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MAŁGORZATA KARZMARZYK
Uniwersytet Gdański
ORCID 00000199069574

THE AUTHOR'S METHOD OF PAINTING DIALOGUES
AS AN EXAMPLE OF ACTION RESEARCH.
REPORT OF A PROJECT CARRIED OUT WITH STUDENTS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GDANSK

Introduction

As it is widely known, through art we can pour our emotions onto paper, we can paint our fear, our sense of loss, emptiness, suffering, lack. Viewing paintings or creating them has a self-reflective and self-therapeutic dimension. In a sense, because we are creative beings, our live can become a work of art.¹ We just must take a brush or pen in our hand and start creating. This is the essence of life - the release of creation that can give us a sense of power or emotional stability.

In this article I describe the author's method of painting dialogues that I created in 2016. Initially, the project involved working with artists, but over time, in my pedagogical practice, I have noticed that it also has a developing, therapeutic and creative effect on groups such as tutors, university teachers, early childhood education teachers, pre-school teachers, parents, but also pre-school, early childhood and children with disabilities (e.g., autism).

In this paper, I will present the method of painting dialogues carried out as action research with students of pedagogy at the University of Gdańsk (a group of 25 people, both men and women) in 2021–2022.

This method enables one's own creative expression to take place in simultaneous dialogue with another person. This can be a daughter, son, neighbor, friend, acquaintance, but also a stranger, whom one gets to know through a common dialogue. The joint art activity brings people together and helps them get through difficult times. It is not only art therapy, communication and contact with another person, but also

¹ J. Cameron, *Droga artysty. Jak wyzwolić w sobie twórcę*, Warszawa 2017.

self-discovery during a creative activity. Dealing with the drawing of the child,² the meanings of children and adults on the iconography of Polish³ and European painting,⁴ emancipation in art,⁵ I continue my reflections on therapy and liberation through art, opening to the search for a broader context. The analyses of the painting dialogues, carried out with action research, form the basis for a more in-depth psychological analysis, and are a contribution to different research than the one presented by me, from a pedagogical perspective.

Painting dialogues, or dialogues without dialogues

The term I have coined is a kind of metaphorical structure through which I try to put into words what happens between partners during the process I am describing. It can be created in a space of silence, but at the same time being a dialogue on a visual level. The painting dialogue is not a classic, ordinary conversation between two people/partners. It is an encounter, a communication on a much more ambiguous level. Therefore, it can be said to happen at a higher level, to transcend words and ordinary understanding. It is not conceptualized in the way in which it is usually described in pedagogical texts. It is much closer to the philosophical concept of “third space.”⁶ It takes the form of an ambiguous and multifaceted plane of communication, on which there is the possibility of negotiating opposing meanings, different perspectives that often do not fit together and are even mutually exclusive. This brings it closer to a space “which is created in conditions of destroying the existing ‘properness’ and ‘acceptability’ regulating the structure’s modus”⁷ which rises/comes to life when the old meanings are deconstructed by new ones, much deeper and more ambiguous and where a possibility of creating new sets is accepted which are not too much “limiting.”⁸

The painting dialogue creates a communicative situation from scratch. It deconstructs the classical dialogue, turning it into a deeper discussion between the two partners on a visual level. The conversation is deeper and more ambiguous because it takes place both on an energetic, mental, and visual level.

² M. Karczmarzyk, *Co znaczą rysunki dziecięce*, Gdańsk 2014.

³ Ibidem, p. 56.

⁴ M. Karczmarzyk, A. Wasilewska, *Malarstwo w oczach dzieci. Znaczenia nadawane wybranym obrazom Salvadora Dalego, Pabla Picassa, Jacka Yerki*, „Kultura i Wychowanie” 2015, no. 10(2), pp. 36–43.

⁵ M. Karczmarzyk, *Wspólnota i u(nie)upamiętnianie. Rewizualizacje, znaczenia i strategie budowy miasta w przestrzeni Gdańska* [in:] *Miasto jak wspólny pokój: Gdańskie modi co-vivendi*, ed. M. Mendel, Gdańsk 2015, p. 121.

⁶ E. Soja, *Thirdspace: Expanding the Geographical Imagination*, Oxford 1996.

⁷ M. Mendel, *Spoleczeństwo i rytuał. Heterotopia bezdomności*, Toruń 2007, p. 66.

⁸ Ibidem.

The dialogues I have described are not considered as typical working tools for teachers and educators, although they can be so. They may however be more than that: an idea, a deepening of one's self-reflection, a self-observation, a mirror, a development of one's creativity, a search for freedom, for one's own voice – but at the same time – a tuning in to another voice, an empathic opening to one's partner, a communication with the one with whom the dialogue is co-created.

