

Altered Books in Art Therapy with Adolescents

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Abstract

This article examines how altered books can be used in art therapy with adolescents. An altered book is a published book that has been changed into a new work of visual art through various art processes such as painting, drawing, collage, writing, and embellishment. Books are discussed as an art canvas on which to provide stimulation, structure, portability, and increased opportunities for reflection. Altered book making is an option for art therapists who are looking for a means to provide containment while promoting creativity. Case examples of using altered books in art therapy groups with adolescents are featured.

Introduction

Interest has developed in recent years in the art form of altered books. An altered book is any pre-existing book that has been changed into a new work of art. Creating altered books can be a powerful technique in art therapy, as this art form is adaptable to many levels of art expertise while providing a unique springboard for artistic self-expression. Altering books allows a symbolically rich canvas on which to express one's inner life. The process of making art in an intentional manner through creatively altering a book becomes healing, life affirming, and helpful in producing growth and change.

Characteristics of Altered Books

Altered books are growing in popularity as a "new" art form although people have altered and adorned text since books were first made (Harrison, 2003; Taylor, 2004). Part of the appeal of altered books is the wide variety of artistic approaches that can be used in the alteration process. Artists can draw or paint on the pages or cover of the book, and add or remove text, poetry, words, and images. The book can be adorned with stamps, stickers, fabric, leather, beads, wire, twigs or found objects. Niches can be cut into the book, to create shadow-box effects. Elaborate glazing, image transfers, envelopes, pockets, doors or pop-up features can be created inside the pages of the book. The artist

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may choose any method he or she wishes to use to transform and recycle the book into one-of-a-kind artwork that becomes a personal expression (Figure 1).

Freedom of expression is a theme in the literature about altered books. According to Brazelton, author of *Altered Books Workshop* (2004), artists "can let the original content of the book play as little or as big a part of [the] new artwork as [they] want, letting words and images show through or covering them up to use the book's pages simply as a surface," (p. 13). An altered books Yahoo Internet group of 6,000 members emphasizes this freedom. The "Frequently Asked Questions" page of the Yahoo group states: "You can do whatever you want. Some people inject humor, politics or philosophy...others create pure works of art" (AB Group moderators, 2007). Altered book artist Alldredge writes:

I find the healing benefits of altered books in the "no rules" aspect of the whole thing. I have used most artistic media, but haven't felt the freedom that altered books holds. I can... [put] sarcastic, silly, angry, or any number of other emotions or attitudes in altered books that just don't seem to fit other 'spaces.' Also, I know that I can rip out a page that doesn't work for me and no one will ever miss it (Alldredge, personal communication, August 7, 2004).

This enthusiasm to create with no rules or simply "in your own way" is similar to the encouragement art therapists give their clients to help them create freely. As art therapist Malchiodi (1998) wrote, "Don't worry about technical skills; there will be no grades and no judgments about whether your drawings or paintings are 'good enough'. This time you do not have to 'stay within the lines'" (p. 55). Both art therapy and the altered book culture aim to welcome each individual's creativity and personhood.



Figure 1
Examples of altered books in the author's collection.

Art therapists have found many ways to provide clients with strategies that address the fear of facing a blank page or canvas, such as providing paper with pre-drawn elements, or using other techniques to stimulate and structure the art experience while encouraging self-expression. Rubin (1978) coined the phrase “framework for freedom” to describe the process whereby the therapist establishes structure to support the client while simultaneously creating an atmosphere in the art studio that encourages freedom to play, grow, and heal. The art therapist carefully considers the abilities and needs of the client(s) when choosing from a variety of art forms and interventions that promote artistic play.

In altered books, the book itself provides an inherent structure or framework. The bound pages are already filled with text and possibly images, thus ameliorating the classic struggle the artist undergoes when facing a blank page. Each page within the book offers an opportunity to react to and to explore the text and/or images that are present. Inspiration may strike when the artist finds a pre-printed word, letter, or image on the page which becomes an interesting background or focal point that generates an artistic response. Altered book making is an option for the art therapist who is looking to provide clients with an art technique that provides an innovative way of offering contained and accessible art making opportunities.

Because a book may have numerous pages, the alteration process may take an extended period of time. The book becomes a portable, compact body of work and a container for therapeutic treatment. Altered book artist Ward (as cited in Harrison, 2003) reflects that it is “really like working in a series because it is one whole piece of work...Because you're driven by the book, driven by the theme, driven by the text, driven by the images, you can really develop a story of images across your pages” (p. 11). In art therapy, value is placed on viewing artwork made over time as a tangible record of the individual's experience (Wadson, 1980).

The review of this tangible record with the therapist may happen more easily with altered books. Books have a series of connected pages that can illustrate a person's artistic story over time. Individuals can reflect upon the meaning of their creations simply by turning the pages. The routine nature and accessibility of looking through a book may encourage people to view their artwork more often, and perhaps integrate at an accelerated pace the information that the images hold. “Book-learning” has a whole new meaning when the book is a piece of one's own expressive artwork. For example, art therapist Junge (1985) described how reading and re-reading a home-made, handbound book created by a grieving family became an “important family ritual” (p. 9). She stated that the book described in the family's treatment functioned as “a permanent, stable container of memories, feelings, and of history” (p. 9).

