

A First for Art Therapy at the University Malaysia Terengganu 2007

Dr Susan Mason

ABSTRACT

From 22 July 2006, until 23 August of this year, Susan Mason had the honour to serve an appointment as a Visiting Fellow with the University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) in the Psychology and Counselling Department, Faculty of Management and Economics. During that time she oversaw the introduction of the university's Art Therapy programme and in so doing developed an approach to Art Therapy that is simultaneously cognisant of and effective in the sensitive area of cultural difference between the Therapist and Client.

INTRODUCTION

Setting the theoretical context for the cultural practice of Art Therapy

A request was made by the UMT Head of Department that from August 2006 I commence work on introducing an Art Therapy programme. The programme was to draw its underpinning from humanistic models such as family therapy, gestalt therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, rational emotive therapy and client-centred therapies. I had some prior insight into community issues in Malaysia due to a 15 year ongoing family private business partnership, as well as having carried out some therapeutic work four years ago with families living in Kuala Lumpur.

I had shared with the university psychology and counselling staff my background knowledge of cultural 'ways of working', through the evidence-based outcomes of my engagement in Art Therapy with Aboriginal people over the previous 12 years. My PhD research had explored the development of healing practices through therapeutic art processes in Indigenous mental health (Mason, 2000, pp. 431-8). Through this technique, the art and text of Aboriginal seniors' mental

health and healing make explicit both the processes and outcomes of their exploration of therapeutic applications of art. This includes associated shared narrative by affirmation of their own cultural experience, and adds to critical theory-oriented research in cultural therapeutic practices (Riley, 1998, p. 15).

It was this approach of facilitating working therapeutically, with art and dialogue, and from within the clients' own culturally lived experience, that was attractive to the Malaysian participants as culturally safe, respectful and effective. The participants were familiar with aspects of Western therapeutic theory, models and approaches, and were looking for an approach that would integrate this learning from within their own cultural realities to strengthen rather than colonise their identity and cultural ways of working (Smith, 1999, p. 4).

As the staff members in Malaysia were themselves professional practitioners, they were also interested to learn how Art Therapy could be used in conjunction with an eclectic approach with an accent on Gestalt Therapy. This pragmatic approach provides the broad conceptual framework and deeper context