The impact of the Art Therapy Large Group, an educational tool in the training of art therapists, on post-qualification professional practice

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a Likert scale survey that was sent to past graduates of the MA Art Psychotherapy, Goldsmiths, University of London asking them about the relevance of their experience in the Art Therapy Large Group (ATLG) to their subsequent employment as art therapists or work in another capacity. The ATLG comprises all the students and staff in a psychodynamically based experiential group that meets six times during the year. Survey questions were drawn from previously devised theory and related to learning relevant to the workplace and the development of professional identity. Though there was a low response rate (20%), there were some significant findings, namely that graduates found the ATLG to be helpful in their work, whether this was art therapy or non-art therapy work, and that those who had studied part-time were much more positive about the applicability of their learning in the group to their work than those who had studied full-time. The findings suggest that the ATLG has a particular role in meeting key performance indicators in professional regulation and teaching and in quality assurance and employability policies in higher education. Finally, the potential for the use of the ATLG beyond the university in the public, private and voluntary sectors is suggested.

Introduction

In this article we will describe the findings from a survey, funded by the British Academy, which was sent out to 142 graduates of the MA Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths, University of London, asking about the impact of the Art Therapy Large Group (ATLG) on post-qualification practice. The survey, which was sent out to those graduates whose contact details we had, who had begun their training in the years between 2005/6 and 2010/11, tests the hypothesis that the ATLG teaches students about issues relevant to the workplace that will increase their competency at work and their employability. We asked a series of questions based on our developing theory (Jones & Skaife, 2009; Skaife & Jones, 2009) and also asked for demographic information and for any comments. Although the response rate means that we must be cautious, analysis of the responses suggests some significant findings. In particular, they suggest that the ATLG is of benefit to graduates whether they are working in non-art therapy jobs or in art therapy jobs, and this is particularly so for graduates who have taken the programme part-time.

After introducing the MA programme and the ATLG within it, we will discuss the background to the survey and what led to our questions. We will go on to

describe the research method before reporting on the key findings and discussing their implications.

Context of the survey

The programme

The MA Art Psychotherapy is a two-year full-time, three-year part-time programme based on a 'learning through doing' ethos: about clinical work on placement and in supervision; about art therapy processes in experiential groups; and theory, in lectures, seminars and debates. The theoretical roots are in Group Analysis, Object Relations Theory and Systems Theory, all of which are explored through art-making with a critical eye on the social and political context of what is being learnt, the form in which it is learnt and the arena in which it is practised. The programme model is derived from the systems model, which informed the early therapeutic communities and has small, interlocking groups— supervision, experiential and the larger year groups, held together by the ATLG. The staff team also forms one of the groups and meets regularly to process the dynamics of the student groups. Learning happens not only within groups but also between them (Dudley, Gilroy, & Skaife, 1998). De Mare, Piper, and Thompson (1991) describe this system model as like a tree—the large group is the

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trunk and the branches and twigs the small groups and individual relationships which both sustain and are sustained by the trunk of the tree.

The ATLG

The ATLG was introduced onto the programme in 1998. It runs for 1.5 hours and takes place six times a year, twice a term. All the students and all the staff attend (100+ people). A circle of chairs is made around the room with, in some places, two or three rows. There is a large space in the centre into which are put three crates containing art and found materials. The ATLG follows a large verbal group model as has been developed by group analysts (see Kreeger, 1975; De Mare et al., 1991; and Schneider and Weinberg, 2003). The group has no agenda and students are told that they should speak to the whole group and only one at a time. Unlike in the large verbal group, however, participants are invited to use art materials as they wish, and can get up and move around and look at what others are making. Although the culture of the group has developed over time, the structure of the group has remained largely the same. What is set up is a theatrical space in which spoken language, physical actions and art-making happen simultaneously. Performance art, which emphasises the relationship between performer, audience and the specific context of the performance, informs the way that art in the group is conceived. The role of the staff is to facilitate the aims of the group (as set out below) and to keep the boundaries (Jones & Skaife, 2009; Skaife & Jones, 2009).

Relevant literature

We found two papers in which large art therapy groups are described. Ramos and Zelaskowski (2014) write about a group analytically-based, single session large art therapy group for art therapy trainees in Barcelona. The group is for between 20 and 60 participants and unlike our ATLG is structured in three parts, the first for eliciting individual verbal images, the second for making a group mosaic out of small card pieces and the last for discussion of the image. In the USA, Carol Vandiver Lark (2005) draws on De Mare et al.'s work (1991) and the social action theories of Bohm, Factor, and Garrett (1991) for her 'TREC Model: Talking Race, Engaging Creatively'. She describes three of five pilot groups set up for using art to address issues of race; the largest of these had 35 people but the others could be described as small groups. There is a small literature on art therapy education of which there are a handful of research papers (Dudley et al., 1998, 2000; Gilroy, 1995; Linesch, 2005; Westwood, 2010). However, we found no research that evaluated the impact on professional practice of different elements of art therapy education.

There are a small number of papers and chapters on the large verbal group in training (Island, 2003; Lorentzen et al., 1998; Skynner, 1975; Spiro, Becker, & Beech, 2013; Stephenson & Bums, 1997), though nothing yet written or researched on the relationship between the large verbal group in training and its impact on subsequent professional practice.

