

# The Bridge

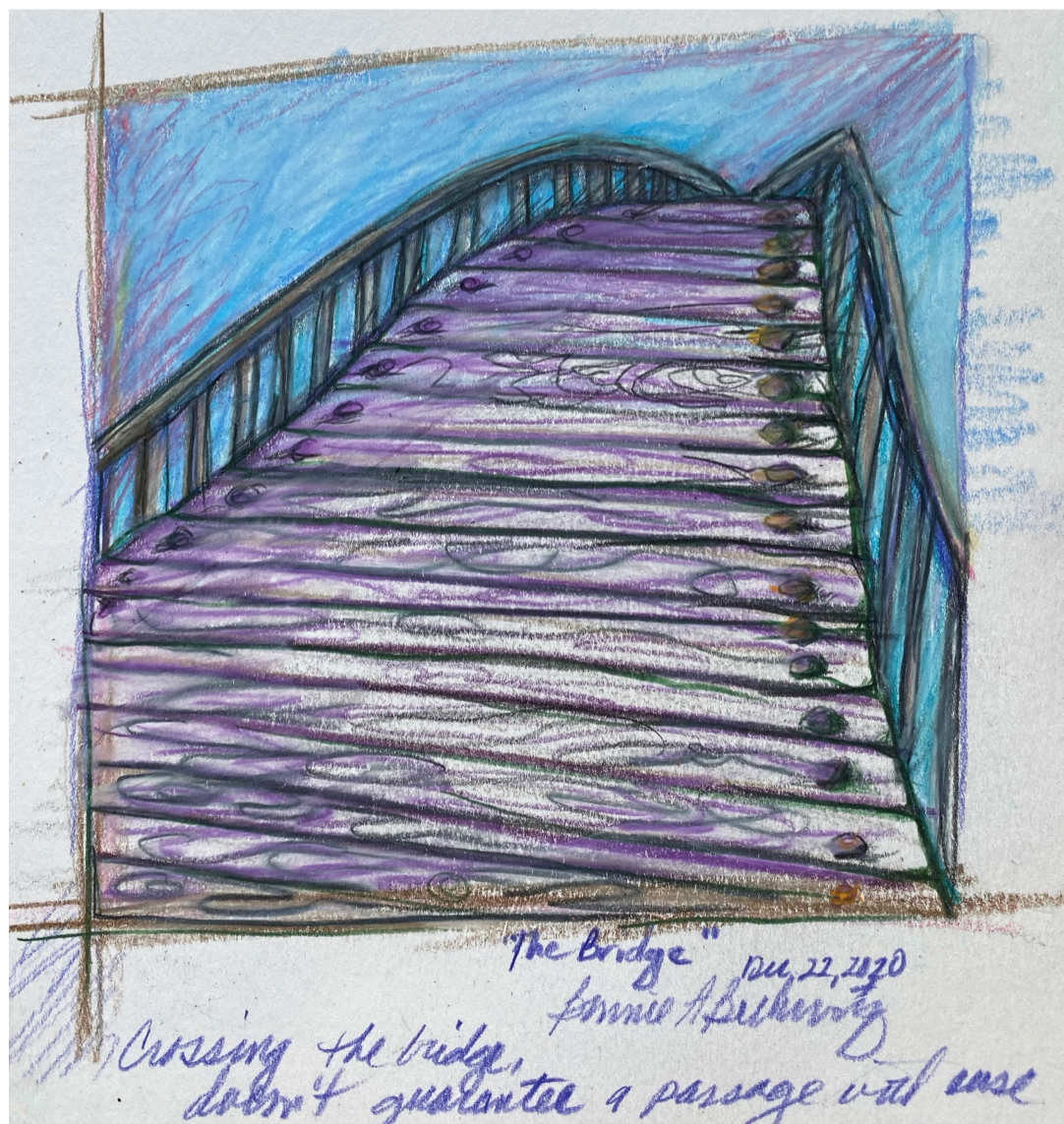
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## Abstract

Stories That Mattered: Inspired Stories and the Unfolding Arts Curriculum as a call for papers for Fall 2021 issue inspired this Art Therapy educator to consider and re-examine past teaching beliefs and practices, to underscore and understand with more clarity, how the dissonance between two styles of a classical Fine Arts and an Art Therapy Education became apparent in an Art Therapy graduate studio course. With a sharing of past experiences and ideology, Berkowitz writes about how the examination of quality and fears, about a fine arts critique and the nonjudgmental art discussion, highlight the need to increase communication with students, inviting them into a safe environment, where a conceptual bridge connects these two important aspects.

