

Newcomers, Creative Spaces, and Connection Through Art

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Call to Support Newcomers

Historically, the island of Newfoundland has had a culturally homogeneous population. For this reason, newcomers report a distressing insider/outsider dynamic of disconnect and challenges accessing local social support systems (Anderson, 2012; Baker, Price, & Walsh, 2015; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Li, Doyle, Lymburner, & Ghadi, 2016). This is disconcerting, as a scoping review conducted by Guruge and Butt (2015) found that post-migration experiences of discrimination and *othering* are as important as traumatic pre-migration experiences in determining mental health variance in newcomers. Indeed, moving to a new country is challenging in itself, beyond experiencing loss of the familiar, culture shock, and discrimination. Cultural bereavement, defined as experiencing the “loss of identity, culture, home, familiar surroundings, and loss of family and friends” (Ishafani, 2008, p. 79), may negatively impact an individual’s wellbeing. However, it is important to emphasize the resiliency of newcomers when relocating to a new country and not stereotype refugees as “helpless victims that need to be studied, uplifted, and cured” (Guruge, Hynie, Shakya, Akbari, Htoo, & Abiyo, 2015, para. 1)

Nonetheless, preventative, inclusive, welcoming, and strengths-based social support that recognizes newcomers’ profound experiences of resettling in a new country is needed in Canada (Simich, Beiser, & Mawani, 2003). *Towards Recovery*, a recent all-party report on the need for expanded mental health services in Newfoundland, issued urgent recommendations for accessible frontline services to provide preventive programming at grassroots community levels (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, All-Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, 2017).

While traditional forms of art therapy often effectively merge art within and as a therapeutic process, the framework locales of existing counselling and psychotherapy models are not always accessible. Public mental health services, such as Art Therapy services, typically involve lengthy waitlists, addressing complex psychiatric diagnoses. Private services, although quicker to access, are often not affordable to unemployed and underemployed people. Obstacles increase for newcomers due, in part, to language barriers and mental health stigma (Durbin, Lin, Moineddin, Steele, & Glazier, 2014; Saunders, Gill, Holder, Vgod, Kurdyak, Gandhi, & Guttman, 2018). Moreover, cultural and identity differences may present other barriers to accessing services (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008).

Argyle and Bolton (2005) promote the use of community arts programming as beneficial to mental health and functioning. Community arts programming, inspired by art therapy, social justice, and community psychology frameworks, offers a versatile and accessible opportunity to engage in process-focused art making to enhance wellness (Timm-Bottos, 2016). Due to its ability to meet human need via non-verbal, creative, and sensory-aesthetic process, arts-based programming can suit community settings and reach diverse groups (Burt, 2011; Macoretta, 2017; Malchiodi, 2012; Moon, 2009).

Art Hives: Wellness in an Open Art Studio

Community arts initiatives privilege wellbeing rather than health, because wellbeing connotes a state of self-acceptance that includes a holistic sense of self, as a personal appraisal of one's quality of life (Coemans & Hannes, 2017; Deiner & Ryan, 2009; Goldbard, 2006). Illness and wellbeing can coexist, whereas 'health' and 'ill health' cannot. Thus, combining mental health intervention service learning with a community-located creative centre can act as a form of frontline preventive care for diverse marginalized populations who typically do not, or cannot, access public institutional care, or for whom public care is not applicable or appropriate (Ottmiller & Awais, 2017; Timm-Bottos, 2006). Current evidence supports community engagement and connected programming to inform increased functioning of mental health in concrete ways (Allen & Allen, 2016). These ways include reduced drug use and hospital stays; access to work; maintaining work improvement; increased relationships with support and care including reporting of changes in health status; and increased understanding and awareness of diverse identity and cultural contexts including perspectives on mental health and functioning (Argyle & Bolton, 2005).

Art Hives are a form of community art therapy programming within the public sphere that are designed to encourage and foster personal and independent creative processes in a contained, safe, and inclusive space (i.e. a space where the individual feels comfortable not judged to explore and express ideas). Facilitators are trained in a non-evaluative approach that strives to avoid judging technical art skills, but deliver feedback with supportive and descriptive words that emphasize positive encouragement and foster autonomous agency of participants (Timm-Bottos, 2017; Timm-Bottos & Chainey, n.d.).

Within an Art Hive, an Open Studio is a publicly accessible art-making space grounded in ideals of collaborative community development, Adlerian theory, social justice and feminist values. Grounded in Adler's (1932) humanistic psychology theory, open studios are informed by the emphasis of human connectedness as a primary site from which character and adaptive engagement is fostered. Themes of belonging, feeling valued, contributing to wider society, and altruism are essential building blocks for mental health and cohesive communities (Eleniak et al., 2016).