Among these papers there are two student evaluations. Matthew Stephenson and Tom Bums (1997) attempt to correlate the professional background of participants of a one-year introductory course in Group Analysis in London with the students' evaluation of particular elements of the programme, namely the lectures, small group and large group. Responses to the large group were varied with just over half rating it as a useful learning experience, a 51% response of good and very good in comparison to the small group which had an 89% response of good and very good. There was little difference between the professions in their responses.

Lorentzen et al. (1998) describe a student evaluation of elements of a block one-year programme in Group Analysis that took place in Lithuania and compare the results to an unpublished student evaluation of a similar course in Norway. They ran 15 large groups over a period of one year alongside supervision, theory and small groups. The participants valued the large group lowest and this element of the training had the highest variance (range of response); the large group in the Norwegian basic course was scored similarly. However, the Norwegian basic course is the first year of a five-year programme and Lorentzen et al., who also teach there, say that the large group is valued more highly later in the programme. They conclude that it 'takes longer to develop a large group culture, and it is more difficult to grasp the dynamics of the large group and to work constructively and meaningfully with it' (Lorentzen et al., 1998, p. 357), a point echoed by Dick Blackwell who talks about dialogue in the large group as something that must be learned (Blackwell, 2009). This issue of time spent in the group became significant in our own results.

Background to the survey questions

De Mare et al. (1991) describe the large size of the group as arousing sub-cultural features, powerful responses often of panic, phobia and fear of annihilation as the impulse towards intimate relating is frustrated. The idea is that these feelings are then transformed in the large group through dialogue in which all voices are treated as equally valid. As all group members, including the convenors, are subject to the same feelings and dynamics, and there is no ostensible output to be achieved, there is a flattening of hierarchy. De Mare et al. regard the large group as

a micro-culture which brings together sub-cultural features with the macro-culture, that is, wider society, culture, political and world events, and see the large group as potentially contributing to the 'humanization and transformation of society' (De Mare et al., 1991, p. 178).

We consider that understood like this, the ATLG has a particular role to play in enabling students to understand the impact of politics and culture on the organisational dynamics as they experience them on their placements. The large size of the ATLG gives rise to a situation in which members cannot be sure how others have heard them, conversations can be broken up by responses to what was said or made earlier, and visual contact is disrupted as the group as a whole cannot be seen and neither can all the art work. The result of this is a similar sense of fragmentation that can be felt in the workplace where paranoia about other disciplines, how one is seen and how one experiences others, can abound. The content of what happens in the ATLG is often a representation of events in the world, political conflicts, natural disasters, the effect of economic policies and social division. The feelings arising from these are worked on through the art-making, performance and the witnessing of these, and through dialogue. The group, while magnifying experiences in the world outside of it, and thus becoming more real than reality, is still only an illusory, theatrical space. Feelings can be transformed into thoughts and so contained and communicated in the developing group culture, leading to a sense of empowerment and value and to a sense of community. It was these ideas that we wanted to test in our questions to graduates.

We also asked specifically about the relevance of the ATLG to learning about issues of equality and difference. The ATLG reflects a variety of voices; students come from a range of countries representing a diversity of ethnic backgrounds and social classes all interrelated to disability, gender, sexualities and beliefs. Thus, there will be different reactions in the group to the same experience. Even if these differences are not explored, they become visible in the ATLG. Dominant forms of communication in the ATLG will reflect those of the values of wider society and we can therefore expect that some voices in the large group will lead and others will remain hidden. In the ATLG these voices, given different modes of expression—spoken, performed, visual or silent—can be thought about, bringing about awareness of issues of equality and diversity.

In the ATLG students learn about the identity of a professional art therapist: when they join, through looking at the way the more experienced students use the group and the issues important to them; in their final year they look back to the questions they asked as first years when heard again by the new incoming students. Through this they become aware of what they have learnt, what has been involved in their training as art psychotherapists. Lastly, in consideration of De Mare's idea that 'Everyone shall have a voice', we thought that students learn about what it means to be active, or not, in the ATLG through choosing whether or not to speak or make art, enabling them to become more able to be active in their workplaces.

We developed these thoughts about the purpose of the ATLG through applying ideas in the verbal group literature to art therapy, and from considering what happens to the dynamics in the small art therapy groups, and the role of art in them, when the group is very large. We also listened to feedback from students and brainstormed ideas within the staff team (Skaife & Jones, 2009).

From this background, we devised a set of statements that set out to explore whether the students indeed learnt what we hoped they would, and most importantly, whether the learning objectives were relevant to the organisations in which they would work, and thus to their employability. Each statement had three sub-divisions related to workplace, the staff team and clinical work. These three sets mirrored the large group, the small group and the intimacy of clinical work, which in turn can be seen to reflect society, the family and the infant/other relationship.

Method

We designed a survey in two parts. Part one asked for demographic and workplace related information. Part two was a Likert Scale which presented respondents with a series of statements about the helpfulness or not of the ATLG in relation to particular aspects of their work and which they were asked to rate from 1 strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 undecided, 4 disagree and 5 strongly disagree.

A pilot study was sent out to current third year graduate students on the MA Art Psychotherapy and received positive feedback. An email was sent to 142 graduates with available contact details who had enrolled between the years 2005/6 and 2010/11, with a cover letter describing the study with a link to the questionnaire, which was completed using the online Qualtrics system (Qualtrics, 2015). The full set of statements are shown in Appendix A. The demographic information we asked for included: the year that people trained; their age and gender; the country they worked in; whether or not they were in art therapy work or non-art therapy work and if not in art therapy work, what sector they were in—Education, Health, Charity, Other; and whether or not their work was paid. There was also a box for any comments.