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"The Bridge" Bonnie A. Berkowitz 2020, Derwent colored pencils, ®

## Introduction

After every semester, I have become a smarter Art Therapy educator, based on what I came to learn from my students. I am a teacher who is rather passionate about my subject matter, learning through observation and practice about the importance of listening in the classroom. I reconsider what the students will take away with them at the end of the semester, as I prepare each lecture, demonstration, and discussion by making careful notations. As an artist, I am committed to the exploration of where materials and ideas collide in the messy, beautiful chaos of process and creation. And it is both teaching and artistry that have taught me to learn and grow alongside my students. It is during this process, that a brave student was able to tell her story, and in so doing helped me to build a bridge.

## The Setting

In 2007, I accepted a half-time position at Caldwell University, to teach in both the undergraduate and graduate art therapy programs. I was specifically hired to develop the graduate course, at that time called Psychology of Art Materials, now named Art Therapy Methods. The intention of this entry level graduate art therapy studio class was to focus on a wide creative continuum designed to foster a self-reflective experience. For the next thirteen years, I watched as the program grew from 7 to 70 plus students, marking it as the first nationally accredited art therapy program with the Council for the Advancement of Higher Education Programs (CACREP). Because of the national accreditation, the program exploded in size. With this growth came the popularity of the Advanced art therapy graduate student program. The BA or BFA candidate was eligible to apply to the graduate program with 60 completed Undergraduate credits, with at least a 3.3 GPA. They were able to accumulate up to 12 credits for each, graduate and undergraduate program concurrently, prior to the receiving their BFA.

## Recognizing the Problem

Within the Psychology of Art Materials course, the new graduate art therapy students were asked to explore mark making from the primitive and simple, to the complexity of integrative mixed media, with a focus on self-reflection. In each class, students were invited to tack up their weekly art directives. When initially asked to create and share assignments, the “*Advanced*” arts students’ hesitation was often palpable. They were fearful that personally themed artwork was going to be evaluated and measured to be either good or bad. This response was quite plausible as they were new to this experience and unsure about what they might expect. Unfamiliarity with the nonjudgmental art therapy critique, at first, led them to be cautious and feel vulnerable in front of their classmates. Art Therapy critiques, or nonjudgmental discussions generally focus on exploration of *what* is communicated through the image, with regards to the materials, style, and methods.

Over the course of the semester, the students were soon to learn how to “read” the visual marks without judgment, to view and describe the art with objectivity (manifest level), before discovering the underlying thoughts and meanings (latent content) and associations. Each individual student was asked to look, not only at their artwork, but also at their creative process, and how to identify intention (Allen, 1994). It is ironic, as learning to read the artwork begins with the core elements of art, something which the students are very familiar. It is exactly where the art therapy interpretation process begins with a concrete, evidenced-based framework; there is no secret or

magic. It simply begins with learning to “see” and describe the artwork as clearly as possible.

### **The Breakthrough**

One night, late, at the end of class, Diana, an undergraduate “Advanced” student in the art therapy graduate program, asked to speak with me. She often seemed overwhelmed by her academic load, while at the same time, completing and executing her BFA Senior show. Maybe it was because of, or despite her full plate, she candidly spoke with me regarding the problem that she and other advanced students faced. She reported that it was difficult to navigate the differences in course critiques and expectations, comparing her fine arts studios and professors with that of the new guidelines of art therapy coursework. For most of her undergraduate career, she was told that aesthetics mattered, skill mattered. She explained about the conflict, stating that when she shared her original or spontaneously generated artwork, it felt like she was breaking all the rules. She was not alone, her peers felt similarly. Here in this art therapy course, as all were encouraged to experiment with themes and materials, it felt like everything she learned about becoming a formal artist was going to have to be abandoned. She did not know how to trust this new experience, how to integrate her classical fine arts training with that of spontaneously generated, or process-oriented art making.

