

SAFE AND SOUND: SAFE SPACE IN DRAMA THERAPY
A HEURISTIC INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research paper uses a heuristic model of investigation (Moustakas, 2011) to focus on the process of a drama therapy student exploring the concept of safe space and its implications for potential therapeutic transformation. Within the therapeutic context, a safe space is defined as a free-from-harm environment between therapist and client where the latter can explore his/her inner conflicts with freedom; without fear of being judged or hurt in any way. In drama therapy, the safe space lies in the relationship between client and therapist, which is developed through play. The curiosity on the notion of safe space emerges from the student's context of training as a drama therapist and her own encounter with the subject as a foreigner in Canada. This paper aims to tell the experience of the researcher examining in depth the idea of safe space through the literature and visiting several locations, in which she used art to respond to her living process.

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In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand
I will stand, I will stand
All other ground is sinking sand
So I'll stand

- Stuart Townend & Keith Getty, *In Christ Alone*

Word of Honesty

This research is a heuristic exploration of a drama therapy student on the idea of safe space. It is heuristic because it talks about my experience with the phenomenon of safe spaces (Kenny, 2012). According to Moustakas (2011), the father of heuristic methodology, the journey starts with a burning interest in a subject, in the form of a question, that urges the researcher to enter in the process to find the answer. Sela-Smith (2002) argues that for a heuristic study to be valid, the inquirer needs to be honest and passionate about the burning question, as this must be worrying him/her day and night in order to dwell in the process with commitment and responsibility.

Thus, I found it necessary and just with the reader to write a word of honesty about my relationship with this study. I must say that the subject of safe space does interest me and I tried to be as faithful as possible with the process, given my time restrictions. However, I did not necessarily feel passionate about it throughout my journey. In fact, as I was moving along with this inquiry, I was losing interest in it and doubting that it was appealing to do a research on the topic. And, at the end, it was difficult to write about my experience since I did not feel connected with the theme anymore. I realized there were other subjects that have been burning in my heart for years, and I questioned myself why I did not recognize them before to do my research on them. The stress and pressure to have a topic of investigation; my tiredness and willingness to finish the program; and some of my own insecurities; certainly influenced my decision. I had the temptation to change my study at the end of it. But, my supervisor wisely advised me to finish it for my own good, to finish my studies, and have the time to look at those burning interests that require my attention.

I am happy I followed his advice, because through the writing I could reconnect with the subject, and see that I lived the process with the depth and seriousness I could give to it, along with my other responsibilities. I now understand that the disconnection was part of the process of my heuristic journey. Someone once told me that one needs to get lost to find a way out. Thus, my doubts on the subject were a huge part of my learning experience to connect the findings of this research. What I intend to share with the reader in the following pages is a compilation of my encounter with the idea of safe spaces, hoping that him/her will embrace it with openness and generosity.

Chapter 1. Introduction

I have heard the term of a “safe space” since the beginning of my studies in drama therapy. It has usually referred to the idea that therapy provides the client a place free from harm, where he can explore his inner conflicts through the drama therapy techniques with confidence. Because drama therapy involves playing (Emunah, 1994), the concept of a safe space also means allowing the client to play and recreate what lives in his imagination with total freedom, and with the assurance that he will not get hurt in this process. However, the notion of safe space has been challenged in some of my classes, as there is no such thing as a completely free-from-harm place within the therapeutic frame. Client and therapist are human beings and they can hurt each other without intention or the client can get hurt in the play.

My interest in this subject started with some questions: What does a safe space mean? How do I experience it? How, as a drama therapist, can I create a safe space for my clients? What are the elements of a safe space? Are there other safe places like the therapy room?

In addition, my interest in the notion of safe space increased through a site-specific theatre class I took at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM), as part of my elective courses in the drama therapy program. During this course, the word that mostly resonated with me was “space.” Site-specific theatre is about transforming any space, aside from a conventional theatre, into a performing room (Turner, 2004). For instance, a house, a garage, a park, a metro station, a bus, etc., could be a theatre. In this class, we talked about the safety of this type of theatre, for the actors and for “the audience,” which in many cases are regular pedestrians, who do not necessarily know that they are in an actual performance. We created some site-specific performances, as part of the class’s projects. In some of them I felt safe, and in some, I did not. Thus, I questioned myself: is the idea of safe space in drama therapy, the same as in theatre, as both fields are so related? Is this concept the same in other places?

Moreover, through my journey as a foreigner in Montreal, I became more engaged in the thought of safe space. I left my country, Ecuador, to come and study for my master’s in Drama Therapy. The experience has been long, intense, difficult, rewarding and beautiful. Many times, I have not felt safe in this place. And I am not talking in terms of criminality, which in my country is higher than here. I am talking about the freedom that comes with the sense of safety; the freedom to be oneself without fear of being judged or threatened of any harm. How then, have I felt threatened and insecure in this city, if no one was assaulting me?

What makes a place safe or unsafe? All these interrogates were inviting me to embark in a personal heuristic exploration on the idea of a safe space to better understand how it informs my life as a drama therapist, and individual in the society.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this heuristic research is to study the experience of a drama therapy student exploring the idea of safe space. As stated before, my interest in the subject came from my own lived experience with the phenomenon of safe spaces as a drama therapy student, performer and foreigner in Montreal. I thought the best way to answer these questions was through a heuristic study, to be able to better understand and know myself and the world I live in (Moustakas, 2011). I wanted to deepen my understanding of the concept of safe space, expanding my exploration to different locations, such as: a drama therapy session, a drama therapy classroom, an art therapy studio, a site-specific theatre experiences, a church, and other locations that could emerge in the process.

Definition of Safe and Unsafe

For this research, “safe” is defined as “the condition of being free from undergoing or causing hurt, injury or loss” (Safe, n.d., in Merriam-Webster online); and “the quality state of being free from danger, fear or anxiety” (Security, n.d., in Merriam-Webster online). “Unsafe” is explained as “not being protected from danger, harm or loss” and “beset by fear and anxiety” (Unsafe, n.d., in Merriam-Webster online).

Primary Research Question

The main question of my study is: What is the lived experience of a drama therapy student exploring the idea of safe space? This research begins and ends with my own experience. My interest in the subject started as a curiosity, with questions from the drama therapy and theatre courses; then, it transformed into a desire to better understand an aspect of my present: being a foreigner in Canada. Knowing myself as a person who is constantly reflecting, questioning and trying to passionately find answers, I was already embarking in a heuristic journey for “self-search, self-dialogue and self-discovery” (Moustakas, 2011, p. 3). However, I believe that my quest on this concept started way before through my previous experiences. I have always struggled with this idea of feeling safe and secure within myself due to my own past; hence, now that I look back, I have constantly been searching for safe spaces where I could be myself with freedom and with the assurance that nobody or nothing would hurt me. Therefore, it

is through this research that I can examine the notion of safe space and articulate what it means and how I relate to it.

Secondary Research Questions

The following are secondary questions, which along with the principal inquiry, have dwelled in me in this heuristic process, to help me find more understanding of the idea of safe space: What makes a place safe or unsafe? Are there other places, aside from the therapy room, that share the same idea of a safe space? Is it possible to feel safe on the outside and unsafe on the inside and vice versa?

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Safe Space in Psychotherapy

In the field of psychology the idea of safe space refers to how safe the person is and feels within his or herself, with others and in the world (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976). The first safe space of the human being is the womb, since it is the home for the baby. This image is so impacting in the psyche that after the person is born, he/she will constantly search a safe place just like the womb wherever he/she goes, to avoid danger (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976). For many people the sense of safety is so fragile, full of anxiety, invaded with conflicts, that they are unable to identify a safe home, like the womb, in the world. A safe home, not only outside but also inside the self, to gain the capacity to trust that the person can stay internally undivided in any circumstance (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976).

If any type of danger has threatened the person's growth, the individual might not be able to find safety within the self nor in others. Thus, fear will reign in the person's life and he/she will build defenses and try to find that sense of safety in things, possessions, roles they play, ritualized patterns, addictions, fantasies, or other human beings, in order to cope with difficult situations (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976). The sense of safety is necessary for the human being to achieve therapeutic transformation. In fact, Geller & Porges (2014) argue an effective therapeutic work, that brings positive change to clients, is only possible when they feel safe and secure in the therapy setting. Human beings have a natural propensity to self-realization or transformation (Yalom, 2009). However, when there is fear and other obstacles that block this transformation, the individual can become aggressive and defensive, isolated and withdrawn from reality (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976).

On the contrary, when the person feels safe, he/she can trust in his/her worth as a human being; he/she can find the freedom to be who he/she really is, to relate to others, and to get involved in the world, and achieve the transformation or self-realization he/she longs for (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976).

