

## Clown workshop: Playful self-discovery

A report by presenter Liz Dowling

### Abstract

The experience of 'changing costume' can reveal other aspects of a personality, and those aspects depend on the context in which the costume is worn. In this clown workshop activities were introduced to explore processes of self-esteem and self-image through intuitive responses in a playful, supportive group environment. With all 21 participants in clown costume, and with makeup expressing 'how they were feeling' it was a socially equalising and uniting process. As the workshop progressed the group created its own dynamic, transcending stressors, and became more and more spontaneous. Participants' responses were assessed by comparing their free drawings, made before and after the performance.

### Keywords

Self-esteem, intuitive, supportive, equalising, transcending, spontaneous.

### Introduction

The clown workshop evolved from one experience I had as a diversional therapist working with residents in a mental health unit in Brisbane. I borrowed clown costumes for staff to wear in a spontaneous show for the residents.

Through this equalising of status, previously unknown aspects of their personalities were liberated as each staff member stepped up to their own perceived clowning role. I could feel the breaking down of barriers as we entered the realm of the ridiculous. We had united to entertain and the residents really enjoyed it. So did the staff.

Since then, I have held clown workshops in an art therapy context with various client populations, each of which has shaped my timing and delivery of activities. I have discovered that the process of a participant choosing a costume, putting it on and applying clown makeup became a revealing projection of their self-image. My direction being "to show how you are feeling", I have therefore allowed more preparation time for participants to consider their choices to accomplish this.

### This workshop

I invited other arts therapists and other conference attendees to discover or rediscover their unpredictable selves by dressing up in clown costumes. The invitation suggested that "with life stressors abounding, during the workshop people may transcend pressures and let go of the mind to act and react intuitively with the other clowns. It's a chance to change/borrow/act out a character as if your inner child has come out to play". I also

commented that the process may revive some childhood memories. Twenty one people accepted the invitation. It was a comedy from the beginning. Due to conference delays, the 15 minutes set-up time was reduced to five minutes. My conference assistant helped me set up tables and chairs and participants were to do a freestyle drawing and write '1' on it when finished. This drawing was the first part of my assessment for the workshop. The chairs were then set up in a circle and I put on my MC's jacket and hat.

While everyone was settled into drawing, my assistant and I had placed one costume on each of the chairs. Drawings completed, participants each chose a costume and put on makeup. People helped each other get into costume and then took photos of each other. It was chaotic in a positive way. I felt my role was to assist the preparation progress and ensure each person handled the process to their satisfaction. Examples of clown makeup were provided for their inspiration. A table of accessories – with musical instruments, horns, wigs, hats, spectacles, tutus, noses, etc – was provided for participants to put finishing touches on their costumes.

All this preparation is a very important process and lasted about half an hour. Each clown was invited to choose their clown name and pin it onto their costume. There were names like 'Zog', 'Ponti', 'Bip', 'Cha Cha La Vuong' and 'Cupey'.

Soon everyone was in full clown persona, and unrecognisable. After tidying up the makeup table, I turned around to face a squad of clowns all fully dressed and loudly making honking, tinging, and rattling music. It was glorious! They were ready!

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