

I am Brave! I am an Artist!

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Purpose:

This activity is a capstone activity for Human Services/Counselor Education students who have been studying Self Esteem.

The concepts of self esteem that have been learned throughout the semester such as self image and self esteem, the inner critic, handling criticism, the importance of reframing mistakes and negative thought patterns, characterological and situational low self esteem, negative self talk and goal setting all come to life in this interactive, lively, abstract art activity. As students embark on this hands-on, abstract art activity with little direction, students will invariably begin criticizing their work, making statements of personal criticism and insults, ridiculing and berating themselves and wanting to give up. These smart students end up doing all of the destructive behaviors that they have just spent the semester learning to avoid! What fun it is as the instructor to simply point out these behaviors and then step back and watch the students self correct and shift their criticisms to encouragement. Mistakes become opportunities. Students let go of their hesitation and demonstrate bravery as they try something new.

Materials Needed:

Inexpensive bottles of acrylic paint, old credit cards, toothbrushes and sponge dabbers (no paint brushes), paper towels, many sheets of watercolor paper, buckets of water, and newspaper/plastic to cover desk surfaces, old cafeteria trays or other palettes for paint, aprons or old, oversized shirts, music, and a camera (to document the fun)

Procedures:

Prior to class, encourage student to wear old clothes/paint clothes. Encourage attendance by calling this a "Capstone Group Experience" and offer a grade. I've learned that some students will conveniently be absent on this day when they hear the word "paint". Arrive early and spread newspaper or plastic or both over the surfaces of tables. If you have only individual desks, group them together to make a table. Set out buckets of water, paints, paint palettes, credit cards, toothbrushes and sponge brushes.

Once class begins, summarize the concepts that the student have learned in the class such as believing in yourself, the power of positive thinking, reframing mistakes, etc. with group participation and praise for mastering the content of the course. Introduce the activity as a celebration of all that we have learned.

For instructions, tell the students about abstract art. Perhaps show them some photographs or real art canvases that demonstrate the colors and shapes and flow of abstract art. Explain that there are no paintbrushes available. The students are allowed to use their fingers, the toothbrushes, the credit cards or the sponges to put paint on their papers. Explain that they are not allowed to paint any sort of recognizable picture... no trees or sail boats or horses, etc. Have many blank pieces of watercolor paper available. Demonstrate how to spread paint with the tools available and briefly explain color theory (mixing lots of colors together makes mud). Ask students to write their names on the back of the paper prior to painting.

As the instructor, make encouraging gestures and offer guidance at first. Some students will be hesitant at first. You may pick up some paint with your fingers and smear paint on their papers to demonstrate that it's really ok to touch the paint and to just put color on the paper. You can also draw similarities to life in that sometimes, other people come along and mess up what you are working on, etc.

Once students get started, you will hear them criticize themselves. They will say things like "I can't do this" and "this looks stupid" and "her's is better than mine" and "I'm not an artist". After some time has passed, you may offer some instruction and intervention. As the instructor and group facilitator, point out the words they are using and connect their own words to the content of the course. Influence their behaviors by using Socratic Questioning techniques and reminders of course content. Awareness is almost instant and the students will laugh at themselves and each other as they realize that their own inner critics are preventing them from enjoying themselves and letting go.

Instruct them to carry on with new insights into their own ability and bravery. You will likely hear students talking back to themselves in a new way. For example, students may say "this is fun" and "I don't like the way this looks. I'll add some pink" and "I'm an artist" and "look at me, I'm doing it!".

Have a designated drying area. Have students place completed paintings on the newspaper to dry. Students will end up painting many abstract paintings.

You might have a large canvas if time allows and let the students all work together to make one large canvas. This is particularly fun because there will be some students who are upset that others put paint in the "wrong place" or "messed it up", while there will be others who will smear paint intentionally just to remind the group to "let it go".

Take pictures (with permission) throughout this exercise. I take informal action shots as well as individual posed photographs with the students' favorite works.

As class comes to a close, ask everyone to help clean up, rinse out paint buckets and tools and generally help you pack supplies. Stand around the artwork drying area and admire the artwork while processing the many lessons learned and new awarenesses. (importance of being mindful and present, being brave, reframing mistakes, being gentle with yourself, etc.)

Then, tell students farewell. They will want to take the paintings with them. Tell the students that this is part of the letting go process. Watch the students' faces. You will see that they are attached to their work and don't want to leave the work in the classroom. Some may even take photographs of their work so they can remember their work.

You will take the paintings once they are dry back to your office and press them with heavy books. The paint will cause the papers to crinkle and warp. As students sit for their final exam, I offer gratitude for allowing me to watch them learn and grow and remind them that they are all artists.....and give them their paintings.

It's an uplifting way to end the semester. Students have told me that they have gotten their paintings framed as a reminder that they can "do anything" and that there are "no mistakes". Students have told me that they were inspired to set up their own art studio in their home and they now paint when they are stressed. Some have used this technique with their own children to help them overcome perfectionism and enjoy the process rather than focusing on outcomes.

Process Questions and Follow-Up:

Process questions and follow up information are integrated into the procedures description.

I send photos via email to the students for a keepsake along with a compliment or two. These photos are also used on our program's social media page to showcase the talented, brave students we have.

Theoretical Rationale and/or Research Base:

This activity is an integration of Adlerian Psychology and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques as well as art therapy. Matthew McKay's book on Self Esteem and Flora Bowley's artwork were inspirations for this activity. Also included are the principles of mindfulness from Jon Kabat-Zinn's work. All of these were integrated into the course over the semester and ultimately are connected to the learning outcomes of the course.

Limitations:

Space can be limiting, but with a little planning, this is not an issue. Funding for paint supplies may be limited, however, you may collect coupons to stores like Michaels and Jo-Ann Fabric stores which can cut cost in half. Also, wholesale educator catalogs sell art supplies in bulk for a reasonable price.

Practice Settings:

Counselor Education and Supervision

Mental Health Agency/Private Practice Counseling (can be altered slightly for individual lessons)

School Counseling