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HEAR THE UNHEARD VOICES OF VISUAL ART: WHAT IS THE STORY?

ABSTRACT

The debate in contemporary visual art exhibitions focuses on the art-making process. This article aims to compare the current art-making process regarding concept development in fine arts to the concept of storytelling, as applied in narrative therapy. Several case studies done over the past three years at Tshwane University of Technology motivated the researcher to investigate this process that brought healing to many, whilst contextualising an art concept. This narrative approach in concept development is subject to the student's ability to understand and manipulate content, together with the facilitators' approach to the reality. The researcher proposes the use of the narrative as a starting point to identify and develop a personal theme/concept in "tracing an untold history" of "unheard voices", not only to add content to art-making, but also to guide art students to trace their "history and meaning of a unique outcome" and rewrite their own alternative stories.

1. BACKGROUND

The debate¹ in contemporary visual art exhibitions focuses on the art-making process.

The aesthetics and purpose of an exhibited artwork may be debatable, but neither is it the main focus of this article, nor the artworks displayed in contemporary visual art exhibitions. Although the artwork is exhibited, the process or catalyst for making art is usually not. The author supports Carroll's (1999:242) statement that the artwork in itself does not only function to provide

The art-making process of contemporary visual art is mostly determined by a theme and concept. The artwork is either a poor representation/ illustration of the concept and theme, or the art-making process is debatable. A narrative² perception/approach singles out specific themes to apply to an art-making process and to the underlying content of an artwork which are worth researching. This article aims to compare the current art-making process regarding concept development in fine arts to the concept of storytelling, as applied in narrative therapy, as a contribution to existing and future knowledge on the effects of the art-making process on the person, in an experimental work space under art-making facilitation.³ Several case studies done over the past three years at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) motivated the researcher to investigate this process that brought healing to many, whilst contextualising an art concept. Different discourses had different outcomes, which pursued a discussion of "tracing an untold history" and "unheard voices". The use of the narrative approach subject to the facilitators' approach to the reality/moment is evident. This article can potentially impact on the way in which art facilitators guide art students to develop alternative and positive concepts as part of the artmaking process. The narrative understanding and concept development are the student's ability to understand and manipulate content, which is facilitated by a lecturer, supervisor or tutor. The researcher proposes the use of the narrative as a starting point to identify and develop a personal theme/concept in "tracing an untold history" of "unheard voices", not only to add content to art-making, but also to guide art students to trace their "history and meaning of a unique outcome" and rewrite their own alternative stories.

aesthetic experiences (form of contemplation) and visual pleasure, but that the artist's intention should still count. The researcher does not wish to elaborate in this article on research done on Carroll's (1999:167) model on how "the artwork provides an experience to the audience, since an artwork has the potential to carry a metaphorical meaning, which leads to philosophical and critical thinking" (Dry 2018:11).

- 2 The theory on the *narrative* is not commonly referred to in visual arts. It can be referred to as the personal story of the one telling it.
- 3 The researcher refers to the art-making process of art students and the process that affords them the opportunity to tell their personal/sociocultural history. At the time of the observations, the researcher was not familiar with the practice of narrative therapy. The art teacher, tutor or lecturer is not allowed or qualified to counsel students, and the researcher does not suggest that any art facilitator acts as a therapist.

2. INTRODUCTION

A narrative perception, as presented in narrative therapy, postmodernism and social construct, provides the theoretical framework for this article. The theoretical framework of the narrative prompted the narrative metaphor and discourses developed, as proposed by *Coram Deo's pastoral narrative therapy* course.⁴

Michael White (1948-2008), family therapist and psychotherapist, is known as the founder of narrative therapy, cultural anthropology and non-structuralist psychology (White 2007). White's numerous studies and publications have been sources of techniques adopted by therapists and even scholars from other discourses and disciplines. White's work with children and Aboriginal communities includes, among others, numerous case studies and stories of trauma, domestic violence, schizophrenia, and eating disorders. Du Preez and Eskell-Blokland (2012:51), among others, have documented White's (1995; 1998) narrative approach and fieldwork in local South African case studies.

