

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Art Therapy Studio Project – Susan Allaker



This is a photograph of the of the art room that I used in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) team for the South East of Sheffield based at Beighton Hospital. The photograph was taken in 2009. The room was used by me, and various other Art Psychotherapists, from 1998 to 2010.

The room was quite large and I was able to meet with sibling groups and families in the space. It was light and airy, with one wall painted yellow which gave a less clinical feel than the room I now work in which has all off-white walls. It also had brightly coloured curtains which I think made the room inviting and warm.

It was a well resourced room and I had the opportunity of planning and deciding on the furniture for the room at the beginning of its use back in 1998. I particularly liked the circular table which was chosen for clients to work on. I liked the fact that there were a number of pieces of wooden furniture which made the room feel homely and less clinical. This space has evolved during the period that I worked in it, for example new shelving or an addition of a painting board which you cannot see from the photograph. As I have shared this room with a number of other therapists and trainees, their influence also helped shape how it looked and felt.

Also not apparent in the photograph is the art psychotherapy office, which I shared with a number of other therapists during the period. The office was directly opposite this therapy room and I think this gave us the opportunity to feel connected to the art psychotherapy room in a way that is different to our current set up. In our current setup the art psychotherapy room is down a corridor quite away from the office.

The age group that this team works with is children up to the age of 16 and this is reflected in the materials that we provide. For example, there are some art materials more suited for primary school children and art materials that would be attractive to teenagers. The children referred to art psychotherapy had a variety of problems ranging from behaviour difficulties to more extreme conditions like eating disorders and self harming. I found that the children really enjoyed using this space; it was easy for them to engage in being creative as all the materials were accessible. Often children would gasp with delight and excitement when they were first shown the room!

The window overlooked a garden space and this was a pleasant space to look out on. The window sill was important space for the children to leave artwork to dry. I enjoyed working in this room very much and when the team were asked to leave and move to the other part of the hospital I felt a sense of mourning to say goodbye to this space.

I felt this space was a good space in which to develop as an Art Psychotherapist. It allowed me to work in many different ways. It was a large room and this meant that the clients and I could move around at ease. I enjoyed the fact that there were a number of different ways that the clients could engage with art materials and make work. For example, they could work on the table or they could use the bean bag to kneel down and work on the floor or they could use the painting board on the wall standing up to make large pieces.

It was helpful having a locked cupboard as this gave the opportunity for children to put art work in a safe space, not on display if they so wished. We also had a rail along one side of the wall where art work could be pinned up

This space was a very important place for me in my development as an Art Psychotherapist as it came midway through my career. I qualified in 1990 and my first art psychotherapy job was in North Derbyshire where I had an art room slightly smaller but still well equipped. Having this room from the period of 1998 to 2010 encapsulated a crucial period of my clinical practice and I feel I developed a lot during the period that I worked in this room. The time that I worked in this room was a positive period for me.

In this space there was the opportunity for children to feel contained despite the fact it was fairly large room. I think the circular table gave the room a focus. I felt the room allowed the client to explore the different materials easily. It was a space that didn't feel too confined and I felt that it had a studio style because of the different ways that the client could engage in the art materials, either sitting, kneeling or standing. Children described this space as an Aladdin's cave or the special art room, reflecting the positive attachment they had to the space. My clients expressed sadness on hearing the news that we were to move.



This photograph was taken February 2011 and is of the art psychotherapy room that I currently share with my colleague. We have been using this room since March 2010 when our team moved from its previous space from the other side of the hospital. This room can be booked by other staff but is predominately an art psychotherapy space.

The above photograph was taken in winter so I feel perhaps gives a particular cold feel to the space, as it is dark outside and the lights are on. In the summer months this room is light and airy and the window looks out onto a garden space which is attractive. The room is painted off- white which gives it a more clinical feel in comparison to the room I previously used on the other side of the hospital. The furniture we have in the room is the same as in the previous room.

Storage has been an issue in this room as we have had to wait awhile for all the shelving to be put up. The space felt unfinished for the first few months that we used it.

What you can't see in the photograph is that we have two comfortable chairs in one corner and a small coffee table. I find these chairs very helpful in providing a space for individuals to sit and talk if they wish to away from the art materials. This can be particularly helpful for teenagers who may want to have a break in a space away from their art work. It is also a good place to meet with parents when we are reviewing their children's sessions. The children who use this room have similar difficulties to those who used our old art room. Their response to the room is often very positive, though have wondered if this room is less inviting than the previous art room due to the lack of colour on walls and curtains. This room has felt less like an Aladdin's cave and more a functional space.

The room works well and I think, like the previous room, has space for us to carry out sibling or family art psychotherapy. I guess because my relationship with this room is relatively short, it may take awhile to feel as comfortable about the space as I did with the previous art room.

I feel this room provides the opportunity for intimacy for clients, as we have a piece of furniture that divides the art making area and the area where the comfortable chairs are, providing two different parts of the room. The children and teenagers who use this room find it easy to engage with the materials and I encourage the children to walk around and look and decide what they want to use and bring it to the table.

I feel I practice in this room in a similar way to the way I did in my previous room. However, I do feel this room has a more clinical feel. I think the children enjoy the space and are able to move around and chose the art materials easily. I expect that this room may well evolve and develop as my previous room did and I look forward to seeing change overtime.

One final thought. Since writing this piece about the art rooms, my colleague - Diane Rees – and I have been prompted to paint a wall yellow in our current room to try and recreate the feel of the old art room.

Biography

Susan Allaker qualified as an art therapist in 1990, having trained at Sheffield University. Susan worked initially in adult mental health employed as a mental health therapist in social services. Following this she worked for seven years in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service in north Derbyshire as an Art Psychotherapist. Since 1998 she has worked in the Sheffield CAMHS. She also lectures occasionally on the Foundation and MA Art Psychotherapy courses run in Sheffield by the Northern Programme.