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## ART AND ART THERAPY ACTIVITIES IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE: DISCOVERING THE VALUE OF ART IN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE ACTIVITIES

### DZIAŁANIA ARTYSTYCZNE I ARTETERAPEUTYCZNE W SŁUŻBIE POKOJU. O ODKRYWANIU WARTOŚCI SZTUKI W DZIAŁANIACH OPARTYCH NA WYMIANIE MIĘDZYNARODOWEJ

**Streszczenie:** Programy międzynarodowej wymiany studenckiej pomagają poznawać świat i kultury. Szczególne miejsce pełnią tu zajęcia ujawniające potencjał społeczny działań artystycznych. Artykuł prezentuje arteterapeutyczny projekt realizowany w grupie międzynarodowej studentów, służący wzajemnej wymianie i tolerancji. Zajęcia poddane zostały także badaniom o charakterze jakościowym, potwierdzającym ich znaczenie w tworzeniu relacji interpersonalnych opartych na wzajemnym poznaniu, szacunku i akceptacji. Wartości, które leżą u podstaw pokoju.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pokój, arteterapia, sztuka, Erasmus +, studenci, wymiana międzynarodowa, art-based studies

**Abstract:** International student exchange programs help students learn about the world and cultures. Activities that reveal the social potential of art have a special place here. The article presents an art therapy project carried out in a group of international students for mutual exchange and tolerance. The classes were also subjected to qualitative research, confirming their importance in creating interpersonal relationships based on mutual knowledge, respect, and acceptance – the values that underlie peace.

**Keywords:** peace, art therapy, art, Erasmus +, students, international exchange, art-based studies

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Peace and social harmony can only have one foundation – man himself.  
(Montessori, 2021, XIV)

## **Introduction**

Regardless of the causes of armed conflict, human relations form the basis of peace or its absence. “The essence of peace and war is no longer the need to equip people with material weapons so that they can guard the geographical boundaries separating nations from one another, for the first real line of defence against war is the human being, and where humans are socially disorganised and devalued, a breach appears through which this universal enemy manages to penetrate” (Montessori 2021, XVI). The essence of peace-building activities, therefore, is to teach people to live in mutual respect, understanding, and tolerance. While we recognise the value of diversity, we can also exploit it to justify aggression and violence. This may be because diversity, as a trait that defines beauty, is most often discussed in the context of aesthetics (Gerard 2022), an area that is often overlooked and undervalued in everyday life. Even Maslow’s theory of needs (1954) categorises aesthetic needs as so-called higher needs, thus confirming the stereotypical view that beauty is something a person can do without. This approach is contradicted by examples of artistic creativity produced in extreme circumstances, such as in concentration camps (Karay 1994; Urbańska 2005), prisons (Hasiuk 2015), and psychiatric hospitals (Edbom-Kolarz & Marcinkowski 2011). These examples serve to illustrate the presence of beauty, aesthetics, and art in everyday life (Ventegodt, Merrick & Anderson 2003).

### **From international exchanges to art and art therapy interventions**

Can activities that recognise diversity and appreciate the beauty in life’s various aspects foster pacifist attitudes and opposition to conflicts that lead to war? International exchange programmes in education seem to offer great potential for the creation of such projects. The most prominent of these is the Erasmus+ programme, which was launched in 1998 to facilitate international exchanges for students, teachers, lecturers, and volunteers (Feyen & Krzaklewska 2012). This programme helps people learn about the world and other cultures, educating them towards tolerance and openness to cultural differences (Oborune 2013). The outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 provided a new context for this exchange. This experience was crucial in preparing the art therapy classes conducted as part of the Erasmus+ programme at the University of Silesia in Katowice in 2022/23 and 2023/24, exploring international experiences and facilitating interaction and exchange among students.

## **Review of the Literature**

A review of the literature indicates that the use of artistic tools for therapeutic or educational purposes, guided by the concept of peace, is already well documented. The area of social practice is represented by studies divided into those relating to:

- minimising the effects of conflict; publications devoted to projects aimed at immigrant groups come to the forefront,
- preventing hostilities by using art therapy to change social attitudes.

