Joy Schaverien (1990) states that TR concept put emphasis on gazes between the therapist, the artwork and the client. In theory, it will projects an in-between space of therapeutic relationship which engages the gaze between the client and the therapist. In spite of this, we discover that TR concept suggested by the western scholars lacks spiritual sense that is the relationship with the divinity of Allah (the Almighty). In Islam, this can be referred as 'Tawheed' or the oneness of Allah. Therefore, the modified triangular relationship model comprises of the Therapist, the Client, the Artwork and

Allah (Figure 1). In this sense, no matter what the outcome of the relationship may be it should directs to Allah, which is the final destiny for all human beings.

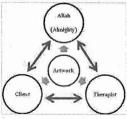


Figure 1

Scope & limitations

The study was carried out by a group of art design researchers from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Melaka on 21 April 2014 until 28 April 2014. Eighteen (n=18) Malay Muslim inmates from Sg Udang Prison in Melaka were selected by the prison authorities to participate in this study. Majority of them are incarcerated for sex offense case (376) and drug abuse (39B). The selection was made based on two categories; (1) The inmates have basic knowledge in art and are talented (2) The inmates have no background in art but are interested to learn it.

Research Questions:

- 1. What level of knowledge (or skills) does the inmates possess before the program?
- 2. What are the inmates' expectations regarding art?
- 3. Does creative art help improve self esteem among the inmates?
- 4. Can the inmates produce artworks with high artistic value?

Method & Procedures:

The method for this study involves two measurement stages, the Pre-Test and the Post-Test. Prior to this, the inmates were given an ice-breaking activity by introducing a topic regarding creative art. The following lists are the topics discussed:

- 1. An introduction to art (General history)
- 2. Formal Aspect (Form, Shape, Line, Color)
- 3. Drawing technique and style
- 4. Content and meaning

The purpose of the lecture was to help the inmates familiarize and understand creative art as well as to inspire. During this stage, several impromptu exercises were given which include drawing three squares, three triangles and three circles on a blank paper; connecting three dots without lifting the pen and solving simple equation. These exercises are designed to stimulate creative mind and eliminate stereotypical view. After the lecture, the inmates were divided into two groups with ten (n=10) members each. Four instructors monitored the group inmates. During the drawing activities, the instructors did not dictate or intervene. This is to ensure that the end result will not be influenced or manipulated.

Pre-Test Measure

The Pre-Test Measure stage involves four drawing exercises. They are Contour Drawing (CD), Self Reflection Portrait (SRP), Memory Drawing (MD) and Visual Diary (VD). In the first exercise (CD), the inmates are taught to create an outline drawing of a still life object using only a black felt-tip pen and a sketch paper. The aim was to train the inmates to synchronize the movement of the eyes with the movement of the hands. However the inmates were not allowed to make any corrections but to continue on. In the second drawing exercise (SRP), the inmates were asked to choose a partner and then draw each other face. The aim here was to train the inmates to recognize the distinctive characteristic of their partner. In the third drawing task (MD the inmates were asked visualize their love ones and make a portrait of them. This particular task was intended to encourage the inmates to use their emotions and then transfer them on paper. Finally in the fourth exercise (VD), each of the inmates were given a task to sketch freely and record their daily activities within seven days or one week. From all of these exercises, approximately one hundred individual sketches have been produced.

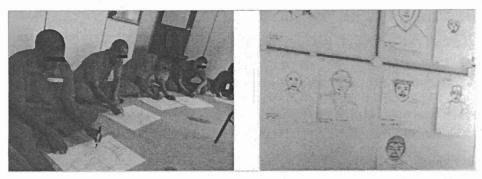


Figure 1: Contour Drawing (CD)

Figure 2: Self Reflection Drawing (SRD)

Post-Test Measure

The Post-Test Measure stage four groups of inmates participated in a painting exercise administered by facilitators. The group members were asked to create a freestyle abstract painting based on the drawings they have sketched earlier. In this exercise, the inmates were expected to explore and apply all possible techniques to create freestyle painting.

Program Outcome Survey

The final stage of the creative art therapy program is a survey. Here the study intends to assess the program outcome especially on the effectiveness of the creative art program module. A set of questionnaire was distributed among the inmates, which concentrated on positive feeling at the end of the program. Basically there are seven key items in the survey. They are categorized as Confidence, Excited, Peaceful, Skills, Creativity, Relax and Keen. These (positive feeling) items essentially will help researcher determine the level of understanding and appreciation among the inmates regarding the creative art therapy modules.

Result and Discussion

In the Pre-test measure stage, we observe that the inmates were hesitant when asked to draw. To understand why, we then asked the inmates to state their opinion. One inmate said that his artwork might look ridiculous and worried that his fellow inmates will make fun of him. Another inmate said that he is nervous because he does not know how to coordinate his eyes and hand simultaneously. Despite many excuses, all of the inmates completed the Contour Drawing (CD) exercise. After a few attempts, we notice that majority of the inmates were able to draw contour line of a still subject and managed to control their hand movement. Their drawings were collected, displayed and discussed openly. During this session, we asked what they think about the contour drawings exercise. Majority of the inmates said that they could not believe that a simple contour drawing can be very challenging and exciting. They also said that the Contour Drawing (CD) exercise made them aware about the importance of controlling the eye and hand as well as staying focus to the subject.

