

Creating Connections: A Pilot Qualitative Exploration of Graduate Student Experiences with an Arts-based Program

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Background

- Experiences of social isolation among graduate students is a pervasive problem within academic settings (Ali & Kohun, 2007).
- Social isolation can be understood as a lack of meaningful connections, or feelings of loneliness, which can lead to decreased overall well-being (Leal Filho et al., 2021).
- Graduate students who do not have close social support, are non-native English speakers, and who are in caregiving roles are at an especially high risk (Ray et al., 2019).
- Protective factors to social isolation include engaging in student-led organizations and communities (Ray et al., 2019)
- Specifically participating in arts-based groups can provide opportunities to build social connections and develop a sense of community (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Maidment et al., 2014)
- Little research has gone into examining arts-based initiatives offered at the graduate student level (Burge et al., 2016).

Our Program

Art and Play is a pilot interdisciplinary arts-based program for graduate students at the University of Ottawa that began November 2021

Aim: Supporting and enhancing the graduate student experience through emphasizing the transformative power of art and humanities across disciplines.

Over 200 graduate students have attended the Art and Play events since the program's start

- Graduate students have participated from a wide range of faculties and programs including:
 - Social Sciences
 - Health Sciences
 - Science
 - Mathematics
 - Engineering
 - Arts
 - Business
- Art and Play has partnered with other student-led groups (e.g., OPRIG) on campus to achieve common goals.

The ART

Intentional Art Activities

- Mindful watercolours
- Community collage
- Citations in calligraphy
- Acrylic painting "en plein-air"
- Mandalas and meditation
- Striking stencils
- Botanical art

Social Change Themes

- Food sovereignty on campus
- Uplifting female artists
- Black History Month and anti-racism
- Supporting Ukrainian Refugees
- Student mental-health



The PLAY

- All materials are provided free of charge.
- Refreshments, art material raffles and GSAED merchandise are offered periodically.
- The workshop is held in the graduate student house which is a central, accessible, student-run space.
- No art experience is necessary to join the workshops.
- The emphasis is on the process not the product
- Students can choose to use the materials for the proposed activity or in any way they desire, or not at all if they prefer just to connect with peers.

Next Step: A Qualitative Exploration of Student Experiences

Sample: 15 graduate students who have participated in Art and Play

Inclusion Criteria:

- Currently or previously enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Ottawa
- Has participated in at least 1 of the events hosted by "Art and Play" between 2021-2023
- Are English or French speaking

Data Collection:

Semi-structured virtual interviews approximately 60 minutes in length. Participants will also be invited to share photos of their artwork

Interview Sample Guide

Section 1: Demographics (age, gender, program of study, year of study, domestic or international student)

Section 2: Art engagement and "Art and Play"

- Do you have any previous experience with visual arts?
- Which "Art and Play" events have you attended?
- What motivated you to participate in "Art and Play" events?
- What are the aspects of "Art and Play" that you like the most?
- What are the aspects of "Art and Play" that you like the least?
- Did your participation in "Art and Play" encourage you to engage in art activities beyond the group?

Section 3: "Art and Play" and the graduate student experience

- Prior to participating in "Art and Play" events; had you participated in other extracurricular activities?
- Do you feel a part of the graduate student community?
- Have you found many opportunities for graduate students to engage in non-academic activities?
- Do you feel you have a good sense of balance between engaging in academic and non-academic activities?
- Has participation in "Art and Play" allowed you to develop new skills?
- Has participating in "Art and Play" allowed you to access any helpful resources?
- "Art and Play" events often focus on themes related to social change.
 - Do you enjoy this aspect of the group?
 - Were you knowledgeable about these topics prior to participating?
 - Did you develop any new learnings on these topics?
 - Are there any topics you feel should be covered?

Section 4: Discussion of Artwork (Optional)

- Can you describe your artwork?
- How was your overall experience and process completing this specific piece?
- How did you find working with the specific materials required for this piece?
- Are there any specific themes related to your piece that stand out?
- Did anything surprise you about your artwork (either during the process or of the product itself)?

Data Analysis:

Using interpretive description (Thorne, 2016) the data will be organized and highlighted for preliminary themes, then we will refine the themes to uncover patterns and differences. We will then further our exploration of the themes to gain a broader interpretation of the meaning of the experiences presented by the participants.

If you would like to know more about how our study progresses, contact us and we will share with you future publications detailing our findings.

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