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## An Evaluation of Comprehensive Projects Used in an Expressive Arts Workshop for Cancer Patients and Survivors

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An Evaluation of Comprehensive Projects Used in an  
Expressive Arts Workshop for Cancer Patients and Survivors

by  
Beta S. Abdolahi

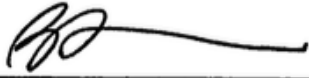
A research paper presented to the  
Faculty of the Department of Marital and Family Therapy  
Loyola Marymount University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of the Arts in Marital and Family Therapy

April 28, 2020

**Signature Page**

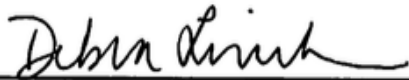
**Author's Signature:**



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Beta S. Abdolahi, MA Candidate, MFT and Clinical Art Therapy

**Research Mentor's Signature:**



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Debra Linesch, PhD, MFT, ATR-BC

**Dedication**

For my mom, everything I do, I do for you.

### **Acknowledgments**

I'd like to express my deepest gratitude to my research mentor, Debra Linesch, for sharing her immense knowledge and wisdom along with her continuous guidance, patience, and enthusiasm throughout the completion of this research project. Working with you has been an invaluable and refreshing learning experience. I'd also like to thank my sweet friends, family, partner, and peers for their unconditional support and encouragement throughout this journey. 😊

### **Abstract**

This research project examines an array of art prompts and projects that have been used in program-based art making workshops to facilitate creative expression amongst those who have been impacted by a cancer diagnosis. The review of literature emphasizes the value of this research, as the field of healing arts programs/expressive arts workshops in cancer care is varied and sparse. While there is substantial research that indicates art therapy to be a highly valued and accepted clinical intervention used in cancer care, there is little research that focuses on the specific role of art making with cancer patients/survivors and even less research on program-based art making workshops. As an artist and cancer survivor, this research incorporates my lived experiences to inform the cataloging, evaluation, and analysis of five art projects completed and used as inspiration for a program-based art-making workshop. The artworks included are an altered book, a cloth doll, a paper mask, a wooden box, and a Styrofoam head. The five central themes that arose from these five particular projects include that they were fun/engaging, encouraged play/experimentation, increased self-understanding, fostered the need to creatively express unexpressed emotions, and offered a sense of pride/accomplishment. This preliminary research project suggests that a broader investigation is needed in order to gather a deeper understanding of the impact of program-based expressive arts workshops as a healing modality with this patient population.

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### **Introduction**

This research project examines an array of art prompts and projects that have been used in program-based art making workshops to facilitate creative expression amongst those who have been impacted by a cancer diagnosis. This research intends to inform and guide the projects and prompts used in program-based art-making workshops held for cancer patients and survivors. As an artist and cancer survivor, this research incorporates my personal experiences to inform the cataloging, evaluation, and analysis of five art projects completed and used as inspiration for a program-based art-making workshop. The catalog presented in a table format will display the projects/prompts used, photos of the artwork completed, the title of the artwork/the materials used, excerpts from journal entries completed during/after project completion, and reflections/observations regarding each artwork. The catalog intends to inform the creative process, highlighting what makes a successful project/prompt, and in a parallel way, supporting the exploration of my own cancer narrative.

**Background of the Study Topic**

Art therapy and art making have been used in cancer care for many decades. The way art is used within the context of cancer care warrants careful examination, as the integration of art therapy and art making can undervalue the specific skills and training of art therapists and artists/artist facilitators. Art making entails creating art or craft either individually or within a group setting and does not require facilitation by an art therapist. Art making as opposed to art therapy places an emphasis on creativity and expression rather than placing a focus on deep psychological/therapeutic intent. While there is substantial research that indicates art therapy to be a highly valued and accepted clinical intervention used in cancer care, there is little research that focuses on the specific role of art making with cancer patients/survivors and even less research on program-based art making workshops.

## Literature Review

### *Introduction*

The following review examines the literature that presents art projects and prompts that have been used to stimulate creative expression among cancer patients and survivors. Specifically, this review describes how these authors utilized art-making projects/prompts with cancer patients and survivors. This review begins with a brief background on the literature that discusses the role of art making with cancer patients and survivors and follows with a description of different approaches to using art in the context of cancer care within a program-based art-making workshop.

### *Background on the Role of Art Making with Cancer Patients and Survivors*

Mische Lawson, Williams, et al., (2012); Collie & Long (2006) state that receiving a cancer diagnosis can be a life-altering event, as its treatment can exert significant physical strain including high levels of pain and fatigue, psychological distress such as anxiety and depression, and psychosocial challenges such as lifestyle changes, interpersonal issues, and social isolation. Reynolds & Prior (2006) suggest that even after successful completion of treatment many cancer survivors may continue to live with fears and concerns regarding issues of mortality, recurrence, and metastasis. According to Hass-Cohen (2008) when individuals experience a traumatic life event or crisis, the higher verbal functions in the cerebral cortex become less accessible. Thus, many cancer patients/survivors may feel as though they do not have the words to express or describe their experiences. Morrison, Nishimoto, et al., (2019) found that art making can provide cancer patients and survivors that may struggle with verbalizing difficult emotions with a vehicle to articulate and navigate through their cancer experiences beyond language.

