

# Online vs. in Vivo Workshops in a Master's Degree Course in Mental Health Nursing: Students' Views and Opinions

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**Abstract**— Workshops tend to be a vivid and productive way as an in vivo teaching method. Due to the pandemic COVID-19 university courses were conducted through the Internet.

**Method:** Due to the Pandemic restrictions, it was tried for the first time to integrate online art therapy workshops in a core course named "Special Themes of Mental Health Nursing" in an MSc Program in Mental Health. The course lasts 3 hours per week for 11 weeks in a single semester. The course has a main instructor, a professor of psychiatric nursing experience in art therapy workshops, and visiting art therapists. All art therapists were given a certain topic to cover. Students were encouraged to keep a personal notebook that was evaluated at the end of the semester and was submitted as a part of the examination process of the course. An interview of 20 minutes was conducted with each student at the end of the course by an independent investigator (an assistant professor).

**Participants:** The students (sample) of the program were: nurses, psychologists, and social workers.

**Results:** All students who participated in the course found that the learning process was vivid, encouraging participation, and self-motivation and there were no main differences from in vivo learning concerning learning outcomes. The students identified their personal needs, and they felt a personal connection with the learning experience. The personalized learning resulted in students discovering their strengths and weaknesses and developing skills like critical thinking. Additionally, they all reported that with online they have less communication between them, they are losing important information concerning the forming of a team, and in the end, they prefer face-to-face teaching.

**Conclusion:** All students admitted that the workshops were the optimal way for them to comprehend the courses' content, their capability to become therapists, as well as their obstacles and weaknesses while working with patients in mental health but they consider online teaching a necessity only because of the Pandemic restrictions.

**Keywords:** art therapy, COVID-19, students, university, workshops.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The WHO declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020, has provoked the closure of universities, and the disruption to medical and nursing education. This closure has affected all enrolled students and academic staff. Universities needed to adapt to the new situation. Teaching has integrated online platforms and digital learning to meet the educational needs of the students [1,2].

Workshops tend to be a vivid and productive way as an in vivo teaching method. The main objective of the workshop is to improve the thinking or psychomotor skills of the participants. Their goals are to develop the critical thinking of the students and improve the learners' understanding skills through role-playing activities. They also develop individual personalities and build teams within the academic environment. It has proven also to be effective as a learning activity. Students learn faster in a more productive way [3].

The workshops combine self-directed learning where the individual or the team determines how progress will be assessed through a sequence of activities. Art therapy has

proven to be an effective tool in psychotherapeutic interventions for patients. Research has shown that art activities can be an essential part of nursing care and can result in positive treatment outcomes [4,5,6].

Several research also indicated that art therapy techniques can be integrated into mental health education programs in universities. Art therapy allows the expression in a symbolic manner that facilitates the extraction of authentic information with a sense of safety. They facilitate self-expression, social interaction, and communication [6,7].

Due to the pandemic COVID-19 university courses were conducted online through the Internet. Universities were obliged to change from face-to-face courses to internet-based teaching using platforms and digital data [8,9].

E-learning has become a necessity but couldn't be compared with traditional face-to-face teaching in terms of planning and development based on experience. Online teaching must face several barriers [10].

On the other hand, there didn't exist an evaluation test to determine the effectiveness of the new teaching methods. The main indicator of the quality of the e[learning teaching is students' perceptions [11,12].

The objective of this work was to explore the educational effectiveness of online art therapy workshops in comparison with face-to-face teaching methods. Students' views and opinions were investigated as a tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the method.

## II. METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

Online art therapy workshops were integrated into a core course, "Special Themes of Mental Health Nursing" in an MSc Program in Mental Health. The course lasts 3 hours per week for 11 weeks in a single semester. Art therapy workshops consisted of "art therapy", "drama therapy", "play therapy", and "music therapy". Each art therapy workshop consisted of the actual workshop, a mini-lesson, and a debrief. In the first 2 hours, students participate in a workshop on art therapy without knowing the main theme. At the second stage – 30 minutes - the theme is revealed and connections to clinical reality are made by the two instructors. At the debrief, there is a 15-minute presentation of the art therapy used and clinical applications of the method and at the last 15 minutes, students are encouraged to ask questions. The main themes of the workshops were therapeutic relationships, self-perception, the role of past experiences, therapeutic roles, and therapeutic communication.