With this new knowledge, the chasm between the two worlds seemed quite understandable. How had I missed this? It was now my objective to create a bridge, to honor both worlds and teach my students how to integrate both skill and spontaneity, with an intentional eye on what it means to address quality. This step is essential then, regardless of the style and method employed to create the art. The question posed and to be considered by each student, “how do I engage with specific aspects of making spontaneously generated art without having to abandon quality or skill?” Listening to and reframing internal dialogue about the making of the work, stepping back from the object and deciding what needed to be changed or altered with intention, was decidedly among the skills that added to best practices. Only experience and practice lead towards this end.

Although there were usually only a small percentage of Advanced art therapy students in my class, Diana’s dilemma highlighted what others might be experiencing as well but were unable to articulate. Everyone engaged in the class might benefit. The non-judgmental art critique process provided an understanding about how to access the underlying meaning, “*tell us about the story,*” as well as to acknowledge the student’s experience of creating the work. The act of creating art with an intention to not abandon quality, is where students like Diana, needed instructive comments to learn to look, think and feel about combining technique, after the experimentation and exploration of ideas had been established. Addressing intention at this point becomes so useful for the integration of skill and immediacy. It is in the very act of art making that the evidence of relationship with materials can become a barometer, how to engage with and witness what is accomplished, what is present, and how to stay the course even if it becomes tedious, frustrating or difficult. Just like in our human relationships, we work at it.

The students learned from each other, as they practiced sharing observations, first about their own, then, by semester’s end, about each other’s. They came to develop, improve and increase descriptive language, validating hard work, as well as their creative voices, both vocally and visually. They also learned to identify a range of styles, and methods of problem-solving, and how to apply questions without bias. For some, the

ability to integrate quality and spontaneity required perseverance. It became clear that what was essential in managing and navigating these new waters was time, investing more focus and patience, in the moment of making, relating and responding to the surface of the art. Learning to listen and look at their own uniqueness as a strength became the ballast of the bridge, the building blocks to link the walk from one side to the other. This invited a “back and forth” from craft to process, again and again.

### **Some History**

I had never intended to teach art or art therapy and always wanted to be an art therapist. Beginning in the mid 1970's, my training began in state hospitals, and professional experiences led me to community mental health, with Adolescent inpatient units, day hospitals and later Adolescent intensive outpatient programs. After I had received my professional credentials, my art therapy supervisor encouraged me to attend a summer workshop. Without her insistence that I go to replenish my creative batteries, I might have never experienced The New Jersey Artist/Teachers' Institute (ATI), that provided me with a life-altering, and meaningful creative direction. I was challenged about my artistic beliefs and philosophy, especially about what my own creative voice sounded like. Over the span of ten years, ATI had informed and altered my personal art, as well as my art therapy practice. I experienced a paradigm shift, gently confronted by my teacher Jacob Landau, to “get out of the watchtower”. Taking such a leap felt like, I too, was abandoning skill and craft and everything that I was previously taught. But what I came to know, was that one was not sacrificed or abandoned for the other, and that experimentation and exploration leads to discoveries, a glorious place where the chaotic primacy of materials align, with access to the core elements of art. Returning to graduate school in 1986 to study Fiber Arts further influenced a deeper creative process, as Fiber arts was a perfect union to explore traditional materials applied to nonconventional forms. It was because of these experiences that I understood what my student, Diana had told me on that late Monday night after class, and how I knew then, that I was going to be able to help them build their own bridge.

### **Building the Bridge**

It is clear, how one student can make such a difference. The conversation with Diana provided significant information to begin to mend the chasm that under my watchful eye, had formed a dividing river between the university's Fine Arts and Art Therapy programs. Imagine my surprise, that although I thought I was doing my due diligence, I was unable to see what was right in front of me. There is not one specific task that was going to connect skill and spontaneity. But like building a bridge with many planks, I was able to strengthen a foundation to integrate both the core elements of the arts with art therapy. Creating a link between the two styles provides a pathway to allow for the positive psychological principle of flow (Czikszentmihalyi, 2009), a back and forth, to cross the bridge, with ease, safety and stability.