This research received ethical approval from Goldsmiths Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

Response rate

The response rate to the questionnaire was 20% (N = 142 with 28 respondents). Of these, six respondents did not answer statements about clinical work, five respondents did not give full information about their workplace and one respondent did not state whether they were a full-time or part-time student. We decided to include these incomplete questionnaires in the analysis as the response rate was low. In the report of the findings this is noted by the number of people (N), in the number after the slash, who responded to the question or statement.

Demographics

The age range represented that of the student demographic as a whole, with a slightly higher proportion of 25–34-year-olds. (Figure 1)

The gender balance was as expected given the predominance of female art therapists in the profession. (Figure 2)

We did not feel that the range of ethnicities in respondents (Figure 3) reflected the student demographic as a whole as there are many more international students on the programme, with a large cohort from Southeast Asia and also from other European countries. We had sent out the ethnographic questionnaire used by the college, which did not pick up this information.

The full-time/part-time (Figure 4) modes of taking the programme are reflective of the usual student distribution at the time, with 16 part-time and 11 full-time students (one respondent did not provide this information).

The two peaks for year of enrolment at 2005/6 and 2009\10 were marked. (Figure 5)

Graduates were asked if they worked in art therapy or non-art therapy work and could answer each question for each type of work if they had work in both roles. Of the 28 respondents, 20 said they were in art therapy (AT) work. Twelve replied for AT work only, eight replied for non-art therapy work only, eight replied for both, but one of these replied only for her AT work. Thus, there were answers for 20 AT job
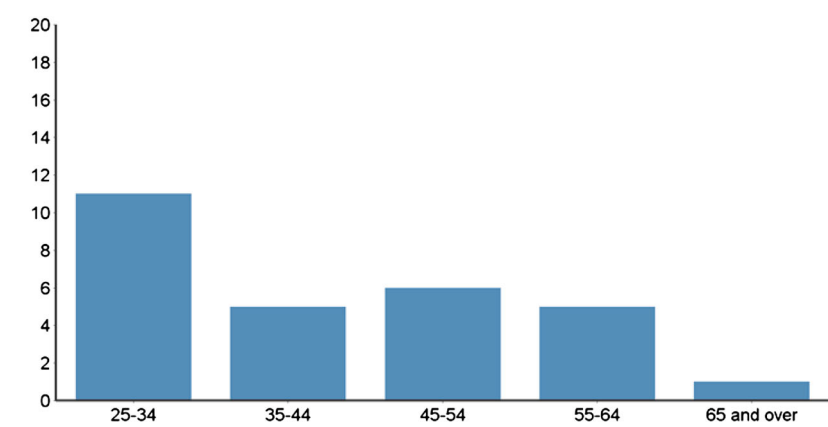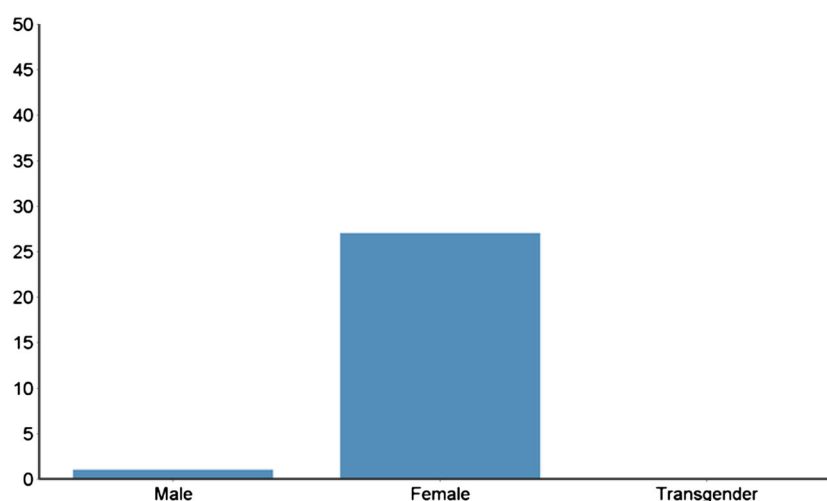

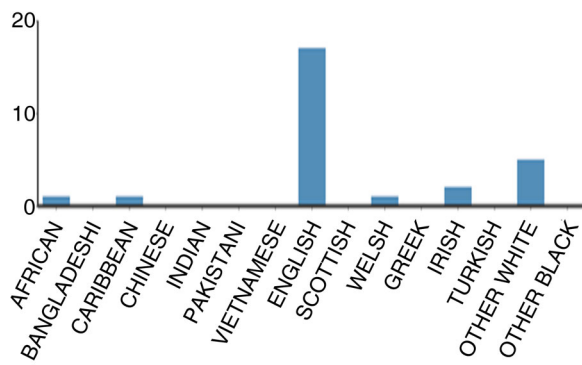**Figure 1.** Age range.

