How Can Learning Art in a VET Context Enhance the Social and Emotional Development of Students?

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Abstract: Art acts as a “social cement” and a “community of minds”. In this research, level five students in an art institution were studied. The results show that the created artworks managed to convey more than was originally intended. Art can express concepts which are not visible and can be a tool to see through the thoughts of the artist, specifically those thoughts that cannot be explained in a tangible way. Through its playful and creative nature, art creates the perfect space for capturing the essence of things through metaphor. The beauty of metaphor is that it maintains the ability to have a deeper meaning than what can be perceived at its surface, making it versatile and adaptive as it recalls different memories and streams of thought that are within each different viewer. Moreover, results have shown that art can be a safe space to go to for self-reflection and quiet time, where the student can reflect on their current emotional state and process the fast-paced life which we currently live in. Art can prompt a creative attitude that is expressed through exciting energy which enhances the capacity of communication and healthy social interactions. This expresses the need for more opportunities in which students can express their artistic development.

Keywords: art; expression; education, VET, social development; emotional development

Introduction

Art for the mental process of developing knowledge has been of great interest since the cognition revolution. Since studies about how the human brain functions have gained momentum, it has revealed the importance of social and emotional properties for effective learning. This therefore demonstrates how the making of art inevitably projects such properties which add value to the educational experience by making information meaningful. It transforms what is usually known as a frivolous task into a valuable and effective method (Blatt-Gross 2010).

“There is no communication without emotions and without communication there is no social life” (Rusu 2017: 228). Artworks are a representation of one’s internal thoughts and reflections; therefore, talking about art is like talking about the lives of other people. Looking at social and emotional development through art, this research aims to investigate how art can enhance a student’s social aspects through communication and expression. Whilst it expresses what cannot be expressed in everyday life, it creates a bridge between the artist and their thoughts, helping the individual understand one’s own emotions better. The art process evokes an imaginative approach towards life which instills in the creator the ability of interaction and healthy social relationships. This research also aims to investigate how the use of metaphor can enhance ways of expression and communication. Additionally, this study also investigates how art can enhance the emotional development of a student. It can help students become more aware of their emotions by expressing them visually.
The chosen area of study is inspired by the researcher’s lifetime exposure to the arts world. It is a search for understanding how this has been unconsciously beneficial for both the social and the emotional development of the researcher, as well as how this development can contribute to the general growth of a person. Additionally, as a 2D animation lecturer in the creative arts sector, the researcher is interested in studying how teaching arts in a VET context fulfills the brief of an educational system yet also creates an opportunity for the student to develop both socially and emotionally through a personal journey. Therefore, this research analyses the concepts of education for art and education through art.

In this part of the study, the aim of the researcher was to work with MQF Level 5 students during a 2D animation class to create a short, five-second animation inspired by an emotion the students chose. This could be an abstract or figurative interpretation of the emotion, expressed through colour, form, and motion. Here the students practised their animation skills and artistic knowledge whilst connecting with the self to express an emotion of choice. After they finished the animation, the students got to share their outcome as they all discussed and interpreted each other’s work. This was followed by a short survey where each student reflected on the process and experience of this exercise. The results were analysed and compared to the findings in the literature. Since emotions and art are very subjective and easily influenced or malleable, a survey was chosen as a method of research in order to avoid any biases when the questions were asked. Therefore, the participants were able to fill in the survey independently and have the space to reflect and answer authentically.

This research is important for the field of VET, both nationally and abroad. It is helpful for students who are carrying out their studies both in the artistic field or otherwise, and for teachers for whom it is a necessity to understand students’ needs and design the academic plan accordingly. It is important for education policy makers to understand the significance art can have in students’ lives in order to give it the adequate space, time, and prominence in the academic process. Likewise, this research is also relevant for the industry to further build and enhance on such experiences after students finish their studies and join the industry.

Chapter two of this study will delve into the literature of art expression, social development through art, the use of metaphor through art, as well as how art can be used to enhance the education journey of students. Chapter three outlines the qualitative methodology selected by the researcher where the specifications of action research and surveys for this study are reviewed. Chapter four analyses and compares the findings of the empirical part of this study with the literature. Finally, chapter five presents conclusions and proposes further recommendations as a follow-up to this research.