The majority of descriptions of art therapy interventions targeting children in migratory crises, as well as studies investigating their effectiveness, emerged in the 1990s. They present narrative approaches and storytelling (Howard 1991), free drawing and the projection mechanism (Elbedour et al. 1997), as well as other art therapy methods and tools that use non-verbal communication to address migrants' identity, migration trauma, feelings of isolation, homelessness, exclusion, alienation and adaptation to new socio-cultural circumstances (Miller & Billings 1994). S. Jabbar and A. Betawi (2019) undertook an analysis of the ways in which peace and war are expressed in children's drawings, focusing their attention on the works of children who had to leave their country as a result of Islamic State aggression. This analysis was supplemented by verbal material.

C. Rousseau is one of the more frequently cited researchers addressing the issue of working with immigrant communities. She specialises in school-based intervention programmes targeting refugees and preventing social polarisation and violent radicalisation. A particular strength of her studies is the combination of educational and therapeutic interventions with research procedures. Her experience includes conducting research based on art therapy projects that use various forms of expression (Rousseau & Heusch 2000; Rousseau et al. 2003; Rousseau et al. 2005; Beauregard, Papazian-Zohrabian & Rousseau 2017a, 2017b; Bourgeois-Guérin, Rousseau & Lyke 2021; de Smet et al. 2018, 2024; de Freitas et al. 2020; Audet et al. 2021). The author's research methodology is noteworthy, whether she uses standardised measurement methods and large research groups or limits herself to case studies and qualitative methods. This diversity suggests that the research procedure can be varied depending not only on the research objectives and issues but also on the modes of artistic intervention.

## **Terminological clarifications**

However, it is important to distinguish between artistic activities and art therapy activities. The former are directed towards self-expression, resulting from openness to emotional and aesthetic stimuli in the form of experiences of reality. The essential element is spontaneity and the expression of one's own emotions. The precursors of alternative schools, such as J. Dewey, M. Montessori and C. Freinet, emphasised this type of experience and its organisation in the educational process. Their

pedagogical practice, stemming from their critique of the traditional school and their views on the importance of art in human life, especially that of children, paved the way for an underestimated form of aesthetic education. Nowadays, attempts are being made to compensate for its absence through art therapy, which has different aims. In art therapy, art remains a tool for communication, but the therapeutic nature of the profession emphasises that it uses methods to express thoughts and feelings that are too painful to put into words. Art therapy incorporates elements of psychotherapy and psychological counselling in order to analyse emotions and beliefs, minimise stress, resolve problems and conflicts, and improve well-being (Malchiodi 2011, p. ix).

Thus, when we talk about artistic and art-therapeutic activities carried out by an international group of students, we are referring to a kind of preventive activity that fosters understanding, tolerance, and respect for diversity. These objectives are closely aligned with the principles of peace education and the promotion of mutual respect among young people from diverse backgrounds. These activities may also have an interventionist function, particularly when the intention is to facilitate contact, relationships, and collaborative creation between individuals from nations in conflict.

R. Mims, a U.S. Army veteran and art therapist, asserts that her story of recovery through art is not unique: “Many veterans have utilised art to deal with physical and emotional pain. Many have used it to deal with the stresses of transitioning back to civilian life. For some, it gives a new purpose after leaving the military” (Mims 2022, p. 6). R. Farrell-Kirk (2022) points out that the function of museums employing art therapists should be to serve the public – broad groups of interested parties, not just art connoisseurs. It can be assumed that art therapy and educational activities within the framework of education through art serve the same purpose: to improve the social functioning of young people in an international group, fostering mutual respect, tolerance, understanding, and peace.

### **Participants – international contexts**

Working with a student group in a university setting means that the random selection of participants in the classes is limited, especially if the activities are aimed at foreign students. The range of possible meetings of students from different countries taking advantage of the offer depends on the agreements signed between the universities, as well as on the level of interest in the proposed offer. The classes I prepared were attended by students from the Faculty of Social Sciences. They were future psychologists, early childhood educators, special educators, and social workers. The students came from Germany, Turkey, and Spain. This mix of nationalities proved fruitful, resulting in new discoveries and the sharing of common and different experiences arising from various educational and cultural traditions.

