A Living Quilt: The Journey of a Cohort of Emerging Arts Therapists in Aotearoa

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Abstract

This article traces the collaborative creation of a final gift—a symbolic weighted quilt—recently given by a cohort of third year trainee arts therapists to their faculty and fellow students. The article uses poetry and narrative to present and explore the process of this group of emerging arts therapists being woven together via their experiences of creativity, uncertainty and trust during their time on the Master of Arts in Arts Therapy program. It notes the interconnectivity between the singular and shared identities found during this journey, and explores the precious, expansive, and universal nature of the arts therapy experience and profession. This creative collaboration is a representation of the experience of student arts therapists who, having been soaked in the heavy liquids of creative encounters and felted together as a community, are now on the cusp of taking this deep fluid identity and experience out into the wider community.

Keywords: quilt, weighted blanket, emerging arts therapists, Aotearoa, poetry

The heavy blanket lies at the centre of the room, occupying both physical and emotional space. Its eight-kilogram weight is spread out over an area of 1.5 metres by 2 metres; its great back is covered in a quilt of vivid colours. This patchwork top consists of 20 squares of robust fabrics – velvet, denim, polyester, calico, wool – each with a unique pattern or image stitched, painted or embroidered upon its fabric. It sits upon a blue liminal layer of a custom-made calico blanket, filled with tiny river stones that have been sewn into evenly-balanced sections. This weighting is designed to be around a tenth of a person’s body-weight and provides a calming layer of protection as they prepare for, or rest in, or recover from one of life’s journeys. A final layer of soft blue polyester sits where the blanket touches the body. This is our weighted blanket.

~

Be Longing

Kōwatāhau? Who am I?
Where do I belong?
To longing,
connection,
people, earth, water,
creation or creator?

Not knowing
creates a space for you to teach me
in rich detail,
to trust and take risks.

When I’m all at sea I can float.
Your story, my story, their stories,
our stories are connected.
Be still, be quiet, breathe
Tihei Mauri Ora!
There is life.

~

FIGURE 1 | ‘The Quilt’ (MAAT year 3, September 2018)
Can we offer
find, make a home
here with art
amongst the gorgeous
and dangerous
shadows cast
moving and still
beings
You hand me
a brush
You lend me
your colours
I paint beside
with, within
tears stitched finely quietly
transforming
into wild birds
skwarrk!!
wings creak wings sing
wings joining in creating
a strong and beautiful
formation

and then
the sky changes...

watch them
swooping, diving, seeking
defining drawing
into clear and open
spaces

~

Whilst climbing up and down the ladder of my life I became intrigued by the process of giving birth to things from nothing and I started to realise that whatever art I created by my own hands was basically a response to the general human condition, to our mutual terrain, similarly to the quilt where we shared every inch of thread and turned personal into communal. I feel
magically connected to these creative warriors who are dedicated to respond with art to suffering and inspired to perceive what is broken and fragile as wholesome and beautiful.

~

Patches sewn by another
for me to fill
with my own creation
I wonder how to fill the empty space
with its neatly stitched borders
it’s up to me
to decide
what happens right now
I don’t want to sketch out every
detail or
define every object in soft neat
erasable pencil
before I begin
I pull out a black pen,
permanent, and
I just begin

~

We gathered in a high room one evening after class. With churning emotions, we spoke about the fast-approaching end to our time as student arts therapists and began to discuss a way to show our tutors our deep appreciation for their guidance during these enshrining years. This discussion vacillated between gestures of gratitude and pragmatic gifts until the two coalesced into our final offering – a weighted blanket; a quilt of many colours.

A custom weighted blanket-maker was contacted whilst measurements were divided, lists were written, and plans were developed. We looked around, nodding: over time and distance, between the layers of our lives, we would do this.

We exchanged countless emails over the following months. We agreed: in our separate spaces, we would source and create our individual squares before tucking them away, ready to be brought back out when we would meet again.