**Literature Review**

Recent studies have shed light on a high concentration of so-called mirror neurons, which are cells found in the human brain. As they fire, these imitate the emotions picked up from people around us and it feels as if we are going through the same emotional situation. It has been documented that mirror neurons particularly activate with social relevance, which indicates that humans are built to be social beings (Blatt-Gross 2010). This is how empathy works and how art can be a major tool in this sector.

*Communication through Art*

An interesting question is why do we create art? Even though it does not offer any specific survival benefits, it has been present since prehistoric times. Proust (Epstein 2004) explains...
that visual art provides an opportunity to express oneself in a way which language does not provide. He states that it is a way of self-preservation from death—not only of a life coming to an end, but also to preserve personalities which might be forgotten as time goes by.

The sociologist Norbert Elias (Jensen 2001: 123) suggests that the way civilization works depends heavily on how its civilians deal with emotions. What society can offer often depends on how the personality of young people develops.

For one to build a connection between art and our social development, the original roots of our social nature and ability to communicate need to be investigated. Dunbar states that our communication origins developed through conversational language as it is a practical way of expressing information about the self and others. Art, however, also provides an opportunity for meaningful connections. This is expressed through likely forms which represent human emotions. Whilst in language certain parts of an expression remain unsaid, visual arts can express “the realm of so-called inner experience, the life of feeling and emotion” (Langer 1966).

“Art allows us to communicate our consciousness in a way that cannot be communicated by direct language” (Epstein 2004: 226). It has been argued that consciousness is created through language, however, thoughts and feelings are expressed more effectively through the making of visual arts (Solso 1994: 2003). Additionally, art has the power to exist independently of the artist, it can be reproduced, and it can communicate as long as it is still in existence, therefore extending the voice of the artist.

Philosopher of art Dennis Dutton (2009: 235) expresses the opinion that, “Extending Darwin’s original suggestion, I believe that this intense interest in art as emotional expression derives from wanting to see through art into another personality: it springs from a desire for knowledge of another person”. This is referred to as the theory of mind (Dunbar 2003/2004; Walter 2006), which is a human tendency to sense what others might be thinking. Philosopher Noel Carroll (Blatt-Gross 2010) argues that an artwork evokes a similar set of feelings in the same way a movie does, just like when we laugh or cry at the same instances of a movie. This connects the viewer with the artist, creating what he calls a “social cement” (Blatt-Gross 2010: 100). Dewey (1934) also gels together the viewer and the artist as he explains that through the expression of meaning, what was originally isolated is now made common and shared both by the creator and by the viewer. Art becomes a product, a task, and a process. As the artist creates, the artwork is interpreted, and the profundity of the message sets off on a journey.

**Connection through Art**

Both Donald (2006) and Vygotsky (1971) state that culture is the origin of artistic endeavour and although artists might be perceived as detached from society, they are in fact very much a part of it. Although their artwork is a personal experience, it also becomes a public one, especially since very often it reflects thoughts, activities, symbols, and people that mirror the artist’s culture. Donald (2006: 15) refers to “Mimesis”, which comprises “typically human cognitive patterns as ritual, skills, gesture, tribal identification, personal style and public spectacle”. Humans are not only social beings but also self-analytical and reflective beings. Therefore, they are a great example of practitioners of mimesis, a mode which developed from early prehistory and eventually became a typical element of human expression. Vygotsky (1971) argues that art expresses passions that cannot be expressed in everyday life and there is therefore a bridge between art and emotional reflection. Simple surroundings result in simple behavior, whilst more complex environments become more complicated to harmonise. As such, art suits the perfect reflection of the world around us.
as it becomes a central emotion and, therefore, as Vygotsky (1971: 212) rightly explains, the “emotions caused by art are intelligent emotions”. That is why the social and emotional richness that the arts provide in the educational sector are of great value. This is due to the context and application it provides during learning stages, which makes it more relatable and memorable. It helps students grow into sensible beings and build meaningful connections. The socio-emotional aspects of art-making are particularly important especially because of the sense of adaptability it instills in students, which is then put into practice in life’s complex situations. This is what Vygotsky (1971: 93) refers to as “situated-learning”. Dewey (1934: 350) also notes that the arts are an opportunity for students to learn from each other as they build a community and explains that these communities are “the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living”.