Psychosocial group interventions such as support groups have become a common adjunctive treatment modality to address challenges posed by a cancer diagnosis (Collie & Long, 2006, p. 762). Complementary therapies, such as art therapy, can be “used to improve cognitive and sensory-motor functions, foster self-esteem, and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change” (American Art Therapy Association, 2017). Only a professional art therapist, who holds advanced training and education in the psychotherapeutic uses of art can conduct art therapy. While there is substantial research that indicates art therapy to be a highly valued and accepted clinical intervention used in cancer care, there is little research that specifically focuses on the role of art making with cancer patients/survivors and even less research on program-based art making workshops.

For the purposes of this paper, art making, “involves the active creation of art or craft, in a range of formats and contexts” (Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., 2017, p. 71). Art making as opposed to art therapy fosters creative expression using tactile materials and serves to bring pleasure, new knowledge, and skills to the individual without emphasizing deep emotional processing. Reynolds and Lim (2007) found that art making can be used to enhance self-worth by providing individuals with opportunities for challenges and achievements. According to Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., (2017) research has shown that creative expression and art programs used with cancer patients and survivors have been successful in decreasing treatment-related symptoms including mood disturbances and stress, aiding in learning about one’s self/identity, cultivating a sense of fun and distraction, in addition to fostering a sense of support and acceptance within a group setting.

*Program-Based Approaches to Using Art-Making in Cancer Care*

The research examined falls within two broad categories: program-based art making and leisure-based art making. For the purposes of this review, only eight studies pertaining to program-based art making were reviewed; as individual, non-facilitated leisure-based art making appeared to be a different phenomenon (Ennis, Kirshbaum, 2016). The literature on program-based art making varies in terms of contexts, facilitation, structure/framework, duration, methodologies used, and materials/media used. The literature demonstrates that these programs range from one-time expressive arts workshops to eight-week-long expressive arts workshops thus; the following descriptions are organized by length/duration of the workshop.

Program-based art making, commonly led by artists or health care workers, presents a goal or an aim and involves art making within a group setting, individually, or both (Ennis, Kirshbaum, et al., 2016). Morrison, Nishimoto, et al. (2019) examined the use of art to express the experiences of the cancer journey of military cancer patients and survivors, family, friends, caregivers, volunteers, and staff members. Non-art therapists conducted this one-time art-making workshop, “Oncology on Canvas”, and the researchers of this study utilized mixed methods to examine the 28 participants’ experiences of using art to express their cancer journey (Morrison, Nishimoto, et al, 2019). The emergent themes that the authors found as a result of this study revealed that the expressive art workshop provided participants with an opportunity to create meaning from their cancer journey by supplying participants with a new approach to putting their feelings into words and communicating their cancer narrative with others who have also been directly and indirectly affected by cancer.

Similarly, Mische Lawson, Williams, et al. (2012) utilized a crossover design study informed by pre- and post- testing of participant experiences after engaging in “Tiles of Hope”, a

one-time one-hour art-making program designed specifically for Bone Marrow Transplant (BMT) patients in an outpatient cancer center. The program is offered to patients and their caregivers and run by occupational therapists and students. Patients were provided with a ceramic tile, brushes, and paints and were invited to decorate the tile however they desired (Mische Lawson, Williams, et al. (2012). The authors found that some patients painted their tiles to illustrate their cancer journey whereas other patients' art appeared unrelated to their cancer experience.

Sabo & Thibeault (2012) found through their feasibility study involving two breast cancer survivors that the production of the art as well as the viewing of the finished art product aided in creating new meaning and understanding out of the participants' cancer experiences, re-authoring of the participants life narratives, as well as highlighting the potential healing role of active engagement through art. Sabo & Thibeault (2012) fostered an environment where nurse-researchers and professional artists/sculptors joined together in collaboration to create realistic life-sized depictions of female bodies following treatment/surgery. This study aimed to have participants develop lifelike torsos of two female bodies utilizing high-quality sculpting materials and to highlight the meaning that the participants gave to the experience of viewing their sculpted torsos (Sabo & Thibeault, 2012). The researchers employed a qualitative paradigm informed by an interpretative phenomenological approach to better understand how meaning is created out the human experience of receiving a cancer diagnosis and undergoing its treatment. The authors emphasized the importance of creating opportunities and relationships for medical practitioners and patients to deepen their understanding of the world post-illness (Sabo & Thibeault, 2012).

Ferszt, Massotti, et al. (2000) proposed that art-making can play an important role in patient care as well as for support staff in a hospital setting, as it can create a bridge for communication between practitioners and patients, generate a less threatening environment and a more humanistic hospital experience for patients. Seven patients in an inpatient oncology unit and seven nurses who cared for these patients participated in semi-structured, in-depth, audiotaped interviews post art-program to describe how the art program “Art on Rounds”, facilitated expression of participant feelings and emotions (Ferszt, Massotti, et al., 2000). In this study, participants were introduced to the weekly topic, presented a reproduction of famous artists’ work as inspiration, and given a variety of art materials to create a work of art. For two of the participants who were unable to leave their rooms due to limitations related to their illness, the art teacher visited them in their rooms and provided them with the lesson of the day (Ferszt, Massotti, et al., 2000).

Lockhart & Anania (2011) review the “Healing Arts Program” which was developed for cancer patients in a comprehensive cancer care program in Denver, CO to provide patients with an opportunity to explore creativity as a means of healing from the emotional stressors of a cancer diagnosis. The program offers patients a variety of art materials and media, which are accessible for patients to use during any time of the day. This study focused on a collaborative piece where patients in the BMT unit, their families, and the staff worked together to create 1,000 origami paper cranes (Lockhart & Anania, 2011). The participants of this study reported that each paper crane was embedded with “the desire for hope and peace throughout their healing journey” and that the cranes provided participants with a sense of pride and accomplishment, as well as a reduction in some side effects of certain medications such as increased range of motion in fingers and wrists (Lockhart & Anania, 2011, p. 107). Once completed the paper cranes were

organized according to color and displayed within the walls of the BMT unit to reflect the seasons of change (Lockhart & Anania, 2011).

