

Brief Report

Development of a Creative Arts Therapies Center for People With Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract

The Centre for the Arts in Human Development in Montreal has provided art, drama, music, and dance/movement therapies to adults with developmental disabilities for over 10 years with the goals of developing and enhancing self-esteem, social skills, and communication abilities. This report describes the development and purpose of the center, sustainability challenges, and efforts made to create community both within the center and with the community at large. Recommendations are made for initiating creative arts therapies centers in other locales.

Introduction

The Centre for the Arts in Human Development (CAHD) in Montreal is a unique facility that offers creative arts therapies to adults with developmental disabilities. The arts are a viable mode of exploration for this population, particularly in developing social functioning, (Got & Cheng, 2008) and enhancing personal expression and social relationships (Carrigan, 1993; Got & Cheng, 2008).

However, there seems to be no literature describing centers that aim to fulfill multiple mandates of clinical, educational, and research objectives as part of their missions. After 10 years, CAHD has become an established hub for people with developmental disabilities, student interns, researchers, and the wider community of Montreal. This report provides reflections on the development, goals, and challenges of the center, and offers suggestions for establishing similar centers in other locales.

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History of the Centre for the Arts in Human Development

The seeds for CAHD began in 1993, when social worker Lenore Vosberg considered whether involvement in theater would help people who have developmental disabilities. Vosberg approached drama therapist Stephen Snow from Concordia University in Montreal with the idea of producing a play with adults from rehabilitation centers as the actors. This collaboration involved 20 adults with developmental disabilities and over 20 students enrolled in a course in developmental drama at Concordia University. The course operated on a buddy system where each adult client was paired with a student. Because positive changes were noted in the clients as a result, educational psychologist Miranda D'Amico was brought in to evaluate the course by conducting nonparticipatory observation research. The course was repeated the following year, this time in the production of a full scale musical with developmentally disabled adults assuming the main acting roles, and with systematic observation of the participants. In 1995, Stephen Snow, Leland Peterson, and Miranda D'Amico obtained a grant for academic innovation and launched the Centre for the Arts in Human Development (CAHD, 2006).

CAHD was linked to the Departments of Education and Art Education (which housed the art therapy program) at Concordia University. Concordia provided the space while external funding covered supplies and salaries. A number of factors coalesced to help launch the center: timely start-up monies, university priorities that emphasized research and community outreach, and administrative and academic support from the university.

Once initiated, CAHD needed the participation of clients, interns, volunteers and supervisors. Rehabilitation centers that could refer clients were notified of CAHD's opening and existence. Each year referrals from Montreal area rehabilitation centers create a pool from which 20 clients are selected biennially for the 2-year creative arts therapies community program. Since its inception, over 120 people with various developmental disabilities have participated.

CAHD also has provided internships for graduate students at Concordia University. In the first year of the center's operation, three art therapy students facilitated three groups for a total of 20 clients. These clients also participated in dance-movement therapy, music therapy and developmental drama run by professionals. The drama therapy option at Concordia opened in 1997 and in the following year, four art therapy students and four drama therapy students interned at CAHD. In each subsequent year, new first-year art and drama therapy students have obtained their practicum experiences at the center, and along with volunteers from other university departments with similar practicum needs, they ensure the center's smooth running. Additional paid support is provided by six part-time employees. Almost all of the staff members have been with CAHD for its entire 10-year history.

CAHD Mission and Goals

Unique in Canada, the Centre for the Arts in Human Development strives to fulfill many goals. Not only does the center serve adults with developmental disabilities, it also functions as a training and research center for Concordia University. Over the years, CAHD's mission has expanded to encompass the goals of providing a setting for therapeutic programs, facilitating student training, fostering research, and promoting public outreach. The following describes each of these goals.

Therapeutic Programs. At CAHD, clients participate in therapeutic activities to improve their self-esteem, confidence, social skills, and general quality of life. The program takes place twice a week over the course of 2 academic years. Interested participants can return for a once-weekly program in the 3rd year to consolidate their therapeutic gains. These weekly community meetings for CAHD graduates grew out of participants' desires to continue to meet, as a result of the group cohesiveness that develops during each 2-year program. The weekly program brings together staff, interns, and volunteers, and functions as a friendship program and drop-in center.

Student Training. Over the course of 10 years, more than 100 students have received clinical training or fieldwork experience at CAHD. In addition to art and drama therapy students, students from business, education, applied human sciences, and other departments can apply for fieldwork. Art and drama therapy students receive intensive clinical training for groups and individuals. Having a registered art therapist on site allows students to receive thorough and timely supervision. They learn how to cofacilitate groups and also to assist with another modality (music or dance-movement therapy). The center provides a unique opportunity to observe how clients are doing in each of the creative arts therapies groups; thus, the multidisciplinary team can provide a coherent care plan for each client.