In order to find safety, the person needs to develop the freedom to give and receive what is good: affection, love, information, stimulation, opportunities, etc. At the same time, the individual needs to find ways to express feelings and thoughts, and let go what is blocking the dynamic of giving and receiving: confusion, negative thoughts and feelings, rage, sorrow, etc. Limits and boundaries are important to help the person achieve the safety in giving, receiving

and letting go (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976). The same authors indicate that the person is able to take in and let go what he/she needs, in regulation by an inner clock that determines the rhythms of the body and the whole self. Safety works in a continual living dynamic of giving and receiving, taking in and letting go. Hence, the true safe space is an expanding universe where the person can be, do, think, feel, and experience within structure and limits but with flexibility and not be imprisoned in them (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976). Moreover, the sense of safety is based on trust in oneself and others. Trust, is an ongoing process in which the person learns to be aware of his/her real feelings, situations, needs and capacities; and expresses them without fear (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976). When the individual has this confidence, he/she is able to hold others when they express their own emotions and needs, creating a sense of safe space for them as well.

Thus, the sense of safety will depend on the individual's inner world, informed by his/her own life experiences and; social relationships, which are not invaders but trustworthy companions that allow the person to achieve self-realization (Yalom, 2009). Hence, the idea of safe space is not a fixed place, but a psychological and social reality that lies on a relationship, within the self and outside, which is evolving continuously in space-time (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976).

In psychotherapy, the concept of safe space also relies on the relationship between the therapist and the client. For Freud (as cited in Hartmann, 1995), the psychotherapeutic process is essentially making the unconscious conscious. For this uncovering work to take place, there must be a strong therapeutic alliance between therapist and client. Hartmann (1995) describes how the real work with the client can only start after the therapeutic alliance is built as a safe environment or container. Hill (2009) supports the latter, when she highlights that if this relationship is built on trust it will invite the client to tell his/her story without fear, knowing that he/she will be safe and, at least in the room with the therapist, he/she will not get hurt. Yalom (2009) also emphasizes that human beings are essentially relational, and most of them go to therapy because they have problems with their different interpersonal relationships. Since the therapy involves a close relationship between the therapist and the client, the clinician needs to connect with the client in such a way so that he/she feels safe to reveal his/her most hidden secrets. Simple, and continuous check-in questions such as "How are you and I doing today?" or "How are you experiencing the space between us today?" (Yalom, 2009, p. 12) can help build the safety the

patient needs to keep trusting in the therapist and progress in the therapeutic work. Also, being supportive, empathic, letting the patient matter to the therapist, and creating a new therapy for each client, are some of the elements Yalom (2009) suggests to generate the safe space in the therapeutic relationship.

In addition, Havens (1989) states that the first requirement of psychological work is to create a safe space between the therapist and the client. Both have to understand that they should not hurt or frighten each other in any way. The same author highlights that in the therapeutic relationship, both therapist and client are looking for safety, as in any other relationship. However, the therapist needs to discover what that sense of safety means to each client, because it can be different in each case (Havens, 1989). Creating a safe space for client and therapist, where they are assured that they will not hurt each other, may not always be as evident because they both are human beings and make mistakes. The relationship between therapist and client needs to be safe enough for the latter to open his heart, and tell his/her stories, pain, struggles, etc. Geller & Porges (2014) explain that the therapist needs to be fully present and engaged with the client during the whole session to start creating a safe space for him/her to show his/her vulnerability. This presence involves the therapist total and devotional attention to the client at all levels: physical, emotional, cognitive and relational. Geller & Porges (2014) expound that the therapeutic presence starts with the therapist having the intention of “being with and for the client in the service of their healing process” (p. 179). This purpose helps the clinician be grounded and in contact with his/her integrated self, even prior to the session; and, be receptive and immersed in what the client is sharing and what needs a special attention in the moment (Geller & Porges, 2014). The therapist needs to develop a very sharp eye to observe the client, especially in his/her body language, to understand what he/she is communicating. This will help the therapist know when to intervene or not, because ultimately the therapist wants the client to be the one who speaks most (Havens, 1989).

Thus, The art of creating a safe space gives freedom to both, therapist and client. The freedom to say or not to say things (Havens, 1989); the freedom to feel discomfort; the freedom to make mistakes and apologize for them (Yalom, 2009); the freedom to be and let the other be who he/she really is: natural and genuine (Havens, 1989). Similarly, in play therapy, Landreth (2012) also talks about this freedom in a safe space. In fact, when the child feels accepted and

understood in the relationship with the therapist, he/she will be free to explore, test boundaries, share his/her fears, or change.

Moreover, Emerson (1996) suggests that not only in therapy it is necessary to build a safe space between therapist and client, but also in individual or group therapeutic supervision, because this will impact how young therapists and students create a safe space for their own clients. Most beginning therapists show insecurity, confusion and are terrified of failure in evaluation, as they do not want to feel judged. Feedback can be seen as criticism and young therapists and students might feel less open to talk, which can block the learning process (Emerson, 1996). As a result, beginning therapists might start acting out how they feel the supervisor wants them to behave or to be. This can lead them to take fewer risks, and be less natural and genuine in their therapeutic sessions with clients, because their focus is on the supervisor's feedback (Emerson, 1996). In addition, as Emerson (1996) proposes, supervisors create an atmosphere of trust with supervisees, by modelling unconditional positive regard and respect, for the student to be real and truthful. This can be achieved with attentive listening, no hurtful negative remarks, respecting the student's boundaries and individual autonomy to speak or not and respecting confidentiality. In group supervision, a safe space atmosphere is created by making each member feel included, honored, important and loved (Emerson, 1996). If supervisees are able to feel this kind of safe space, they most likely will be able to create the same environment for their clients.

Furthermore, confidentiality in therapy and in supervision is a key element to build a safe space in these relationships, because the therapist and the supervisor hold the deep hidden secrets of clients and supervisees. Therapy and supervision must allow vulnerability, personal disclosure, and the emergence of the unconscious. Thus, the client and supervisee need to be reassured that his/her information and sharing will be kept safe (Greenberg, 2015). The psychotherapy and supervision room must be considered as "a shrine, a temple, a special wood grove, protected and sacred" (Greenberg, 2015, p. 80).

Safe Space in the Creative Arts Therapies

In drama therapy, the concept of safe space can be explored through the idea of dramatic reality. This latter is a "make-believe" or "as if" space that allows the person to tangibly enter into the imaginary realm and play with fantasy and reality, making possible what seems

impossible in life (Pendzik, 2006). Other names as “surplus reality,” “playspace” or “fantastic reality” refer to the same idea of dramatic reality (Pendzik, 2006).

Drama therapy functions in this “as if” zone since it takes its roots in theatre, which develops between reality and fiction. Theatre happens in real spaces, time and with real bodies; however, the real space can signify many fictional places; the real time is not the same as the time represented; and the real bodies represent a character that is not real (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Actors, then, have the freedom to bring reality into the stage and transform it to fictional or vice-versa. They are constantly playing with this idea of “make-believe.” Thus, theatre becomes a space of potential, where actors can explore and examine different possibilities to resolve conflicts within the play (Turner, 2004).

This notion of dramatic reality is similar to what Winnicott (1971) called a “potential” or “transitional” space, where the person has a “me” and “not me” experience that opens the possibility for creativity. This transitional space happens between the mother and the child, and it connects and separates them at the same time. The first “me-not me” experience children have is when they are out of the womb; then, they transition from the mother’s breast to thumb, to teddy bear and play in general. Winnicott (1971) calls this “transitional phenomena.” “Transitional objects,” (blanket, teddy bear) are symbols of the union of the child and the mother; and, through them, the infant learns to be a unique individual separated and different from the mother. The latter lets the child grow and separate from her, ideally providing a safe-enough context that allows the child to explore the possible boundaries to achieve a sense of self, undivided, secure and confident of his/her individuality (Turner, 2004). According to Winnicott (1971) this experience of transitional phenomena in childhood is crucial for the development of creativity in the following years of adulthood. Actually, human beings are always going through the process of transitional phenomena, figuring out what belongs to them and what to the outside world (Turner, 2004). Thus, in every human being there is a constant need of a space where imaginary and reality, objective and subjective, me and not me, can meet and “the madness of childhood can be revisited” (Turner, 2004, p. 380). Through this process, healing, reconnection, transformation and creativity emerge (Winnicott, 1971).

Similarly, anthropologists call “liminality” the idea of the “as if” or transitional space, which gives place to ritualistic processes (Apergi, 2014). Liminality comes from the Latin word “limen,” which literally means “threshold,” and it refers to area or space of ritual, where

objective and subjective reality meet. Rituals in different cultures serve to help people cope with difficult and important transitions in life, such as arrivals, departures, joys and grief. Some of these transitions can be very painful; thus, rituals serve as safe spaces for people to heal these painful changes (Apergi, 2014).