Regarding the Self Reflection Drawing (SRD) exercise, we notice that the inmates were facing difficulties in drawing the human face especially eyes, nose and mouth. Despite some imperfections, the final portraits display reasonable artistic quality. When asked to present their drawing, most of them responded with smile, giggles and laugh. They were amused because none of the portraits resemble like real people let alone themselves. However the intention of SRD exercise was not to humiliate the inmates but rather to train them to see their reflection from other people view. When explained about this, they realized that the human face is an important factor, which communicates

inner feelings that in non visible to human eyes. Hence the reflection in the mirror may be partially true but a different point of view (from other inmates) might give more meaning. This exercise is meant to help the inmates to listen to other people opinion and accept criticism.

In the Memory Drawing (MD) exercise, we observe how inmates recall the face of their family members. It is surprising that there are inmates who could not even remember the face of their father, mother and siblings. This was probably due to the effect of being incarcerated for many years. The images (of their family) gradually faded and eventually disappear from their memory. To help the inmates recall the faces of their love ones, we asked them to focus on certain personality traits such as mole, scars, nose, ears, hair style and so forth. It is interesting that the inmates finally were able to visualize their love ones by referring to their personality traits.

In the Visual Diary (VD) exercise, we observe how the inmates document their daily activities. They were asked to draw anything using a sketchbook and a felt tip marker and to complete the task within seven days (one week). The result produces a variety of subject matters and drawing styles. Interestingly, the inmates were not only producing drawings but also enhance them with narrative and meaning. One inmate said that his drawing expresses how much he misses his parents (Figure 3). His drawing depicts two human figures (male and female), representing his father and mother on the right whereas on the left page he drew graphic art with. Another inmates expressed his feeling about his home (Figure 4). His drawing depicts a rural landscape with coconut trees, a hut, and mountains in the background scene. What is interesting about VD exercise is the fact that the inmates have discovered multiple ways to tell their stories and share their thoughts through creative art.

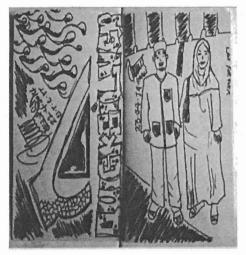




Figure 3

Figure 4

In the Post Test measurement stage, the inmates were given a task to create five freestyle paintings on 3' by 4' canvas. An interesting fact about this exercise is that the inmates worked in a group instead of individual to create freestyle paintings. To begin the process, we asked the inmates to discuss among themselves and then select the best ideas. From this point they are asked to complete the artwork within . The final result (as shown in Figure 4,5,6 and 7), displays multiple drawing style, subject matters and colorful palettes.



Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6



Figure 6

Figure 7

Regarding the program outcome survey conducted at the end of the program, we discover a constant frequency pattern. As predicted, all seven items (positive feelings) record higher percentage of agreement. As shown in Figure 8, the Confidence level is at 72.7% on Extremely Agree and 27.8% on Agree; the Excited level is at 72.2% on Extremely Agree and 27.8% on Agree; the Peaceful feeling is at 55.6% on Extremely Agree, 38.9% on Agree and 5.6% on Moderate; the Skill level is at 88.9% on Extremely Agree and 11.1% on Agree; the creativity level is at 72.7% on Extremely Agree and 27.8% on Agree; the Relax level is at 77.8% on Extremely Agree, 16.7% on Agree and 5.6 Moderate; the Keen level is at 77.8% on Extremely Agree and 22.2% on Agree.

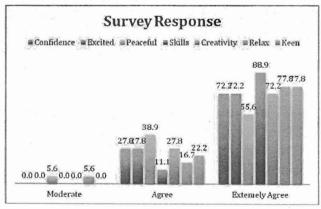


Figure 8

Conclusion

Creative art therapy is commonly employed by prison authorities in the western world as a pragmatic method in rehabilitating inmates. Unfortunately this approach is not officially practiced in Malaysian prison setting. Hence the creative art therapy program at Sg Udang Prison in Melaka was proposed by the researchers from the faculty of Art & Design, UiTM Melaka to establish understanding on how Malay Muslim inmates perceive creative art and how they can gain benefit from it especially in terms of restoring self esteem, motivation and knowing the purpose of life. Eighteen (n=18) Malay Muslim inmates who participated in the program have expressed positive feeling about the creative art therapy program. Based on our observation and survey result, we discover that majority of the inmates have completed all four program modules (Contour Drawing, Self Reflection Drawing, Memory Drawing and Visual Diary) in spite of many limitations and restrictions. It could be concluded that the creative art therapy program at Sungai Udang Prison in Melaka, not only has paved the way for researchers to explore creative art as rehabilitation tool but also helped the inmates elevate moral and spiritual level to a new height.

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