**Expression through Metaphor**

Finding the right language to express an experience is no easy task. Many a times one is faced with emotions that are overwhelming to explain, and no words are adequate enough to do it justice. Epstein (2004: 222), in his collection of lessons by Marcel Proust, mentions that Proust was once was so stimulated by the beauty of a landscape that all he could say was “gosh!” Whilst it is an authentic expression of his feelings, it is by no means a “sufficient representation of his experience” (Epstein 2004: 222). Literature can describe the landscape but cannot explain the experience. The experience is what builds the memories, sentiments, and connotations evoked by the landscape. All of these are built subconsciously without even knowing, however, how does one express such an experience? (Epstein 2004).

A metaphor has the power to explore more than individual emotions. This activates a network of memories, thoughts, and sensations. Comparing two experiences which have a similar social and emotional configuration can convey associations in a more impactful way and guide a stream of thought into a particular experience that is usually difficult to directly represent it. By capturing the essence of things through metaphor, an emotional experience that usually cannot be experienced all at once, but rather experienced over a period of time, can be translated through subconscious memory and expressed through art (Epstein 2004).

Epstein (2004) talks about how Proust perceives experience as the raw material that inspires the artist to create, just like an impression leads the writer to write—just like an experiment is of essence for a scientist. The sense of awe and beauty one feels when faced with an artwork revolves around the idea that it might have a deeper meaning than what can be perceived at its surface. It recalls different memories and streams of thought that are within the viewer, each to their own experiences. However, the connotations it conjures are somewhat like those in the artist’s mind. The function of the artwork is to invite the viewer to participate in the artist’s thoughts, specifically those thoughts that cannot be explained in a literal way. Through art, artists guide us to look at things that are important to them. Despite the many things we are surrounded with in our universe, each artist consciously or subconsciously picks the subject matter according to their concerns and memories. Although art elicits emotions through a depiction of a visual, there is more to it than meets the eye. It is the beauty of how the mind of the artist interacts with features of the world and assigns them meaning, through which then emotion is expressed (Epstein 2004). The artwork becomes an expression of the artist’s sensibility. Epstein (2004: 227) explains that Proust is keen on defining art as “translations of something that already exists”—something which already exists in the artist’s mind. Rather than it being invented, art is something that is to be discovered. Artworks “are a direct representation of our internal memory networks” (Epstein 2004: 227).
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**Education for Art and Education through Art**

A student’s personality can be shaped in two ways through aesthetic pedagogy: Education for art is where the students learn their artistic receptivity. Additionally, education through art is where, with wider aims, they develop further their personality. Rusu (2017) states that through connections with nature, art and social life, students can develop a sensitivity for beauty. Similarly, the formation of the senses can be developed through interactions with different artistic media incorporating form, colour, symmetry, and sound. Additionally, when students contemplate and assess artworks, they awaken aesthetic feelings and, through emotional participation, students develop a receptivity for beauty which then leads to the formation of taste in the arts and aesthetic judgment.

Neaçsu argues that one should “Feed the aesthetic and artistic trends by observing, production and interpretation of artwork...to develop perceptive skills: to listen, to look and read the complex art forms” (Rusu 2017: 231). Value judgment therefore is a skill developed a step further than that of aesthetics. Here the students would be able to reflect and explain their taste and aesthetic judgement. They express the why through a theoretical opinion and logical reasoning. At their first stage, students go through spontaneous aesthetic judgments; however, during their second stage, their judgment is supported by reason. A combination of reason and aesthetic decisions leads to a holistic appreciation of beauty. This is gained through experience, aesthetic culture, and comparison ability (Rusu 2017).

Additionally, the freedom and space that the nature of art offers creates the right ecosystem for creativity. Its playful and experimental attributes prompt a creative attitude that is expressed through an exciting energy which enhances the capacity of communication and healthy social interactions. Aside from practicing the artistic skill, art also becomes an opportunity to imagine, and problem-solve in a playful way. Art education incorporates emotional, rational, and motivational attributes. These come together through authentic communication when expressed through spontaneous participation in class through drawing, painting, or theater (Rusu 2017). On the other hand, Ackermann (2018) states that as students live a hyper-connected and fast-paced life, art becomes the remedy by offering a slower pace whereby they stop, reflect, and connect with their inner storyteller. Therefore, apart from being a source of pulsating energy, art can also be the safe space to go to for self-reflection and quiet time.