In painting dialogues, there are no rules, no aesthetic rules are needed, composition is not important, there is no imposed theme, no judgement. Painting is a purely intuitive, simultaneous activity and is based on freedom. As in art therapy – the result is less important than the process of creating the work itself.

The genesis of the painting dialogue method

When describing the method of painting dialogue, I must go far back in my memory, namely to my childhood. I recall a scene in which I am sitting on a bed, covered with a white blanket, with my mother. Crayons and pieces of paper were everywhere around. I watched her draw, and then I finished some symbols of her/our common drawing. My mother used to paint beautiful princesses, cars, animals, but I altered them, changed them, adding colors and symbols of my own. That is how we both mutually communicated with each other through the painting. Unlike in everyday life, where there were completely different rules governing the coexistence of adult and child. We created cartoon worlds that were our alternative places, where the principles of partnership, equality and reciprocity prevailed.

My research regarding a child's visual voice and "the child-parent communication."⁹ As well as artistic projects and pedagogical interventions related to visual dialogues, are early attempts at searching for a different language, based on visualization, which may be ambiguous. Taking as a working hypothesis an assumption that verbalization tends to be focused solely on another individual, I attempt to find a space where meanings may be negotiable, mutually contradictory, or mutually complementary. Also, my recent publication, a book where I use selected works of contemporary art as a communications medium between the child and an adult,¹⁰ is coherent with the subject matter of dialogue described herein. Images analyses both by children as well as by adults became a common space of meanings, frequently mutually close, stemming from the same experiences, stereotypes, and cognitive categories.

Art performs a communications role and often becomes a substitute for verbal communication.¹¹

⁹ M. Kaczmarzyk, *Co znaczą rysunki...*

¹⁰ Eadem, *Metoda dialogów wizualno-werbalnych w terapii z dzieckiem niepełnosprawnym w wieku wczesnoszkolnym*, „Niepełnosprawność. Półrocznik naukowy” 2020, no. 36, pp. 91–102.

¹¹ A. Czajkowska, *Fototerapia. Fotografia w pracy nauczyciela, pedagoga i terapeuty*, Łódź 2019.

In painting dialogues there are several types of communication: there is a metaphoric communication through images, communication through one's own expression, which takes place during a visual-verbal dialogue, as well as through verbal communication, which becomes crucial after painting the visual image. Discussing the common work is a specific closure of the entire process. Both dialogue partners, apart from feeling with the heart, sharing emotions, and expressing themselves through their own expression, which are taking place during painting, activate thinking and auto-analysis as well. They are entering thereby deeper into the entire creative and self-therapeutic process.

The painting dialogues method as an example of action research. A methodological commentary

The visual works of the students I collected, and the interviews conducted as painting dialogues are not just typical research material. They constitute a part of a process, which takes place during the painting project performed with a given person/partner. Therefore, both the quality approach, as well as the selection of a rather controversial, and still not so popular in pedagogy, action research¹² is a non-standard step that enables me to link theory with practice, action with exploration and learning with teaching. This is because being a theorist, a researcher, but at the same time a practitioner, I combine different roles and cognitive strategies. Research action is a specific form of individual case analysis¹³ and is the study of a social situation in which the researcher finds him/herself, with the intention of improving it, as well as improving the quality of his/her action during the research situation.

For the research procedure of the action research method, the deep, critical, and practical experience of the situation in which the action is to take place is particularly important. It is also about recognition, entering a relationship with another person and acting together. The painting dialogues are such an exploration in action, because during the process of painting together there is a deep entering into a relationship with the person participating in the exploration. Once the painting is completed, which takes place on various levels, an interview with the researcher and the joint making of meanings of the work carried out in the dialogue begins. The practical experience, followed by a joint analysis of the creation, enables critical self-reflection by the research partners.

¹² B.D. Gołębnik, *Edukacyjne badania w działaniu – między akademicką legitymizacją a realizacyjnymi uproszczeniami* [in:] *Edukacyjne badania w działaniu*, red. H. Červinková, B.D. Gołębnik, Warszawa 2013, p. 47.

¹³ M. Ruczko, *Studium przypadku w naukach humanistycznych* [w:] *Jakościowe inspiracje w badaniach edukacyjnych*, ed. H. Kędzierska, Olsztyn 2010, p. 16.

The subject of this study is the creative process, carried out simultaneously by two people who work together on a single artwork. The action of both partners, here, is of equal importance with the resulting artwork and the interview, which at the end of the painting completes the whole project.