Because of the online nature of the course, students were working independently from their own house and a shared screen was helping the interaction. The course has a main instructor, a professor of psychiatric nursing experienced in art therapy workshops and visiting art therapists. All art therapists were given a certain topic to cover. Students were encouraged to keep a notebook with their personal experience during the art process that was evaluated at the end of the semester and submitted as a part of the examination of the course. Qualitative research was conducted with the participation of the 14 students. Each student was interviewed at the end of the course by an independent investigator (an assistant professor) for 20 minutes.

Students were encouraged to respond to two main themes:

1. Their views and opinions of art therapy workshops in a master's degree course
2. Their perception of online teaching compared to face-to-face teaching.
3. Their opinions on the benefits and the barriers of online teaching

Notebooks were analyzed through content analysis to categorize the different themes that emerged by the students. All students have given their permission to analyze the notebooks for research purposes.

## III. PARTICIPANTS

The sample consisted of 14 students in the 2-year master's degree program of Mental Health at the School of Health Sciences, Faculty of Nursing. The students of the program were: nurses, psychologists, and social workers.

## IV. RESULTS

### Basic Demographic characteristics

We interviewed 14 students participating in the online course "Special Themes of Mental Health Nursing" using art therapy workshops.

The sample included 12 (87.5%) females and 2 (12.5%) males. The mean age was 25.87 (5.74) years. All students were single. From the total of the sample 7 students were certified nurses, 5 students were psychologists, and 2 students were sociologists. All students were working in various health sectors.

All students participated in a 20-minute interview and were given a notebook with their thoughts and feelings about the course.

### Interview results

#### A. Views and opinions of art therapy workshops in a master's degree course

The students have reported positive results.

- Understand the meaning of therapy effectively and easily.
- Discover their role and the roles of the patient and the family.
- Understand what the meaning of a therapeutic relationship is.
- Practice active listening.
- Realize the communication patterns, verbal, and non-verbal communication.
- Understand the defense mechanisms.
- Feeling members of a team and how a therapeutic team is formed.
- Realize their obstacles and preferences.
- Feeling protected by the method and the instructor to reveal and express themselves.

Students have noticed some negative elements:

- All students felt that they needed more explanations about "what happened." They have said that the course must have a duration of at least 30 minutes more.
- Two students reported that some scenarios were difficult for them because they are not used to express themselves to others.
- The self-revealing and self-exposure were strange for one of them and made her realize that she must think about her therapeutic role in the future.

#### B. Online vs face to face teaching

The students reported the positive and negative effects of the online art therapy courses.

Positive effects

1. Feeling a member of the university "family" even from home
2. It allowed them to learn in an amusing and interactive way

3. It was a form of social interaction during a very lonely period like the pandemic.
4. The main teaching goals were achieved.
5. They have acquired the main knowledge easily.
6. They felt close to the professor and free to express ideas and feelings.

Negative effects

1. Worried that they have lost important experience due to the online nature of the course.
2. Concerned that they have missed important information, especially about the formation of teamwork.
3. They perceived less communication with other students.
4. They have lost part of the “movement” of the art therapy workshops.
5. Dance therapy was not possible to be implemented.
6. Drama therapy was mainly storytelling and a narrative scenario.
7. At music therapy they didn’t have the opportunity to play different instruments only listening to music.

The main themes identified by students’ notebooks were:

A. The use of Alternative therapies for mental health problems

Student 3: “The workshops were the best way to get in touch with alternative therapies that work supportively for patients with mental health problems and to understand the therapeutic concepts”.

B. Experience – Feelings – Personal story and therapeutic relationship and client evaluation

Student 5: “The experience we underwent - listening to two pieces of music - had a completely different meaning for each of us. The emotions that emerged and the reactions that arose made sense of each person’s personal story.”

C. Self-expression of the therapist

Student 1: “Dramatherapy touched me. The dramatic play, role-playing, and role-playing helped us to express ourselves with the charismatic presence of the therapist who motivated us to free ourselves. I wish we could live this experience face-to-face.”

D. Team building – Therapeutic relationship.

Student 11: “We were asked to comment on other students’ work. We all actively participated. There was no shortage of excitement, but the teacher brought us back into a context where we all felt safe.”

E. Self-motivation for therapy

Student 12: “The material that can emerge through play therapy is inconceivable. Feelings, experiences, and experiences that shape us. We learned a lot in this course but most importantly we need to look at ourselves before we become therapists.”

**V. DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to observe and analyze the effectiveness of online art therapy workshops in a master’s degree-level course called “Special Themes of mental health nursing”. Given the fact that in recent years the attention is mainly on how to improve students’ learning ability and the implementation of the knowledge in the clinical field, the effort was to determine if online courses can contribute to the learning process.