Although the narrative metaphor is not unique to a traditional therapeutic setting, narrative therapy is not simply another therapeutic practice of "techniques" and normative practices. According to White (2011:3), narrative therapy is a subversive operation of modern power discourses.

The two therapeutic practices that are particularly relevant to the narrative metaphor are, according to White, the imperative decentring of the therapist's⁵ voice and a commitment to deriving practices that are nonnormative, and paradigms that shift from social construction to stories instead (Freedman & Combs 1996:1-18). Numerous scholars and authors reference and contextualise their narrative theories on the writings and publications of White from 1986 to 1995 and collaborated publications (White & Epston 1990). One particular introduction to narrative therapy is the book by Morgan (2000).

In her book, Morgan (2000) covers a broad spectrum of narrative practices, including, among others, externalisation, re-membering [sic], therapeutic letter-writing, the use of formal procedure, groups, reflecting teams. Morgan (2000:2, 4) opines that the two most significant principles in the commitments, ideas and beliefs of narrative therapy are the facilitator's

⁴ This course is accredited by the University of Pretoria's Centre for Contextual Ministry in conjunction with the division for Continued Education, CE@UP, referred to as UP Enterprises.

⁵ By decentring the therapist's voice or the facilitator's agenda, the narrative therapy "centres people as the experts in their own lives" (Morgan 2000:2).

ability to maintain curiosity and get a deeper understanding by asking questions to which the facilitator really does not know the answers.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Morgan (2000:5) explains how people live their lives in stories, based on Denborough's (2014:3) statement: "Who we are and what we do are influenced by the stories we tell about ourselves." Morgan (2000:5) describes how the storyteller should accept authorship and ownership, since the storyteller/narrator is the expert of his/her own story. Although the narrator cannot change the stories told by others, s/he can choose either to believe these stories and behave accordingly or take ownership of his/her own story and live according to his/her own authentic version. The therapist/facilitator has an opportunity to interview the narrator's life story while metaphorically "unpacking their suitcase", as referred to by Dr Louw (2018) during the pastoral narrative therapy course. The facilitator needs to be equipped in order to co-create hope and facilitate healing in a wide variety of situations.

Cottor *et al.* (2004:5) contextualise the construct of a story – with regard to the ability to develop language and to use it effectively – due to being "biologically equipped as human beings to act linguistically with each other", which is "only [possible] through ... relational actions with one another".

According to Morgan (2000:5), all human beings are constantly interpreting experiences, events and circumstances in their pursuit of potential meaning or understanding. In a constant effort to make sense and find explanations, people tell their stories. The stories consist of daily experiences which happen in a series of events that occur in a particular sequence, over a period of time in a certain context (plot). Both Morgan (2000) and Cottor et al. (2004:5) agree that meaning-making is an essential human quality, which cannot happen in solitude or isolation. To live in relationships from an early age creates collaborative meaning-making between people within communities and cultures, in which individuals can participate through language that triggers a response. These relationships between people within communities and cultures are an important aspect that is similar to the conversations and stories told in the classroom.

Multiple events occur simultaneously and affect the story in more than one way. Morgan (2000:8) notes that many different stories happen at the same time and many "different stories can be told about the same event". The more frequently told stories are often referred to as the dominant story. According to Morgan (2000:11-12), these stories are problem-filled

stories that contain many flaws, since they are based on selected plots only. The dominant story often expresses a false "truth" about someone. Morgan (2000:12) refers to this as a thin description as opposed to a rich description or anti-problem story, which is referred to as the alternative story. The basic idea behind narrative therapy is to allow the person to tell his/her preferred dominant story (thin description or problem-filled story) and to find an alternative story (rich description or anti-problem story).

Louw (2018:1) suggests that alternative stories are "usually hidden, often unheard and untold by the people themselves", and yet such stories affirm people's competencies, hopes and skills.