The main research problem in the project analysed here, together with the method described above, is an attempt to find a communicative space through a painting dialogue carried out by two people creating a visual work together (in this case, they are students of the University of Gdansk participating in an art workshop). Both their visual work and their communication through selected artistic means during the painting activity, as well as analysing the final joint work, are intended to help the process of joint communication. It is a communication involving the use of a process of joint creation (of paintings), but also a process of mutual learning, and therefore an educational activity.

So the main question I try to answer in the article is: how do the two participants communicate?

Quality research is hybrid in nature and is based on an interpretative and critical paradigm. Joining of discrepant research paradigms is an effective metasynthesis, thanks to which it is possible to explore a given phenomenon more broadly. And a painting dialogue realized as action research has a multilevel dimension. As Jarosław Marzec writes: "integral research is characterized by inclusiveness, which is a process of opposing the fragmentariness of cognition and opposing exclusive research practices."¹⁴ Cognition therefore is open to every research perspective, which results in a broadening of empirical possibilities.

The aim of the study is to analyze the signs and meanings that will be created during the process of painting together and in the interview at the end of the work. By gaining insights into the depths of the meanings created through the painting dialogues, I may be able to get at the idea of reflexive intervention that emerges in precisely this kind of experimentation, that is, action research.¹⁵

During the painting dialogues, which are carried out using the method of action research, emancipatory references¹⁶ may occur through a joint process of visual-verbal communication, in which the partners find themselves swapping roles, getting to know each other, but also getting to know themselves. This is because in the course of the dialogue the partners view each other as in mirrors, and this refines, engages and prepares them for change. Such self-therapy allows for a deeper insight into oneself, into one's life.

¹⁴ J. Marzec, *Fale istnienia. Moje spotkania z Kenem Wilberem*, Gdańsk 2019, p. 9.

¹⁵ E. Wołodźko, *Badania w działaniu. Refleksja – wiedza – emancypacja* [in:] *Jakościowe inspiracje w badaniach edukacyjnych*, ed. H. Kędzierska, Olsztyn 2010.

¹⁶ H. Cervinkova, *Badania w działaniu i zaangażowana antropologia edukacyjna*, „Terażniejszość–Człowiek–Edukacja. Kwartalnik myśli społeczno-pedagogicznej” 2012, no. 1(57), p. 15.

In the case of action research, it is important to be clearly grounded in a specific paradigm, and this paradigm is the pragmatic paradigm.¹⁷ Hanna Cervinková's research, which combines the tradition of engaged educational anthropology and educational research in action, is an example of praxis-oriented pedagogy, which is one way of nurturing and developing critical consciousness and participatory action.¹⁸

Project report from a study conducted in cooperation with students at the University of Gdańsk

The studied subjects, students of the pedagogy department of the University of Gdańsk (a group of twenty five people, both women and men), during the interviews run by me at the conclusion of paintings dialogues, referred to their own emotions, fears, traumas they have gone through, as well as to the aims which they desired to set for themselves. A common element that appeared at the start of our common artistic work was a sense of fear of the unknown, fear of something which we have not done for a long time, and one of such things is, for instance, painting using a new technique. Fear teaches us who we are, but also who we should not be. Therefore in painting dialogues we may freely express that which we expect, we self-discover each other in a mutual creative process. That which we lack, or the area where we are not sufficiently good at, becomes a cause for frustration.

Here is a sample analysis of an interview after the completion of one of the art work, carried out at the University of Gdansk, with a third-year Pedagogy student:

Researcher: How do you feel now after all this?

Student: So sleepy, so relaxed a lot.

Researcher: And a bit tired?

Student: Yes, but it's such a great relaxation. Stopping... as if to say stop to yourself!

A fragment of the student's statement relates to the therapeutic thread of the dialogue. Painting offers solace and peace. In a painting dialogue, one can pour one's emotions and frustrations onto paper. Art becomes a kind of catalyst for many different states. The art dialogue thus becomes a time in which emotions come to a standstill. They stay on paper and remain there forever. By pouring over feelings while painting simultaneously with another person, we simultaneously record what we have felt while working together.

¹⁷ H. Červinková, *Edukacyjne badania w działaniu – w poszukiwaniu emancypacyjnego wymiaru badań pedagogicznych i antropologicznych*, „Animacja Życia Publicznego. Analizy i Rekomendacje” 2011, nr 2(5), pp. 4–7.

¹⁸ Eadem, *Badania w działaniu...*, p. 15.