Heiney, Darr-Hope, et al, (2015) describe the conceptual framework used in a visual arts program and provide an evaluation that utilizes a qualitative methodology to interpret patient perceptions of the program. Darr-Hope, an artist, and Heiney, a mental health clinical nurse, conducted a six-week-long, 90-minute arts workshop with each session consisting of didactic presentations, studio time, and group discussion. Group members were provided with a variety of art materials such as paper, canvas, inks, paints, colored pencils, photographs, collage, mosaic, and found object assemblage materials to facilitate creating an art piece that represented participants personal perspectives on living with cancer (Heiney, Darr-Hope, et al, 2015). The authors' rationale for providing participants with a variety of art mediums and techniques was to "encourage creativity, decrease defensiveness about participants cancer experience and to increase their engagement in the creative process" (Heiney, Darr-Hope, et al, 2015, p. 37). The authors found that patient evaluations collected in the form of surveys after each group indicated patients had an overall positive response to using the art as a healing modality with this patient population (Heiney, Darr-Hope, et al, 2015).

Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., (2017) examined the experience of participation in an eight-week, two-hour-long, experimental/free facilitated arts and crafts program for patients during and after their cancer treatment in the Northern Territory of Australia. The researchers utilized a longitudinal, qualitative, single cohort study method to examine the weekly art made by eight women diagnosed with breast and/or ovarian cancers (Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., 2017). Findings from semi-structured interviews collected before, during, and after art making and group discussions were then analyzed using an Energy Restorative Framework. According to



Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., (2017) the workshops were facilitated by two professional artists and each group began with an introduction and demonstration of a particular art form or craft to which then participants were encouraged to create whatever they wanted for the remainder of the group. Some of the art making activities included creating fiber sculptures, weavings, still-life paintings, paper-mâche pots, jewelry making, and natural silk-scarf dying (Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., 2017). The authors suggest that the value of art making or creating “art for arts-sake” was highlighted in this study as it provided participants with the opportunity to balance the physical, psychological, and social challenges associated with a cancer diagnosis meanwhile providing participants with new experiences of stimulation, excitement, and accomplishment (Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., 2017).

### *Conclusion*

Program-based art making workshops appear to be an activity worth further investigation and consideration for integrating into cancer patient and survivor care, as art-making has the potential to leave a positive impact on cancer patients sense of identity and in their relationships with others (Ennis, Kirshbaum, 2016). According to Ennis, Kirshbaum, et al., (2016) the three common themes that emerged from the literature regarding the impact of art-making programs used in cancer care include: learning about one’s self through expression and creativity, the feeling of being supported by a group, and that art provided patients with an enjoyable distraction from symptoms and concerns regarding their illness. The creation of art within a supportive group environment regardless of the duration of the workshop can contribute to emotional healing for cancer patients experiencing treatment as well as for cancer survivors navigating the world post-treatment.

## **Research Approach**

For the purposes of this master's level research project, I am implementing an arts-based case-study approach. My rationale for selecting this pragmatic, practice-oriented approach is informed by my own lived experiences as a cancer survivor and artist. Elliot (2011) suggests that utilizing an arts-based approach can provide a “fundamental structure and quality of a personal and social experience” (p.98). Engaging in an arts-based approach encourages the process of revisiting and reflecting thus; it appears to be an appropriate methodology to research the subjective human experiences of having cancer. Kapitan (2018) notes that autobiographical/biographical information such as researcher notes, journal/diary entries, photos, videos, and art can serve as sources of data in a case study. This reinforces and informs my reasoning for utilizing a case study approach as I intend to create a catalog presented in a table format that will display the projects/prompts used as prompts/inspiration in a program-based art making workshop, photos of the artwork completed, the project title/materials used, excerpts from journal entries completed during/after project completion, and reflections/observations regarding each artwork.

The case-study approach can also offer multiple sources and perspectives on a given situation, which can supply researchers with a medley of data sources for comparative analysis (McNiff, 1998). As outlined by McNiff (1998) the descriptive nature of case studies can provide researchers with the tools for communicating and understanding an experience. My intention for this research project includes examining the themes/patterns that emerge from the art in order to construct a rubric that suggests what makes a successful project/prompt for future program-based art making workshops. Kapitan (2018) suggests that a “case study is not a statistical generalization rather it is a way of making sense that can apply to other cases of people who

share commonalities of an experience” (p. 130). Therefore, by utilizing an arts-based case study method I hope to gain deeper knowledge, insight, and understanding of my own cancer narrative meanwhile, highlighting the potential of art making in the healing process of those impacted by a cancer diagnosis.

## Methods

This section includes definitions of terms necessary to comprehend the data.

### Definition of Terms:

For the purposes of this research, *art making*, “involves the active creation of art or craft, in a range of formats and contexts” (Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., 2017, p. 71). Art making as opposed to art therapy fosters creative self-expression using tactile materials and serves to bring pleasure, new knowledge, and skills to the individual without emphasizing deep emotional processing.

*Program-based art making* is commonly led by artists or health care workers, presents a goal or an aim and involves art making within a group setting (Ennis, Kirshbaum, et al., 2016). The literature on program-based art making varies in terms of context, facilitation, structure/framework, duration, methodologies used, and materials/media utilized.