Figure 2. Gender.
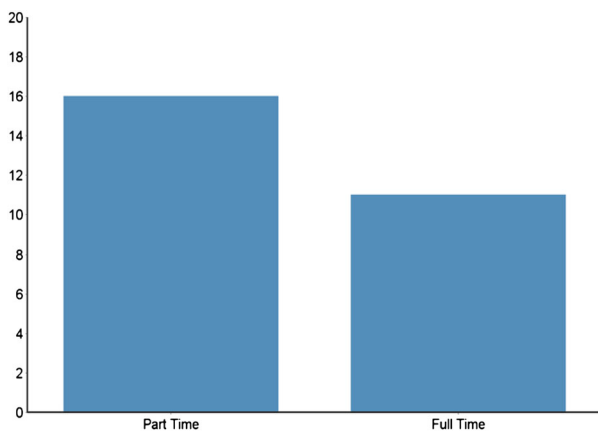
Figure 3. Ethnicity.

Figure 4. Full-time, part-time mode of study.

responses and 15 non-art therapy job responses. There were no responses to the unemployed category. (Figure 6)

The distribution shows that graduates who studied full-time were all in paid jobs, either as an art therapist or as a non-art therapist, compared to graduates who studied part-time where there was a mixture of both paid and unpaid art therapist and non-art therapist work. (Figure 7)

Fourteen of the 17 people replied that they worked in the UK, with one working in one of the Arabic speaking countries, another in the Republic of Ireland and a third in New Zealand.

The job titles in Health included: Art Therapist, Art Psychotherapist, Support Worker, Private Practitioner, Nursing Assistant, Registered Nurse, Primary Mental Health Worker, and Eating Disorder Children's and Young Person's Service Manager (EDCYPS). In Education they included: Further Education (FE) College, Director of a Preschool, Art Psychotherapist, School Counsellor, Councillor and Lecturer. In the voluntary sector they included: Senior Group Facilitator/Project Development Co-ordinator, Art Therapist, Group Leader, Lead Artist/ Tutor. Other job titles included Freelance, Administrator and Bookseller.

Ten art therapy jobs were occupied by practitioners who had studied part-time; nine art therapy jobs were occupied by practitioners who had studied full-time. Nine non-art therapy jobs were occupied by those who had studied part-time; five non-art therapy jobs were occupied by those who had studied full-time.

Responses to the survey statements

The mean (average response) was 2.29, with a standard deviation (range of response) of 1.27. A few respondents had consistently answered strongly agree or agree to all the statements and one respondent had answered strongly disagree to all the statements.

Because of the small number of respondents, our main findings rested with two frames of analysis: the difference between those who were in art therapy jobs and those who were in non-art therapy jobs and between those students who had undertaken the programme as full-time students and those who had undertaken it as part-time students. As the number of respondents was low and small shifts in number produced large percentage differences, we have reported the actual numbers of respondents replying to each statements and used percentages to show significant differences in the answers.
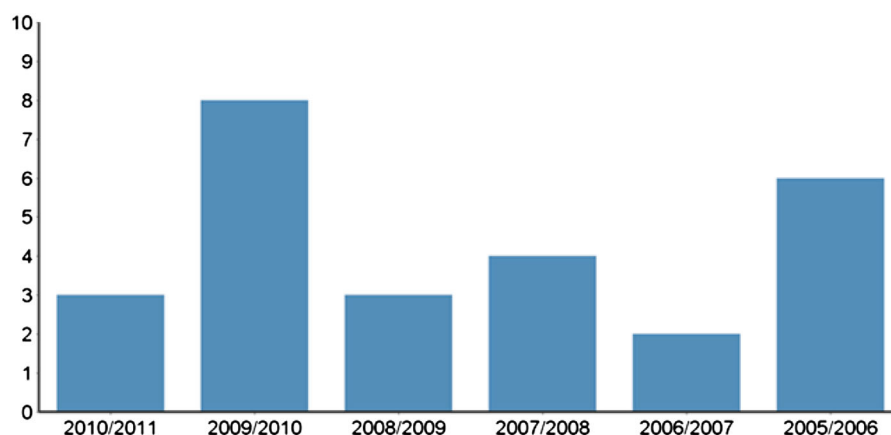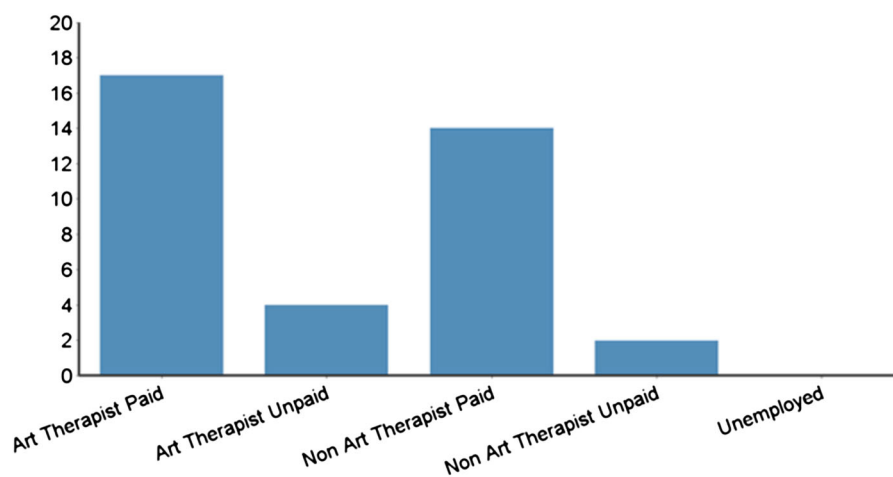