The act of living requires that we are engaged in the mediation between the dominant stories and the alternative stories of our lives. We are always negotiating and interpreting our experiences (Morgan 2000:9).

Morgan (2000:57) refers to identifying and authoring the *alternative story* and giving it a rich description as a *unique outcome*, which contradicts or stands apart from the dominant story. Once the relational content is authored, the problem can be identified. Louw (2018) highlights the need to separate the problem from the person, so that "the person is not the problem, but the problem is the problem" (Morgan 2000:29). Louw (2018:2) also directs attention to the use and purpose of asking questions:

Questions act to open space for new descriptions and meaning previously restrained by the problem. Questions are designed to unpack the politics and strategies of the problem and to discover unique outcomes and explore events (past – present – future).

4. METHOD AND CASE STUDY

The motivation for this article is based on observations in the classroom and students' artworks, where the "unheard voices" spoke of an "untold history" that left the researcher speechless and in a state of shock, indifference, uncertainty and a feeling of incompetence. Although the study guide demarcates precise methods and outcomes, the researcher had to use alternative facilitation techniques and strategies to assist the students in their efforts. It is only after three years' part-time teaching that the researcher questioned the process of art-making in relation to the

⁶ The researcher applied the highly directive technique of Trauma Incident Reduction (TIR), which is entirely person-centred, in order to facilitate the students to "view" the situations objectively, until "the incident becomes part

facilitation strategies that were followed. Every six months, the students evaluated their lecturers' teaching strategies and many other aspects of interaction that are kept on record. Since the results of the (anonymous) student assessments of the researcher as lecturer proved to be exceptional, the matter was worth researching. Unfortunately, a list of common factors and extreme opposites between student attendees did not provide the reason for the exceptional results. The researcher first eliminated factors that proved to be irrelevant to the cathartic experience of the majority of the classmates: language barriers, bad class attendance, lack of compliance and student ethnicities, namely Xhosa, Zulu, Basotho, Bapedi, Venda, Tswana, Tsonga, Swazi, Ndebele, European, Nigerian, German, Afrikaans, Dutch, Korean, Tsai, among others. Once the qualitative research on narrative art therapy was conducted, the researcher's attention was drawn to the teaching methods that might explain the cathartic outcome of this particular group of students.

The study course offers the students a wide variety of stimuli and encourages experimentation, alternative approaches and spontaneous ways of art-making.

The aim of the National Diploma (Fine Arts) course at TUT is to train artists (Van der Merwe 2015:5):

Artists need to develop certain skills and abilities: visual and manual skills, creativity, and conceptual and critical thinking. All of these contribute to a career as an artist, as well as to culture and society. Painting is a means to develop these skills. It has practical, intellectual, communal and entrepreneurial applications, and the course aims to allow the student to develop his/her potential as a painter or in related artistic fields (Van der Merwe 2015:5, 10).

The purpose of the second-year painting course is described in the students' study guide with the focus on the technical aspects of the particular subject, in terms of what is expected of the student and what skills the student needs to acquire:

After the foundation year, the student is expected to be able to manage the basic technical aspects of painting (i.e. colour contrasts, colour mixing, paint application, layering and underpainting) and the formal aspects (i.e. composition, visual awareness). The second year is focused on the development of advanced painting techniques, development of advanced formal abilities, exploration of different

of the life history of this person who can then proceed with life in a normal way" (Retief 2016).

approaches to painting and the beginning of the exploration of personal themes and ideas (Van der Merwe 2015:10, 12-13).

