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## Reflecting on Professional Identity Through Art: A Case Example

Nicole Kras

### Capsule Statement

Undergraduate human services programs seek ways to support students as they develop their professional identities. Few, if any studies, have considered the benefits of engaging human services students in art directives as a method for them to reflect on their professional identities. The following is a case example on how an art directive was incorporated in an undergraduate fieldwork course at an urban community college.

### Introduction

Designing curriculum that provides students opportunities to reflect on professional identity is an essential component of undergraduate human services programs (Council for Standards in Human Services Education, 2020). Although there is currently a lack of research describing how human services professionals develop their professional identity, some researchers have suggested that human services education programs should focus on developing both the foundational traits and interpersonal skills of students (Sparkman-Key et al., 2018).

Supporting students as they develop their professional identities is often a complex task, but one that is a crucial component of human services programs (Sparkman-Key et al., 2018). Traditionally, programmatic support for developing professional identity is done through experiences such as journaling, class projects, portfolios, agency supervision, reflective assignments, and professional guest speakers. Few, if any, studies have considered the benefits of engaging students in art directives as a method to foster reflection on professional identity.

Art making has been used to support professional identity development in fields such as social work and medicine (Bartkeviciene, 2014; Joseph et al., 2017; Mulder & Dull, 2014). For example, photovoice has been used with graduate social work education students to enhance self-awareness (Mulder & Dull, 2014) and self-portraits to enhance personal and professional self-awareness in undergraduate social work students (Bartkeviciene, 2014). Both of these art-based examples provided students opportunities for self-reflection. Engaging in art directives might also be a beneficial way for human services students to reflect on their own professional identities. The following is a description of how an art directive focusing on professional identity was presented in an undergraduate human services fieldwork course.

### Student Demographics

Students were seven undergraduate human services male ( $n=3$ ) and female ( $n=4$ ) students enrolled in a fieldwork seminar course at a public urban community college located in New York City. Participants were representative of the college's overall population, which is primarily traditional-aged college students (ages 18–22), with Hispanic and Black/African American ethnic backgrounds, from low-income households, who are residents of the five boroughs of New York City. At the point of this experience, all students had almost completed their 250 required fieldwork hours.

### Workshop

An art therapist from a non-profit art therapy organization in New York City led an art therapy workshop for human services students enrolled in an undergraduate fieldwork course.

The funds for the 90-minute workshop were allocated from a student success grant. The art therapist began the workshop by describing what the field of art therapy is, the benefits, the populations served, and then presented a case study of his work with a client. He began a class discussion about what professional identity is and why it is important. Students shared examples from their fieldwork experiences that supported the development of their professional identity. They also shared challenges that they faced ending their internships and fears about taking the next step in their careers.

The art therapist then introduced the students to the art directive. He posed two questions for students to think about: *Who do you want to be in the workplace?* and *What professional qualities do you want to possess?* He told students that they would use the provided art materials to create a piece of art that represented their professional identity. The art materials included pencils, paper, markers, glue, scissors, and magazine clippings sorted into categories such as people, places, and words. Students had 45 minutes to complete their artwork. Instrumental music was played in the background while the students created their art. After the 45 minutes ended, the art therapist led a discussion about the art process and their final art pieces. Five students wanted to share with the class what they created.

At the end of the class, students were asked to complete an anonymous workshop feedback form created by the course instructor. This form consisted of four open-ended prompts:

1. Describe what this experience was like for you.
2. What have you discovered about yourself after completing this art directive?
3. What have you discovered about yourself as a human services professional after completing this art directive?
4. Please include any additional information you would like to share.

All students completed the workshop feedback form. IRB approval was granted for collecting student feedback.

### **Student Feedback**

Based on the collected student feedback, all students ( $N = 7$ ) indicated that they enjoyed the experience. Some students ( $n = 3$ ) described the experience as “fun,” while others ( $n = 2$ ) described it as “relaxing.” Responses showed that the art directive provided students a way to reflect on their professional identity. When reflecting on the completed art piece, one student stated, “It describes what I strive for in the workplace and also that I need to be myself in the process.” Another student described her professional identity as a mask that “can’t show her personal stuff.” Another student who used primarily words in his collage—such as “detail-oriented,” “maturity,” “honor,” and “equity”—shared that these are the qualities he wants his clients to see in him. Two students noted that it was difficult to know what to do after they were given the art directive, but that they eventually figured out what to create.

### **Discussion**

Supporting human services students as they develop their professional identities can be a challenging task for undergraduate faculty. Reflection on professional identity is something that is addressed throughout the fieldwork experience. Professional identity is addressed through reflective journaling assignments, fieldwork supervisor-student workshops run by the program fieldwork coordinator, supervisory sessions, in-class discussions, role-playing exercises, written assignments, and guest speakers. Introducing art directives into the human services curriculum offers an additional method for students to reflect on their professional identity. Art can serve as

a non-verbal way to express the professional identity development process while also serving as a catalyst for verbal and written reflection. This form of reflection might not be preferred by all students, but it does provide those students who struggle communicating verbally or in writing another way to express themselves.

This case example only includes feedback from a small number of students. Further research into the benefits of this type of classroom experience should be explored with a larger population of students. Additionally, this art directive was led by a registered and board-certified art therapist. The need for outside guidance in leading art directives should be noted for replication. This initial integration shows promising results, but further investigation is necessary.

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