The terms *art projects* and *prompts* are used interchangeably throughout this paper to describe a facilitated theme or topic, which inspires and/or encourages creative expression.

The terms *cancer patients* and *survivors* are used interchangeably throughout this paper to describe “people who have had a diagnosis of cancer and are at any stage of treatment of recovery” (Ennis, Kirshbaum, et al., 2016, p. 1).

**Design of Study:**

**Sampling:** For the purposes of this research project, I collect data from myself based on my own lived experiences as a thyroid cancer survivor and artist.



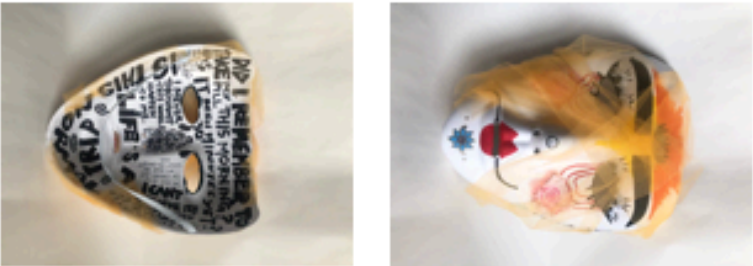


**Gathering of Data:** The data collected consists of five artworks used as inspiration in a program-based art making workshop and the corresponding journal excerpts completed during/after each artwork. The artworks included are an altered book, a cloth doll, a paper mask, a wooden box, and a Styrofoam head.

**Analysis of Data:** The data collected (the artwork and journal entries) are analyzed and organized into a catalog. The catalog is presented in a table format and displays the five projects/prompts used, photos of the artwork completed, the project title/materials used, excerpts from journal entries completed during/after project completion, and reflections/observations regarding each artwork. The themes/patterns that emerge from the artwork and journal entries inform the construction of a rubric that aids in the assessment of what makes a successful project/prompt for future program-based art making workshops.

## Results

### Presentation of the Data

The data gathered from the analysis of the artwork and journal entries is organized and presented into a table format. *Figure 1* displays the five projects/prompts used, photos of the artwork completed, the project title/materials used, excerpts from journal entries completed during/after project completion, and reflections/observations regarding each artwork. Based on my observations/reflections collected from my journal entries I have identified five emergent themes that appear across all five projects. The five central themes that arose from these five particular projects include that they were fun/engaging, encouraged play/experimentation, increased self-understanding, fostered a need to creatively express unexpressed emotions, and offered a sense of pride/accomplishment.

|  |  |   |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|---|--|
| <p><b>Project Template</b></p>   | <p><b>Book</b><br/>Dimensions may vary<br/>Found book</p>                          | <p><b>Doll</b><br/>12 inches<br/>White Muslin cloth<br/>doll</p>                    | <p><b>Mask</b><br/>8-1/2x7-1/4 inches<br/>White paper mask w/<br/>white elastic cord on<br/>the back</p> | <p><b>Box</b><br/>4.5 x 3.1 x 1.8 inches<br/>Unfinished plywood<br/>w/ hinged lid</p> | <p><b>Head</b><br/>8 x 6.5 x 11 inches<br/>White foam<br/>mannequin head</p>         |
| <p><b>Photos of the<br/>Artwork</b><br/><br/> <u>Prompt:</u> "Embellish<br/>the template in a way<br/>that reflects your<br/>cancer experience".</p> |  |  |                      |   |  |

|   |  |  |   |   |  |
|---|--|--|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Project Title, Year Completed, &amp; Materials Used</b></p> | <p><i>Three Kisses</i>, 2019<br/>Mixed Media on Pre-existing Book</p>  | <p><i>Shine Through</i>, 2019<br/>Watercolor and Marker on Fabric</p>  | <p><i>Beyond the Horizon</i>, 2019<br/>Marker, Tulle, Googly Eyes on Pressed Paper</p>  | <p><i>Big Feels</i>, 2019<br/>Tissue Paper, Marker, Paper, Ribbon, Pom-Poms, Googly Eyes on Wood</p>  | <p><i>Heavy</i>, 2019<br/>Tissue Paper, Glue, Pipe Cleaner, Paper, Tulle, Yarn, Fake Eyelashes on Styrofoam</p>  |
| <p><b>Excerpts from Journal Entries</b></p>                       | <p>"As time progresses, my cancer narrative continues to evolve beyond what it first started out as...<br/>Although the book has a natural stopping point, this narrative will continue on for the rest of my life".</p>   | <p>"I want to shine through but some days I feel like I cannot".</p>   | <p>"The mask serves as a reminder to not make assumptions. Some people get really good at hiding what's going on inside...the concern doesn't go away".</p>   | <p>"I know that by sharing my story I can encourage awareness, advocacy, and growth in others...but by no means am I a thyroid expert".</p>   | <p>"The treatment and recovery process looks different for every cancer patient/survivor...but I am curious whether the weight of receiving a cancer diagnosis feels the same?"</p>  |
| <p><b>Reflections/ Observations</b></p>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Fostered problem solving.</li> <li>-Provided structure.</li> <li>-Fun/engaging process.</li> <li>-Encouraged play/experimentation.</li> <li>-Reflective experience.</li> <li>-Illuminated a changing perspective.</li> <li>-Reframed cancer experience.</li> <li>-Increased self-understanding.</li> <li>-Need to creatively express unexpressed emotion.</li> <li>-Offered a sense of pride/accomplishment.</li> <li>-Desire to share artwork with others.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Fun/engaging.</li> <li>-Reflective experience.</li> <li>-Encouraged play/experimentation.</li> <li>-Meaningful/intentional process.</li> <li>-Illuminated a changing perspective.</li> <li>-Increased self-understanding.</li> <li>-Need to creatively express unexpressed emotion.</li> <li>-Utilized new techniques/materials.</li> <li>-Offered a sense of pride/accomplishment.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Nice metaphor to work with.</li> <li>-Provided structure.</li> <li>-Fun/engaging process.</li> <li>-Reflective process.</li> <li>-Encouraged play/experimentation.</li> <li>-Need to creatively express unexpressed emotion.</li> <li>-Enhanced feelings of choice and control.</li> <li>-Increased self-understanding.</li> <li>-Offered a sense of pride/accomplishment.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Fun/engaging process.</li> <li>-Nice metaphor to work with.</li> <li>-Reflective process.</li> <li>-Encouraged play/experimentation.</li> <li>-Enhanced feelings of choice and control.</li> <li>-Need to creatively express unexpressed emotion.</li> <li>-Meaningful/intentional process.</li> <li>-Increased self-understanding.</li> <li>-Offered a sense of pride/accomplishment.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Fostered problem solving.</li> <li>-Fun/engaging process.</li> <li>-Encouraged play/experimentation.</li> <li>-Increased self-understanding.</li> <li>-Utilized new techniques/materials.</li> <li>-Need to creatively express unexpressed emotion.</li> <li>-Offered a sense of pride/accomplishment.</li> <li>-Desire to share artwork with others.</li> </ul> |