Pendzik (2012) states that dramatic reality is the unique contribution of drama therapy to the field of psychotherapy. Dramatic reality is imagination manifested and, by allowing the person to engage in a make-believe play (Pendzik, 2012) it gives the individual possibilities to process internal conflicts, and explore new ways for expansion, reconnection and letting go (Apergi, 2014). The dramatic reality, or playspace, becomes a safe space because the person can play out and play with what seems to be problematic and causing harm in her life (Emunah, 1994). It is a safe space because through dramatic reality, the individual is able to use the therapeutic room as a laboratory to test possibilities (Pendzik, 2006), make choices and mistakes in any aspect of his or her life, without facing the consequences that in real life can be potentially harmful. In addition, Johnson (2009) clarifies that the playspace is safe as there is a mutual agreement between therapist and client that what happens in the therapy room is a representation of the reality or the imagination. Clinician and client agree to restrain against harm in the playspace. Paradoxically, the space allows them to enact harm or evil in the play, but only “to the extent to which they feel confident of each other’s ability to restrain from any potentially harmful enactment” (Johnson, 2009, p. 93). Thus, if either the client or the therapist gets hurt or if there is any possibility of harm, the play must stop, as the space is no longer safe.

Moreover, Pendzik (2012) argues that imagination manifested is different from fantasy, as the latter is an “isolated phenomenon, absorbing energy but not contributing-in either to dreaming or to living” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 36). Thus, if fantasy does not transform into displayed imagination it can harm the person because it stays static in the person’s mind, locking her in an idea, wish, desire, nightmare, and disconnecting her from reality (Winnicott, 1971). If the individual has the opportunity to play out his fantasies, he can achieve transformation, because he can experiment the changes he aims for, and eventually put them into practice in his real life. This is the goal of drama therapy, to provide the person a safe space to take their fantasies out of the head and project them onto dramatic media, as role-playing, puppets, performances, story-telling, among others (Pendzik, 2006); and through this process achieve transformation.

Art therapy also talks about the notion of safe space as a liminal area where the individual plays with subjective and objective, by expressing, reacting, building and reconstructing life stories. The created art can be seen as a micro-world of the person, who has the ability and freedom to change, explore and transform it in any way he/she wants (Öster, Åström, Lindh, & Magnusson, 2009). Art therapy provides a space for the person to feel safe expressing difficult situations, sharing feelings and thoughts he/she does not necessarily want to talk about, or finds it difficult, and be ok bringing up scary themes or ‘unacceptable’ feelings (Öster et al., 2009). In addition, the person owns the interpretation of his/her work and decide how much he/she wants to share (Öster et al., 2009); and, it gives the person the freedom to dream, create and recreate the kind of world the/she wants to live in (Timm-Bottos, 2006). Individual or group art-therapy, and community art-studios, can provide the person a space of potential, where reality and fiction can meet and generate transformation (Timm-Bottos, 2006).

In music therapy, the idea of safe space can be seen as a threshold that allows the client to explore different possibilities of being through the creative and improvised expression of the instruments he/she uses. Therapist and client meet in the threshold of music improvisation and this helps both search and find different ways to build a safe bonding in the relationship; and it helps the therapist develop the capacity to have access to the client’s hidden areas, build empathy and hold him/her in the suffering (Frost, 2015). Music functions as a window to the unconscious of the person, and improvisation in Music therapy serves to explore the client’s unconscious experiences and increase personal understanding. Improvisation helps the client play with the subjective and objective, as he/she is essentially creating and manifesting the unconscious through the instruments (Carruthers, 2014). Music therapy provides the client a space to relax, become aware of mind-body connection, control pain, find physical comfort, reframe cognitive distortions, and regulate emotions (Carruthers, 2014).

Examples of Safe Spaces

Human beings need different forms of safe space to function: physical, social and psychological, that are wholly their own. The person requires places to rest, to retreat and restore the self; and safe relationships with trustworthy companions (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976).

Some examples of safe spaces are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which were established after the Civil War in the United States to educate primarily African Americans, since they were not allowed to go to white colleges. These establishments were

aimed to promote social and economic justice through professional and volunteer community service. Throughout the years, these institutions have had great success in developing leadership and providing opportunities and community services to African Americans (Darrell, Littlefield, & Washington, 2016). These schools are considered safe spaces and nurturing places, especially for racially and ethnically marginalized groups, because they “facilitate innovation, excellence, conversation, affirmation, learning and teaching, through the development of a genuine relationship and connection between and among faculty and students” (Darrell et al., 2016, p. 44). These students are often exposed to situations of harm that come with their unprivileged realities of poverty, dysfunctional families, discrimination, drugs and violence. Hence, these schools are aimed to provide them with a sense of safety as “the quality state of being free from danger, fear or anxiety” (Security, n.d., in Merriam-Webster online). Skilled social workers and educators use particular pedagogical strategies to meet the student where he or she is, and from there develop a close relationship to create the safe place that the person needs for learning, growth and development (Darrell et al., 2016).

Another example of the development of a safe space is a psychoeducational program for developing resiliency and coping resources in kindergartens in Northern Israel, after the Second Lebanese War. The daily experience of rocket strikes, shooting guns and burning forests created fear, anxiety and uncertainty in people; therefore, their “home” became an unsafe place to live in. This program was based on story-telling as a healing metaphor to help children connect with their inner sources of strength, to calm them down, reduce anxiety and rebuild a sense of safety (Berger & Lahad, 2010). The story was around a forest that became on fire and how trees and animals coped with it. While the therapist or educator was telling the story, the children played and acted out the whole scene. With the guidance of the therapist, the children changed characters, from animals and trees, to strong and protective forest rangers who helped build a forest camp as they wished. Thus, the kids were responsible for creating their safe spaces; and the metaphor of the weak becoming strong and the victims becoming protectors they were able to develop better resiliency skills and sense of safety (Berger & Lahad, 2010).

Hartmann (1995), argues that dreams are other examples of safe spaces in which the person makes the connections he/she needs to process the unconscious and allow transformation. The bed, state of sleep, and muscular paralysis, provides a safe environment for the individual. Through the state of dreaming, he/she can connect and process the present with the past,

different people, situations, thoughts, themes, periods in our lives, fears, wishes, interpersonal conflicts, etc. The same author explains that dreams can help the person process traumatic or stressful situations, just as in therapy, with the connections that happen in a safe environment.

Timm-Bottos (2006) presents Art Hives, community art studios, as safe spaces since these are spaces in between home, work or school, where people of different backgrounds, who would not interact in other circumstances, meet and interrelate while making art. These studios are public homeplaces (Timm-Bottos & Reilly, 2014) where everyone, but mostly the poor and marginalized can feel welcomed and at home. They provide a safe space for examining personal and collective injustices, and put them into dialogue through non-directive art-making (Timm-Bottos, 2006). Art Hives create an atmosphere of safety through the facilitators, from the greeting when the person arrives, and through the whole stay of the person, with welcoming verbal and non-verbal communication; thus, the whole environment is always sending the message that the individual would not be harmed in these spaces. In addition, by giving participants the possibility to interact with others, they can create social bonds, reduce stress and learn to self-regulate naturally (Timm-Bottos, 2006). Moreover, through the non-directive art making, participants are free to try different art materials, explore possibilities with them, make mistakes without being judged, and figure out new ways of how to do something. Hence, in this space of potential, individuals become their own healers, processing what they need at their own pace (Timm-Bottos, 2011).

Chapter 3. Methodology

Heuristic research is a qualitative method, which takes the lived experience of the researcher as a vehicle for discovery (Rose & Loewenthal, 2006). The word “heuristic” stems from the Greek term *heuriskin*, which means to find out or to discover (Sela-Smith, 2002). The heuristic investigation starts with a self-awareness of an interest on a particular topic that the researcher wants to know more about, through personal experience (Moustakas, 2011). This self-awareness is essential, since it helps the individual surrender to the process of self-examination, until an meaningful insight is achieved. In fact, the word heuristic is related to the word *eureka* that implies an “aha” moment, in which the tester arrives to a clear comprehension of the quest (Moustakas, 2011). This method requires the researcher to enter a personal journey of constant, and sometimes long, self-reflection and introspection regarding the question that he/she wants to answer. It demands the researcher to commit decisively to the process, since the response to the quest comes from within the person. Thus, the more the inquirer immerses him/herself into the experience, the clearer the answer will unfold. Through the lived experience of the phenomenon, the analyst aims to better understand and know him/herself and the world, in relation to problem in question (Moustakas, 2011).

