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## Using Art Therapy Techniques for Team Building in Distance Education Doctor of Nursing Practice Student Cohorts

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## **Introduction**

Learning to work collaboratively within teams is a key aspect of the American Academy of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Doctor of Nursing Practice Essentials. However, Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) programs, especially those with a distance education (DE) component, may have difficulty in helping students develop the skill of working within teams.

The recent trend toward distance education programs is generating a concurrent need to develop fresh approaches to team building for students.<sup>1</sup> The ability to establish effective team connectivity is fundamental to the success of students in DE programs.<sup>2</sup> This connectivity defines how they will accomplish their tasks, communicate with one another and best leverage the skills and experience they already possess.<sup>3</sup> An excellent opportunity to influence this dynamic exists when DE cohorts of DNP students report to campus annually. We describe experiences in discovering and promoting functional team dynamics within DE Doctor of Nursing Practice cohorts by introducing creative Art Therapy activities during on-campus student orientation.

This approach adapts Peter Senge's classic theory of "building a shared vision," that fosters experimentation and innovation for on-campus team activities.<sup>4</sup> Senge's theory provides support to new DNP students as they explore and identify features unique to their cohort, to ensure they flourish in a virtual classroom environment. Student and faculty satisfaction surveys suggest that staging the right combination of live team building initiatives during orientation accelerates cohort engagement in meaningful online collaboration.

## **Background**

In the education of healthcare professionals, the humanities and creative arts are used to promote a person-centered approach to care by engaging students in learner centered activities. Incorporating the humanities offers the opportunity to gain insight into the human experience of both patients, as well as healthcare practitioners. This can be very important as healthcare professionals struggle to maintain their personhood as they encounter the rapidly changing landscape of science, technology, public policy and diminishing resources in healthcare.

Through the narratives we tell and hear, and the thoughts we share in our common quest for reaching our highest potential, we are more able to maximize the quality of our care and enhance the lives of those for whom we care. In this particular activity, the students were able to examine their own thoughts and

emotions about working in interprofessional teams in a way that allowed them to visualize critical features and connections to strengthen their ability to build and maintain teams.

This activity used creative arts to explore and illustrate their stories of interprofessional healthcare teams. While intelligence and skill enable the learner to make quick associations and problem solve, research into creativity indicates that when there is space for creative activity, the brain is able to calm itself and “meander” along interesting side roads and detours, resulting in the linkage of more disparate and novel ideas.<sup>5</sup>

The ability to engage in more creative learning opportunities may enhance our ability to let go of more conventional solutions and solve problems in more innovative ways. Jung, a neuropsychologist and creativity researcher describes intelligence in the brain as an efficient superhighway designed to get from Point A to Point B, while creativity is a more free-flowing journey with enough structure to find useful solutions.

One additional observation is that the humanities and creative arts as a teaching/learning strategy provide a level playing field for interprofessional teams to engage in collaborative learning. Whether team members are from different disciplines, or from diverse backgrounds, settings, and experiences as with the DNP students in this activity, creative activities relieve the participant of having the “right” answer. Instead participants contribute from a space of exploration and novelty. Framed within Senge’s “building a shared vision” the activity provides space for the DNP students as they explore and identify features unique to their cohort, so they can flourish in the virtual classroom environment.

The purpose of this study was:

(A). To assess the value of on campus experiences that incorporate art therapy techniques to promote healthy team dynamics within distance education DNP cohorts.

(B). To facilitate support for community building and a foster a sense of belonging.

### **Design**

This longitudinal study utilized a mixed methods approach and spanned a three year time period from 2010 – 2012. Retrospective data (artistic drawings) were

generated as part of normal curriculum delivery to onboarding DNP students from three cohorts. In 2012, a short quantitative electronic survey was administered to collect data from these three cohorts about their perception of the Art Therapy team building experience.

## **Methods**

Drawings from the 2010, 2011, and 2012 cohort were individually cataloged and evaluated by a team of three Art Therapy experts from the George Washington University (GW) Graduate Art Therapy Program. A three-tiered method of content analysis was conducted and the results were presented using a tag cloud (weighted list in visual design).

In addition to this qualitative analysis, a five point Likert-scale survey was administered to collect quantitative data from the three cohorts about their initial team building experience during orientation (5=Strongly Agree through 1=Strongly Disagree). This retrospective study received IRB approval from the GW Office of Human Research, and participants provided informed consent.