I still believe that the most valuable tool that a teacher has is direct contact with the student. I spoke with the students, sharing my own experiences when useful, directly encouraging creative risk taking. While exposing some of my own creative vulnerabilities, I also encouraged the use of office hours, and extending communication through email, which I have to say, the latter was my least favorite way to be supportive. And in my last semester, we, (the world) were all forced to use an online platform for classes and meetings because of COVID-19. But with one-on-one zoom meetings, I was able to give students far more access to my office hours.

## **Tools for Building a Bridge**

Modifications of instructive lessons were implemented through, utilizing class Review Time, lectures and demonstrations, non-judgmental critiques, journal writing to build observational and self-reflective skills through a specific writing instrument, art directives/assignments, including a final PowerPoint photo/journal personal gallery and also, a long-term book arts project.

## **Review Time**

Each class began with a 10-15minute *Review Time*, adhering to a consistent agenda, including but not limited to questions about the previous week, the review included the following: clarification, debriefing and discussion of current art and written/reading assignments, highlighting instructive information gleaned from reading the students' journal entries from the prior week, of due dates, and ending with a question-and-answer period. The review time became an essential and expected class component where the students were invited into the process of participation and inclusion. Communicating in as many arenas as possible about integrating skill and spontaneity, and about making mistakes in art, reinforced how to be inventive, build curiosity, and be supportive to the students' overall creative learning experience.

## **Weekly Lectures, Demonstrations, and Assignments**

There were many teachable moments to infuse pertinent information into *weekly lectures*. Open discussion at the end of lectures encouraged students to share stories about how their belief systems fed messages that were not always accurate or rational. I also lectured about the importance of the exploration of symbols, metaphors and archetypes, whose meanings are often found embedded below the surface of the product. I reiterated connecting to and the integration of what is seen, what is thought and what is felt, as a foothold to "reading" the artwork. We spoke often about frustration and frustration tolerance, as it related to using both familiar and unfamiliar materials. With this, came identification of the fundamentals of art within the experimental process, while increasing and uncovering access to the imagination and most importantly, how to address and speak with the inner critic. Relishing in final outcomes and feeling satisfaction as a result of brainstorming and examination of problem-solving begins to define a unique personal approach and identity, through how the art was completed.

*Art directives* were assigned weekly, bi-weekly, and long term, the latter to be worked on throughout the 14-week semester. Each directive was listed in the syllabus and posted on Blackboard along with the rubrics. The curriculum was designed to follow a creative continuum, from crayon, oil and chalk pastels, water-based paints, and then a range of sculptural materials. The themes also related to a continuum of emotional and cognitive levels of functioning, correlating specific media with stages of development. (Hinz, 2009) The rubrics were concrete. *Demonstrations* were limited to how to explicitly use the materials and apply them to themes such as childhood memories, family constellations, or identity. Though I was sometimes asked to do so, I rarely shared examples of my own completed art, because the overall content of the artwork needed to be intrinsic to each student. There was no check list, no right or wrong solutions. Sometimes the students complained that I did not "tell them what to do". Problem-solving and the acquisition of ideas from a deeper imaginative well, at first felt awkward, using raw materials to express ideas and concepts without specific details. I told them often to trust in the process (McNiff), and to be kind and patient with themselves, which sometimes presented a difficult challenge. The students were

going to have to learn to accept what was arising from within, to sit with the anxiety of not knowing what to expect. Only with experience were they going to feel more competent and confident while exploring new possibilities, referring to lectures, notes, reading about the creative process, and frustration tolerance. Patience and practice gave permission to let go and make mistakes. Writer, Wendell Berry wrote that art is a series of mistakes, and we get to choose the ones we want to keep.