~

Our creative threads
A Wit(h)n essing

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An honouring
Side by side
As one
Like a pride of lions, awakening from a deep sleep
Us!
Hear us growl! Hear us howl!
Celebrating!
Humbling...
Grieving...
Gratitude.
A chaotic creative metamorphic force
Raw resonance hemmed together

~

Fabrics that reference me as part of an us
An us of strength and warmth
An us that has shrouded me and held my vulnerabilities
And my emergence
I note my beginnings and roots
A tartan that warms the wearer
Rustic stitches
To a soft woollen centre
The centre each have helped form
And I am stitched to you, as you are to me
Our boarders touching
Our colours complementary
The stories of our journey together held
In one piece

~

Starting as a seed, scared fragile and small
we arose.
Fractals weaving to form one,
among a galaxy that is limitless
three stars flicker for the years flown by.
Together traversing this mountainous range
strengthening our ties travelling across rocky tides,
a mesh of co-existing light and dark, dark and light.

A forest of rhizomatic trees
And fledgling birds about to take flight,

We are both and...

A tapestry of holding, wonder and shared delight!

~

Our layer of trusting makes miracles happen.

~

The day came when we gathered once more in the high room to reveal our creations and
begin the process of connection. A pause.
‘Here’s mine’, ‘Here’s mine’.

Our pieces were delicately placed upon the floor to create a variegated field of
coloured patches. A deep, collective breath was drawn before an exhaling of pride,
surprise and joy.

And then back to it. Some of us stitched our last-minute shapes to our squares whilst
others measured and chalked outlines. Some trimmed and pinned, some ordered food,
and some drove the dim murmur of the sewing machines.

‘Where does each piece sit?’, ‘What still needs to be done?’, ‘Where are the
pins?’, ‘Can I borrow that thread?’, ‘Pass me the scissors please.’, ‘Does anyone want
snacks?’, ‘Did you notice the moon tonight is exactly like her moon sewn here?’

Separate pieces were stitched together in twos and threes, laid out, pinned, sewed
again, more and more, until the last pieces were finished. This layer was complete; all
squares were now connected. Our quilt was bundled, gleaming, into a backpack; prepped
and ready to be attached to its weighty counterpart.

~

Across the black material is a row of lines, each strung with variously tilted
disks that suggest levels, stages or a progression of beads. Each strand
stands alone but form an overall pattern. Each of us as students in the Arts
Therapy Masters programme, stood together seminar after seminar, and yet
so much on our own, achieving our differing but similar stages of development,
pushing past the beads of one milestone after another; towards realizing
ourselves as creative arts therapists.

~

We are walking with mountains and moons,
A dark gracious landscape, flapping, growing, breathing.  
Booming deep oceans, and still light all around.  
The seasons, chaos, play, change – these living creatures, I have been introduced to them.  
These mountains hold hands, and bend to visit us who live on and around and inside their wings,  
We move on their shoulders, gather snippets of their conversation, and breathe their aroma,  
We expand, and my body moves on and on to their gracious booming.  
We are here, each with a bag of whispers, tools for play, and our own tatters and ribbons,  
We learn to dive, to notice, to receive, to share this breath.  
We have felted together the first page of our story,  
And we walk with mountains and moons.  

~

Being, together

I put my heart next to yours.

Mine is embroidered with moments from my life.  
Yours is embroidered with moments from yours.  
With needle and thread, we gently weave our two pieces together.

I fold my edge and give one of them to you.  
You fold your corners and pass one of them to me.  
Together we assemble our rough edges and mend our broken hearts.

One stitch forward,  
One stitch backward,  
A step forward, toward each other  
A step backward from each other.  
We create a mindful spacing.

With sincerity, you and I connect.  
I don’t ask you to resemble me.  
You don’t force me to be like you.

Over time we become, each other, side by side.  
Me as I am, you as you are.
United, and stitched loosely together.
And now willing to share our unique edges with others.

~

We created, we moved, we felt, we challenged, we wept, we broke, we breathed, we stretched, we laughed, we absorbed, we acknowledged, we observed, we shared. Each patch of gratitude is holding the learning that was abundant, weaving together with a thread that contains each of us. I am part of the whole, rich in memory, understanding what we came with, has been transitioned.