I thought this method would be appropriate for my study because, in order to have a clearer understanding of what a safe space means to me, and how I can create it for my clients and others around me, I needed to go through my own lived experience with the topic. As mentioned before, my real interest on the subject started with my own self-awareness of my experience as a foreigner in Montreal, who left her home country, where she felt safe most of the time, to study drama therapy in a language and culture different to hers. This life event has been safe and unsafe to me in many ways, which I wanted to explore and articulate through this research. Therefore, I chose heuristic inquiry as it is “an organized and systematic form for investigating human experience” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 59). I was required to immerse myself in an internal process to explore, collect and interpret data holistically (Kenny, 2012), remaining with my primary question: What is the experience of a drama therapy student exploring the idea of safe space? until I was enlightened by a kind of revelation that would answered it. Throughout the process, my attention was focused on what was happening inside of me, with feelings and reflections, in response to an outside situation (Sela-Smith, 2002) regarding the concept of safe space.

Moreover, heuristic research responds well to this study, since the exploration of the concept of safe space is subjective as it can mean different things to each person. For instance, in a drama therapy session, client and therapist experience the safe space from their own personal perspective, and depending on the situation they are living, this notion can signify something different to both. The heuristic journey is subjective because, as stated above, it relies on the personal experience, feelings and reflections of the researcher.

Heuristic Process

Heuristic research was started and developed by Clarke E. Moustakas (2011) in the 1960s, who synthesized it into an organized and systematic form to investigate human experience, from his own journey with the phenomenon of loneliness, and others' personal explorations of different topics for which he served as a research supervisor (Moustakas, 2011). The structure and process of heuristic inquiry include six phases: *initial engagement*, *immersion*, *incubation*, *illumination*, *explication*, and *creative synthesis*. If the researcher surrenders faithfully and sincerely to the process, through a constant self-awareness and self-dialogue, a new meaning and understanding of the topic arises (Sela-Smith, 2002). Hence, a simultaneous process of transformation in the inquirer can happen (Kenny, 2012).

Moustakas (2011) defines the *initial engagement* as the primary contact of the researcher with the question. An autobiographical history of the researcher with the topic dwells in him/her as a curiosity of something that needs to be explored. Then, the question comes from the lived-experience of the investigator as something impossible to ignore because it burns inside and afflicts him/her, with passion, to be resolved. As I explained above, my question: What is the lived experience of a drama therapy student exploring the idea of safe space? appeared within the context of being a foreigner in Montreal studying drama therapy, and living the vulnerability of not feeling quite safe in many ways to be myself with freedom and honesty.

The second phase of a heuristic process is *immersion*, in which the researcher embarks in the journey of exploration, and literally lives the question in everything he does: waking, sleeping, dreaming, eating, taking a shower. The researcher is alert to any signs of the topic being expressed or talked about: public settings, social contexts, professional and friendly meetings (Moustakas, 2011). While the inquirer dwells faithfully in the experience of the phenomenon, he uses continuous self-reflection and self-awareness that eventually will lead him to self-discovery (Kenny, 2012). This is the stage of data collection of this method, and it can

take any form that allows the researcher to be connected with the question and to express what is happening inside, such as journaling, videotaping, story-making, art, poetry, among others (Moustakas, 2011). For this research, exploring the idea of safe space, I used written and videotaped journaling, as well as art-making (painting, dancing, acting and singing) in response to my own process of investigation. Most of my written journaling happened in the moment of the event where I found something related to the idea of safe space that spoke to me. I made art and used videotaped journaling when I was in the actual places in which I wanted to explore the idea of safe space: drama therapy and theatre classes, an art therapy studio, a church, etc. Due to the time restrictions of this study, and the over demanding schedule of the drama therapy program, I found it hard to dwell into the exploration with a faithful commitment. However, I took advantage of school breaks to collect data and I tried to be as alert as possible to anything that spoke to me of the idea of safe space in my daily activities.

The third step is *incubation*, in which the researcher puts the topic aside and engages in other activities different from the study to facilitate intuition and tacit knowledge (Rose & Loewenthal, 2006). Tacit knowledge, according to Moustakas (2011), “is the capacity to understand the unity or wholeness of something from a comprehension of the individual qualities or parts” (p. 7). In this stage, the tester allows unconscious connections to be made, in relation to the subject of study by taking a step back and resting from the exploration. I took almost a month-and-a-half break from this inquiry, which was kind of forced since I had to respond to the school’s semester obligations. I tried not to worry about my research during this time; however, there was the temptation to continue being aware of the question and still finding data. Eventually, the stress of ending the semester allowed me to naturally disconnect from the topic of safe space.

The fourth phase of heuristic research is *illumination*, which is a result of the previous step. Discoveries in different sciences often happen when the researcher leaves the experiment for a while and involves in other activities. This allows the person to be more open to have a different perspective of the subject of inquiry and the answer that might emerge from it (Kenny, 2012). This is the phase of “eureka” or “aha” moment where the researcher is enlightened by a new understanding or discovery of the question in matter (Moustakas, 2011). I was a little worried that this moment would not happen in my study, since I was very disconnected from it, and I was questioning myself whether I had done it well or not, since I found I did not have

much time because of the demanding nature of the master's program. However, my illumination arrived at the end of April, while I was in the process of finding a new computer because mine broke down. Being a person that understands very little of computers, and feeling lost while searching for one, I needed guidance that would make me feel safe and sure of what I was buying. Through the experience of customer service in two different stores, I could make the connections of what a safe space meant to me.

The fifth phase is *explication*, in which the researcher examines what has arisen in the process and tries to analyze the meaning of it (Kenny, 2012). And, the last step of this method is *creative synthesis* where the conclusions of the phenomenon are put together to form a whole that is coherent and comprehensible (Moustakas, 2011). I will focus on these two steps in the following pages of this research, in which I analyze my data and explain my findings.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of a heuristic research lie on the subjectivity of its nature. The researcher's role changes from an objective observer to a subjective actor of the investigation (Kenny, 2012). Thus, many ethical questions arise on how the person discerns what kind of data to include and exclude in the study, since she risks of paying attention only to data that supports her inquiry (Rose & Loewenthal, 2006). This method is biased, since the researcher is the principal subject of the study and he/she has the power to decide all the parameters of it. Therefore, he/she risks missing quality in the process of the inquiry, at any of its stages, losing validity and reliability (Kenny, 2012). Moustakas (2011) emphasizes that a good heuristic research takes a long time; nonetheless, the researcher gets to decide the time frame of the study, and this can also put in question the quality of it. Along with the latter, Sela-Smith (2002) challenges the sincerity and transparency, with which the researcher decides to embark in the heuristic journey for it to be solid. Because of the subjectivity and the bias of the method, the tester could easily lie to protect his/her interests.

One of the main limitations of this research was the time restriction I had to devote myself to the process. The demanding nature of the drama therapy program forced me to juggle many things at the same time: classes, homework, practicum, and taking care of myself, leaving a very limited time for this research. Thus, the quality of my journey might be questioned. Nevertheless, I tried to live the question and commit to it as much as I could, and I think I found meaningful insights for my own learning, which are exposed in the following sections.

In addition, Rose & Loewenthal (2006) argue that one of the biggest limitations of heuristic method is the restriction to arrive to generalizations, since they cannot come from the findings of one person (the researcher). Generalizations arise when other people look at the creative synthesis and resonate with it because they have lived a similar experience, if they have.

Moreover, another ethical consideration is confidentiality because heuristic inquiry sometimes uses participants for interviews or a lived experience of the topic, to make the study more valid and reliable (Rose & Loewenthal, 2006). In my case, I did not use participants; however, I used information from my drama therapy sessions; hence, I needed to make sure I protected the identity of my clients at any time during the process, and while writing this paper.

Furthermore, the postmodern perspective questions heuristic research since it is difficult to de-center and deconstruct it to address interrogations of power and privilege because the person is the protagonist and participant of the study (Derrida, 1996, cited in Rose & Loewenthal, 2006).

Validation

Moustakas (2011) explains that heuristic inquiry uses the processes of qualitative methodology to discover themes and essences of experience. Thus, in this type of study, validity is measured through meaning. The creative synthesis needs to respond to the question if it accurately, truthfully, comprehensively and vividly represents the researcher's experience. Also, does the conclusion of the process resonate with others? Because heuristic research depends on the researcher's experience, it relies on his/her faithfulness and transparency during the whole process. Since the researcher is the primary person of the whole study, from the formulation of the question through the phases of immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis, validity and reliability depend on the person's capacity to reflect, explore and judge with honesty (Kenny, 2012). In addition, Moustakas (2011) claims that the researcher needs to return to the data again and again to check the representations, themes and patterns and determine if they provide sufficient meaning. If a deeper investigation needs to be done, whether he/she requires spending more time or going back to one of the phases, it is important to attend this to let the process be more meaningful and truthful.

Moreover, Sela-Smith (2002) argues that heuristic addresses validity through the complete surrender of the researcher to the process, by letting go the planning or attempts to

control the timeline of the phases, and letting the tacit knowledge do its work of transformation and guidance or the journey to arrive to a more truthful and genuine creative synthesis.