## **Qualitative Data Collection**

Participants were requested to position themselves around a table that had been covered with plain white paper. Numerous colored markers were made available. They were asked to draw a metaphor of what their ideal team looked like, but one minute into the drawing process, they were asked to stop, rotate two places clockwise and pick up with the new drawing they found themselves in front of.

This process was repeated one more time. They were then asked to conduct a “gallery walk”<sup>4</sup> by examining all of the drawings and select one that best represented their ideal, and draw themselves in the picture. The final direction was to draw their patient in the picture.

The debriefing consisted of an opportunity for each participant to explain why they chose that picture and why they positioned themselves & their patient where they did.

## **Quantitative Data Collection**

A professional license to PsychData was purchased, to provide a secure electronic link to a survey. Distribution occurred through the School of Nursing email list serve for all current DNP students. Respondents clicked on a link to go

directly to the informed consent statement. One qualitative open-ended question was included asking participants to provide a scenario (example) of how team building is occurring in their cohort (how it is operationalized).

## **Data Analysis**

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Qualitative constant comparative analysis (QCA) is a purposeful process used in academic work to determine whether interpretations, alignment or an association between ideas or concepts exists.<sup>6</sup> It is a common method used in grounded theory research to describe or organize qualitative data.<sup>6</sup>

For this study, QCA was employed by three raters to independently generate an initial list of open codes for each graphic image depicted by the three separate cohort groups, which resulted in three domains. These were, Cyclical References, Individualization, and Metaphorical Content, each of which revealed strong connectivity between each student cohort in a different way. Examples of each domain are shown in Figure 1 through Figure 4 respectively.

Figure 1. Class of 2014 (Nature/Boat Metaphor, Cyclical Reference)

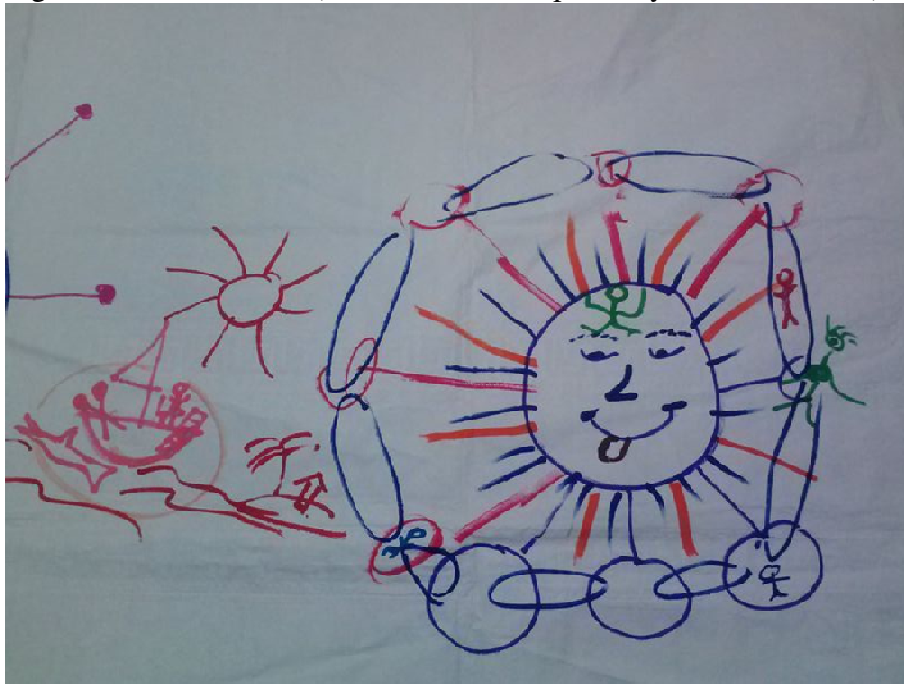


Figure 2: Class of 2013 (Nature Metaphor, Individualization, & Cyclical Reference)



Figure 3: Class of 2015 (Cyclical Reference & Individualization)



