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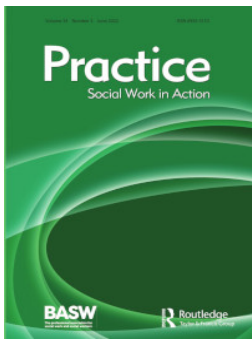
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# Meaningful Online Connections during Covid-19: Reflections on Using Arts-Based Approaches in Social Work Practice

Debbie MacAulay  and Susan Levy 

This paper offers reflections on an organic turn to the arts as a means of connecting and working with children and young people online during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lockdowns during the pandemic required social work practitioners, students, and social care staff to find innovative and creative ways of engaging with people. Online delivery of services presents both challenges and opportunities for communicating and building relationships. The arts, currently underutilised in social work, is one way to open up opportunities, and provide a ‘way in’ to the lives of people who use services. This paper draws on reflections from a student social worker based in Scotland, UK, on how a turn to the arts provided an effective means to connect with and understand the children and young people she was supporting. The paper first explores some of the benefits of using the arts in social work practice; second, it introduces online arts-based approaches used during the Covid-19 pandemic; and concludes by encouraging readers to adopt and adapt the approaches introduced in the paper to integrate arts-based approaches into social work.

*Keywords:* Social work; arts; COVID-19; online; relational

## Introduction

The arts facilitate access to and expression of the inner worlds of people (Sinding, Warren, and Paton 2014). Framed by the work of Dewey (1934) we are using ‘art as experience’, as a relational and ‘embodied aesthetic’ (Levy and Young 2020), that enables meaningful communication, relationship building and co-production of knowledge. Integrating the arts into social work practice is not new (England 1986), and whilst there is an evolving and maturing literature on the topic (Chamberlayn and Smith 2010; Leonard, Hafford-Letchfield, and Couchman 2018; Huss and Bos 2019), the arts remain limited, peripheral, and underutilised in practice (Travis 2019). Consequently, few

practitioners are trained and/or feel they have ‘permission’ (Levy and Young 2020) to use arts-based and experimental approaches in their practice. Yet, as a social work student, MacAulay found, whilst working online during the Covid-19 pandemic, the arts can provide a meaningful way to communicate, understand, and support people.

This is a collaborative paper, co-authored by student, MacAulay, and her lecturer, Levy. MacAulay started using arts-based approaches to connect and work online with children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper draws on and is framed by the experiences and reflections of MacAulay. We first explore the involvement of the arts in social work, and secondly, MacAulay introduces examples of effective online arts-based approaches that she used for working with children and young people during the Covid-19 lockdown in Scotland, UK. We close by suggesting the integration of arts-based practices into social work through adopting and adapting the examples presented in the paper for use with different user groups, and with colleagues, to embed meaningful, creative, and relational interactions into online and in-person working.

## Arts in Social Work

With foundations in social justice, rights-based practice and collective working, social work engages at the intersections of person in environment, supporting people to overcome challenges and enhance their wellbeing. The arts are well placed as a catalyst for this work (Schubert and Gray 2015; Moxley and Feen 2016). The potential collaborative nature of art (Segal-Engelchin, Huss, and Massry 2020) offers a means to reach and connect with people, and is particularly effective for working with marginalised groups. The use of drawings, for example, provides the social worker with material to interpret and more fully understand experiences (Segal-Engelchin, Huss, and Massry 2020; Moxley and Feen 2016). For people who use services, arts-based approaches can lead to engaging with challenges in their lives in new and creative ways. The process of art making as an experience (Dewey 1934), becomes central to co-producing new meaning and understanding of key events and challenges.

The creation of ‘artful’ spaces (Wehbi et al. 2018) where imaginative and experimental practice can unfold, enables service users to communicate and express how they see, feel, and experience their lives. The arts can enable people who often feel their voice is silenced, and their lives too often described not by themselves but by professionals, to excavate and bring to the fore their lived experiences ‘the sublime and charming, but also the tragic and grotesque’ (Gray and Webb 2008: 184). Bringing silenced voices and experiences to the fore helps social workers identify and co-produce relevant support. Furthermore, arts-based approaches can open a space for discussing the

ideas expressed through the art. This can enable the person being supported to become the expert of their own creation and their life, realigning the power dynamics between professional and the people social work support (Segal-Engelchin, Huss, and Massry 2020).

Integrating the arts into social work requires ‘some risk-taking and “experimenting” with knowledge tools’ (van Graan 2018: 150), and for practitioners to step out of their comfort zone (Wehbi et al. 2018). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, working with uncertainty has become ever more present in everyday practice. The pandemic has required much re-thinking, re-imagining, and re-learning. Social workers are, England (1986) argues, uniquely and innately, adaptable, and creative, and as such they have been able to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic in a myriad of innovative ways (Cheung 2022). The following reflection, from MacAulay, is illustrative of a willingness and an openness to experiment with alternative approaches that embrace an aesthetic turn in social work.