Freezing time in a painting dialogue can also be therapeutic.¹⁹ In the modern world, we are in a constant state of flux. There is no way to stop the speeding machine. Although, on the other hand, the ongoing corona virus pandemic has made many of us realise that it is possible and necessary to live slowly. It is healthier, more qualitatively measurable, liberating, more profound, more reflective. The recently fashionable so called slow philosophy is precisely such a response to the need to slow down in various areas of human activity.²⁰

The next excerpt from the interview concerns reading together the meanings encrypted in the created artworks.

Student: Yeah... at first, I was fascinated by the portrait, but it didn't work out [...] the Matrix came out instead... how did Neo have his mouth taped?

Mr Robinson: And what would you say... as the agent came for him... what would you say if you couldn't speak?

Researcher: And for me it's that last Joker film... that's the Joker... and that's the bad guy... the bad character.

What is interesting about this statement is that the dialogue partners refer to two different films belonging to popular culture. These films are: *The Matrix*, a film from 1999, and *The Joker*, from 2019.

The problem that arises here relates to the diverse interpretation that Edmund Husserl writes about. Each state of consciousness has its own horizon, which changes according to changes in its relationship with other states.²¹

So, in the process of discovering the meaning of an image, there can be many different interpretations, which can be very far from each other.²² And this is exactly what happens in the example I have given referring to the image parallel and such different associations from each other.

General conclusions

Dialogue becomes a form of katharsis that cures our complexes and opens us to new skills and abilities. This type of process has therefore a growth and pedagogical potential. Painting dialogues teach us and educate us towards change. They are a state of self-reflexive self-discovery and liberation from the traps of schemes and self-critical, limiting mind.

¹⁹ S. Sontag, *Przeciw interpretacji i inne eseje*, przeł. M. Osicka, A. Skucińska, D. Żukowski, Kraków 2018.

²⁰ E. Farelnik, *Idea slow jako wyznacznik działań rewitalizacyjnych podejmowanych na obszarach miejskich*, „Metropolitan” 2018, no. 1(27), p. 19.

²¹ E. Husserl, *Wykłady z etyki i teorii wartości 1908–1914*, przeł. L. Ostasz, Kraków 1991.

²² Ibidem, p. 56.

Dialogue is also an attempt to get to know another person. We discover each other in the mirrors of other people. Sometimes we are able to understand each other. In many cases among the study objects (i.e., Elżbieta, Marek, Katarzyna, Robert, Anna) this type of communication disclosed an extraverbal message hidden under the surface of a dialogue. In the paintings dialogue the matter is not about extraneous look – at someone, but rather about looking inside one’s own inner self. Searching, which takes place while the partners are feeling each other can be equaled to and compared with experiencing depth, develops us, makes us grow and shapes us.

Another crucial philosophical-pedagogical issue, which illustrates the ambiguity of artistic language and its difference from verbalization, is the truth and infinity in the artistic message. It turns out that painting is an infinite process, and so it has no boundaries or limits, therefore making it genuine. Painting dialogue is in essence a layer of space, where time is not relevant, and the final effect does not have the same impact as the process of creation of the art itself. The more partners can feel each other in their common artistic work, the closer they are to the truth. It is no easy, because one needs to be able to open oneself to the partner of the dialogue, however when we break through the schemes and dogmas, the self-control and temporarily eliminate the mind which evaluates, we will be able to enter this process more deeply.

During the implemented painting dialogues the subjects displayed emotions, fears, traumas, aims, but also were in the process of creation, which released their creative energy.

In an ideal language of art we may express everything we want, but also that which we are not expecting. Something which is born on the verge of common painting may liberate us and bring us closer to discovering our own nature, which too often is closed behind the masks of the daily routine, habituality taking over control of the superconscious energy creating the reality of each human being.

Summary: Emancipational and therapeutic potential of the method

In the painting dialogues method/approach, thanks to a common process of communication I have observed emancipation references, where partner discovered themselves, switching roles, getting to know each other (quality research), but also discovering each other. They examined themselves as in mirrors, and that improved them, liberated them, and prepared them for the change. Such self-therapy allows for a deeper insight into oneself and into one’s life.