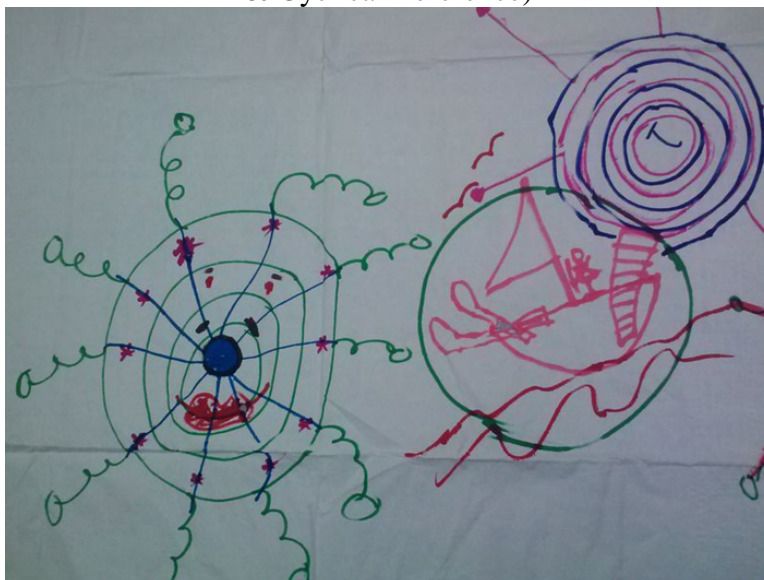
Figure 4: Class of 2015 (Boat Metaphor & Individualization)



The QCA domains revealed that art work from the groups included numerous examples of boats, canoes, row boats and ships. This was especially prevalent for the Class of 2014 cohort. Students frequently positioned themselves together, inside of the boats, and in one drawing are seen throwing a life preserver to a patient positioned in the water below. An association with nature and animals was another common, recurrent theme in each of the cohorts (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. Class of 2014 (Boat/Nature Metaphor & Cyclical Reference)



The open codes were then clustered into a list of secondary or axial codes, which were compared between raters to create a final list of 20 selective codes to form a Tag Cloud Drawing. A Tag Cloud Drawing is defined as a model or display of words using different type-sets or fonts to denote importance or frequency, and closely resembles a histogram.<sup>7</sup> Placement or nesting of the words is sometimes known as floorplanning, and is carefully considered for the display, which is not arbitrary as words that are correlated with one another are placed near one another.<sup>7</sup>

### **Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative data collected from PsychData was mapped for entry into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Edition 20 (SPSS-20) statistical analytic software and a variety of descriptive statistics were generated to examine the level and distribution of key indicators of the various aspects of teambuilding. These were examined across the demographic characteristics of the sample.

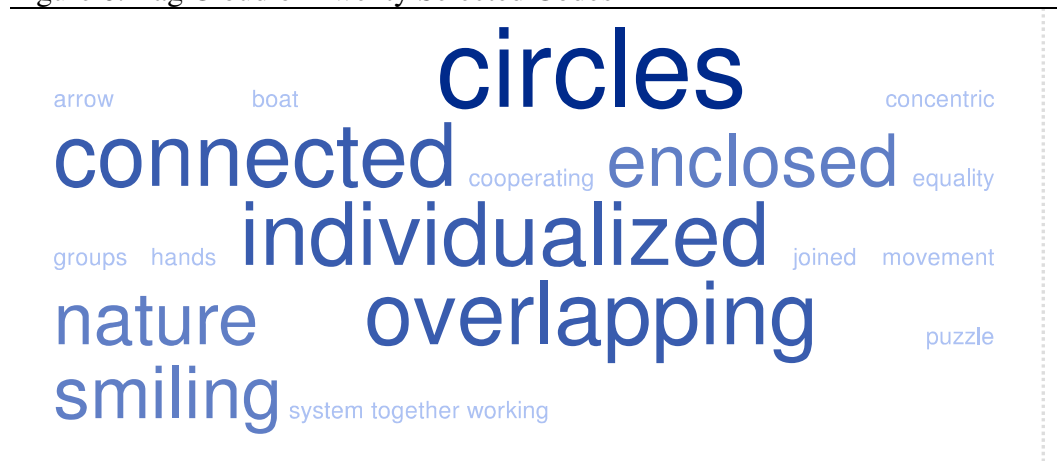
### **Results**

Demographic information was collected on their graduation year, gender, education level, employment status, work unit, age, and years in nursing. The graduation year distribution was as follows, the Class of 2013 (n=16); Class of

2014 (n=16); Class of 2015 (n=13). There were 5 males, and 40 females. Of these, 89.1% were employed full-time with an average number of years in nursing of 21.43 years. They ranged in age from 25 years to 62 years with an average of 46.3 years.