### **MacAulay: Reflecting on My Use of the Arts in Online Practice**

I have always found the creative arts to be a weakness of mine. At school, as is the experience of many pupils, art was not creative (Robb, Jindal-Snape, and Levy 2021). Although we were asked to create images or sculptures, we did so under the guidance of a teacher who was looking for something specific. The whole class offering similar interpretations of a violin, was viewed as a creative process. For me, however, it was stifling. I did not want to draw a violin, I wanted to create my own art. Unfortunately, this is not always encouraged in schools, due to curriculum expectations, and so art became a weak, and disliked, subject for me. The same was true of all the creative subjects in school—drama, music, and woodwork. All appeared creative on the surface, yet all stifled true creativity within me. Even during many years of working in Early Years, where creativity was at the heart of everything the children would do, I never (re)discovered my own creativity. That was until one day, a member of staff at an agency where I was on placement as a student social worker showed me that creativity, and art, was not about being like other people, and instead was about being unique to your own interpretation of things and our ability to communicate through different mediums.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown in Scotland, I was working part time with a Family Support organisation and began volunteering as a Befriender with a third sector organisation working with children and young people. The organisations were determined to continue to support children and families, and so both moved to online delivery using Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp. I have worked with children for many years, and felt comfortable with the online platforms being used, but was unsure how best to plan and facilitate online

sessions with the children and young people. It was at this point that I began using arts-based approaches, something new and alien to me.

During the planning stages of my online sessions during lockdown, I repeated the following question in my head: ‘if art is about communication and interpretation, how can I use this (virtually) to help me connect and engage with children and young people?’ The answer to this question was not my own and was instead offered to me by one of the young people I began working with. Naomi\* loved anime, and I knew nothing about it. We spent our first session talking about what anime was (Japanese animation and drawing), and how it was different to other art forms. She showed me her artwork, and she talked about her favourite characters. The following week, we began creating our own anime story, using three of her favourite characters and worked together to create the artwork needed for the story. Naomi and I hardly spoke about ourselves during the art chat, but I learned a lot about her through the conversations. It helped us to connect in a way that I do not believe would have been possible without the medium of art, and supported forging a relationship that was strengthened through future sessions.

I soon realised the importance and power of art, when supporting children who were feeling isolated or overwhelmed by lockdown. I had been working with Ashley\* prior to lockdown, and so we already had a relationship, but sitting face-to-face online was intense. Ashley only had access to her mobile phone using WhatsApp to do the online sessions, and so we were limited by the technology. After a couple of sessions of trial and error, exploring which activities worked best, we fell into arts-based approaches. Ashley enjoyed drawing and I was beginning to enjoy it too. She was able to prop her phone up on the table and we would draw together. We started with a storytelling session, and Ashley created a story that we would begin to illustrate. Having this story prepared, we each took on a character and created it together. It was not long until Ashley started talking about issues she was having with schoolwork, and how she felt really isolated at home. The drawing and creative work had taken the pressure off, she did not feel like she was being interviewed, and instead felt reassured that I was there (albeit virtually) to talk to when she was ready. Although the art was not the mode of communication here, it was the catalyst.

Naomi taught me another lesson about art. Although I knew, and had been told, that art could be used as a communication tool, I realised up until this point, I had not truly used it as one. Naomi had issues around self-esteem. She did not feel confident about herself and so we began exploring this during our sessions. Whenever I would ask her how she felt, she would shrug her shoulders. I realised she could not verbalise it. So, I turned to the role of art as an ‘embodied aesthetic’ (Levy and Young 2020), the expression and engagement, physically and/or mentally, through the process of art making. I asked Naomi to pick a colour that represented how she felt, and to draw in a way that felt natural. We used the online whiteboard feature in Microsoft Teams, and I

watched as dark grey and black scribbles appeared on my screen. I had my answer to my question, and I knew what our baseline was. We have since moved on to creating a story about Naomi. The thought of doing a self-portrait made her nervous, and so I only asked that she draws what represents herself. Not too long ago, I would have said I would like her to draw her face, two eyes, two ears and so on. Not anymore. I have begun to understand that art is more about the process and experience, a communication tool to express and feel emotions and is less about the product (Dewey 1934).

In a lecture by Levy, my co-author, she talked about being 'creative'; at the time I could not connect this to my practice. Now I see it as an opportunity for diversifying my practice. Art will not always give social workers answers and interpreting someone else's art can be difficult. But seeing Naomi's colour choice move from dark greys and blacks to brighter, happier colours, I knew we were moving in the right direction.

My own understanding of creativity has evolved over the last couple of years. I now understand how retaining a focus on the process, experience, and relational dimensions of art can open up opportunities for meaningful communication, understanding and change.

## Conclusion

Covid-19 has impacted on and changed social work in multiple ways, from what and how we teach and practice, to how we understand, communicate, and interact with people. As we look to the future, we need to consider how to retain what we have learnt and what has become familiar during the Covid-19 pandemic. Acknowledging the continued use of online platforms in social work requires new ways of working at a relational level. This paper offers innovative ways to support practitioners in engaging meaningfully whilst online through the use of arts-based practices.

The arts can provide an effective conduit for communicating, developing, and deepening relationships between social workers and the people they support. The use of different mediums provides a range of ways to access and understand people's lives, to articulate and share experiences. MacAulay's reflections highlight how arts-based approaches can break down barriers for online working and open up opportunities to successfully engage online with children and young people to achieve change in complex lives.

Moxley and Feen (2016) have highlighted the potency of the arts to enhance reflexivity, and whilst this was a small-scale study, MacAulay's reflections provide the foundation for further research to extend understanding on the use of arts-based practices in social work generally, and specifically when working online. We recommend enabling 'artful' spaces (Wehbi et al. 2018) to flourish, for creative and experimental approaches to be integral to how we think about, and how we do social work in the future. We encourage readers to

adopt and adapt the approaches introduced in this paper, to re-imagine social work through a creative lens, and to experiment with different arts-based approaches (drawing, poetry, music, dance) to support online and in-person practice.

\*Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality.

## Disclosure statement

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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