Following Moustakas (2011), Sela-Smith (2002) and Rose & Loewenthal (2006), the validity of my study corresponds to my interest to be serious and transparent with my heuristic process, for my own learning and my responsibility to finish the program. I did this research in the midst of a hectic time of the drama therapy program, due to my other classes and their heavy workload, my practicum and the need of doing activities to take care of myself. However, I committed myself to follow Moustakas's (2011) steps for heuristic research as much as I could. I found my question in November 2016, and I immersed in the process of collecting data until February 2017. It was hard to be faithful to journaling or art-making, but I tried to do it every time I was experiencing something related to safe space or; every week at the art studio I was working, I took advantage to make art in response to my exploration. Given the time limitations, I had to leave the research aside for the incubation phase from March to May 2017, because I needed to finish the assignments for my other classes; and it allowed me to arrive to an illumination. In the analysis of my data I have been real and honest about what I found, trusting in my tacit knowledge and sense of judgement to legitimize my findings (Rose & Loewenthal, 2006). In addition, since I did not use interviews, I relied on the support of my supervisor to be aware of blind spots that might influence the validity and quality of this inquiry (Rose & Loewenthal, 2006).

Chapter 4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Similar to other qualitative methods, in heuristic inquiry data can be collected from different sources. In fact, Moustakas (2011) defends that any type of source is valid for data collection, as long as it refers back to the research question and respects ethical considerations. The main kind of data collection is journaling on a daily basis, and this might be written, recorded or videotaped. This helps the researcher have a record of his/her thoughts, feelings and self-reflections (Kenny, 2012). Another common way of gathering data in a heuristic approach is conducting interviews in the form of dialogues between the researcher and participants. This enriches the study as it invites the researcher to look at his/her experience from other perspectives and, maybe, arrive to findings that are more meaningful and generalized, which can support the validity and reliability of the quest (Moustakas, 2011). Personal documents, that might include artwork, and different types of written work, such as publications and reports, letters, organizational or clinical documents are also good sources of data for a qualitative study (Patton, 2014); thus, for a heuristic inquiry too.

For my study, I used several sources to collect data. First, I gathered literature to see what was written about the concept of safe space, as a point of departure and reference for my experience. My journey around the notion of safe space happened within the context of my training as a drama therapist; consequently, I wanted to learn how this idea was conceived and interpreted in the literature of psychotherapy, drama therapy and other creative arts therapies. I used online databases including PsycInfo and PubMed, through the Concordia library, to find articles on my topic. At the beginning, I used the term “safe space” in all my searching matches: “... in/and psychology” “... in/and psychotherapy” “...in/and the creative arts therapies” “...in/and drama therapy.” To my surprise, I did not find many articles through the stated searching matches in the field of psychotherapy; just a few articles in the creative arts therapies. Then, I changed the words to “safe places” and “feeling safe” using the same searching matches and I found more related articles in psychotherapy, than in the creative arts therapies. However, these two terms were referring to the same idea of creating an environment free from harm for the client in the therapy room.

For the creative arts therapies, especially drama therapy, and the notion of safe space, I selected articles that talked about “play space, dramatic reality, surplus reality, and liminal

space” (Johnson, Pendzik, & Snow, 2012; Pendzik, 2006) since these terminologies closely relate to the meaning of safe space, as explained in the literature review.

In addition to the articles, I searched for books related to the subject of study at the Concordia library and I came across with very few that were directly related to the concept of safe space. Most of the books I found, referred to or mentioned the topic in chapters that were dedicated to other themes. Moreover, I just found one volume that is dedicated to the idea of safe space: *Feeling Safe: Making Space for the Self* (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976). And, even if it is an old source, I based a big part of my literature review on it because I think it addressed the notion of safe space very clearly, it helped me understand it, and it corresponded to my lived experience with this heuristic inquiry.

As stated above, heuristic research allows for any form of collecting data, as long as it helps the researcher live the question and dwell more into the process. Moustakas (2011) explains that heuristic inquiry incorporates creative self-processes through artwork (poetry, painting, storytelling, music, etc), and these offer additional meaning and depth to the experience of the researcher as it gives voice to his/her potential tacit knowledge (or information about things that he/she already possesses from previous experiences).

For this research, I used different forms of journaling and art-making to collect my data that I explain as follows. First, I decided to explore the idea of safe space in different locations: drama therapy practicum sessions, drama therapy classes, a community arts-based studio (Art Hive) where I was working as an engaged scholar, a church, and site-specific theatre projects (in which one was mine and the rest were those of my classmates). Through the process, other spaces emerged as I was living the question inside, like: a concert hall, a dancing class, the metro, skiing, and friends’ houses. I collected data in all these places for three months.

I used journaling (written and videotaped) and art in response to my experience with the concept of safe space (visual art, theatre and dance). I tried to journal after I lived something related to my question and; on Saturdays, I made art in response to my encounter with the locations. In the drama therapy sessions, I made visual art three times: two with my clients and one after the sessions; and I videotaped myself three times alone in the space: two in the first semester of the therapy, and one at the end of the second semester. In the drama therapy classes, I used written journaling three times, and I made four paintings; at church, I danced once; in the art studio, I made visual art twice and I employed videotaped journaling once; however, since I

was working there, I made art in relationship to the rest of the locations, and I could continue reflecting on the idea of safe space. In the site-specific theatre projects, I did my own performance, and I was an active spectator in three other performances, and I wrote my reflections after each presentation. At the concert hall, I sang in a choir and I used written journaling; at the dance class I participated dancing and I journaled; in the metro and skiing, I wore my clown nose and I used written journaling also. For the gathering of friends, and the sincere hug, I wrote on my journal.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (2011) indicates that the researcher can synthesize the data through the form of individual depictions or representations related to the topic of study. Then, the person looks for themes or places of resonance that appear in each depiction. After, the researcher can create a composite depiction, or integration of the representations, in the form of a first-person narrative (Kenny, 2012). According to Kenny (2012), the data analysis in self-inquiry requires perceiving patterns, finding connecting dots for the question, literature and experience; and, recognizing places of correspondence that illuminate something for the researcher and invite him/her to dive deeper in the experience to see what else can emerge.

The most common themes I could identify from my heuristic journey with safe spaces were: trust, connection with others; building relationships of reliance, acceptance, love and respect; sense of protection; freedom to be oneself; freedom to explore without fear of judgement; and, taking risks to be vulnerable and creative. Shapiro & Ryglewicz (1976) state that the sense of safety is based on trust in oneself and others. When the individual has this confidence, he/she is able to hold others when they express their own emotions and needs, creating a sense of safe space for them as well.

For instance, in my drama therapy sessions, I noticed that when I trusted and respected my clients, following their play, moving at their pace and waiting, they would naturally reveal their true selves and open their hearts for me to get to know them better. Here is one example from my journal:

Again, he built a fort. He has been building forts in every session; not letting me in. Once, he said that the fort was so strong that had no doors or windows. So far, he has not allowed me to enter his fort. This time, I waited... he said: "we have to build this to feel

safe. We have to be silent to feel safe... Come in! you are safe now.” He invited me in for the first time. and I felt connected, and safe (Dec. 14, 2016).

Another time, I recorded: “When I succeed to connect with my clients I feel the space is safe... It seems that a safe space comes from a relationship of trust and connection” (Dec. 15, 2016). In my reflections, I see that with trust it seemed easier for me and for the children to enter the playspace or dramatic reality (imaginary realm of real-not real) (Pendzik, 2006), without fear of being judged: “If this space (drama therapy room) could talk, it would say: Yes! I am pretty safe, because you and the children can explore without judgement... you can play, imagine and transform whatever you want” (Dec. 07, 2016).

In addition, at the Art Hive or the arts based community studio I worked on Saturdays, I experienced the safety of the space within trust, building relationships, exploration without judgement, entering into the imaginary realm and taking risks. This space is aimed to be safe as participants get a constant message that nobody will hurt them, from the initial welcoming and throughout their stay (Timm-Bottos, 2006). My job, as a facilitator, was to provide that safety to people making them feel at home. Another particularity of an Art Hive is that no one judges your work. In fact, it is very difficult to judge or compare because each person makes something different. Hence, that made me feel relaxed, as I show as follows:

In this space nobody judges my work, because who says one work is better than another? I feel judged by my own voice of perfectionism, as this is not my favorite art form; but I learn, I have learned so much from other people that come here and have shared their techniques with generosity. I have learned to trust more in my ideas and, if I do not feel happy with the result, I can change it without feeling guilty or ashamed of making a mistake... I come here and I want to challenge myself to play with the materials and see what happens, letting my imagination flow. If this space could speak it would say: “Trust in your ideas and do it!” (Dec. 06, 2016).