The Tag Cloud transcends traditional notions from the psychology of the arts, and the complexity of the interrelationship between the Kinesthetic/Sensory level, Perceptual/Affective level, and Cognitive/Symbolic level was considered.<sup>8</sup> Creativity was the common denominator. These relationships are displayed in the resultant Tag Cloud (See Figure 6).

Figure 6. Tag Cloud of Twenty Selected Codes



Quantitative analysis revealed that participants felt the drawing exercise was a useful assessment tool for new groups, (mean score 4.0) and a visual reminder that they are part of a network, web, or interdependent system (mean score 4.0). Participants also strongly associated the exercise with the AACN Essentials, with an aggregate mean score of 4.2 for that set of survey questions (Table 1).

Table 1. Alignment With AACN Essential

<b>Table 1. Alignment With AACN Essentials Implications</b>	<i>The drawing exercise helped my cohort begin to understand team issues that are usually “below the surface” when new groups form.</i>	<i>The drawing exercise and ensuing debrief by my cohort was a visual/audio reminder that my DNP education would value patient centeredness.</i>	<i>The drawing exercise provided me with a tool to assess some underlying issues in my own organization/work area.</i>	<i>The drawing exercise provided me with a tool to identify some root causes of dysfunction in my own organization/work area.</i>	<i>The drawing exercise is a good example of how people and organizations can’t “exist as islands unto themselves” and are part of a network, web, or interdependent system.</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	32.6%	32.6%	23.9%	23.9%	50%
<i>Agree</i>	50%	45.7%	43.5%	34.8%	32.6%
<i>Neutral</i>	13%	21.7%	19.6%	30.4%	13%
<i>Disagree</i>	2%	0	13%	10.9%	4.3%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Mean</i>	4.11	4.11	3.78	3.72	4.28
<i>Median</i>	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.5
<i>Mode</i>	4	4	4	4	5
*Reference for Survey Questions: Zaccagnini, M., White, K., (2011). <i>The Doctor of Nursing Practice Essentials: A New Model for Advanced Practice Nursing.</i> <sup>14</sup>					

The DNP degree was designed to develop nurse leaders who can promote and improve health within our complex health care system. In 2003, the Institute of Medicine recommended that all healthcare professionals must be educated to function as members of highly collaborative teams.<sup>9</sup> The AACN (2006)<sup>10</sup> developed the Essentials of Doctoral Education for Advanced Nursing Practice (DNP Essentials) to guide faculty on the development of DNP program curriculum and DNP graduates must develop the ability to build and lead interprofessional teams. In this regard, Art Therapy uses the creative process of art making as a form of visual expression that represents problem solving and reflection.<sup>11</sup>

Re-envisioning of reflective learning through the arts is considered by Arnheim (1969)<sup>12</sup> in his theory of Question and Explain (process, intentions, and decisions) and Evaluate (critical reflection of self and others). This form of visual thinking is known as a “Skill of Envisioning” or the ability to generate images of possibilities, a competency related to collaboration for the purpose of improving health outcomes, and described in the DNP Essentials.<sup>11, 10</sup> DNP graduates must be able to develop communication and collaborative skills to effectively understand team processes, contribute as members of teams, manage the common issues that arise within teams and ultimately lead teams.<sup>10</sup>

## **Summary**

Interprofessional collaboration improves the opportunity for meaningful team building by integrating arts and humanities with science for advanced practice DE nursing student cohorts. In addition, it enhances alignment with the AACN-DNP Essentials, which is an accreditation requirement for Schools of Nursing nationwide. The inclusion of artmaking activities in team building exercises provides not only a nonverbal means of expression but also a means to access sensory and affective responses.<sup>8</sup>

In this respect, directives geared toward the creative synthesis of cognitive and symbolic content can foster intuitive problem-solving and deeper reflection that leads to self-discovery.<sup>8</sup> The field of art therapy is credited with studying visual modes of thinking that support a cognitive basis for the arts.<sup>12</sup>

As higher education shifts to include a more technology driven delivery system, it will become increasingly important to innovate new ways to develop DE classroom relationships. Educators need to establish virtual learning environments for students that circumvent feelings of isolation, anxiety, and

dissatisfaction that frequently lead to attrition.<sup>13</sup> By utilizing limited face-to-face time among DNP cohorts to focus on the promotion of group interaction and mutual understanding, supportive faculty can mitigate the negative elements that contribute to attrition, and strengthen the DE experience.

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