

Using the Arts and Multiple Intelligences in Psycho-educational Curriculum

By Shannon Simonelli Ph.D., ATR

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The arts can be an effective tool for teaching psycho-educational curriculum to a wide variety of clients in treatment. When used strategically to enrich a therapeutic intention the arts; visual art, poetry, drama, movement and music can deepen learning, meaning and implicit – or “inside-out” learning.

The arts naturally lend themselves to discovery, expression and inside-out learning – providing the client with opportunities to discover and try new aspects of behavior and perceptions of self. The arts teach qualitative values to clients, such as compassion, social and emotional fluency, joy, and creativity, which contribute to a rich and successful life.

Let's look at how the arts provide multiple avenues to curriculum for clients who learn differently by drawing on a multiple intelligence approach to differentiating curriculum. Multiple Intelligence theory has identified nine ways in which people learn, think, and perceive the world. They are: spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, linguistic, and mathematic, spiritual (Gardner, 1993). When we truly understand and apply multiple intelligence theory, we plan for learning opportunities that include the arts, the body, nature, spirituality, and social and emotional fluency to engage the full potential of all clients – particularly important for clients dealing with addiction.

Clients at all levels of ability, from delayed to gifted, benefit from art based and multiple intelligence sourced curriculum. Creative leeway can be offered to clients who need more challenge and freedom and also provide diverse ways to make curriculum accessible to clients who require greater supports. At-risk youth, and those who have grown into adults, respond particularly well to arts based curriculum. Many such clients are primarily visual, kinesthetic, and interpersonally intelligent and find an opportunity to succeed through art.

Research shows that sensory preferences for learning is 46% visual, 35% kinesthetic-tactile, and 19% auditory, yet in many learning environments, the main mode of instruction is auditory with low stimulation and dull visual supports. (Sousa, 2001)

Psycho-education that involves the arts can enhance a client's attention, cognitive, and emotional development. It can positively affect a client's ability to think alternatively, their willingness to explore opposing ideas, to see multiple perspectives and examine unexpected points of view (Jensen, 2001); ultimately developing their higher order thinking skills and cultural awareness (Deasy, 2002).

For many clients the abstract world of words and concepts – the traditional teaching tool in treatment, has never been fully connected with their more concrete or “real” world experiences. Their closest tie to the concrete world is through and in their own bodies.

“The most effective techniques for cultivating intelligence is aimed at uniting (not divorcing) mind and body.” (Wilson, as cited in Jensen, 2001). Curriculum that engages the body creates a context for intellectual learning in the physical world, making lessons and new life skills real and understandable.

New learning and the brain

Looking at brain research helps us to understand the brain as a complex system of neurons that changes structurally and functionally with learning and experiences. This information tells us that engaging clients in positive nurturing environments that encourage action, interaction, and stimulation can have real effects on learning (Dickenson, 2002). The arts provide this kind of learning environment and can enrich curriculum and “homework” assignments in treatment when linked to therapeutic intention.

New neural connections form throughout life and build most intensely through adolescence. These neural pathways form to **support** activities that we are involved with on a regular basis, such as participation in sports or learning to play a musical instrument. The brain perceives these activities as critical for survival and builds strong neural branches to ensure a life long ability in these activities (Penland, 2001). So, if an individual is involved in drugs, criminal behavior, dropping out and being bored, these are the skill sets the brain develops as critical for survival. On the other hand, if an individual is exposed to exciting learning opportunities they can succeed in and even master, their brains will develop those skill sets. This leads to higher levels of functioning throughout their lives. This process is particularly powerful when positive emotions are linked to the learning experience. The arts and body movement can produce pleasurable, emotion producing learning experiences, which mark the new learning as critical for survival in the growing or healing brain.

The next step

Consider including an intentional art based experience in the groups you lead. Numerous books and resources are available. Contact Shannon for her top picks.

Reference:

http://www.sig.hawaii.edu/products/briefs/arts_in_education.pdf