Moreover, I saw that making art with people made a huge difference than being alone in the space for me to feel safe. By meeting people from so many different backgrounds, and the simplicity and naturality of everyone (Timm-Bottos, 2006), I felt free to be myself. I went to the Art Hive alone once, and as I reflected in my video (Dec. 13, 2016), I felt scared, uncomfortable, intimidated by all the materials, and lost. I realized that I could easily judge my own work being alone there. I thought there was something about being in relationship with others and building a

community that helped me feel a sense of safety and more confident. While I was there alone I made an art piece that I called *Vulnerability* (see Appendix) in response to my feelings in that moment of fear; and, at the same time the safety that the space provided me to express myself in any way I wanted.

Similarly, at church I experienced a safe space, within the context of being in a relationship of trust, acceptance, love and respect; freedom to explore and be myself without fear of being judged; and taking risks to be vulnerable and creative. The fact is, there is no safer place for me than this. Through my Catholic faith, I have developed a close relationship with God; and, I have encountered his infinite love for me for who I am, not for what I do or fail to do. This truth brings me the safety that He will always be there for me in any circumstance, and helps me to trust in the middle of my insecurities, fears and problems. A few years ago, I started dancing and rehearsing my performances at church. So, for this research, I danced there. I was almost alone; one woman was there and watched me. As I reflected (Feb 15th, 2017), I have always felt free to express myself in the ways a love most in front of my God, Jesus. There I was entering in the playspace with trust (Pendzik, 2006). The relationship with Him sets me free to be vulnerable, to risk and be more creative, to offer Him my whole self because I believe He finds delight in me. This is safety to me.

Likewise, I was aware of the safety that comes from trustworthy relationships, in which I did not fear being judged at my friends' houses. In my writings, I reflected that in the relationship with my friends I felt welcomed, loved and accepted and I could be vulnerable, and trust that I would be held and supported. Their home always felt a place of safety for me because I was welcomed with love and acceptance. I felt supported and accompanied through my experience in Montreal; and, I could be vulnerable to open my heart whenever I needed. This confirmed how in therapy, there must be a strong alliance between therapist and client for this latter to feel the safety to open his/her heart (Hartmann, 1995).

At the beginning of another drama therapy class, I could be aware that a safe space meant that someone would be there for me offering support and help whenever I needed.

She asked: "How are you doing?" I replied: "So, so. This week is very busy for me in terms of assignments." And she said: "I would like to help. This week is pretty calm for me. If you need company or support please let me know." I thanked her and I thought that having someone there for me was safe (Nov. 21st, 2016).

Moreover, in one of the site-specific theatre performances, I could experience safe spaces involve connection and trust. A group of classmates performed the story of a girl who wanted to commit suicide in a real metro station. The rest of the class, we watched it from the other side of the metro rails. I reflected on my journal: “It was not the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, nor the safest place to do such a performance; but, I felt safe of what they were doing. I trusted in them because from the beginning they built a connection with me through the story and the performance” (Dec. 09, 2016).

In addition, I encountered beauty creating a safe space to allow vulnerability, in a Christmas concert I sang at. As I was walking to the metro back home, at the end of it, I met a lady who attended the concert, and I did not know. In my journal, I wrote the experience:

She said: “It was beautiful, thank you. I had a very bad day, and just listening to you guys (pause), the music entered little by little into my soul and calmed me down.” She must have been crying a lot because of all the Kleenex in her car... There is something about beauty that brings us peace, caressing the soul, telling us that everything will be fine. Beauty is safe and it invited her to take the risk to be vulnerable and open her heart to a stranger like me (Nov. 20, 2016).

Furthermore, I lived the experience of trust, confidence, freedom of exploration, and risk-taking in a safe space in a ballroom dance class. I love dancing; it is like playing to me; I enter in this dramatic reality of real not-real (Pendzik, 2006). As I wrote in my journal:

Another safe space. I can shine when I dance; I can forget about everything; I can be free; I can literally be the dancing queen. My talent brings a lot of confidence in me and I show it. I feel like I am being transported to a different world or dimension, and I do not want to come back to my reality. This feels so nice. Life should be an eternal dance... A woman talked about her experience in this dance school: “I always wanted to dance, but I thought I was not good enough. I came here; I tried; I faced my fears, and it has changed my life. Teachers have always encouraged and supported me to trust. I love coming here. I can forget about anything and have fun. It is a space where I found friends, family, and something I love to do.” (Nov. 25, 2016).

From the latter and other experiences, I learned that inner confidence brought me a sense of safety, and enhanced safe spaces, or made me feel safer in insecure areas or circumstances. As Shapiro and Ryglewicz (1976) explain, safety starts with trust that is projected by the person

from the inside-out; it is about having an internal confidence that the individual will be alright in any circumstance. I went skiing and I put on my clown nose. This is not the safest place on earth, and I had only skied three times before, but it felt safe to me, because I was confident inside. On my data (Feb. 18, 2017), I reflected that my inner confidence allowed me to take the risk and have fun. I fell several times, but I was willing to try again; and even go to harder trails. I also made an art piece that I called *Trust* (see Appendix) to illustrate that confidence that made me let go of my fears and take a risk.

Similarly, I discovered that taking risks without necessarily feeling completely safe or secure, helped me gain more inner confidence that would guide me to take more risks. For instance, for this research I wore my clown nose in the metro. Wearing it always puts me in a vulnerable state because I feel seen. Surprisingly, putting on the clown nose in public spaces in Montreal has been harder than in my home country, maybe because of my experience of not being totally at ease in this city, as I mentioned before. I reflected on my journal:

Only when I feel secure and safe can I enter in the playspace? What happens with the clown nose? Have I always felt safe to put it on in public spaces? Is there an inner confidence that most people are of good will and would not hurt me? It is funny; I do not feel confident enough to wear the nose here in Montreal where nobody knows me and it is a culture where most people do not care how the other presents him/herself. But I fear more than in my country. Is it because I do not feel at home here? Maybe, but I decided to overcome that fear and put the nose on. I could feel the discomfort of being seen and probably judged. But, after, I felt so happy that I did it. I feel I gained more confidence in me. I want to do it again (Jan 25, 2017).

Other themes that emerged in my journey with safe spaces were feeling at home, and inner transformation. For example, in my drama therapy classes we had to draw a picture of what home meant to us. I drew a colorful circle surrounded by lines that represented chaos (see *Home* in Appendix). I wrote in my journal: “Home is the nest that holds me when all around seems to be falling apart” (Nov. 14, 2016). It made me reflect on how much I missed my home country: Ecuador. In the last three years, before coming to Montreal, I finally felt I belonged there, after years of searching and healing; and I felt safe, even in the middle of a relatively unsafe environment because of thefts and assaults. But, my home was a place for deep transformation. It took several years to heal many wounds in my family; but, I found love, unconditional

acceptance, forgiveness and support. These findings made my home safe, they brought transformation and the desire to always go back. The same feeling of home I had experienced at church and at my friend's house, which have also allowed a deep transformation in me throughout my journey in Montreal, confirming me that it has been a positive experience because I have grown and matured in many ways I needed. Likewise, as Yalom (2009) clarifies, that the therapist becomes a trustworthy companion that walks along with the client on the path for self-realization.

In my heuristic journey, I also experienced unsafe spaces. The most common themes in these encounters were: fear of danger; fear of being judged; unwillingness to risk and be vulnerable; not feeling free to be oneself; anger; hurt; confusion; disconnection from others; feeling as a stranger; feeling invaded and disrespected. As explained in the literature review, if any type of danger threatens the person's sense of safety, fear reigns and she will build defenses to protect herself, and this will impede her to relate to others with freedom and trust (Shapiro & Ryglewicz, 1976).

For example, in drama therapy sessions, some of my clients broke boundaries and hurt me verbally and physically. Others made me conscious of my own trauma through their play. Even when I knew they were projecting their inner conflicts on me, it made me feel unsafe and uncertain about how to react. I quote my journal:

She cannot stop moving. She does not listen to me. She is rude to me. She has been insulting me the whole semester: "you are ugly; nobody wants to see your face. Your face is ugly. You are disgusting. Nobody likes you." She messes the whole room around; all the objects on the floor; she wants to hit me with the paper pack; she goes out and laughs. From the door, she looks at me sarcastically and says: "look at her, she is so annoying." I don't feel safe with her. Am I building a relationship of trust? Does she feel safe with me? What am I doing wrong? (Dec. 7th, 2016).