Figure 1. Projects completed and reviewed.



## **Analysis of Data**

Several noteworthy observations emerged from each project, however the five prominent themes that surfaced across all five projects incited a deeper exploration. These five themes serve to highlight what makes a successful project/prompt for future program-based art making workshops. The five central themes include that the projects were fun/engaging, encouraged play/experimentation, increased self-understanding, fostered the need to creatively express unexpressed emotions, and offered a sense of pride/accomplishment. The presentation and analysis of the themes is guided by the data collected from each project, thus the information is organized by project.

### *Fun/Engaging Projects*

The Altered Book: The process of data gathering first began by jotting down a series of fragmented sentences and memories in no particular order on a sheet of notebook paper. What parts of my cancer narrative am I going to include and exclude? It all seems relevant but how am I going to translate it into imagery? This was a quick process that only lasted a mere couple of minutes because as soon as I decided where I wanted to start my story I jumped right into the pages of the book. I was excited to start. I was looking forward to ripping, crumbling, and adding in new pages. In the past I've handled and treated my books whether rented or owned, with a sense of care and caution, so it felt liberating to be able to work in this manner without fear of "ruining" the template. I worked on this project in several sittings and each time I gave myself a break from it I found myself longing to return to it. Upon reflection, this project felt the most engaging to me because I noticed that while I was working on one page I would already be thinking about what I was going to do on the next page.

The Doll: Similar to the book, I started working on this project without a clear roadmap. I predict that I commonly work this way because I am excited to get started. In my art making practice I often enjoy working intuitively and watching my artwork evolve throughout a series of trials and errors. This project like the others felt especially engaging to me because the three-dimensional planes (the front and back side of the doll) called for additional consideration and attention. This subsequently prompted contemplation as to how I wanted to display my figure once it was completed. I had fun playing around with all of the different possible endpoints/positions that the figure could rest in and found that each of the differing positions told a distinctive story. I'm still unsure about what is the "right" position but I think that sort adds to the creative problem solving process.

The Mask: I found this project fun and engaging the moment I received the template. I enjoy the duality (inside/outside) that the mask provides. To me it offered an opportunity to explore and showcase my playful nature meanwhile displaying a less overt yet, complementary side of me as well. Throughout the process, I found myself wondering should this go on the inside or does this go on the outside? Causing me to actively think about both sides of the mask simultaneously. I first worked on the outside of the mask and then worked on the inside. By the time I had started working on the inside I felt that I had run out of ideas/ways to translate my thoughts into images so I decided to work only with text on the inside. The more I worked on the mask the more I realized I could keep adding to it which provided me with a lot of creative freedom and choices.

The Box: I was really excited to start this project because the metaphor of a box really resonates with me. Similar to the mask, I found it fun to play around with the dichotomy between the inside and the outside. Initially, I was unsure how or where to begin so I just started playing

around with different materials and ideas. The box really allowed me to collectively explore each of my ideas on a different plane. Each side of the box provided an opportunity to try something new and different which felt exciting and compelling.

The Head: This was a fun one. When else in my life have I ever been presented with a foam head and been given the opportunity to embellish it to my liking? Never! I felt like the possibilities with this project were endless. Where to start and where to stop? This project inspired me to think creatively and outside of my comfort zone. It encouraged me to play and experiment with various kinds of mediums and materials, which made the project enjoyable to bring to life.

#### *Encouraging Play/Experimentation*

The Book: The idea of an altered book is that the author/artist has the ability to modify a book from its original and intended form into an altered and different form thus, giving the book new meaning and significance in the world. I love this idea. I really felt like I couldn't go wrong with this project. Anytime I made a mistake it felt like there was always a way to resolve it and if there wasn't...well, out goes that page and on to the next! This allowed me to work spontaneously and without restriction. I felt compelled to play around with numerous materials including gel pens, paint markers, various colored/textured papers, collage imagery, and watercolor to see what kind of effects I could achieve. I even utilized several unconventional materials that aren't commonly found in books such as plastic bags, tulle, and yarn. Each page is a work of art inspired by the page before.