Figure 5. Year of enrolment.
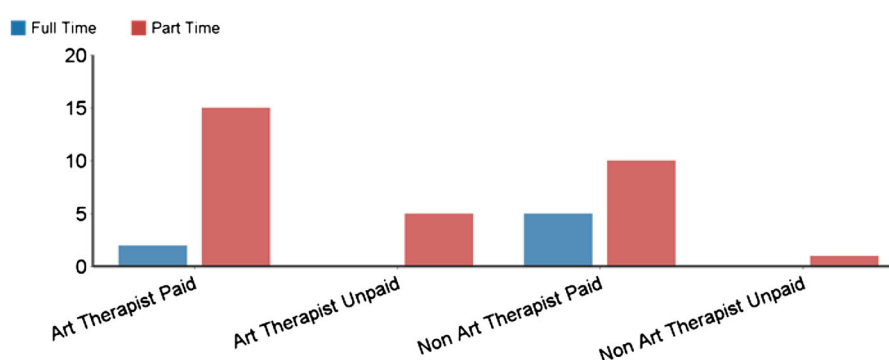
Figure 6. Employment breakdown.

Figure 7. Full-time/part-time student breakdown with paid/unpaid employment breakdown.

There were three key findings: the ATLG appeared to be more helpful than not across all the statements; the ATLG was as helpful for the non-art therapy jobs as the art therapy jobs; those who had taken the part-time mode of the programme seemed to derive much more benefit than those who had taken the full-time mode.

Overall, an average of 19/28 (*N* = 28) of the responses to all the statements were strongly agree or agree. An average of 4/28 disagreed that the ATLG was helpful; an average of 5/28 were undecided. However, 22/28 (80%) of part-time students agreed in comparison with 16/28 (58%) of full-time students, a 22% difference which gets larger on particular questions (Appendix C). There was very little difference in response between the different posts—14/20 (67%) of those in art therapy jobs and 10/15 (68%) of those in non-art therapy jobs agreed that the ATLG was helpful (Appendix D).

The statement that received the highest score was: 'My experience in the ATLG helps with understanding interactions between different groups of professionals at my workplace' (25/28 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing; 9/11 full-time students and 16/16 part-time students; 17/20 art therapy jobs and 14/15 non-art therapy jobs). Two other statements share the next highest score: 'My experience in the ATLG helped me to understand how wider political and

social issues impact on the organisation in which I work' (24/28 agreeing or strongly agreeing; 8/11 full-time and 15/16 part-time students; 16/20 art therapy jobs and 12/15 non-art therapy jobs), and 'My experience in the ATLG helped me to understand how organisational change impacts on team work' (23/28 agreeing or strongly agreeing; 9/11 full-time students and 13/16 part-time students; 17/20 art therapy jobs and 12/15 non-art therapy jobs).

The statements that resonated least with the respondents were: 'My experience in the ATLG helped me to be an active member of my workplace organisation' (8/28 disagree or strongly disagree; 5/11 full-time, 2/16 part-time, 1 answering all questions but not giving information on whether they had studied full or part-time; 6/20 art therapy jobs, 4/15 non-art therapy jobs); 'My experience in the ATLG helped me to be an active member within the staff team' (8/28 disagree or strongly disagree; 5/11 full-time, 2/16 part-time; 6/20 art therapy jobs, 4/15 non-art therapy jobs); 'My experience in the ATLG helped me to be active in asserting my clinical work in my staff team' (8/28 disagree or strongly disagree; 4/11 full-time, 3/16 part-time; 5/20 art therapy jobs, 5/15 non-art therapy jobs).

The lowest score in the strongly agree or agree answers was the statement: 'My experience in the ATLG helped me

to become more confident of my professional identity in my clinical work' (12/28; 4/11 full-time students, 8/16 part-time students; 9/20 art therapy jobs, 4/15 non-art therapy jobs).

The question about increased awareness of issues of equality and diversity achieved equally high scores for each of the three dimensions (organisation, team and clinical work), 20/28, though there was an interesting 31% difference here between full-time students and part-time students in the organisation and team work dimensions, with the part-time students answering much more positively (14/15 part-time students, 7/11 full-time students), and a 15% difference in the same direction in the clinical work category (13/15 part-time students, 8/11 full-time students). Similarly, it appears that the ATLG helping the awareness of issues of equality and diversity was more relevant to art therapy jobs (16/20) than to non-art therapy jobs (10/15), with an 18% difference for organisation, 13% for team work and 8% for clinical work.

We next looked at the total distribution of scores for the three dimensions, organisation, staff team and clinical work. The ATLG proved to be least useful for teaching directly about clinical work (in comparison to team work and organisational issues). Organisation agree scores—121; staff team agree scores—123; clinical work agree scores—102. (The difference between the organisation and staff team scores is negligible as full-time students answered fractionally higher for teams and part-time students fractionally higher for organisations.) The score for clinical work was at its lowest when it came to giving confidence about professional identity in clinical work—11/28. However, given that 15 out of the 20 jobs being considered were in the category about being active in art therapy, this result was not surprising. It was here that the difference between the impact of the ATLG on art therapy and non-art therapy work would be expected to be at its greatest. However, while both full-time and part-time students answered lower for clinical work, there was a surprising 30% difference in their responses (average full-time 5/11 (45%), average part-time 12/16 (75%)).