The very nature of both art and books is interactive. Books have a cover that invites one to open it and pages that are meant to be turned. Many art techniques used in altered books involve engineering interactive details such as windows, accordion folds, tags, envelopes with enclosures,

and so on, that engage the viewer (Cote, 2003). The tactile quality of the surface is emphasized by the nature of this art form, where the viewers hold the art object in their hands. Altered books therefore can have a very personal and intimate feel that welcomes perusal.

Perhaps due to this quality, altered books seem to invite a community of readers. An altered book “round robin” is created when several individuals come together and exchange books within which to make artwork. The book goes to each individual in the group until it comes back to its original owner, filled with artwork made by the group. The round robin approach could be a method of working with altered books in art therapy groups. With the aim of building group cohesion, an art therapist may choose to have an exchange of books among group members or have each member create a page in a single book that becomes a group project over time. A group project can help develop an artist's community, can reduce isolation and create a sense of connection, enriching the members' lives through shared creative experience (Kapitan, 2003).

The Book as a Symbol

In altering a book, the artist manipulates an object already rich with symbolic meaning. As opposed to a blank sheet of white paper, a book is already filled with text, possibly contains pictures, and has a heft, size, smell and an overall tactile quality that can be quite substantial. Symbolically, books can represent knowledge, illumination, learning, wisdom, revelation, and both the universe and the self (Lewis, 1995; Cooper, 1978). Dusty old books may represent neglected or forgotten knowledge, or an earlier “chapter” of one's life. Opening or closing a book may symbolize opening or closing a stage in one's life. Associated connotations of “bookworm,” “booklearning,” and the “book of life” may be applicable. Some individuals with religious backgrounds may associate “The Good Book” as the Bible (Lewis, 1995). Cooper (1978) reported that in China, the book is connected with tree symbolism; together images of the tree and book can represent the whole cosmos. “Books are vessels of knowledge, memory and culture” writes artist and author Taylor (2004, p. 34). The many associations and possible meanings indicate that a book is a powerful archetype across cultures. Art therapists may investigate the particular cultural background of the population they work with and find that various groups of people have very different, particular associations to books. Furthermore, the overall purpose of a book is to transmit information, which makes altered books a rich source for both personal and archetypal meanings.

Abstract, archetypal meanings and deeply personal associations may be significant in treatment. Art therapists should consider a variety of questions: In the client's life, were books read aloud? Did reading come easily or with difficulty? Is the client able to read? Are books a source of pleasure or do they bring up negative associations to school failure? What is the client's historical family experience of books and education? Are books a part of the life of the client's family? Each client will have a unique expe-

rience with books, as well as responses to the concept of altering them.

Using a book as an art material would be seen as benign in the United States, where cast-off books and material objects are relatively plentiful and accessible, but this is not the case in many parts of the world. For clients who have experienced poverty in their lives, or for certain cultural or religious reasons, using a book as an art material may be experienced as disrespectful or wasteful. It is the art therapist's responsibility to ensure that the books offered up to be altered, like all art materials in the therapeutic art studio, are appropriate for the setting and people involved. Taylor (2004) states: "Books, as objects, are precious.... I wouldn't dream of scrawling notes or cutting pages in a rare first edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. But I have no problem using a discarded book club edition or textbook as a base for creative expression" (p. 34).

In general, for the purposes of group art therapy, any controversial, explicit, or religious texts should be avoided. Some may feel uncomfortable, as well, with the idea of marking over another's words. The issue of appropriation of the original author's work may raise concerns about ethical or legal boundary violations. However, the intent of altered books is different from appropriation art (where artists use the expressive form of another artist to create a new work of art without major changes). When creating an altered book, the emphasis is on the significant alteration and transformation of another's work into one's own. Art therapists should be alert to concerns regarding the impact of altered book making on therapeutic or other boundary issues and help clients understand that the words in the text were written by a real person, who has gifted the world with his or her writing. Art therapists should not condone the destruction of a book or any work of art that is irreplaceable or one-of-a-kind, without a clear and thorough invitation from the original artist. Attention also should be paid to clients possibly becoming flooded by the amount of stimuli provided by the book, or becoming overwhelmed by the task of altering a whole book. These various factors must be considered when using the altered book process in a clinical setting.

A book is an object that evokes a response on many levels. The invitation to alter it may be experienced as a freeing but also confusing request. Harrison (2003) wrote, "Of course, we were all told not to color in our books as children—and here is an art form that actually encourages it. It's a little subversive, really" (p. 10). By altering the fact of the printed text, the artist confronts a symbol of authority, reality, or convention, and changes it. Thus the artist becomes a rebel agent of change and transformation, perhaps practicing internal change through the art form. Another rebellious delight found in altering a book is the act of making unique that which is a replica. In the U.S., a published book is ordinary, replaceable, and a uniform copy. When altered, it becomes a one-of-a-kind art object. This creative act mirrors the existential drive to make one's one identity unique in the world, to become one's own person.