Research. Because CAHD is housed within Concordia University, it offers the added benefit of scholarly resource support for research projects. The program has served as a research site for two major projects including an art therapy assessment (Lister & Rosales, in press), a sandplay assess-

ment (Tanguay, in press), and a forthcoming project on the ethnodramatic stories of the participants.

Public Outreach in the Community. At CAHD, clients have developed strong bonds with the interns, volunteers, the facility, and each other. These relationships have called on staff to find strategies for maintaining the internal community needs of the center. Because it is affiliated with an educational institution, the center also strives to educate beyond the university walls. CAHD is dedicated to educating the public about people with developmental disabilities and their creative expressions. One way to do so is through annual open houses where the general public can come to the center to meet the staff, interns, and participants, and to view client artwork created specifically for the event. These open houses have proven to be a very successful way of inviting the public to see how creative arts therapies work and to witness the creativity of people with developmental disabilities. One creative exhibition that occurred in 2006 paired clients from the center with two artists and a museum educator from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, culminating in an art exhibit at the museum. Such an exhibition experience may provide clients with the therapeutic benefit of public recognition (Treadon, Rosal, & Wylder, 2006).

In keeping with CAHD's original goals, every 2 years a play is mounted with client and student actors. These plays are written and produced by faculty and composers for the particular group of actors that year. The plays explore issues of self-esteem and overcoming obstacles. Participants act, sing, dance, and fulfill all the leading roles. Volunteer students provide the supporting cast to ensure that the actors stay on cue. These plays have drawn thousands of people and provide much visibility as a result.

Challenges

Despite its success, there are many challenges in running a community center with multiple, complex goals and program needs. First among them are the ongoing challenges for funding and fundraising. The Centre for the Arts in Human Development does not receive "hard money"; thus, sustainable funding is always a challenge. Ludins-Katz and Katz (1990) described similar challenges in supporting an arts center, such as balancing the limitations of funds with the needs of the disabled community, whose members would like more programming.

The relationship of the center with the university that houses it also contributes particular challenges. Although space for the center is assured, CAHD's relationship with Concordia University has changed as the university has expanded. The research demands of the institution must be balanced with the clinical needs of the clientele. Also, because the current program follows the academic calendar, only short-term therapies can be offered. The continual restarting of the program every other year poses challenges in terms of interviewing clientele, and selecting and training interns and volunteers.

Therapeutically, CAHD's orientation is an amalgam of humanistic, psychodynamic, and developmental approach-

es. When interns and staff members are faced with difficult behavioral issues there can be challenges in coordinating and finding effective strategies for their management. This is coupled with the need for ongoing consultation with adjunct professionals in fields such as psychiatry, neurology, and psychology. Maintaining these complex relationships creates richness for the program but adds to time demands on staff members and sometimes results in differing responses to a particular problem.

Impact of CAHD on Participants

Despite these ongoing challenges, a consensus obtained from interviews with clients, family supporters, and referring agencies indicates that the program has been worth the effort. Staff, students, volunteers, and the community of developmentally disabled adults have all benefited from the creation of the center. Furthermore, the Montreal community at large has witnessed creative expressions through publicly promoted art shows and plays. Feedback has documented that viewers and audiences leave the center's art shows and plays with a new, positive awareness of people who have developmental disabilities.

Consistent with the findings of Got and Cheng (2008), CAHD interns, supervisors, parents, and caregivers who are with the clients daily almost uniformly see positive changes in the clients' creative accomplishments and in areas of self-esteem, social skills, and communication. Most participants improve in their self-esteem and social skills (Snow & D'Amico, in press). Benefits from participation in CAHD extend into the clients' lives as well; for example, clients generally build friendships and increase their social networks. Through their participation in the public outreach program, participants develop their voices in the community and can advocate for themselves as well as educate others. Special projects, such as the joint program with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, help connect the participants with the community, an outcome that Treadon et al. (2006) also found in their museum project.

CAHD is Concordia University's only practicum site that uses creative arts therapies as the primary therapeutic intervention for clients. Interns work under close supervision with a well established understanding of the different modalities involved. Therefore, another important outcome of the center is the interns' exposure to other creative arts therapies. Interns also learn about the complexity of the participants' lives by working closely with referring agencies, families, group homes, and family-type resource homes.

Recommendations for Establishing a Creative Arts Therapies Center

Although some community centers provide arts programs to adults with developmental disabilities, such as the programs described by Ludins-Katz and Katz (1990), it appears that there is no widely-known model for a center that has an explicit emphasis on creative therapies for adults with developmental disabilities. The added goals of training art and drama therapy interns, providing a place to

volunteer, engaging in research, and educating the community at large offer a recipe for a very special place with many benefits. Despite these laudable goals, it is clear that such a recipe needs fine-tuning on an ongoing basis to sustain a center that will achieve the best possible outcomes. Therefore, we offer a number of recommendations for starting a creative arts therapies center for people with developmental disabilities or other special needs.