The participants (two German, three Turkish, and four Spanish) worked individually, in pairs, and in small groups of three to four people. The main principle was that they could choose their partners freely. They naturally felt more comfortable in the company of people from their own national group but were happy to work in mixed teams. Thus, the students formed the following teams: German–Turkish–Spanish, German–Turkish, and Turkish–Spanish. Situations in which students initiated joint work when it could have been done individually were particularly relevant to the purposefulness of the classes. Not only personality factors but also language skills seemed to play a significant role: students who were more comfortable with the English language in which the classes were conducted were more willing to propose working in mixed-nationality teams. This fact is not surprising, as language competence is an important component of development and social functioning (Abdulrahman & Abu-Ayyash 2019).

In contrast, the participation of Turkish students in these cooperative activities is particularly noteworthy. In light of the complicated German–Turkish relations and conflicts surrounding migration, the issue of interaction between representatives of these nations may have seemed delicate (Aydin 2016). Similarly, the relationship between Spanish and Turkish students may have appeared fraught with the risk of failure due to migration issues, although it should be noted that “Spain’s immigration policies are now remarkably inclusive, not only by historical standards but also compared to peer nations” (Finotelli & Rincken 2023).

## Method

Introducing the research procedure into the framework of student classes for educational purposes necessitates the use of an action research strategy, combining researchers’ expertise with their commitment and energy to solving social, political, or environmental problems. A key argument is that “research in action is based on both respect for diversity and the belief that diversity of experience, perspectives, and abilities is one of the most important resources available to the group of people participating in the study” (Greenwood 2012, p. 135). While the research and practice presented in this article are not intended to be systemic, they have been inspired by the observation of macro-social processes. This makes it possible to define the nature of the research, according to D.J. Greenwood’s proposal, as incorporating elements of the facilitative, organiser–activist, and psychodynamic models. This is evident in its reliance on interaction and collaboration, the researcher’s involvement in organising the group and its activities, and consultation rather than radical action.

The research stands out from typical social action research due to its reliance on artistic activities. This approach is useful for committed researchers with a qualitative orientation, combining research using the arts with political action (Finley 2009). A similar strategy is used by art therapists conducting research,

e.g. working with NGOs (Kapitan et al. 2011). They emphasise that creative art therapy in participatory research can enhance participants' personal potential and social development, consequently contributing to change in communities at different levels. The study described below also employed art-based research as one of its primary strategies (Kapitan 2010; McNiff 2011). As P. Leavy (2015) points out, this research does not create new research tools but applies them in a novel way that allows research problems to be approached from a holistic, integrated perspective. This is why all forms of human behaviour remain such an important source of research information, and why, in addition to the statements given during interviews, all indirect messages — such as images, non-verbal behaviour, and fictional stories — are also important.

The following research practices based on the visual arts were used: collage, painting, drawing, graphic narratives, installations, and art objects. It should be noted that the participants in the classes were amateurs, so the aesthetic value of the works was considered less important (a principle also applied in art therapy activities). Additionally, the products created were treated as research data and their representations, which is a fundamental principle of participatory art-based methods (Leavy 2015). However, as the material is highly susceptible to interpretation, the visual works were supplemented with interpretive statements in the form of interviews (Banks 2007), which constitute therapeutic, educational, and research practices.

Some visual activities were complemented by research based on literary fiction (Leavy 2015), which was created during the process of writing poems and stories. The importance of this cannot be overstated, as it is fictional narratives that can be used to build empathy. Fiction, like metaphor, provides access to the inner life and is the foundation for building empathy (de Freitas & Truman 2021).

Participant observation was also a valuable source of data, providing access to tacit knowledge and first-hand information (Kostera & Krzyworzeka 2012; Angrosino 2007). Using yet another research method was also intended to fulfil the requirement of triangulation and the collection of data from different sources.

### **Activities**

Meetings were held once a week and lasted 1.5 hours. Due to the limited space, it is not possible to describe all the activities prepared during the classes (research), however, some of those carried out in the given order must be highlighted.