On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected most of the students facing the changes as negative. The majority also participated in digital courses. Because of the restrictions students described some barriers such as the lack of intimacy and active interaction with the other students. All students reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their job, their everyday life, and mainly their interests in things. They noted that it has also affected their career plans and future interests. Loneliness and social disclosure were the main problems [13,14,15].

The main differences in the online nature of the course were that students had to work independently. It was also very difficult to integrate dance therapy and active music therapy workshops into the curriculum. Students expressed opinions about art therapy, drama therapy, play therapy, and passive listening to music workshops. Students reported that online courses achieved the learning goals and obtained acceptable knowledge [2,16].

Qualitative analysis of students’ notebooks has shown that workshops are the ultimate way to understand the concept easily and in-depth and develop thinking skills and learning abilities. All students who participated in the courses found that the learning process was vivid, encouraging participation, and self-motivation and they believed that there were no main differences from in vivo learning concerning the main teaching goals. A student has noticed that “I had profited from it and surely had enjoyed it a lot!”.

The students identified their personal needs, and they felt a personal connection with the learning experience. A student noted that “this process had pushed me to look more critically at everything, to identify possible alternative points of view, and to gain more confidence”.

All the students recommended that art therapy workshops should be used for future groups, but they suggest keeping the in vivo way of teaching in the classroom. This approach even in an online form enhances students’ involvement and identification with the profession of the therapist. The personalized learning resulted in students discovering their strengths and weaknesses and developing skills like critical thinking. Previous research has shown that communication skills learned in classrooms do not easily transfer to clinical practice because of various elements like the hierarchy and the department’s culture. Art therapy workshops seem to give the students the confidence to try new skills at work with more confidence [16,17].



All students admitted that the workshops were the optimal way for them to comprehend the courses' content, their capability to become therapists, as well as their obstacles and weaknesses while working with patients in mental health. They noted that online workshops had the main advantage of accessing the course from any location even from work in some cases [18].

They have also reported that online workshops were important for them in a time when anxiety, fear, and loneliness were the main issues of the students because of the pandemic. They were expecting the day of the course impatiently and helped not to suspend their studies. A student said, "It was the only thing I was excited about those days. With this online workshop, I was forgetting all the bad stuff and I was transferred to another world both educational and amusing" [2].

The main importance was that students found the course enjoyable even in an online form in contrast to other studies that had evaluated online teaching of medical students. It seems that art therapy workshops contribute to an overall positive experience despite the restrictions [19]. They also reported that social interaction was very important for them and online courses during the pandemic offered a sense of teamwork in a period of great loneliness [20].

Students reported good satisfaction with online teaching, but they clearly stated that they prefer face-to-face teaching. As previous study has shown most students reported better satisfaction with face-to-face teaching without rejecting online in periods of emergency like the pandemic [21]. Art therapies as a therapeutic intervention or in an educational field had to be applied on an online basis because of the pandemic. Even though creative arts need the "in vivo" presence of both the therapist and the client or student, previous study has shown that may offer a new possibility in the education system in times of emergency [22].

Students reported also barriers concerning online teaching. Less communication, internet connection, and family distraction were the main. In Greece, like in many other countries, there appeared a lot of problems with internet connections during the pandemic and as a result, any disruption during the workshop was noted as "extremely annoying" by the students [15,19]. Less interaction between colleagues and less communication was noted by all students. Those factors seem to play an important role in achieving the learning outcomes [13]. Even though research supports no significant differences in academic performance in various courses in medical and nursing schools during the pandemic, students' views have revealed that face-to-face teaching cannot be replaced by online teaching concerning art therapy workshops. All the respondents admitted that they prefer face-to-face teaching and reported online education as "non-interesting" [21].

## VI. LIMITATIONS

Courses with workshops need at least 3 hours to be effective and are suitable for small groups of students, a maximum of 16 students. Art therapy lessons acquire the presence of two instructors-therapists to keep the balance between learning and expressing personal thoughts and feelings. Each instructor plays a significant role in maintaining the equilibrium and creating a safe nontherapeutic environment.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Experience from previous years with in vivo workshops has shown that working with smaller groups or as a whole group was important for the formation of the team, the development of social skills, and the feeling of security of anonymity at the final group presentations. The students have said that online workshops were effective and interesting but in fact, they were less vivid and had no team building and communication compared to in vivo courses in the classroom. Even though the results have shown that workshops in mental health can contribute equally to the learning experience concerning educational goals and play an important role in the feeling of continuance in universities, the online workshop must be the ultimate solution in special cases like the one of the pandemics and not a stable practice at the MSc program of Mental Health.

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