The Doll: I have worked on and with fabric before so I was interested in somehow dyeing the doll without getting it wet/having to wait for it to dry. This prompted me to use markers on the fabric and then to apply water to the doll so that the ink from the marker would bleed. This

process worked well but I found that it was messy and the doll was getting pretty wet. So I thought, what other materials can I use to achieve a similar look? I began utilizing watercolor paints and quickly became enamored with the result. I experimented with different pigments and saturations, mixing colors, and allowing them to naturally bleed into one and other. It was an unforeseen process; one that I initially did not intend or plan for but I became delighted with the end result.

The Mask: I tried to utilize several different mediums and techniques when working on the mask but I found myself getting frustrated with the outcome. I felt that spontaneity did not translate as well onto the mask as it did with the book and the doll, however this did not stop me from experimenting with my copious ideas and art materials. Aesthetically, the mask is not my favorite piece that I created but there are several elements that I really appreciate and enjoy about it. These details such as the Googly eye eyelashes, the orange veil, and the textured cheeks are all products of play. Inspiration from the materials played an important role in the construction of this piece.

The Box: I really enjoyed that each of the five projects presented the opportunity to work on/with various materials. The actual physical material itself can evoke a sense of inspiration and creative expression. This was true for me when working on the wooden box. I utilized various materials including tissue paper, pompoms, permanent marker, Googly eyes, gel pens, and paint markers along the outside of the box and decorated the inside of the box using watercolor, permanent markers, and strips of folded colored paper. Although the box is small in size I felt that there was a lot of space to fill, which provided me with enhanced feelings of choices and control thus, encouraging me to imaginatively envision and playfully decorate each plane with intention and care.

The Head: This project inspired me to attempt a technique that I have yet to try out in my personal art practice. I've known about decoupage but never experienced an appropriate time to test out this approach, so when presented with a Styrofoam head I thought, this seems like an ideal project to try this out on! Once the head was covered in colorful pieces of tissue paper I did not intend on stopping there. I am attracted to saturated hues and rich colors. I am drawn to kinesthetic and tactile materials/objects because I connect to my art and relate to the world through my eyes and my hands. So it was really important for me to utilize color and texture in each of the pieces, particularly this one because it brings out my desire to play and explore.

#### *Increasing Self-Understanding*

The Book: This is the first time that I have created an altered book, let alone made art specifically about my cancer narrative. I found the process and concept of this project to be quite powerful. It inspired me to talk about and subsequently illustrate my story in a way that I never have before. As noted in a journal entry in *Figure 1*, "as time progresses, my cancer narrative continues to evolve beyond what it first started out as... Although the book has a natural stopping point, this narrative will continue on for the rest of my life". Organizing my narrative on paper and putting it into text and imagery aided in illuminating a changing perspective and reframing my cancer experience.

The Doll: Since receiving a cancer diagnosis I've had to re-evaluate my relationship with my body. Some days, I'll admit, I wonder what it would be like to trade out my body for a new one? Would I miss the one I originally had? It's a complicated relationship that requires continual attunement, readjustment, compassion, patience, and gratitude. My mind and body are in constant dialogue with each other even when I don't always have the time to listen. So I really enjoyed working on this project in particular because it allowed me to further explore that

relationship with my body in a non-judgmental light. I enjoyed the parallel process that occurred while I was working/handling my doll with such care and intention. It served as a gentle reminder to be kind and to check-in.

The Mask: To me, what stands out the most about this project is what lies on the inside of the mask. It allowed me to highlight some thoughts and concerns that I don't typically share out loud which reinforced the need to creatively express unexpressed emotions. I could see how this project might be beneficial to use in a group setting as it may aid in decreasing feelings of isolation, normalizing concerns/symptoms, and validating intense emotional experiences. I think the metaphor of a mask can offer cancer patients/survivors with an opportunity to relearn and re-explore their identities post-diagnosis.

The Box: Throughout my cancer journey, I have genuinely gained newfound insight and perspective as to how I engage with and navigate through the world. I chose to showcase some of that insight/perspective by creating the colorful "paper thoughts" flowing outwards from the inside of the box. Those thoughts are very personal and applicable to my own situation/experiences but I wonder if other cancer patients/survivors can relate? Similar to the thoughts written on the inside of the mask, the thoughts I've placed inside the box are beginning to find a way out into the world. The art felt like a safe way to divulge that information with others.

The Head: I bear a daily reminder of my cancer experience along and across my neck, in the form of a scar. Though, I am fortunate enough to have the option to show or hide that part of myself depending on the clothing I'm wearing and how I decide to wear my hair. I am not embarrassed or ashamed of my scar but sometimes I don't want people to see it and ask about it. So I am usually pretty cognizant of it. I utilized bright yellow yarn to represent my scar in this project. I often wonder, when is it an appropriate time to share that I've had cancer? I wonder

how others bring it up? I wonder if people look at me differently once they've learned that I've had cancer? What does it actually mean to be a survivor? This project prompted many questions without clear answers.