The art therapy job, non-art therapy job similarity in responses overall was mostly consistent (see Appendix B). This was particularly so for understanding how wider political and social issues impact on each of the three different dimensions we looked at (14/20 average for art therapy jobs, 11/15 average for non-art therapy jobs, a 3% difference). There was least agreement for answers to the question: My experience in the ATLG helps me to become more confident of my professional identity (12/20 (60%) for art therapy jobs and 6/15 (40%) for non-art therapy jobs, a 20% difference).

Nine respondents gave comments that will be discussed in relation to the other findings below.

Discussion

Response rate

The low response rate means we must be cautious about our findings, which are suggestive rather than conclusive. Informal feedback on the question as to why the response rate might have been low was that the invitation to complete the questionnaire was too impersonal as it was sent out by the research assistant and therefore did not make a connection between us as researchers and the past students. One of the demographic questions asked respondents if they were employed or unemployed in art therapy or non-art therapy work (see Figure 6). However, none of the respondents ticked the unemployed category. This may have been because the question posed an ambiguity between being unemployed yet providing art therapy or non-art therapy as 'unpaid work'. It is possible that unemployment among graduates played a part in the low response rate.

We thought it significant that the highest response rate was from two student cohorts, 2005/6 and 2009/10. In considering what was particular about these two cohorts we recalled that these were years in which students had been introduced to the fact that we were researching the ATLG. In 2007 (when the cohort of 2005/6 full-timers were graduating) we had sought students' permission to describe art work they had made in the ATLG in publications, and in 2009 we had introduced a camera and the taking of photographs into the ATLG for four sessions as part of an ongoing case study research project we are undertaking. This has made us think of the importance of involving the students more actively in research projects in their education, which might improve the response rate to future surveys and thus the validity of the findings.

Usefulness of the ATLG

The research suggests the continued relevance of psychodynamically based experiential groups in art therapy education. It indicates that the ATLG contributes to the MA Art Psychotherapy successfully meeting the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Proficiency (SOPS) required of graduates. For example, SOP 5 states that graduates should be aware of 'the impact of culture, equality and diversity on practice'; SOP 6, 'to be able to practice in a non discriminatory manner'; and SOP 9, to 'be able to work appropriately with others' (HCPC, 2013). That these SOPs are strongly met is suggested by our findings that the three statements which had the highest score were: 'My experience in the ATLG helps with understanding interactions between different groups of professionals at my workplace'; 'My experience in the ATLG helped me to understand how wider political and social issues impact on the organisation in which I

work'; and 'My experience in the ATLG helped me to understand how organisational change impacts on team work'.

The finding that the ATLG is equally helpful for those in non-art therapy jobs as those in art therapy jobs suggests that the ATLG has a particular role in meeting the reporting requirements of the independent Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The QAA monitors quality standards in UK higher education and requires universities to publish Key Information Sets (KIS) that allow students to see how their programme of study relates to future employment prospects (QAA, 2015). Similarly, HESA requires all universities to publish UK performance indicators (UKPI), which include information on graduate employment (HESA, 2015). The research shows that training in art therapy teaches transferable skills that are useful to diverse employers, maximising employment possibilities. This relevance at the level of policy is heartening for those graduates who seek different sorts of employment or jobs that are not actually called art therapy jobs as they seek to build portfolios of work experience in changing patterns of service provision and employment.

In our two previous papers on the ATLG (Jones & Skaife, 2009; Skaife & Jones, 2009) we described the values and practice of the ATLG as being in opposition to dominant educational practices and instrumental methods designed to fit an educational marketplace. The research suggests that the ATLG offered an alternative educational practice that at the same time provided graduates with an experience relevant to current employment. Further exploration of the contradictions between the values inherent in the ATLG and those of the educational marketplace could contribute to debates about UK higher education policy.

The ability to learn to sit with very uncomfortable feelings and to work with them, as Pat De Mare et al. (1991) posited as a feature of the large group, may be one of the key enabling features of the ATLG. This is borne out by one of the comments:

> 'The large group offered me a way of sitting with anxiety and "not knowing", which I apply to my work and team dynamics every day. However I felt quite overwhelmed by the large group and unable to find/ use my voice within it. I did not have the same difficulty within experiential, supervision groups. I did gain an ability to sit with, what is often termed by ex-students as "the Goldsmith silence". I gained a deeper level of containment/resilience and introspection from those experiences'.

Another of the respondents remarked that the ATLG gave her '[r]ecognition that an organisation can act like a fearful and wounded animal when under threat. Acting on trying to make the feelings go away takes place over thinking and people stop thinking'. Another respondent said, 'certainly the experience

aided my thinking about what happens in large groups and organisations'.

It seems that the learning outcomes we cite might not be so apparent to students during the time they are in the group, but the emotional experience is remembered. One student commented:

> I think the large group remains a largely emotional memory for me rather than a cognitive one—I can remember how it felt at points rather than it being something I consciously apply to my clinical work. It was useful from this perspective for allowing me to experience the power and importance of emotional learning and development that can be activated by group therapy/experience that would not occur within a one to one therapeutic encounter. This is particularly pertinent for my client group, adults with learning disabilities, who may not learn in a straightforward cognitive manner but where change and progression can be brought about through emotional learning/encounters.