Adler (1932) championed the idea that valued experiences create confidence of self and the need to achieve a grounded sense of belonging is central to mental health and functioning. Bettner & Lew (1990) characterize the realization of this need via Adler's framework as the Crucial 'Cs'. The Crucial C's include: feeling *connected* with others, feeling *competent* in our skills and our ability to take responsibility, feeling that one *counts* or is valued and, lastly, feeling able to *cope*

with stressful or challenging experiences by possessing *courage*. The Crucial C's are a result of diverse experiences and contribute to healthy functioning. For example, in a study of Canadian immigrants, Pearce (2008) found that, although a general trust of the population in one's new country may not lead to a strong sense of belonging, a specific trust of one's neighbours can help people feel that they belong. However, if we fail or struggle to connect to others and feel excluded (i.e. one's language or culture is not valued), then relational health, respect for the broader community, and personal functioning can suffer (Croucher, 2009). The Open Studio project aligned the Art Hive framework with the Crucial Cs, as Art Hives are spaces that emphasize connectedness and shared art making, which can be inherently healing (Eleniak, Canning, Demill, & Samra, 2016).

In Practice: A School-Based Art Hive with Newcomer Youth

Last year, our interdisciplinary team created a pop-up Art Hive with newcomer youth that was hosted in partnership with a local high school (see Lewis, McLeod & Li, 2018). The *Open Studio Project* was a collaborative research effort between the Faculty of Education's English as a Second Language, Art Education, and Counselling Psychology programming. For sixteen weeks, weekly open studio Art Hive sessions focused on themes of belonging and inclusion with the purpose of helping immigrant and refugee youth adapt in St. John's. Refugee and immigrant youth were chosen because they had particular intersectional challenges relating to growing up as adolescents and navigating challenging cross-cultural experiences when moving to a new country. This can include mediating past traumas related to refugee experiences, supporting their families, experiencing culture shock and acculturation (and the acculturation gap between youth and older adults), among various other adaptations (Guruge et al., 2015).

These Art Hives fostered an open and creative safe space by emphasizing reflective and descriptive feedback rather than evaluation, highlighting individual choice and creativity, engaging participatory involvement of facilitators, and using simple-technique instruction (Timm-Bottos & Chainey, n.d.). The program was designed to privilege accessible arts and craft technique for the purposes of optimizing positive art-making experiences, while fostering communication and connection-building between members. Newcomer youth (who participated voluntarily and who were from Brazil, Burundi, China, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, and Tanzania) were invited to engage in technically simple and strength-based art making activities that reduced apprehension about creating "perfect" artwork. These included: lantern making, simple printmaking, still life drawing, and paper weaving.

Early results speak to the strong impact of the hive experience for the student participants. Participants found the weekly experiences to be very meaningful, in a safe space, and like home at school (Lewis, McLeod & Li, 2018). Meeting friends was a valued integrative piece that fostered and affirmed experiences of inclusion. One participant stated:

I feel at peace...you know with math you worry am I going to get this right, am I going to get this wrong, whatever...but art is just like...you put your ideas on paper...it gives me peace. (Lewis, McLeod & Li, 2018, p. 14)

Following this Art Hive format, these participants, who wanted to expand and diversify the group to include local peers, initiated a second series of sessions. Accordingly, the newcomer youth welcomed their Canadian high school peers to attend an Art Hive art exhibition and hosted a printmaking workshop. A desire to connect with diverse local peers and teach them skills was facilitated through the Art Hive creative process. Newcomer students expressed the need to expand their group to a broader community, preferably outside of the school walls.



Figure 1. Photographs of artwork created in the Open Studio at a local high school in St. John's.

Expanding Art Hives to the Wider Community: The Hearthstone Studio

Following our participants' recommendations to include the community in creative and empowering art-making, we are now establishing an Art Hive that is located in a local community setting in downtown St. John's. Named for its reference to home safety and comfort, the Hearthstone Studio is inspired by Montreal's LaRuche D'Art (Timm Bottos & Reilly, 2015). It is located in the city centre of St. John's and in close proximity to Memorial University. The pilot phase extends to two years, with the hope of expansion based on the community's feedback and needs. Influenced by the "values of community, co-operation, equality, and mutuality" (Elabor-Idemudia, 2008, p. 11), we are investigating the significance of community arts programming through community-based arts-informed data collection (Cole & Knowles, 2008).

This new Art Hive creates a transformational learning space for research, support, and training initiatives. Within this “place of creative inquiry” (Timm-Bottos & Chainey, n.d., p. 26), we will provide supervision and community-based psychology training for MUN's students from the Counseling Psychology graduate program, and also support and supervise research opportunities for Faculty of Education doctoral students. This will connect student talent and skills to reach diverse individuals from a range of socioeconomic, ages, and cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, the larger goals of the *Hearthstone Studio* are to:

1. Provide a community-situated arts-based research site that privileges community, creative and cultural engagement through the Art Hive framework;
2. Engage in culturally diverse and affirming scholarship for the integration and inclusion of newcomer groups in St. John's;
3. Foster a community-based classroom for creative knowledge building in community situated counselling practice;
4. Provide practice training and support for masters and doctoral students, interns, graduate and teaching assistants of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University;
5. Engage in arts-based knowledge mobilizing practice, including public exhibits, community-university creative partnerships with local community groups, multigenerational arts programming, and newcomer arts programming.

Conclusion and Invitation

With the belief that creativity and community connections are inherently transformational and contribute to wellbeing, we invite you to join us at the *Hearthstone Studio*. We hope that you will come across this mediated and liminal space, wander inside, and bring your community. Once the space is complete, we hope that you enter it with an open heart and mind in order to fully enjoy potential of a community-based transitional space that reaches across diverse socio-political and cultural divides.

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