Reviewing my reflections, after these challenging sessions, I felt confused about my worth and my abilities as a drama therapist. I felt guilty that the clients probably did not feel understood or held by me to react like that. Consequently, I closed myself and did not want to play anymore with the children; I just wanted the sessions to be over and not see them again. I made an art piece that I called *Confusion* (see Appendix). Nevertheless, it seemed that those moments that were unsafe for me were safe for the kids to express that anger, or rebellion. I

wrote: “She told me that maybe giving them the space to be who they are in that moment, with their anger, is the most therapeutic approach, even if it does not feel that safe for me; but I am still willing to stay and hold them” (Jan 29, 2017).

In addition, in a drama therapy class we had to draw a representation of our name and its meaning to share with the other students. Through this drawing and the sharing of my classmates, I could reflect I felt unsafe in Montreal and in my cohort many times. “Isabel” means “promise of God” or “gift of God” (Isabel, n.d., in Wikipedia online), and for the assignment I drew a boat on the ocean that was arriving to a beautiful, sunny place (see Appendix). As I reflected on my journal:

She shared she felt lost and with no direction. Sometimes I feel the same way, like this boat in the ocean, especially here in Montreal... I still feel like a stranger. This is not home. Will it ever be? And I fear. Do I feel safe in my cohort to trust and be vulnerable to open my heart? I do not feel a connection with them. Their values are so different to mine. I fear being myself, why? I feel judged, especially in expressing my Catholic faith. Is it my own insecurity? Yes, probably; but, I close myself...I hold on to my “promise of God”, that my boat will arrive to a beautiful, sunny and safe port (Nov. 21st, 2016).

At the same time, I made another art piece that I called *Fear* (see Appendix), to illustrate my feelings of unsafety in Montreal - the sensation of not feeling at home, as I mentioned above.

Other locations where I experienced unsafe spaces were some of the site-specific final performances for the class I took. As described before, site-specific theatre is about transforming any space into a place for performance (Newman, 2009). In my own performance, I did not feel that sense of inner safety and trust. With a classmate, we did shadow-theatre in a café. It was the story of a girl at a café, who imagined another story of a marriage proposal and a run-away bride, which was projected as shadows on a white paper on the window. That day I was tired and in physical pain. We had some technical issues and people waited a long time. I reflected on my journal (Dec. 9, 2016) that I felt insecure, and I feared people’s disapproval. I felt vulnerable and I did not want people to see that. People could watch the spectacle from the inside, and from the outside. I felt safer with the audience outside; maybe because they could only see the shadows; it was not the real me. Whereas, inside people were watching me, in character; but it felt more real and vulnerable, and I was not ready. My defenses went up and I wanted to control everything to

feel safe. As Shapiro & Ryglewicz (1976) explain, how safe we feel inside influences how safe we will feel outside.

Another site-specific performance, where I experienced the unsafety on the outside more than inside, was about virtual spaces, as online dating and prostitution sites. At the living room of an apartment, with projected screens on every wall, we watched a live performance of a girl who was using these sites to prostitute herself. Eventually, a man accepted the offer and was invited to the apartment we were at. At some point, the girl came out of a room and the man arrived. He and us were in shock. When they both went to the room, the scene was over. We learned at the end that both were actors. On my notes (Dec. 2nd, 2016) I thought it was very well played; but, as an audience, I felt unsafe; invaded; insecure; intimidated; and, in danger.

The last performance, where I lived fear, confusion and not willing to take risks, was at a building garage where we were invited to explore different games established in different stations. I usually enter easily into the playspace (Pendzik, 2012); nevertheless, this time they presented regular games as board and card games, dancing and taking pictures, so bizarre and dark, that I felt very confused. They found actors that played very strange and scary characters. I wrote: “What was that? Theatre of the absurd? I was uncomfortable and I closed myself. I learned again that when I do not feel safe I do not risk having fun and be creative, because I feel disoriented and distressful” (Dec. 09, 2016).

Chapter 5. Creative Synthesis

The conclusions of a heuristic inquiry start emerging in the illumination phase, since it is when the researcher awaits the fruits of all his/her work of the previous stages. After leaving the research aside for a while and engaging in other activities, the person opens up to let tacit knowledge work by integrating all the received information from the different sources of data collection. The illumination stage is a eureka! moment where the understanding of the topic becomes clear for the researcher (Moustakas, 2011). The findings in this phase can get different directions, either expanding what was initially intuited, or showing unexpected revelations. In any case it is important that the researcher remains open to be transformed by the truth that will be revealed to him, since this will enrich the process of the experience (Moustakas, 2011; Rose & Loewenthal, 2006).

As I previously disclosed, I left my research aside in March. Given the time restrictions, I was afraid that I did not collect enough data, or that I would not have an illumination as I was dealing with stress and fatigue. Besides, my computer broke down and that caused more tension. Comically, my eureka moment arrived while I was searching a new computer in two different stores. I went to the first store and the man who helped me made me feel confident, sure and at peace with the option he gave me. He gave me a warm welcome as soon as he saw me at the computer section. He answered my questions with patience. He did not make me feel judged or dumb for my little knowledge with technology. And he respected my freedom of not buying the computer that day as I wanted to compare prices in another store. At the second place, my experience was awful. Nobody took interest in helping me and there was no warm welcoming. Then, two men came and they seemed in a hurry; they could not answer my questions; they confused me with the information; and, they pressured me to buy the product that day. I did not feel respected or free to ask anything else. As I was going back home I could connect the ideas of my exploration with safe spaces. I confirmed what I experienced in the *immersion* phase. I could resonate with what I lived in the different locations I visited, and I explained in the analysis. Safe spaces offered me a warm welcoming; relationships based on trust; help and support; an openness for honesty; freedom to be myself; acceptance; and respect of my choices. On the contrary, unsafe spaces made me feel judged; and confused; misunderstood; unsupported; and disrespected.

The creative synthesis of a heuristic journey gives the researcher the freedom to integrate all the acquired knowledge in any form that is representative and meaningful for him/her. Thus, it can be presented in any art form such as a story, poem, work of art, metaphor, analogy or tale (Kenny, 2012; Moustakas, 2011).

What was my lived experience as a drama therapy student exploring the idea of safe space? I wrote a story and made three art pieces to illustrate my journey:

The Walk

I leave home; and decide to take a walk...I walk, and walk... I do not know how long I have been walking. The horizon is so foggy; I cannot see any further than the next step, and I take it. I walk and I fear; at every step I take, I fear. Why? It seems I am in the middle of nowhere and I do not know if I am on the right direction... You said you'll be with me always. Where are you now? Why are you so silent? I feel alone here. The ground feels like sinking sand. I keep walking, and I am tired. I lose the purpose of my walk; I am confused. As safe as a boat in a storm; that's how I feel. I stop to take some rest, and sit down on an old bench. It is wet and I don't care; I wipe some of the water and sit. I drink some water that I have in my bag, and I realize I am running out of it. I worry. Where would I find more water?

I rest... I remember the sensation of being at home; the smell of family lunch on Sundays; and the music in the background. I remember my heart beating with joy and love; hoping, dreaming. And I want to stop and go back to that safe place. I can't stop my tears coming out. But, I can't go back; it's too far, and the fog is so heavy that I can't see the way back. I decide to keep walking and, as soon as I stand, my feet lose balance and I fall. Ahhh! I cry; I shout: You said you will always be with me! This was not the plan of this walk! Where are you? I am angry; furious. I get tired...I feel cold and the night is coming. It has felt like night time since I left home. I lie down on the bench, I grab another sweater from my bag and I immediately fall asleep.

Some noise wakes me up in the middle of the night; and I see a man at a fire. I wait. I fear. I look around and nobody else is near. I come closer to the fire with suspicion, but I want to warm-up. He looks at me and smiles: "I did not want to wake you up. Did you have a good sleep?" I keep silent. He asks: "Have you eaten? I prepared some food;" I take it and eat it in silence. He also gives me some water. I do not want to talk. He keeps asking: "Where are you

going?" I do not answer. "It seems you have been walking a long time." I nod. "The next village is not that far, but it will take a few hours of walking." I am not surprised. I have been walking a long time. Another mile wouldn't make any difference. "I am going there; if you want, we can walk together." I hesitate, but I want to arrive at a safe port, and he says he knows the way. Besides, I have been walking alone for so long that I start missing company. I take my bag and decide to walk with him.

It is still dark, but the fog cleared up and we can see a sky full of stars. In fact, we can see everything. He says: "Stop. Look at the sky. Look at the mountains. It is a beautiful night. It will soon be the morning (pause). You know, in the immensity and beauty of nature you can always be safe. You can rest. It holds you. It tells you that everything will be fine." I am moved by his words and I reply: "It is beautiful. I was longing for a clear sky." We smile. It feels safe. He seems so calm. We keep walking. He asks me why I am walking. "I want to follow my dreams." He replies: "Wow! That can take a lifetime, and one can easily get lost." Along the way, he tells me about him. Little by little I feel I can trust in him, and risk being vulnerable to open my heart. He does not force me to speak; he respects my freedom. I do not know how many hours we have been walking and talking. We laugh. "I thought you did not like talking at all." I say: "I just need some time." He replies: "I am glad you did it."