First, the student needs to explore a South African theme in a relevant and sophisticated manner. Secondly, the student needs to present the research and planning in a workbook, together with a personalised concept development with innovative sketches and presentational drawings for this postmodern artwork. The facilitator's observation, attention and guidance are crucial at this stage. The third step is to adjust and conclude the proposed artwork's planning, in order to start with the art-making process. The preparation and skill level of the student are not the only challenges/ obstacles in the making of a large, multifaceted, postmodern artwork or painting, but rather the day-to-day challenges and struggles to survive. Circumstantial events and complicated relationships in their immediate communities and the after-effects of cultural beliefs prevent numerous students from thriving. Since the completion of the actual artwork is not the final stage of the process of art-making, the student should at least keep up with the time schedule, in which the process can be monitored and facilitated. This means that the student should attend classes, regardless of the challenges s/he faces. The final stage of the art-making process is the assessment of the student's efforts; this is where the failure of compliance alternates. Although Van der Merwe's (2015:23-24) outline for assessment validates the student's ability to present a (supposedly) completed work of "original and professional quality", the student should also demonstrate the ability to "produce a complex, contemporary, personal, expressive work, that shows the development of [the student's] own ideas and approach to art-making" (Van der Merwe 2015:24).

The launching of a new project is considered an important aspect of art-making. The facilitator has the opportunity to present the students with the relevant background, visual examples and possible outcomes of this new project (Van der Merwe 2015:2). At second-year level, students can use their own stories as a starting point, when considering a theme. They are given the option of researching the following:

Postmodernism and a theme that relates to their *own history*, e.g., South African wars, British colonialism, Afrikaner Nationalism, Black Consciousness, African mythology, own family background and memories (e.g. Greek, Tswana, Zulu, British) or an aspect of South African politics (Van der Merwe 2015:21).

Van der Merwe (2015:21) urges the students to do research in a practical way by making sketches or gathering tactile material such as "written information, old photographs, old magazines and newspapers, objects,

memorabilia and posters". They may also choose to "visit a national history museum, an archive, a shop with South African antiques" or any other related source of information on their own theme. Van der Merwe suggests that the students "are given a choice between using personal/family history as a starting point, or opting for any topic that is of particular personal interest to the student". Such a theme or concept evolves over time from a series of processes. The facilitator has to allow ample time for the students to add content to the formulation and development of a personal theme. Time for mindful contemplation is an essential part of concept development, if one is familiar with the process, but this project is the first of its kind for second-year students. The challenge to gather the necessary requirements is greater than expected, since the majority of the students' families and relatives do not live in or around Pretoria.

For this particular case study, the facilitator sent the students home with some questions and tasks, which they could address over the June/ July school holidays:

- Why are you here? Today, in Pretoria, studying art, in this specific period of time, at TUT, and not elsewhere or at another time?
- Who made those choices and what circumstances led to those choices?
- Where are your parents from originally, and what contribution did they make for you to be here, today?
- Stop and stand still, turn around and look back at your life's journey. What culture and heritage do you call your own?
- Do you have a say? Do you have a voice?
- Decide your own position with regard to your choice of material for your art project and how you would transform it in a postmodern way.
- Go home and gather proof of your family's cultural heritage, if you have access to any.

The expectations and reality of the project's outcome were two different stories. At this stage of the art-making process, the students brought their research to class to discuss the objects they gathered. The facilitator jumped at the opportunity to interview the students, while they tell their stories or *unpack their suitcase* (Louw 2018). Instead of the expected *well-formulated*, personal themes or the expectation that the students will demonstrate a clear understanding of contemporary concept development, the facilitator viewed the aftershock of the toxic elements of Western culture, which only recently raised a red flag through the perspective of narrative therapy. This was no interview. Instead, it was

a personal conversation between the student and the facilitator, which resulted from the visual research presented by the student. Although the study guide gives clear instructions as to the process to be followed, the process was not complete without the facilitator's guidance.⁷

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The processes and discourses in the case studies presented different outcomes, which the art facilitator could easily misinterpret for a number of reasons such as, among others, language barriers, the difference in cultural discourses, and the artist's inability to articulate the content. The concept development of the artist's understanding and manipulation of the gathered data and content to make art, which were retrieved from their explicit involvement and selective collaboration with family members or companions, pursued an "untold history" of their own "unheard voices". Stories of physical abuse, substance addiction and abuse, trauma, depression and many other, gave way to hurtful contemplations. The art facilitator, who was not a therapist, still needed to partake in this conversation. The researcher did not know how to assist the students from here on, and made the conscious choice not to get involved in the stories, by only asking more questions to get more information that could, it was hoped, lead to workable visual ideas.⁸