Interestingly, the two categories that asked about performance as opposed to understanding achieved the lowest scores. One statement asked if graduates found that the ATLG had helped them become active within their staff teams and if it had helped them become confident of their professional identity. Of course the answers to the statement would depend as much on the current situation that they were in as on their learning in the ATLG. Whereas it would be possible to understand about the effect of social and political issues on the organisation in which you worked without being in a position to do anything about it, if it was very difficult to be an active member of your organisation, you may feel that the ATLG had not helped you with this. Similarly, becoming confident about professional identity is reliant on an enabling context; without this the ATLG might not have been felt to be effective in this regard. This has implications for our teaching, suggesting that we need to think about the gap between understanding, action and change and maintenance of professional identity in non-conducive working environments.

One respondent strongly disagreed with all the statements and said that she found the group 'nothing but a waste of time, nothing much happened and nothing was resolved, there was little creativity', and continued that '[t]he only thing that I might have got out of it was that if you put that many people together with no agenda nothing is gained. This is often the case in large organisations'. Opposing feelings about the large group were found in Lorentzen et al.'s (1998) and Stephenson and Burns (1997) research. The interdependence of those for and those against is of interest. Perhaps it is only if there is a voice that speaks of the frustration engendered by the lack of structure that the freedom for abstractions and creativity is released.

Difference between full-time students' and part-time students' responses

The difference between the full-time and the part-time students' responses was a very striking finding but nonetheless concurred with discussion in the literature that the large group becomes more beneficial the longer people participate in it, as mentioned above in the evaluations by Stephenson and Bums (1997) and Lorentzen et al. (1998). However, there is a particular difference in our ATLG and that is that the third years become conspicuously 'the seniors' in the group because of the longer time they have been in it. They have witnessed three starts to the year and so on. Also, their leaving might feel like a bigger occasion to them having been part of the training for three years. Towards the end of the year there is always quite a lot of focus on the third years because at this time, those who have never spoken or performed might do so, and many talk movingly about the meaning of the group to them. In contrast, the full-time second years can seem hidden and usually at least one of them will mention that no-one seems to have noticed that they are leaving too. This means that not only do they have less time in the ATLG, they also have a different experience of it. However, there are implications for how we address the second year full-time experience in the group as staff facilitators.

The part-time/full-time difference may also throw some light on the opposing feelings towards the large group expressed in the literature and in our survey. Perhaps the strong, polarised feelings are experienced in the ATLG early on in the individual's experience of it. At the start of the second year of the programme we give both part-time and full-time students a lecture in which we explain that the feelings engendered in the ATLG are expected and that it is the experience of these and their transformation through the activity of the group that leads to the learning that is relevant to working in institutions. Students are usually very surprised to find that they are not alone in experiencing these feelings and that they are acceptable and expected. This understanding perhaps helps them to think about their feelings in the ATLG and thus to communicate better. The part-timers get two more years to realise this, whereas the full-timers get only one year.

Equality and diversity

The most consistent set of responses came in the equality and diversity category, suggesting that the ATLG addresses this area strongly. This accords with De Mare et al.'s (1991) view that the immediate aimlessness of the large group enables an equality among voices. Perhaps, in addition, the ATLG's different modes of voice in speech, art, performance and so on

allow a space for hidden voices to be heard (Skaife, 2013).

The art therapy education literature emphasises the importance of consideration of issues of race and culture in art therapy education (Brooks, 1999; Lark, 2005; Linesch, 2005; Skaife, 2007, 2013; Ward, 1999; Westwood, 2010). It is interesting then to consider how the ATLG differs from those strategies described in the literature to address this important topic and the relevance of the survey findings to this. A key difference is in the thematic approaches described (Lark, 2005; Linesch, 2005) in its promotion of learning experientially rather than cognitively. It is interesting that Lark chose to work with the large group to explore race. Perhaps the large group addresses the political dimensions of race and culture, and the small group teaching method addresses the more personal experience.

Staff team

Of the three dimensions—organisation, staff team and clinical work—the staff team dimension received the highest agree and strongly agree scores (121—organisation; 123—staff team; 106—clinical work), and there were less staff disagree scores than organisation disagree scores (21—organisation; 17—staff team; 26—clinical work). For some questions in particular, the staff team comes out quite high in relation to other categories, for example four more people thought the ATLG had helped them understand the impact of change on the staff team than they did on the organisation or on clinical work (20—organisation; 24—staff team; 20—clinical work) and three fewer people disagreed (3—organisation; 6—staff team; 3—clinical work). This made us think about the fact that it is in the ATLG that the students actually experience a staff team at work together. The team are the joint facilitators of the group. This might make them more conscious of the functioning of an operating team and the sort of dynamics that are held within it. They also witness the effect of wider social and political issues, and change that has resulted from these, on the staff team. As one respondent said: 'The large group was also useful for experiencing the tutors as separate individuals rather than a homogenous staff team as distinct personalities and viewpoints were apparent in their responses to the large group and the themes that arose'. It seems that in experiencing the staff as individuals, there is less likelihood for idealisation of their teaching, enabling students to value their own thinking more.

Limitations

The survey clearly has its limitations, not least the small numbers of respondents and the difference between the way the two statements about being active and

about professional identity, and the rest of the statements, were asked.

In a further survey, to increase the response rate we might change the way in which we sent the questionnaire, making more of a connection between us who know the past graduates as tutors, and us as researchers. When teaching about experiential education we are now emphasising the importance of research for development of our teaching methods. The university is also now allowing graduates to keep their university email addresses for life and this will enable us to reach more graduates. We also might reconsider the final two statement categories of the questionnaire to make the answers less reliant on the circumstances of employment.