The blind contour drawing series provided an example of letting go of preconceived ideas about what the art “should” look like. Following the rules of not looking at the paper, but rather at the artist’s subject, resulted in what was seen by focusing on the hand and eye moving together at the same rate of speed, the ball point pen’s line only as a recorded mark. It was a good parallel to accept the outcome, as eventually, over time, the exercise strengthened and fostered again, the importance of “seeing”.

Edith Kramer (Kramer, 1972) referred to art therapy as a three-pronged stool, built upon psychology, fine arts and Art Therapy. The latter is predicated on the combination of fine arts education and psychology. The art therapy student must learn to suspend belief about everything that they were told, to ingest the idea that it does not matter what the work looks like, and instead accept that what it communicates is where the gold lies. It is after all, easy to understand why quality might be sacrificed for spontaneity, at once a freeing act of imposed guidelines. Once the students were encouraged to experiment with a wide range of media, especially the unfamiliar, creating mysterious, original and unrecognizable marks gave them more license to re-create the wheel for themselves, as they had to test the boundaries in order to complete the directive.

A sampling of art assignments such as creating a Doorway, a portrait of a classmate only from listening to a few shared personal items, building a miniature theater box about a childhood memory, creating a family sculpture with found objects, and basic fiber arts materials and techniques (wrapped, coiled, free embroidery), or a table-top puppet, met the range of a vast continuum beginning with crayon, to 2-d mixed media, to yarns and threads, to rope, newspaper and tape.

The creative process can be unorganized and gritty. It is within the messiness, the relational aesthetics (Moon, 2002), physical making of the art, where the materials are left to tell the story of that process. Throughout art school, we are taught to improve skills and techniques, where we rarely show others our “mistakes”, the failed attempts, the unwittingly expressive process. Mistake making is the very place where we find the seeds that spark a way forward towards a discovery. While skill building provides confidence and mastery, experimental art making strengthens and fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

### **Journal Entry Writing**

The *Weekly Journal Entry* offered the students one of the most significant tools, to engage in a self-reflective writing practice whose subject is the artwork. With a very specific writing instrument, all were asked at first to write objectively about “what is seen”, describing an object with its core elements of color, shape, form, rhythm, texture, volume, etc. Secondly, they had to contemplate “thoughts about the artwork”, raising speculative questions and ideas about what had been made visible, and to raise awareness about the process of making the work, as well. And thirdly, they considered “what is felt” in relationship to the art and the process, about how thoughts are not the same as emotions. This system assists in delineating between an objective and subjective

response. With a consistent practice, thoughts and feelings are more easily and likely to be separated. This tool teaches a student how to see objectivity, in order to separate personal responses from those of their future clients. This is an essential strength to keep safe boundaries between therapists and their clients.

Passing this specific writing instrument along to my students built observational skills and provided a place for them to deepened self-awareness. I had first adopted this system of journaling from Mark Wilenski at Trenton State College in 1976; he was one of my earliest teachers who influenced my understanding of how self-observance is essential for any art therapy student and therapist. Since that earlier college experience, more than four decades ago, Mark's journaling style has given me an indelible learning tool, as I applied it, not only to teaching, but to my own clinical experience and artistic life.

While teaching, one of my weekly tasks was to read each of the students' journals, and to correspond on their typewritten entries. Providing each student with an individualized response fostered growth and development, having great benefit for those who allowed themselves to fully engage in the journal writing entries. Comments gave specific details to consider and incorporate into their next journal entry. They were taught to return to reread and identify places where the content needed to be sorted, to separate thoughts from feelings, to use third person for objective writing in Part 1, and first person for Parts 2 and 3. The students were surprised to find that the writing required as much time or sometimes more than the making of the art itself. My hope is that students might adopt this process as they continue to search for a balance of the two different energies of skill and spontaneity.