We arrive to the village and he takes me to the house of a lady who will host me. I am scared; I do not know that woman. He says she is very kind and lovable. We say good bye; he hugs me and says: "Don't ever forget how beautiful you are." In his arms, I feel safe and comforted. It reminds me of home. He leaves. I do not want him to leave. I feel vulnerable and unsafe. The woman receives me with a big smile and a hug. She says she was expecting me. I am surprised. She gives me a room. I thank her. I take a shower. She invites me to have supper. She says it is my welcoming supper. The other girls that live there are at the table and welcome me with joy. I feel overwhelmed and resistant, but something inside tells me that this place is safe and I have some peace.

The days pass and I feel I trust the lady more; we start to build a relationship. I still fear being judged; but, she holds the space for me when I feel vulnerable and she invites me to be myself. Little by little I start meeting the girls and feeling more comfortable... The man comes from time to time to see how I am doing. I still miss home, and I wish I can go back someday. But, it is nice to have found a place here that I can call home.

In the intimacy of my room I talk to you and I believe you listen to me. I breathe; I rest. I remember the man; I think of the lady; the girls; and the people I meet in the village. I realize it is You; it is You through them. My eyes open up; my heart starts beating again with joy, as before, and I feel something is happening inside. Maybe some kind of transformation. You kept your promise, You have always been with me. Thank You for being my safe home wherever I go.

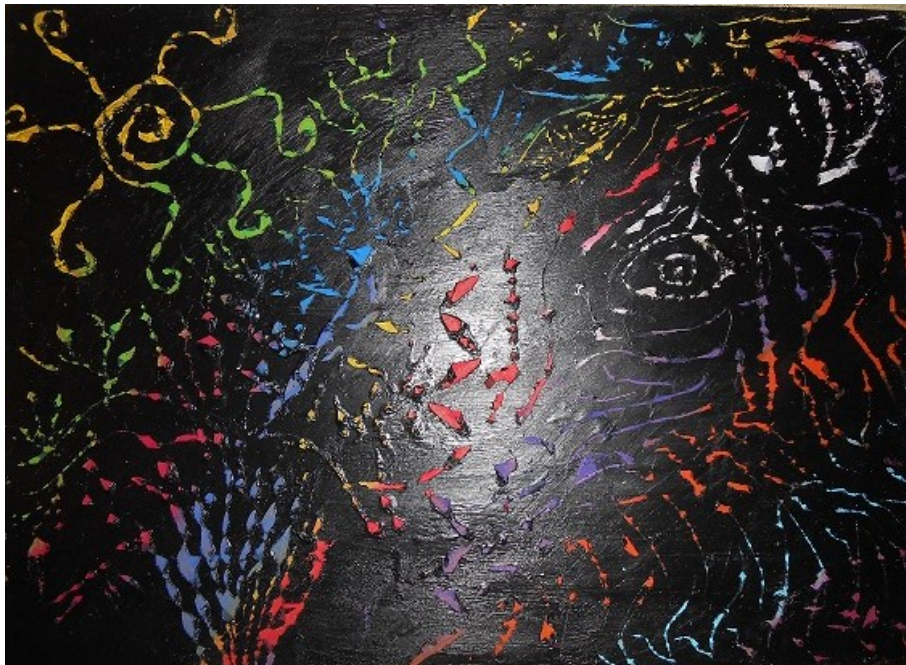
Art Pieces



- Risk. April, 2017



- *Everything will be fine.* April, 2017



- *Effeta (Open yourself).* May, 2017

Conclusion

My heuristic exploration on the idea of safe space has helped me better understand my experience as an international drama therapy student in Montreal. As challenging and unsafe as it has seemed many times, I am grateful to have found safe spaces that facilitated my growth and learning. Through this journey, I realize there is no such thing as a perfect safe space or state of safety, because the world is imperfect and broken. However, in the middle of chaos, conflict, fear and insecurity, there are safe spaces where I can find comfort, healing, love and transformation. These have been represented by the people I have encountered and the relationships I have built with them in these two years of studies. Thus, I understood that safe or unsafe spaces were mostly generated and determined by the human relationships I developed in the different locations I visited for this inquiry.

In addition, I discovered that the sense of inner safety or confidence and the sense of security in the outside environment had a two-way impact dynamic. On one hand, my self-confidence somehow increased the security I felt in different places, allowing me to trust and take risks. And on the other hand, the safety of the locations helped me take risks that would increase my inner confidence.

Moreover, as a future drama therapist, these findings have helped me understand more the concept of safe space in the field of creative arts therapies, bringing more awareness of the kind of environment and relationship I want to build with my clients for them to feel safe in the playspace. I learned that the safe space I aim for is founded on trust that is projected from the inside-out; and is enriched from the outside-in. With trust, I realized, I could build a relationship with others; have the freedom to be myself; explore without fear; and take risks to be vulnerable and creative to achieve the transformation I want. This is the type of environment I desire to create with my clients. Through this research, I could explore ways in which I could do it. For instance, always giving him/her a warm welcome; not judging him/her at anytime; having an attitude of profound respect and acceptance for the person, without forcing him/her to open up when he/she is not ready; providing him/her different creative media by which he/she can respond in the therapeutic process; and, giving constant support and encouraging his/her progress. At the same time, in this inquiry I learned I need to have a continuous self-awareness of what is happening inside me while I am developing the relationship with the client; how safe, confident and trustful I am feeling; and, how my own emotions impact the sense of safety the

client is perceiving with me. This awareness can help me identify areas I need to improve in the therapeutic dynamic to build a safer space with the client. I also need to keep working on my own processes to gain more confidence and trust to provide it for my clients.

Furthermore, I found that the creation of a safe space in drama therapy is not a goal that I can achieve for the therapy to take place; it is an ongoing process that needs to happen throughout the therapy from the first day until termination. I need to build trust with the clients in every session for him/her to enter in the playspace with more confidence. This ongoing process can help the client and I be conscious that the safety in the playspace will never be perfect, as we both are not perfect; we can make mistakes and eventually hurt each other, but every session is another opportunity to keep building a safer space between us.

Finally, I realized that since a safe space occurs and develops in a relationship, the client and I build it together every time we meet. It is true that I, as the drama therapist, have more responsibility in the dynamic because I want to provide the client with as much safety as he/she needs to open up and explore what he/she needs to in the playspace; but the person also contributes with his/her trust, respect and acceptance of me as his/her companion in a time-limited journey.

I think this research can be an opening to continue a deep exploration on the idea of safe space in drama therapy and other creative arts therapies to enrich the understanding and application of the topic. For instance, the relationship between the concept of safe space and boundaries and limit setting in the therapy room, that I did not address in my journey due to time restrictions; but is an important element of this topic as I have learned in my drama therapy courses. Also, the exploration of safe space in therapeutic supervision, as I mentioned in the literature review, but I could not focus on because of my time limitations.

I complete my heuristic journey happy and grateful for the learning it brought to me, and willing to embark in other heuristic experiences that will inform my practice as a drama therapist and my growth as a human being.

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Appendix



- *Home.* Nov, 2016



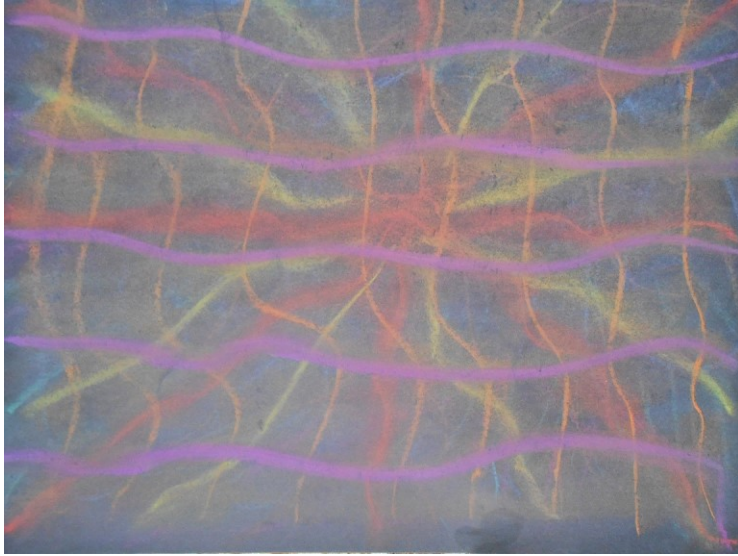
- *Promise of God.* Nov, 2016



- *Trust*. Feb, 2017



- *Vulnerability*. Dec, 2016



- *Confusion.* Feb, 2017



- *Fear.* Feb, 2017