One could ask why we separated out the ATLG from the rest of the programme in the survey given that the ATLG is an integral part of the MA and enmeshed with all the other groups in it. How can we know that respondents were not answering questions about the whole programme rather than the ATLG alone, and might we have got different responses if the different aspects of the training had been separated out as they were in the Stephenson and Bums (1997) and Lorentzen et al. (1998) surveys? We did not want to send out a survey that asked questions about all the different aspects of the MA, as we were not concerned with finding a comparison. However, in separating out the ATLG from the other groups it could appear that we think it can stand alone, which would not be true. It is possible that some of the answers people gave might have been to the programme as a whole; however, the fact that responses to statements asking about the impact on clinical work were lower than for team and organisation suggests that respondents were considering their experience of the ATLG in its own right.

Conclusion

The intention of the survey in the first instance was to improve teaching through learning from feedback and to communicate our findings to other professions in health and social care. Although the findings are suggestive rather than conclusive due to the low number of responses, there is still something to be learnt from them. The fact that the ATLG teaches transferable skills related to employability suggests that it might have a role in other areas of education in the university. If the ATLG increases graduates' awareness of the way the wider social and political agendas affect social interactions in organisations and staff teams, it might have applicability in other areas. The findings have raised issues that need further investigation with different methodology to ascertain how the learning in the ATLG actually happens, why some aspects are more relevant than others to the workplace and how facilitation of it can be improved. These findings, though, could be based on more robust evidence and given further validation through repeating the survey (with moderations) and obtaining a greater response rate in a few years' time.

De Mare et al. (1991) hoped that in providing a space in which each should have a voice, the large group would have a role in the 'humanisation of society'. Our research suggests that the ATLG and large groups may have a very particular role to play in relation to the contemporary workplace.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A

The Statements

These were the 18 statements. Each began with:

My experience in the ATLG has helped me:
To understand how wider political and social issues impact on the organisation in which I work.
To understand how wider political and social issues impact on team work.
To understand how wider political and social issues impact on my clinical work.
To understand how government and social policy causes change in the organisation in which I work.
To understand how organisational change impacts on team work.
To understand how organisational change impacts on my clinical work.
To understand the interactions between different groups of professionals at my workplace.
To understand the interactions between members of my staff team.
To understand the interactions between myself and my clients in my clinical work.
To be aware of issues of equality and diversity in the organisation in which I work.
To be aware of issues of equality and diversity in my staff team.
To be aware of issues of equality and diversity within my clinical work.
To become more confident of my professional identity within my workplace organisation.
To become more confident of my professional identity in relation to my team.
To become more confident of my professional identity in my clinical work.
To be an active member of my workplace organisation.
To be an active member within the staff team.
To be active in asserting my clinical work as part of my staff team.

Appendix B

Overall scores with Strongly Agree (SA) and Agree (A) amalgamated and Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) amalgamated. U is undecided.

	SA A	D SD	U
Understanding how wider social and political issues impact on:			
Organisation	24	1	3
Staff team	23	1	4
Clinical work	20	2	5
Understanding of how government and social policy causes change to:			
Organisation	20	5	3
Staff team	24	2	2
Clinical work	20	2	5
Understanding of interactions between people in:			
Organisation	25	1	2
Staff team	21	2	5
Clinical work	15	7	5
To be aware of issues of equality and diversity in:			
Organisation	21	1	6
Staff team	21	1	6
Clinical work	21	1	5
To become more confident of my professional identity in:			
Organisation	16	5	7
Staff team	18	3	7
Clinical work	12	6	9
To be an active member of:			
Organisation	15	8	5
Staff Team	16	8	4
Clinical work	14	8	5

Appendix C

Strongly agree and agree according to full-time and part-time modes of taking the programme.

Wider Social and Political	Full-Time Students (%)	Part-Time Students (%)	Percentage Difference (%)
Organisation	72	94	22
Team work	72	87	15
Clinical work	54	93	39
Change			
Organisation	72	69	-3
Team work	82	81	-1
Clinical work	54	93	39
Interactions			
Organisation	81	100	19
Team work	54	87	33
Clinical work	36	75	39
Professional Identity			
Organisation	54	62	8
Team work	64	69	5
Clinical work	36	53	17
Equality and Diversity			
Organisation	63	94	31
Team work	63	94	31
Clinical work	72	87	15
Active			
Organisation	27	75	48
Team work	45	69	24
Clinical work	45	53	8
Total	58 average	80 average	

Appendix D

Art therapist work and non-art therapist work strongly agrees and agrees

Wider Social and Political	ArtTherapist Jobs (%)	Non-Art Therapy Jobs (%)	Percentage Difference (%)
Organisation	80	80	0
Team work	70	73	-3
Clinical work	55	57	-2
Change			
Organisation	75	60	15
Team work	85	80	5
Clinical work	70	78	-8
Interactions			
Organisation	85	93	-8
Team work	70	73	-3
Clinical work	55	57	-2
Professional Identity			
Organisation	65	47	18
Team work	70	54	16
Clinical work	40	28	12
Equality and Diversity			
Organisation	85	67	18
Team work	80	67	13
Clinical work	75	67	8
Active			
Organisation	55	60	5
Team work	55	60	5
Clinical work	60	38	22
Total	68.3 average	68.8 average	