### **The Nonjudgmental Critique**

With encouragement and permission, I often was relieved to witness the students' need to perform lessen over the course of a semester. The discussions took place in every class, and every teachable moment. As class size grew, it was difficult sometimes to make sure each of the students had equal time to talk about their work. They learned to redefine how "quality" may be integrated and represented in their artwork in the following ways: by reframing negative messages, such as "this is not good enough", by making inquiries into how to make changes in order to achieve more satisfaction in the verification (Hinz, 2009) of creating the art, to strengthen the ability to be more comfortable with making "mistakes", and how mistake making indicates a path forward. Setting new intentions became possible when considering what needed to be done to acquire their own approval, and specifically to alter and change the art piece, if so desired.

The students learned how to redefine terms, adding to a creative vocabulary while becoming more aware of the internal self-critical dialogue. Discussion about metaphor and archetypes, the universal stories that touch on personal narratives, led to deeper understanding about the latent content, without needing to imply deep psychological interpretations. First, we learn to read the art, what is "seen", which will lead then to what lies beneath. Redefining the aesthetically based criticism assisted the students to objectively see with compassionate eyes. Teaching students to describe their art in terms of a relationship, deepened their artistic relational, connection (Moon, 2002) as seen through physicality of the mark making. They began to describe their experiences with a sharper accuracy.

The students, too, appeared to be relieved to eventually see that the art therapy classroom, in fact, was a safe place to show and share their sometimes private, and personal works of art, a place without judgment, implicit or explicit. They stepped up, when asked to do what's hard, to be courageous and curious. In so doing, they were able to show a vulnerable side, that tender, sometimes fragile nature, which can feel like an enormous risk. Listening to and witnessing stories, thoughts and feelings strengthen an innate ability to become empathetic. This is an essential component and most helpful when beginning to build an art therapy practice. In the future, a large portion of their clients will be non-artists, who will experience a high level of resistance to share their artwork; the empathy will be vital.

Finally, in review, a confluence of three areas of particular importance in tandem with each other, occurred with regularity throughout the duration of the semester; (1) the weekly journal writing, (2) the photography of their entire expressive experience throughout the semester culminating in a PowerPoint photo/journal essay set to music as part of their finals, and (3) each student was required to write a final, Journal Summary paper, providing an independent look back to the beginning of the semester, to observe what they had learned, what was the take away, and to set creative goals for the next coming semesters.

It was there in the final celebration and viewing of the PowerPoint Galleries, and in the writing, that the students identified how they learned to see, to read the art, how the marks and the relationship with materials became evident on the surface, through color, line, shape, texture and aesthetics. Now, the core elements of art and art making provided them with the information necessary to proceed with experience and confidence to continue to experiment and explore unfamiliar territory. I so wanted all my students to do well, to learn and grow, to understand that the discomfort of struggle and toleration of this creative process is where the largess of knowledge is derived.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the past few decades, I have come to understand that both a classical academic art experience with spontaneously generated art must be creatively integrated to find the balance, the limitations and the freedom too, to learn and grow as artists and art therapists. Like a bridge across a river, the integration of the two sides connects skill-based art making with experimentation, to develop skill within an explorative method and a self-reflective practice. Broadening the students' ability to "look" at the quality as seen through core elements of art, and the content of the artwork, connected the duality of their own process. Again, I do not think that Mark Wilenski might have laid venture to guess as to how long into the future his style of journaling served so many. He gave me a tool that fostered independent thinking, one that I have used throughout my entire career, as an artist, art therapist, and art therapy educator. It taught me about what must be seen, and understood and the importance to identify thoughts, and honor what is felt. I am grateful to my students who were willing to do what's hard, that I was able to develop this writing instrument throughout my teaching career, and to have shared it with so many. This process honors both sides of the art making process, and that it is in seeing our own vulnerability, that makes us strongest, so that we may cross the bridge when we come to it



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## Author Biography

Bonnie A. Berkowitz, MA, ATR-BC, ATCS is a Nationally Board-Certified Art Therapist, Art Therapy Clinical Supervisor and Art Therapy educator, with many years of clinical experience in community mental health, private practice, as an artist and teacher. At the end of Spring 2020, Bonnie left Caldwell University where for thirteen years, she taught Graduate and Undergraduate art therapy courses in the master's in counseling with a Specialization in Art Therapy program. Berkowitz's focus now is on Art Mentorship, private practice and a commitment to making art and writing.  
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