Applications of Altered Books with Adolescents in a Therapeutic Setting

Developmentally, this aspect of altered book making—the transformation from uniform to unique—is an apt metaphor, particularly for the adolescent faced with the challenge of exploring identity. Asserting individuality and identity is often a theme in the artwork of adolescents (Linesch, 1988) and healthy rebellion is one of the ways young people can discover their own selfhood and individual power. In the therapeutic setting in which I work, adolescents in foster care are seen in short group art therapy sessions. Altered books provide a substantial project that can be easily divided into segments completed in short amounts of time.

In art therapy sessions with adolescents in foster care, the act of choosing a book to be altered is significant. By making any choice at all, the adolescents commit to working—with their therapist, with the group around them, and with their own inner artist. This decision reflects their desire for health, wellness, and creative growth. The choice of a specific book to alter can also reflect inner concerns nonverbally.

One young man in the foster care treatment program, Raul (pseudonym), chose a 1960s-era children's book celebrating Christmas. Santa was prominently featured on the cover. Raul spent the entire session carefully using an awl to punch the image of Santa out of the cover of the book—perhaps in much the same way as "Santa" and all the traditional holidays and family life he represents had been removed from Raul's life. Raul himself had been removed from his family; here in the art therapy session he was supported in taking the opportunity to be in charge through his active role in art processes that included of the removal of Santa.

As the art therapist, I supported Raul in his actions, making sure that he did not wound himself with the awl. Basic safety was an important feature of the therapy, as the awl was quite sharp and he had to use force to cut through the cover of the book. Raul was able to express his rebellion and anger in a safe and appropriate way, utilizing the safety and freedom provided by the art therapy studio setting. In later sessions he carefully cut out magazine images of people's faces and glued them over the existing characters' faces in the book, making a sardonic and humorous recreation of Santa's world into Raul's world. Through altering the Santa book, Raul "rewrote" the book to reflect his reality, one in which his traditional family rituals and observances had been altered.

Maria (pseudonym), a 16-year-old living in foster care, attached a great many objects inside her book, such as shiny fake gems, plastic toy alligators and bugs, coins, and fake flowers. Later I learned that prior to her placement in foster care due to neglect, she had often gone without enough food. The layering of object upon object in her book may have been a way to symbolically feed herself. Consuming large amounts of materials is a common theme in the art making processes of formerly impoverished children in foster care (Gonick & Gold, 1992; Hurwitz, as



Figure 2
Nora's altered book cover with attached white feather.



Figure 3
Nora's altered book, first page. Cut and fabric wrapped pages form a niche for shells, parrot stickers, a faux flower and a cherub charm framed by a white ribbon bow and blue feather.



Figure 4 Nora's two page collage spread: "Illusion" and "Chains of Oppression."

cited in Betts, 2003). In the art therapy group, Maria could use as many objects as she needed while the book acted as a container for her desire to consume. The limited nature of a book as an object to affix items to provided a boundary for her hoarding behavior. Books, like boxes, act as containers that can enable symbolic and physical safety through their limits and boundaries (Junge, 1985; Kapitan, 2003; Kaufman, 1996; White, 2002).

Nora, a 16-year-old immigrant from Russia, transformed *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (Figure 2). While I do not know if Nora had read the famous novel, it is interesting that she chose a book in which the heroine experiences shame and exile, yet triumphs at the end. Perhaps Nora desired to live a similar story. The very first page in the book (Figure 3) is the most delicate, as the text becomes background of a niche safely holding small shells, stickers of birds, a faux flower and a cherub charm framed by light blue fabric, a white ribbon bow, and a blue feather. Perhaps these delicate and feminine objects mirrored Nora and were a contrast with the messages made clear deeper into the book. In one collage, photos of a fake eyelash and many drops of water seem to evoke the idea of tears falling near the word "Illusion" (Figure 4). Images of chains fill the other side of the two-page spread; within the text, noticeable in the upper right corner, is the word "suicide" over which Nora wrote "Chains of oppression." Labeling the collages with words may be a way Nora tried to communicate, using an art medium in which the original language, the text, was transformed into a new expressive story.

Conclusion

Altered book making is a unique art form that can be useful in art therapy. Altered books provide an abundant and stimulating canvas while allowing freedom of expression. The portable and accessible nature of books makes altered books effective for the concrete recording of the creative process and subsequent self discovery. The interactive quality of altered books lends itself to community building. Rich in symbolic meaning, altering books can even be a

symbolic rebellion against the status quo, thus making it a particularly suitable art form for adolescents.

In altered books, the art object acts as a metaphor for how our lives are altered by experiences. Our own core text—that blend of culture, childhood experiences, and inner spirit—can also be transformed by the material life presents us. The wisdom and revelation contained in the books we alter become our own, changed at times beyond recognition into the stuff of evolving personhood. The art concretizes a life transformed.

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