Studies have shown that students who study mathematics, science, and languages require the same complex cognitive abilities “specific to arts learning” (Faison 2000: 87). Additionally, in a study including over 2,000 children, Chapman states that students who follow the arts curriculum have a greater ability for self-expression, problem solving, risk-taking, cooperation, and thinking creatively (Chapman 1998). Taking part in artistic expression helps students think outside the box, beyond boundaries, rulebooks, adopting flexibility and adaptability. Living through economic crises or a pandemic, the arts activate these abilities in students which in return help them to mature into humans that can tolerate and cope with uncertainties. The arts are the key to unveil instinctive inclinations of the human soul (Eisner 1987). Art instills a sense of mindfulness and emotional richness through ‘non-academic’ benefits such as self-motivation, aesthetic awareness, cultural response, creativity, enhanced emotional expression, social harmony, and appreciation for diversity (Rusu 2017).

In conclusion, artworks are therefore a representation of one’s internal networks. Whilst they express what cannot be expressed in everyday life, they create a bridge between the artist and their thoughts, helping the individual understand one’s own emotions better. Additionally, art provides an opportunity for meaningful connections. It gels together
the viewer and the artist as they share what once was originally isolated. By capturing the essence of things through metaphor, an emotional experience that usually cannot be experienced all at once can be translated through subconscious memory and shared through art. The process of art prompts a creative attitude which enhances the capacity of communication and healthy social interactions. Finally, it equips the individual with flexibility and adaptive skills, amongst many other attributes which are key to the ever-changing industries of work. Considering this, the next chapter discusses how data for this research was collected, studied, and analysed so as to finally compare it to the literature and discover firsthand results.

**Methods**

The researcher is interested in how art can help students become more aware of their emotions by expressing them visually. Art is linked to humans' social interest in other people’s minds and lives. Therefore, talking about art is like talking about the lives of other people. This study aims to look into how art can be key to the social and emotional development of students and how it can help build meaningful connections. The research also aims to find how the VET is an invitation for students to wonder creatively, problem-solve playfully, and eventually create something that they previously never thought they could do. In doing so, a space for learning new skills in created, which can then be transferred to the industry.

The data presented in this study was collected in a literature review by identifying relevant studies which were related to art expression, metaphors in art, building meaningful connections through art, education through and for art, as well as social and emotional development through art. Google Scholar and other academic libraries were used to access postgraduate research about the chosen topic and keywords. Thirteen papers were initially identified, however, after the abstracts of these papers were assessed, six were chosen and included in the review.

Following this review, the researcher formulated the following research question: How can learning art in a VET context enhance the social and emotional development of students? Additionally, sub-questions include the following: How can artistic expression create a safe space for self-reflection and communicate consciousness in a way that language cannot fulfil? How can expression through metaphor in art capture the essence of things and express a feeling which is not visually seen? How can art enhance the capacity of communication and healthy social interactions?

This study adopts an action research methodology where researchers—often teachers—carry out studies in their own institutions with the aim of gathering information and bring about change. It is a process which involves both problem posing and problem solving and requires the researcher to change current practices by understanding a situation, gaining knowledge and then sharing it with other teachers (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018).

Since this study aims to analyse a group of people’s experience through artistic expression, qualitative research was deemed most adequate. Qualitative research seeks to study opinions and experiences about the studied topic. It is a way of understanding other people’s outlook and gathering in-depth analyses through non-numerical data. Qualitative research was chosen as it is flexible and aims to collect true value through its interpretation. Rather than staying at the periphery of a study, qualitative research delves deep into the actions or thoughts of the participants aiming to give them a voice. It analyses different and multiple interpretations of objective situations (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018).
To put this to practice, a survey with open-ended questions was chosen as a research tool for this study. The nature of surveys creates an opportunity to analyse, identify, and compare existing conditions, detect standards, or determine relationships. As such, it is ideal for understanding and documenting the expression of emotions through art along with its social and emotional connotations. It allows for descriptive and explanatory detail in an efficient way as, through a standard set of questions distributed to multiple participants, different results are collected (Jansen n.d.). A survey was favoured over other qualitative methods to minimize biases when questions are asked by the interviewer. This is especially so since emotions and art are very subjective and easily influenced by external factors. A survey also allows time for the participant to think and maintain a certain depth of analysis without the pressure of time or shyness. Therefore, alternative controlled experimentation or statistical analyses would have been rigid or less inviting to create the right space for creativity.