Students, whose art facilitators dug deeper into those wounds, exploited the "cry for help", instead. Negative and harsh comments of bystanders urged the researcher to analyse the differences between the art-making processes across the different art disciplines, in order to understand how the processes diverge from, and conform to a set method. From a narrative therapy stance, one can argue that the outcome of the art-making process is subject to the facilitator's contribution, since the latter's "values [will] shape the questions that she[/he] asks" (Freedman

Before the development of a personal visual language and an understanding of strategies in contemporary art (that is developed up to master's degree level), the researcher chose to stop at the telling of the stories and the effects. The process is not even close to the actual making of art, yet. This information is for contextualising the case studies for the purpose of this research article and not to address the complete process of art-making, the actual development of a theme or concept where the facilitator guides the students through the process and affords the student the opportunity to develop a more personal and sophisticated approach to art-making.

This is one of the first similarities with narrative therapy practice referred to in Section 1.5 paragraphs 4 and 5: Decentring of the therapist, and the shift from discourses of social construct into the personal story.

& Combs 1996:117). Unfortunately, at this stage, the findings are merely speculative and cannot be supported by solid proof or adequate evidence. The researcher can thus only report on the primary case studies, without any comparison of questionable scenarios across disciplines. This matter will be considered for future research.

Individuals from each second-year painting group were very eager to share their experiences after only a number of consultations and feedback sessions. Each student narrated his/her own story, without knowing what benefits would come from the strategy. As an inexperienced part-time lecturer, the researcher preferred not to make any suggestion or statement regarding the dominant stories, but rather asked more questions to obtain as much information from the students as possible, before even trying to "sound clever". What seemed to be astounding and unexplainable was the stage where the student would come to an alternative story without the researcher's purposeful facilitation, thus proving that one of Morgan's (2000:4) narrative therapy principles was definitely the willingness to ask questions, out of curiosity, about matters to which "you really don't know the answers".

The following summaries of three of the 54 stories were shared in 2017 alone. Unaware of a possible opportunity to connect the narrative and its stimulus with the development of a theme or concept in visual arts, the researcher missed the opportunity to capture a total of 169 stories over the three-year period of facilitating the second- and third-year painting students.

Student 1 reported that she was curious yet reluctant to confront her mother with the suggested questions, but eventually decided to argue her case "in the name of a school project". She did not know how to formulate the suggested questions and had to get her mother's attention first. She decided to start off with a casual *chat* (something they have not done in five or six years), before she could barge in with those questions. Her relationship with her mother changed drastically after she gathered all the information she needed for her postmodern project. Her mother had the opportunity to share her story and untold history of oppression and hardship, for the first time. In her own words: "My mom and I want to thank you for the opportunity you created to talk about something that matters. Never before did my mom have the guts to share her story with anyone. This brought so much healing to our family, because once it was said out loud, she could make peace with it and she wants me to thank you for the opportunity".

Student 2's story was not one of joy and laughter, but it came as a surprise to both her and the panel of fine arts lecturers. Her parents were members of a secret government conspiracy during the apartheid era in South Africa.

They lived their lives in fear of their own people, since they worked in secret, alongside the "White" government. She presented evidence and archival news reports from that time when and where her parents were inconspicuously mentioned in the media, without revealing their true identities. Her untold history will eventually be told in her own voice.

Student 3 told his story with great embarrassment and sadness, unaware of the trauma and cultural curse that rests on his family's bloodline, because his parents made the choice to keep and raise their albino baby, instead of accepting payment from the Sangoma (traditional healer) to sacrifice their baby's life so his body parts could be harvested for traditional medicine. He cannot ignore this traumatic discovery, because he loves his brother so much. He was angered by the whole ordeal and that energy and rage had to be channelled somewhere. His artworks were undeniably packed with meaning, personal and cultural symbols and metaphors, which not only contributed to his personal theme, but also started a discussion of similar stories of other people who yearned for an opportunity to talk about their experiences.