....... We see who we are now. We listen. Be

~

An ill-timed courier crisis caused a commotion of texts, a late evening drive, a gentle meeting at a quiet doorway, and a hefty wrapped box sitting on the car seat. Then again in a high room a handful of sewers, energized with determination, gathered with their lunches. The body of the blanket was unboxed and draped over the table. The quilt was then laid over, and pinned. We pulled at it, tacked corners down, and discussed thread colours and strengths. With every tug we came to feel more and more at home with the heavy, beautiful creature that we had created. Sewing machines were fired up once more and it seemingly all-at-once came into being – our beautiful weighted blanket.

~

Shifts and stitches, in time
Under and over, through and within
Emergent from a shadow, past
Leaning into the Onward future
My peace with pieces, in process
A conjurer of the old and the new
From my Pākehā nationality (of strife and ...)
An honouring of bicultural practice
Whakapapa, emergent
I lean into others
Sharing and threaded, alongside
My bricoleured felt sense
Forming a collegial whole
Of the magic, to come
A collective energy, unmatched
And a Korowai for others yet to arrive

~

weaving in
round
through
i don’t know
what’s me
and you

~

Stitch these squares into the folds of your belly,
remembering how once you were frightened to
begin
threading these into the pleats of
your memory
of time and tears
tumbling into the night
Seams sewn
into the fabric of your exalted
being,
cultivating the blessing of square miles crossed
to arrive, annihilated,
only to be created.

~

We walk our singular journeys together.
A powerful tribe.
And finally we place a small part of us.
Gathered in person
Gathered in creating
To gather as unique spirits in unity
Together a whole
Sewn with threads like the net of Indra.
Creating something new and beautiful
Poiesis
For ourselves
For future students
And clients we have yet to meet.

~

Our blanket is our way of honouring the connections that we have formed within and between ourselves, our tutors, and our profession. It is a recognition that we are who we are through our relationships with one another. This gift is both colossal and contained; robust and delicate; weighty and gentle. It is the result of heartfelt gratefulness, communal co-dependency, gumption, dialogues, and the act of simply being together. Our blanket is our cohort: who we are, who we were, and who we hope to be.

~

soft-bodied soul
albino skin (pockmarked, but porous)
oozes from the tepid pond to
collapse upon its cool clay embankment
quivering
(softly ribbiting)
gulping in the sweet morning air
of the new day’s still dark dawn

~

We carry a golden thread in our beaks
Stitch it between and through the layers
Up, down, up, back, down –
It’s the work of patches
A patched work
Patched lives and stories
Patched possibilities
We create new layers to strengthen the old
This patch, my patch, your patch, Our patch –
Each patch a piece of me and of you
Stitched together, a piece of Us

Now we fly,
In the same direction
and in different directions
Wearing our colours like victory flags
Up, down, up, back, down –
Each carrying the golden thread in our beaks
To stitch into our next patched masterpiece.

Emerging
the ruru* ruffles comfortable feathers
on the brink of the elements.
her korowai** wrapping her
a campfire blanket
lingering she sways between
comfort and the groans of the ngahere***.

Raindrops roll off feathers, she
collects the drops
drinks deeply
bitter sweet
offering to share in colourful communion
nods and smiles through tears

Flies by night, dreamtime
curious creatures flock
bizarre, wonder-ful souls
play and sigh and breathe and build and paint
their way home
or perhaps it’s somewhere new.

*Ruru – TeReo for New Zealand’s native owl
**Korowai – a type of Māori cloak
***Ngahere – TeReo for forest
Descriptions retrieved from: http://maoridictionary.co.nz 17th September 2018

Someone says “A gift!”
“A patchwork quilt”
follows hot on their tail.
We are [re?]making our-selves...
The snipped and stitched,
bits and bobs,
harmonious
and hard edged.
There is chaos for a while,
Can this be made?
Will it be made?
The uncertainty sits in the space between.
Us. And still we cut and glue and mould.
Something resembling an identity.
A therapist.
Someone to sit with the tangles,
the tattered or torn, to breath in
the pieces and say;
“it might be made into a whole,
and if it isn’t,
I love it anyway”.
This patched and zigzagged creation

**FIGURE 2** | The Quilt; Gifted (MAAT year 3, September 2018)
is a sign pointing to therapist-born.
A gift found, made of me-ness and you-ness.
And given to whoever needs warm.

~

About the Authors

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