The initial sessions were all about getting to know each other, discovering what the students knew about each other, and inspiring them to share this knowledge. They were largely playful and practical, they had a supportive function in life and sometimes also involved providing practical help to students unfamiliar with Poland and the realities of life there. They reinforced a sense of identity and self-esteem. It was assumed that, by restoring participants' capabilities as

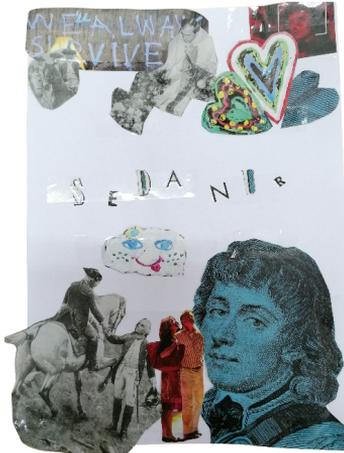
**Tab. 1**

Session	Topics	Techniques
1	welcome	conversation
2	fun and games	scribbles, drawing
3	colours of emotions	painting
4	business cards	collage
5	shared objects	art object
6	common story	drawing, collage, storytelling creating stories for drawings
7	home - house	drawing, narrative - complete sentences, collage, installation, poem
8	journey 1	drawing, painting, collage, art object, autobiographical narrative
9	journey 2	installation, autobiographical narrative
10	goodbye	conversation

individuals through insight, they would support the creation of a community/group that was aware of its diversity and the positive values inherent in it. The set of proposed activities was designed to mobilise the available resources of people from different countries — the idea was to establish a basis for working together despite cultural differences. Thus, most activities were individual, complemented by mutual dialogue. Participants experimented with basic artistic techniques, such as abstract drawing and painting, which reduced their resistance to artistic expression. The idea was to start with spontaneous expression and then move on to techniques that required more control and incorporated ready-made elements. One of the business cards in the form of a collage is particularly noteworthy, as its author used the newspaper slogan ‘We Always Survive’ alongside important Polish national symbols: the figures of T. Kościuszko and J. Popiełuszko (fig. 1a). As the student was not familiar with Polish history, her choice of these images was unconscious and not related to Polish history, but her personal experiences. However, this work was an excellent starting point for discussions about the value of life in various contexts: as an individual value, as a social value – shaping national and historical identity.

The second part of the series of sessions involved activities combining at least two modalities, such as visual and verbal expression, and the creation of narratives and collective works. There was a gradual shift from playful activities to a conscious awareness of how artistic activities relate to individual and shared experience. One of the sessions concluded with a reflection and synthesis in the form of a haiku: *it represents the daily life of human being with a world of war, economic criseses still there is an ongoing life. Everything is continuing in a daily routine.*

*An ongoing dream  
Continue to be well protected  
In a world of war*



**Fig. 1a. Student collage “We Always Survive” (business card activity)**



**Fig. 1b. Collective work: cardboard house and drawings as a symbol of community and peace**

An example of another form of activity is the work done in the Spanish-Turkish pair. The students started with a game of exchanging cards on which they drew spontaneously invented elements, e.g. parts of the landscape, human figures, animals, plants. They then cut out these elements to create a three-part plot (beginning, development, ending). Each part corresponded to a different background colour. Finally, they added a language statement to complete the images. The students prepared a story about children who leave their parents and embark on a journey full of adventures, including dangerous ones, which leads them to discover a treasure. This narrative can be related to analytical art therapy developed from the views of C.G. Jung. This is because the fairy tale has the characteristics of an archetypal journey, referencing the individual biographies of the student authors. They had the chance to deepen their access to inner experiences and ways of perceiving the world, exploring cultural motifs and archetypes. The story contained archetypal elements such as the wanderer, the warrior, the orphan, the innocent and the mage, and the hidden treasure represented values such as independence, courage, resilience, trust and power. These images reappeared in other activities during the further stages of the work, which testifies to the cultural significance of these images for the participants, with their personal experience of leaving, separation from loved ones, meeting a different culture and new people, but also having to face responsibilities and becoming independent.