The study was carried out at the VET Creative Arts Institute with a small class of 5 students studying at MQF level 5 held during their 2D animation lesson. This demographic was chosen since at this level of study, students would have a good understanding of creative expression to follow the exercise yet still at a stage to learn new knowledge. The researcher is the animation lecturer for this class. Since the animation brief for the semester requires the submission of several animation experiments, the participants can submit the exercise carried out during this study for their assignment, making this exercise beneficial both for the researcher and for the participants. This session was also used to teach liquid animation as a style, which is a great way to express flow and flexibility, especially in the context of representing emotions.

The action research started by inviting the students to think of an emotion they would like to express. It could be any emotion of choice. After they created a colour palette which defines the chosen emotion, they constructed a still image that represents this emotion, using the preferred colour scheme along with different textures and form. It could be expressed through figurative, semi-abstract or abstract ways, after which they created a three to five second animation using Adobe Animate as an animation software. After they finished the animation, the students got to share their outcome as they all discussed and interpreted each other’s work.

The research was then concluded by a survey including nine questions about the experience of the participants. The survey was a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions and the aim was for the participant to reflect on the newly created artwork independently and authentically. Some of the questions asked revolved around the participants thinking about their experience, how it feels to express an emotion through art, whether they managed to express what they had in mind, and whether they managed to achieve something which felt challenging at the start. These questions helped to better understand how artistic expression can help develop a student’s social and emotional competences. This exercise took place over two lessons of two hours each, from start to finish. Data was collected by asking the participants for a copy of the animations along with the collection of surveys. These were used to carry out qualitative analyses, where patterns and common instances were identified, interpreted, made sense of, and then compared to literature.

This research is in line with the Malta Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), such that the identity of participants will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. All data was stored in a password-protected computer and only the researcher and the tutor had access to it. In order to keep participants’ identity anonymous, students taking part in the data were referred to as ‘Participant 1, Participant 2,
etc.’. The course and class of the students was not mentioned, and only the scholastic level was stated in order to make sure that identities will not be tracked. Participants took part in the study only if they wished to and had the right to withdraw from the study before, during, and after the data was collected.

In this chapter, the research methods along with the researcher’s thought process adopted for this study were explained. It discussed how the literature was collected, and as to why qualitative research, action research, and surveys were deemed most suitable for this study. The empirical part of this research is a 2D animation exercise carried out with participants. In the next chapter, the results of this exercise will be analysed and compared to better understand how artistic expression can enhance a student’s social and emotional development.

**Results**

Lagner (1966) suggests that whilst in language certain parts of an expression remain unsaid, arts can express “the realm of so-called inner experience, the life of feeling and emotion”. Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to combine a creative empirical project linked to the expression of emotions, especially since the aim of this study is to investigate how art can enhance a student’s social and emotional development. For the practical part of the project, students were asked to think of an emotion and express it in a three-to-five-second 2D animation. They were to express it through a colour palette of their choice, along with form and movement, depicted through figurative, semi-abstract, or abstract ways.

This was then followed by a survey including nine questions about the experience of the participants. The survey was a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions and the aim was for the participant to reflect on the newly created artwork independently and authentically. The questions were the following:

1. How was your experience in this session? Was it positive? Was it negative? Why?
2. What process did you adopt in creating this animation?
3. Why did you decide to express this emotion?
4. Do you feel you managed to convey the emotion you had in mind?
5. Did other participants interpret your artwork according to your intention? How did you feel?
6. Did you interpret the work of other participants according to their intention? How did you feel?
7. When you were presented with the task, did it appear challenging or easily achievable? Did you have any concerns? What where they? Did you manage to address your concerns, if any?
8. How did you feel after you experienced this exercise?
9. Would you consider expressing an emotion through art or animation again? Why?