In the process of art-making, one cannot overlook the technical skills, planning and research that go into the actual artworks. Van der Merwe (2015:23-24) expects the students to produce and present complex, personal, contemporary and expressive work that not only shows "the development of [their] own ideas and approach to art-making", but also "the original and professional quality of the work" (Van der Merwe 2015:25). The students face assessments based on:

Research: The relevance and quality of information gathered and planning done.

Problem analysis: What are the requirements of the project and how can you meet them (planning)?

Work methods: How did you go about answering the problem in a practical work?

Application of skills: Do you demonstrate the required technical, formal and conceptual skills?

Conceptual development: Are your ideas personal and innovative?

Quality of the end product: Professionalism, appropriate presentation and visual challenges that follow consideration of ethical principles in visual arts... (Van der Merwe 2015:13).

Students face personal limitations such as poor time management, public harassments and political strikes, as well as insufficient financial aid and lack of proper public transport, among others. The student will, therefore, get merits for his/her effort in the process as well as the outcome of the completed project, since the artworks are hardly ever completed on time. The two main concerns over the past three years (2015-2017) were the lack of proper workspace off campus and the fact that artworks were damaged or stolen in overcrowded public transport (trains and taxis). Students were told to leave their artworks in the painting studio or somewhere on campus. Opportunely, this resulted in creative ways of working, rethinking the strategies and work ethics so that all students had a fair opportunity to earn merits, regardless of how much or how little they managed to complete. One of the benefits of sharing each other's stories is the understanding of one another's circumstances, which allows one to ask for help, assistance and support without making excuses all the time, or explaining a situation with half truths, for fear of what the whole truth will reveal.

6. CONCLUSION

The researcher concludes that the narrative and the proposed art-making process has similar approaches in terms of the telling of stories and the benefits of an alternative story, which gives hope and relief to the narrator. Whether the narrator tells an "ordinary" story, or a story of substance abuse, trauma, depression or perhaps physical abuse, should not change the outcome of the narrative approach to set the problem aside from the person, and accepting the story for what it is. The painting studio is a neutral space where the students can experiment, make mistakes, and learn. They have the opportunity to share their stories without being judged. The classroom allows the space to make mistakes and to find alternative ways of being creative without being judged, since there is no right or wrong way of doing art. When the visual artist works in a studio space where there is no judgement and where the artist can open up to tell his/her story, one should add the strategy in Freedman & Combs (1996:112, 144), in such a way as to support each other's story-telling. Freedman & Combs (1996:121-124) suggest that the person should stand separate from the feeling, attitude, belief or practice in order to externalise the problem. Once the person is separate from the problem, s/he can objectively deconstruct the story in an attempt to make meaning of the story. Suggested questions, which are grouped into five categories, namely history of relationship, contextual influences, effects or results, interrelationships, and tactics or strategies, can assist the facilitator to stay with the preferred story (Freedman & Combs 1996:121-124).

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The story in art therapy (Hill 1945) is nothing new, although the researcher proposes the use of the narrative as a way of finding the alternative story, to enable the artist to have a cathartic experience while telling the story/reason for making art in this proposed manner, without being diagnosed with the art therapy perspective of *Art versus illness* (Hill 1945). The narrative's therapeutic effect on students worked, even before the connection between the narrative and the conceptual development process in art-making was known to the researcher. In an informal forum of art classes, where the students do not need to construct a concept in art-making, the same evidence should be observed and recognised. The researcher has already archived the artworks of 21 students over the past eight years. The students gave their consent to the researcher to use the workbooks in future research. The researcher is determined to study the effects of art-making on the person, as well as the effect on the audience or art viewer, as this study can contribute to future research.

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Keywords	Trefwoorde
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