Painting dialogue is a relaxation process, a detaching from that which is schematic, mundane and an entrance into oneself through feelings. It is a process of participation of the body and the mind in some way unconsciously. It is based on the visual language, where there are no conscious boundaries. We are our own observers and also observers of our bodily reactions. We free ourselves from mental blocks. Through observation a person initially ‘tames’ the creative activity of a partner, and in the next stage of common work reacts to their signs and symbols, color and gestures painted

on paper. It is in essence a conversation of sorts, which may turn into an inspiring self-discovery. One's own self-reflection, may initially be noted, but it will develop deeper in a mental process of a given participant in the project. The people in the painters' dialogue by reacting to someone's gestures, create a tale about their own worlds and analyze each other. This kind of flow is mutual. We absorb unconsciously the emotions from the other person, their energy and sensitivity, but also enter a relation, molding into a common journey.

Another emancipational issue appearing in the painting dialogues is the problem of exploring boundaries and an attempt to liberate oneself from self-limitation. Everyday we impose instructions, orders, and prohibitions on ourselves, we impose the norms ourselves. We decide what we can and what we cannot. That is why painting together in a dialogue we break our limitations. We may not define, or label art and impose limits and boundaries on it. Art does not have them, it is boundless and infinite. Art is free from limitations and becomes a space for co-experience and co-feeling. Art liberates. That is why opening up of a partner of the dialogue to art is something that transforms and liberates them. What occurs here is development and entering the creative dimension, which may become the beginning of a path towards self-progress and self-creation. It is therefore entering one's own well of creativity which is bottomless. One may draw from it for the rest of one's life. Thanks to that we will solve the problems and challenges of everyday life, plan valuable aims and also, perhaps, solve family and employee problems.

Painting dialogues teach and educate us, liberate us and transform us. During creative work we discover the depth of our own selves. When we paint together, on a common piece of paper, our gestures exist above our words, are an extrasensory message of our hearts. Nestled in the exchange of lines and colours, carved and imprinted in hearts, we feel and desire to discover ourselves, but also each other as well.

Painting dialogues is a project which is understandable for all cultures, exists above and beyond all limitations and boundaries and is more ambiguous than we could have assumed. Thanks to them we discover ourselves and other but also other cultures, touching other dimensions of time and space.

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Summary

As it is widely known, through art we can pour our emotions onto paper, we can paint our fear, our sense of loss, emptiness, suffering, lack. Viewing paintings or creating them has a self-reflective and self-therapeutic dimension. In a sense, because we are creative beings, our lives can become a work of art. We just must take a brush or pen in our hand and start creating. This is the essence of life - the release of creation that can give us a sense of power

or emotional stability. In this article I describe the author's method of painting dialogues that I created in 2016. Initially, the project involved working with Gdansk artists, but over time, in my pedagogical practice, I have noticed that it also has a developing, therapeutic and creative impact on groups such as tutors, university teachers, early childhood education teachers, kindergarten teachers, parents, but also pre-school, early childhood and children with disabilities (e.g., autism). In this article, I will present the method of painting dialogues implemented as an action research with pedagogy students of the University of Gdansk (a group of twenty-five people, both women and men) in 2021–2022.

Keywords: painting dialogues method, students of the University of Gdansk, Gdansk artists, creation

Streszczenie

*Autorska metoda dialogów malarskich jako przykład badania w działaniu.
Raport z projektu realizowanego ze studentami Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego*

Jak powszechnie wiadomo dzięki sztuce możemy przelać na papier emocje – namalować strach, poczucie straty, pustki, cierpienia czy braku. Oglądanie obrazów lub ich tworzenie ma wymiar autorefleksyjny i autoterapeutyczny. W pewnym sensie, ponieważ jesteśmy istotami twórczymi, nasze życie może się stać dziełem sztuki. Musimy po prostu wziąć pędzel lub długopis do ręki i zacząć tworzyć. To jest esencja życia – uwolnienie kreacji, która może nam dać poczucie siły lub stabilności emocjonalnej. W artykule opisuję autorską metodę malowania dialogów, którą stworzyłam w 2016 r. Początkowo projekt zakładał współpracę z gdańskimi artystami, z czasem jednak w mojej praktyce pedagogicznej zauważyłam, że ma to również działanie rozwojowe, terapeutyczne i twórcze w takich grupach, jak korepetytorzy, nauczyciele akademicki, nauczyciele edukacji wczesnoszkolnej, nauczyciele przedszkolni, rodzice, a także przedszkolaki, dzieci wczesnoszkolne i dzieci niepełnosprawne (np. w spektrum autyzmu). W niniejszym artykule przedstawiam metodę malowania dialogów zrealizowaną jako badanie w działaniu ze studentami pedagogiki Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego (grupa 25-osobowa, zarówno kobiet, jak i mężczyzn) w latach 2021–2022.

Słowa kluczowe: metoda dialogów malarskich, studenci Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, artyści gdańscy, twórczość