Committed People. Undoubtedly, a place such as the Centre for the Arts in Human Development will not succeed without individuals who see a need, can identify the resources, and have the energy to pursue the project. In the case of CAHD, the founder was a social worker with years of experience working with this population and realized, as others have, that the arts provide a valuable mode of expression and communication (Reynolds, 2002). An effective strategy for creating interest is tapping the resources of an established program, such as a theater or other department within a university where other people may be mobilized to create an initial vehicle for public outreach like a play. The success of these events can motivate and catalyze the people involved to further pursue their ideas.

Funding. The "deal breaker" in establishing a creative arts therapies center often is the need for adequate funding (Ludins-Katz & Katz, 1990). Philanthropists and government funders were instrumental in beginning and sustaining CAHD. However, these funding sources often are for limited terms, making future funding an ongoing issue. A detailed budget needs to be created that covers housing costs, insurance, salaries, transportation, and supplies. Other funds from community outreach programs can be sought, which help to educate the public about the center and advertise its programs. For example, because they were involved in providing its grant money, government officials attended one of the most recent plays at CAHD and gained a first-hand understanding of the center's outcomes of value to the community. Fundraising can be a full-time job, so it is important to designate a staff person who will be in charge of investigating potential funding sources.

Housing. Once funding is secured, an appropriate space needs to be found. Ludins-Katz and Katz (1990) recommended finding a public space or building that is easily accessible and visible to the public. Other considerations include wheelchair accessibility and adequate storage space. CAHD was provided space by Concordia University; however, as with most universities, space requirements may change with time. Thus, it is important to maintain good communications with university officials or others who must authorize the ongoing use of a space.

Staffing. Funding will determine staffing and hours of operation. To ensure smooth functioning, it will be necessary for at least one paid staff member to have the primary responsibility of managing funding concerns. Additionally, some foundations only fund programs that have a paid director. Over the years, CAHD has been able to employ more people as funding increased. Depending on the mission or mandate of the center, certain persons need to be on site. For example, because CAHD was conceived as a training center for art and drama therapists, it required spe-

cific personnel to provide not only services but also supervision of interns. With the addition of volunteers who rotate through the center, it soon became necessary to add a staff member to be in charge of coordinating volunteers.

Professional Links. Participants at a community center likely will have a wide variety of diagnostic needs. If the center does not have a physician or nurse on site, appropriate persons need to be available if medical needs arise. It is also important to develop and maintain relationships with community agencies to ensure an ongoing group of participants.

Community. A sense of community can happen gradually over the years through clients' collaborations with staff and other personnel, as was the case at CAHD. In our situation, this sense of community was evidenced by the participants' requests for new ways to sustain their involvement at the center and with each other. Bringing the participants together in a unique setting opened them to a community outside their daily experiences. At CAHD, a client can come to see him- or herself as a member of a "disability culture" (Spaniol, 1998): understanding his or her disability "as a characteristic of an oppressed group rather than a personal liability" (p. 30). Spaniol asserted that in viewing a participant group as a culture, art therapists can collaborate with clients to facilitate social change. Implicit in this viewpoint is an understanding that there is an internal community formed by those with the disability, and another group of those who do not have the disability. By recognizing the culture shared by the participants, a sense of community can be developed; efforts to engage and communicate to the outside culture or community can also be facilitated. Such an experience fosters a sense of belonging, which is essential to the notion of culture.

Engaging with the outside community can benefit the wider society as well. As others have found (Girija & Gerber, 2007; Treadon et al., 2006), bringing art created by marginalized groups into the community provides opportunities to create dialogue and even to challenge beliefs and assumptions. By linking with such institutions as art museums, a distinct audience can be introduced to art created from nontraditional artists (Treadon et al., 2006). Furthermore, through such an event, nontraditional artists are afforded a formal venue to display their art, which can enhance creativity, self-expression, and self-worth.

Conclusion

Because the Centre for the Arts in Human Development utilizes multiple creative arts therapies, it is in a unique position to demonstrate and promote the value of visual, musical, and dramatic art forms. It is important to highlight these modalities through such tangible means as an art show, a play, or a musical production. Each of these options can challenge audiences' preconceived ideas about the creativity of people who have developmental disabilities. In turn, the participants can develop skills and express themselves in various and powerful ways.

Over the past 10 years, CAHD has emerged as a unique therapeutic space, educational venue, and research center. Many clients with developmental disabilities have

experienced art, drama, music, and dance-movement therapies. Their musicals and artwork have been publicly viewed and appreciated. These public outreach events are the culmination of 2 years of therapeutic work to help improve participants' social integration, quality of life, and self-worth. Personal feedback and structured assessments have shown that CAHD has been successful in fulfilling these goals. Given the success of the Centre for the Arts in Human Development, others may wish to consider the recommendations for developing a similar center.

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