The results were then analysed and compared with the reviewed literature, from which three themes were identified. The first theme is Expression Through Art, which explores how art has been key in communicating consciousness in a way that language cannot fulfill. The second theme is Expression Through Metaphor and how a feeling which is not visually seen can be expressed by capturing the essence of things and how reading between the lines might have a deeper meaning than what can be perceived at its surface. Finally, the third theme directly addresses the research hypotheses of Social and Emotional Development Through Art and discusses how art can create a safe space to go to for self-reflection as well as enhancing the capacity of communication and healthy social interactions.
Expression through Art

“There is no communication without emotions and without communication there is no social life” (Rusu 2017: 228). In one of the survey questions, when asked about how the participants feel after the creative activity, Participant 4 stated that they “finally got the chance to help others understand me as best as I can.” This shows the instinct of humankind that longs for communication and expression in order to maintain a social life.

Epstein (2004: 226) argues that “Art allows us to communicate our consciousness in a way that cannot be communicated by direct language”. Participant 5 complements Epstein’s statement when explaining that an overwhelming emotion was felt as the other participants effortlessly understood the intention behind the animation created. Participant 3 similarly explained “I was surprised because it is as if they read my mind.” Additionally, Participant 2 explains that the other participants managed to interpret more than was originally intended. Participant 2 explained that the viewers picked up an element of positivity through the overwhelming feeling that was planned to be expressed in the animation. The participant admits that despite the overwhelming emotion caused by the load of assignments to complete during student life, a sense of positivity was unconsciously felt as they truly enjoy what they do. All five participants agreed that they managed to convey what they had in mind through the artwork created during this practical project. Solso (1994 2003) argues that consciousness is created through language, however, thoughts and feelings are expressed more effectively through artmaking. In agreement with this statement, both Participant 1 and Participant 4 explain that it was fulfilling to be understood even though it would have been hard to verbally explain the chosen emotion. Participant 2’s overall feeling about this empirical project was that it was the first art project which “was primarily expressive rather than technical. This may be a tip for educators to take expression into consideration when planning lessons, especially lessons which are related to the creative arts.

Expression through Metaphor

Epstein (2004) explains that a metaphor has the power to explore more than individual emotions. This activates a network of memories, thoughts, and sensations. In fact, Participant 4 explained that it was hard to pick one emotion and stick to it without overlapping onto other emotions.

Two participants out of five mentioned that the task seemed difficult at first since emotions are not visually seen. Sometimes, it is also hard to understand an emotion, let alone express it visually. This supports Epstein’s (2004) argument when he explains that, by capturing the essence of things through metaphor, an emotional experience that usually cannot be experienced all at once, but rather experienced over a period of time, can be translated through subconscious memory and expressed through art. In fact, Participant 5 was amazed to discover how, through an abstract form, one can express an emotion. This participant thinks that the expression of emotion mostly relies on the chosen colour palette. Participant 4 was intrigued to observe and read between the lines of each artwork and agrees with Epstein (2004) when he states that the sense of awe and beauty one feels when faced with an artwork revolves around the idea that it might have a deeper meaning than what can be perceived at its surface.

Participant 1 mentioned that it was fun to interact with friends’ interpretations of the created artworks, whilst Participant 2 observed that it was exciting to hear about the different interpretations and observe how each participant picked up on something that other participant did not. Both participants therefore agree with Epstein (2004) when he states that artworks recall different memories and streams of thought that are within the
viewer, each to his own experiences. The function of the artwork is to invite the viewer to participate in the artist’s thoughts, specifically those thoughts that cannot be explained in a literal way.

Social and Emotional Development through Art

Rusu (2017) explains that art education incorporates emotional, rational, and motivational attributes. Therefore, apart from being a source of pulsating energy, art can also be the safe space to go to for self-reflection and quiet time. Three participants agree with Rusu (2017) by explaining that it was a very helpful process to reflect on what they were feeling at the time and express it visually. Participant 2 also felt satisfied and stated that this exercise was a good opportunity to reflect more about the self.

Additionally, Rusu (2017) explains that the art’s playful and experimental attributes prompt a creative attitude that is expressed through an exciting energy which enhances the capacity of communication and healthy social interactions. In agreement to this, Participant 4 expressed that it was a relieving and fun process to see themselves embodied in forms and shapes yet still have the chance to express a feeling and be understood.

Participant 3 also agrees with Rusu (2017) as she explains that art instills a sense of mindfulness and emotional richness through ‘non-academic’ benefits and, in fact, the participant wrote that this activity felt like therapy, as they felt motivated throughout the process of expression and that they were very satisfied with the outcome. Participant 1 also expressed that it was an empowering experience.