*Fostering the Need to Creatively Express Unexpressed Emotions*

**The Book:** With each year that passes since completing my cancer treatment I still sometimes find it difficult to believe that I actually had cancer. Sometimes I feel like I didn't really make the time to fully process that during or post-treatment. I mean, how could I have when my main concern was just getting through it? Now that I've had some distance from cancer and I've been regularly maintaining my health it feels a lot easier for me to reflect back on that time in my life. This was evident when beginning on the first page of the altered book. I envisioned this page immediately once given this template. It felt really good to physically manipulate (crumple) and black out this once crisp and pristine page. The book granted me the permission to put myself back into that dark place and to reflect on the sense of light that it has shined onto my life. The first page of the book feels to me like the most significant page in the book; it's where it all started.

**The Doll:** Although I am a cancer survivor, the fears and worries I have about cancer returning into my life are still present. The art process provided me a vehicle to sit and examine those feelings on a deeper level. I wondered, "Am I doing a good enough job of taking care of myself?" Could I be doing a better job? Probably so, but it feels like that would take a lot of mental and physical energy. Even the thought of doing more to take better care of myself feels exhausting. Cancer forced me to slow down and make time for rest. Pre-cancer, my desire to rest might have been mistaken as laziness and I would actually feel guilty about making time for it. Post-cancer, I prioritize rest. My doll rests easily with one arm behind its head as it lays back and

tunes into its body's needs. Amongst my friends and family, I am notorious for lying back in this position.

The Mask: On the inside of the mask, I've written, "I'm not glad for cancer but I am glad for what it has taught me". If there is any sort of a "gift" in cancer, what is it? Maybe that is the therapist within me reminding me of the powers of cognitive reframing but I think art making has the potential to bring out the magic of meaning making. How does one make sense of life after cancer? I remember after completing my radiation treatment and receiving an official clean bill of health all I wanted was to return back to my life pre-cancer. In order to return back to my "normal" life I had to wear a figurative mask that concealed the existential questions and concerns I had not only about my life but also about life in general. Things I once valued now felt meaningless and vice versa. How did I think I could return to normalcy after my very own existence was just threatened? How could I explain these looming thoughts and feelings to my friends and family? Well, for the longest time, I didn't. I just kept my mask on and kept on pushing through.

The Box: The "paper thoughts" placed in the inside of the box each display a significant thought that I've had but have not yet verbalized. I have mixed feelings about the term "survivor" because honestly, what other choice did I have? What is the alternative? When people tell me that "I'm a fighter" or that "I'm so brave", I can't help but kindly smile and laugh awkwardly as I cringe internally and try to think of a smooth transition to steer the conversation in a different direction. Maybe that's an unpopular opinion or it's just me but there's something about calling myself a survivor that just doesn't sit 100% right with me.

The Head: The form of the Styrofoam head relates especially to me because of where my cancer was located. Directly above my collarbones, located centrally at the bottom of my neck,



once resided my butterfly-shaped thyroid gland. A part of me that was once there and unacknowledged by me is now missing. The function of my thyroid gland has since then been replaced by a tiny blue pill. It's pretty wild to think that I now rely on this medication to live. Since recovering from my total thyroidectomy, I began self-medicating on a regular basis due to the incessant neck and shoulder pain I constantly had to endure. The title *Heavy* not only represents the figurative weight of receiving a cancer diagnosis but also it highlights the literal weight of my head sitting upon the layers of scar tissue and minor nerve damage on the right side of my neck. *Heavy*, showcases the 9-inch scar that I bear along my neck but what it doesn't show is the chronic aches and pain that I continue to experience on a daily basis.

#### *Achieving a Sense of Pride/Accomplishment*

The Book: I felt really proud and satisfied when I finished this project. It made me want to share it with my family members, specifically my mother who was by my side all throughout my cancer journey. It was important for me to share this with her because although she was with me during my treatment and recovery, I imagine that she had a very different experience of the situation from her point of view. I also shared the book with my research advisor and a small cluster of my peers. It felt really special to share my art and my story with others as it provided me with an opportunity to share this important life event with people who are important to me meanwhile spreading awareness and practicing advocacy.

The Doll: I was quite pleased with the end result of the doll. It did not come out at all like the initial sketches I drew out but I enjoy the simplicity of it. In comparison to the other projects, I modified this one the least, simply utilizing watercolor/markers and a bit of yarn stitched into the neck area. With this project, I knew exactly when to stop. Although, I don't mind sharing this

project with others I will admit that the meaning/significance behind the doll can feel a bit uncomfortable to name out loud.

The Mask: Similar to the doll, I definitely feel a sense of pride and accomplishment from completing the mask, however some of the thoughts written on the inside feel a bit personal to share with others. At times, I felt that it was challenging to work on a template that had a face on it because it felt like there is an implicit and direct connection/link to the artist. Do I give it features to look like me or do I work more generally? I suppose that is the artist's decision but I personally felt that the templates with faces needed to at least encompass some features that resembled me in order for me to connect to the piece.

The Box: What I most enjoy about this project is that each side of the box tells a little snippet of a larger collective story. To me, this makes for a visually and figuratively captivating piece of art. The outside makes me curious about what lies in the inside and vice versa. The thoughts on the inside are intimate but I do have a desire to share them with others and for this purpose I left the box unlatched with the thoughts making their way out. On the outside of the box, I've attached a handmade thyroid cancer ribbon pin to represent spreading awareness. I began creating these pins a few years ago and giving them out to friends and family to wear in support but have since then not actively made any new ones. It is a time consuming process that I wish I made more time for but the creation of this pin for the purposes of this project allowed me to reflect on the times when I did make pins and give them out or have written a post on social media talking about my personal experiences as a thyroid cancer survivor and I feel proud being able to share that with others especially through my art.