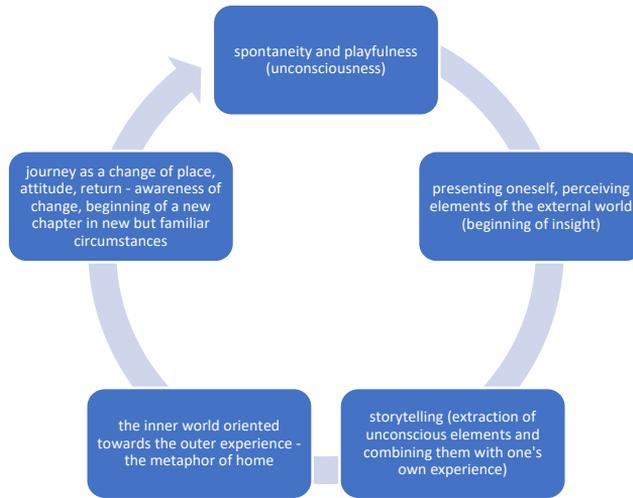
The next stage of the work involved the archetype of the home as a space that is equally external and an internal refuge. It was a milestone moment because it was the first time the students themselves came up with the initiative to act, exchange and create together. This happened in the German-Turkish group

on the initiative of a German student. The students created works comparing themselves to geometric motifs, which they then used to decorate their house. Initially, I had envisaged inviting the participants to 'build' their own houses from cardboard elements, but the students decided to create a joint construction instead. Importantly, the constructed house was indeed a communal space: shared rooms, kitchen, living room, bathroom, bedroom. Elements of nature surrounded the residence (fig. 1b) The resulting structure became a symbol of security and peace, reflecting the universe. It was a place where a community could exist on equal terms, without a hierarchical structure. The living space was divided into areas defined by function: the bedroom for resting, the kitchen for securing vital functions, the living room for contact and play. Private spaces were not separated. The house symbolised the centre, a refuge of emotional stability, a safe, warm, calm place. The session ended with an exercise designed to encourage reflection on privacy, which involved writing a poem about an object carried with us (in our handbag or pocket). The participants chose: a toy, a pin, a loyalty card for coffee.

The series of activities ended with two meetings devoted to the themes of travel, return and change. Participants created artistic illustrations of the three stages of their stay in Poland, from the emotional states experienced upon arrival in a foreign country (fear, fatigue and anxiety being the most frequently cited) to the emotions associated with returning home (such as regret at leaving friends and joy at returning home), as well as the elements of leaving one's comfort zone and the excitement of adventure and maturation.

## Results

Working in small groups fostered an atmosphere of intimacy and safety, the tasks performed based on shared experience and joint action helped participants to discover unifying elements rather than divisive ones. The free choice of means of expression, their non-obviousness, e.g. through the use of packaging materials (films, cardboard), motivated the expressive use and provoked the disclosure of hidden meanings. This provided an opportunity for analytical interpretation. Collaboration was also important, as it created circumstances for learning from each other. This created the conditions for becoming agents of change within communities, based on dialogue, cognition and acceptance of differences. The entire change process can be viewed as a transformative cycle, beginning with play and mutual discovery, and culminating in a transformative journey (fig. 2).



**Fig. 2. The cycle of transformation in art therapy activity**

## Discussion

When organising similar activities or research, the following important points should be noted:

1. It was observed that the level of English proficiency and the ability to use English influenced the willingness to undertake collaborative work.
2. The foundations for change are shared experiences, particularly the experience of feeling lost in a foreign country with a different language, tradition, and culture.
3. It also seems important to conduct activities in an area that is not directly related to potential international or cultural issues of contention.
4. Controversial issues – e.g. those related to the treatment of girls and boys in Muslim cultures and respect for human rights — were not addressed.

## Summary

The activities and research described above are not part of everyday practice. However, the project's concluding reflection on common and well-known stories that link the experiences of people from different cultures and nationalities confirms the belief that shared artistic experiences can foster peaceful relations within an international, multicultural group. The following questions are worth focusing on in such work: "What do our works, our images and stories say about our problems, challenges, dreams, and beliefs? Who or what do we most identify with? What is our role in history? What can be done to change history and our perception of its

impact on society?" A basic condition for success appears to be a sense of common experience despite different backgrounds. The students' statements demonstrated an understanding of the forces that can lead to individual and social change.

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