Participant 1 stated that it was great to visually see the emotions of their fellow friends to which they can relate, agreeing with Dutton (2009: 235) who said that, “this intense interest in art as emotional expression derives from wanting to see through art into another personality: it springs from a desire for knowledge of another person”.

Philosopher Noel Carroll (Blatt-Gross 2010: 100) posits that art binds the viewer as one, creating what he calls a “social cement”. Participant 3 agrees with this statement when expressing that they felt connected with the depicted emotions and felt inspired by the different ways of expression implemented by other participants. Additionally, Participant 1 also agrees, saying that “it felt great to express an emotion visually whilst sharing it with others.”

When asked if they would like to express emotions through art and animation once again, all participants replied positively, which indicates that exploration and expression of feelings are considered worthwhile and meaningful by students. After discussing the multiple benefits of art for social and emotional development, it is certainly an opportunity educators should investigate and adopt for the students’ effective and efficient learning journeys.

Conclusion

With a specific focus on the social and emotional development through art, this study has sought to highlight the importance of art in various ways. The first aim was to investigate how art can enhance a student’s social aspect through communication and expression to maintain a social life. The results shown in the empirical part of this study match what was discovered through literature, where art acts as a “social cement” (Dewey 1934: 100) and a “community of mind” (Merlin Donald 2006: 17). In fact, participants claim that their created artwork managed to convey to other participants more than what was originally intended.
Additionally, it left most participants feeling positively surprised about how art can express concepts which are not visible and how it can be a tool to see through the thoughts of the artist, specifically those thoughts that cannot be explained in a literal way. This enhances both the social and the emotional development of students as communication is highly dependent on emotions, and with no communication, one lacks the ability to interact socially (Rusu: 2017 228).

Additionally, the second aim of this study was to research how through its playful and creative nature, art creates the perfect space for capturing the essence of things through metaphor. This caters for the emotional experience that usually cannot be experienced all at once, but rather experienced over a period of time, which in turn can be translated through subconscious memory and expressed through art. In this study, in fact, each participant picked up on aspects in the artworks which others have not. The beauty of metaphor is that it maintains the ability to have a deeper meaning than what can be perceived at its surface, making it versatile and adaptive as it recalls different memories and streams of thought that are within each different viewer (Epstein 2004).

The third aim of this research was to study how art can enhance the emotional development of a student. Results have shown that art can be the safe space to go to for self-reflection and quiet time, where the student can reflect on the current emotional state and process the fast-paced life which we currently live in. Additionally, art can prompt a creative attitude that is expressed through an exciting energy which enhances the capacity of communication and healthy social interactions (Rusu 2017). As such, it also fulfills the social development of the student. In this study, one participant in fact explained the experience of this project as “therapy”, whilst another participant described it as an “empowering experience”. Art instills a sense of mindfulness and emotional richness. It creates the chance to express a feeling and to be understood. This comes along with an emotional reassurance which is a basic need of humankind.

A very important comment expressed by a participant during this research was that it was their first art project which “was primarily expressive rather than technical”. This expresses the need for more opportunities in which students can apply expression in their artistic development. It is important to teach and learn the technical implementation of art to be able to master a medium. However, what is art without an authentic expression of what the artist truly thinks and feels? In the context of a VET Creative Arts Institute especially, this may be a point for educators to keep in mind when planning lessons. Learning how to combine the technical and the expressive aspects of art from the start creates a balance in the student’s learning journey and enhances self-development wholistically.

Considering this, directions for future research are various. Art with purpose can be an interesting investigation in order to identify how art can step away from the sole purpose of a decorative piece hung on a wall and instead become a medium for activism in society. As discussed in this study, communication through art can reach people of mixed cultures and languages, it can travel to places and may live longer than the artist might. Therefore, how can this versatility in art be implemented in education and society to bring about awareness and change?

In addition to this, another possible direction following this study can be to investigate the power of form and colour. This can delve deeply into how the combination of the two can unconsciously express emotions that are universally understood. How can emotions be expressed and interpreted through common ways? How can colour and form influence perceptions and emotions and how can this effect art interpretation as a follow-up of what was discussed in this research regarding social and emotional development?
Art is a versatile medium which can shape students to become smart beings with proficient self-knowledge as they learn from each other, join the community, and share the arts of living.

References