The Head: As aforementioned, this project was the first time that I attempted a decoupage approach and being that everything I added to the head has managed to remain in the same

position despite gravity and running low on hot glue by this point I felt very pleased with how this project turned out. I find it stimulating to examine the minute details embedded within the hair and along the neck. I enjoy that the piece feels inviting to the viewer and may tempt them to want to engage with the piece by walking around it to get a view from every angle. This was another project that I had a desire to share with others once completed due to the uniqueness of the piece. The details embedded in hair and along the neck are my favorite elements within the piece.

## **Meanings**

This section first summarizes the findings from the analysis of the data, which includes: fun/engaging projects, encouraging play/experimentation, increasing self-understanding, fostering a need to creatively express unexpressed emotions, and achieving a sense of pride/accomplishment. Next, connections to themes from the literature are examined.

### *Fun/Engaging Projects*

All five of the projects were fun/engaging for several distinct reasons, which kept me involved in the creative problem-solving process from start to finish. I also felt that some of the projects such as the doll, the mask, and the box offered a great metaphor to work with which made the creative process feel both meaningful and fun. The book and head were equally powerful and rich in meaning but what I found most fun about those two projects specifically was that they enabled me to engage in an art technique/approach that I have never attempted prior to these projects which made the experience feel new and exciting.

### *Encouraging Play/Experimentation*

I think what really inspired me to play and experiment with color and texture to the extent that I did in all five of the projects was the templates and the art materials that I had access to. The creative choice to use bright bold colors across all five of the projects was more of an aesthetic choice rather than an abstract or representational choice. I enjoyed that all five of the projects were in some way three-dimensional/sculptural because it permitted me to explore/test out multiple ideas within the same space. Working three-dimensionally felt freeing which allowed for play/experimentation without fear or hesitation. Having access to a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional art materials also fostered an environment that promoted exploration and variety.

*Increasing Self-Understanding*

As previously mentioned, this was my first time making art about my own cancer experience and I absolutely enjoyed every minute of it. Organizing my narrative and translating it into text and imagery aided in illuminating a changing perspective and reframing my cancer experience. The creative process emphasized turning a crisis into an opportunity. The language of art provided me with the vocabulary needed to express my emotions and deepen my understanding of my own cancer experience thus, allowing me to gain insight and further develop my inner monolog. I also think the rich metaphors provided by the art/templates can provide cancer patients/survivors with an opportunity to relearn and re-explore their identities post-diagnosis.

*Fostering a Need to Creatively Express Unexpressed Emotions*

The art stimulated the need to creatively express unexpressed emotions/concerns within a non-threatening platform meanwhile eliciting the delicate parallel process between treating my art with a high level of intention and care and relating that to how I take care of myself and my body post-cancer treatment. The art process allowed me to slow down, reflect, and tolerate difficult material such as existential concerns and the fear of cancer returning into my life. From reflection, came meaning.

*Achieving a Sense of Pride/Accomplishment*

Overall, I am pleased with the way that all five projects turned out. This made me want to share my artwork with others such as my family, friends, community, and other cancer patients/survivors. Sharing my art with others provided me with an opportunity to share this important life event with people who are important to me meanwhile spreading awareness and

practicing advocacy. The art serves as a vehicle to put feelings into words and to start conversations about the lived experiences of cancer patients and survivors with others.

### *Connections to Literature*

My findings on utilizing new techniques and methods, working with an array of art materials and prompts/templates/metaphors echo similar findings in Kirshbaum, Ennis, et al., (2017) that suggests expressive arts workshops inspired and challenged participants to learn new skills and ideas which brought forth a sense of “discovery, growth, fulfillment, and revelation through participating in activities many had not considered before” (p.74). The findings of this research supports the three themes found across much of the literature regarding the impact of art-making programs used in cancer care including: learning about one’s self through expression and creativity, the feeling of being supported by a group, and that art provided patients with an enjoyable distraction from treatment (Ennis, Kirshbaum, et al., 2016). Although my research did not occur within a group setting I believe that these five projects can be used within a supportive group environment to help enhance participant’s self-awareness and to deepen their self-understanding. The commonality between the findings of this research and the current research on this topic indicate that art making can have a positive impact on patient’s identities by emphasizing the “reclamation of self” that can occur through the usage of creativity and art meanwhile, fostering a safe environment which promotes exploration, expression, and feelings of acceptance with others (Heiney, Darr-Hope, 1999; Ferszt et al., 2000; Mische Lawson, Williams, Glennon, et al., 2012, Sabo & Thibeault, 2012).

### **Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to evaluate comprehensive projects for an expressive arts workshop for cancer patients and survivors. By inserting myself into the role of participant and researcher, I was able to deepen my knowledge, insight, and understanding of my own cancer narrative meanwhile, highlighting the potential of art making in the healing process of those impacted by a cancer diagnosis. Utilizing my own lived experiences as an artist and a cancer survivor to conduct this research project has made this a highly enriching and engaging experience. The review of literature emphasizes the value of this research, as the field of healing arts programs/expressive arts workshops and cancer care is varied and sparse. Previous expressive art studies commonly included participants who were female, Caucasian, between 45 and 60 years of age, with the predominant diagnosis of breast cancer in active treatment or 1-year post-treatment. Additional evidence-based research examining patient age, gender, cancer type/stage, and prognosis of illness is needed in order to gather a deeper understanding of the impact of program-based expressive arts workshop as a healing modality with this patient population.

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