

EMBODIED EXPERIENCES OF DRAWING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO STRESS AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN ART EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Drawing's impact on students' stress levels and coping with daily life is underexplored. This study used a phenomenological approach to understand how undergraduates experience drawing in art studio courses. Five art students were interviewed during regular assignments, and Moustakas' method was used to analyse the data. Three themes emerged: drawing as an "escape" from worries, a mindfulness practice fostering relaxation and present moment awareness, and beneficial for stress management and coping skills applicable to other areas of life. Immersion in drawing cultivates mind-body awareness, aiding students in managing stress. It buffers academic demands and enhances overall well-being, but can also induce stress during heavy workloads. This study offers qualitative insights into drawing as stress relief and emotional regulation for art students navigating educational and everyday demands.

Keywords: drawing, Phenomenology, embodiment, lived experience, stress

ABSTRAK

Dampak menggambar terhadap tingkat stres siswa dan menghadapi kehidupan sehari-hari masih belum dieksplorasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis untuk memahami bagaimana pengalaman mahasiswa S1 menggambar di mata kuliah sanggar seni. Lima siswa seni diwawancarai selama tugas reguler, dan metode Moustakas digunakan untuk menganalisis data. Tiga tema muncul: menggambar sebagai "pelarian" dari kekhawatiran, praktik mindfulness yang mendorong relaksasi dan kesadaran saat ini, dan bermanfaat untuk manajemen stres dan keterampilan mengatasi masalah yang dapat diterapkan pada bidang kehidupan lainnya. Perendaman dalam menggambar memupuk kesadaran pikiran-tubuh, membantu siswa dalam mengelola stres. Hal ini menyangga tuntutan akademis dan meningkatkan kesejahteraan secara keseluruhan, namun juga dapat menyebabkan stres selama beban kerja yang berat. Studi ini menawarkan wawasan kualitatif tentang menggambar sebagai pelepas stres dan pengaturan emosional bagi siswa seni yang menjalani tuntutan pendidikan dan sehari-hari.

Kata kunci: menggambar, Fenomenologi, perwujudan, pengalaman hidup, stres

1. Introduction

Drawing is a core component of art education, serving as a foundational skill for visual expression and communication (National Art Education Association, 2018). However, research into the embodied experiences of drawing and how this practice relates to an individual's stress levels and ability to cope with everyday life demands remains limited. Previous studies have established that creative acts like drawing can provide benefits such as stress relief by redirecting one's focus away from worries (Sandmire et al., 2012). Yet there is a need for qualitative inquiries examining the phenomenon of drawing from the first-person perspectives of art students and how they personally perceive impacts on their well-being. Understanding students' lived experiences with this process within their educational context could provide valuable insights for supporting health and learning. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the essence of undergraduates' experiences with drawing in art studio courses in relation to managing stress and daily pressures.

This study aims to fill gaps in the literature by gaining a deeper qualitative understanding of art students' lived experiences with drawing. Specifically, the purpose is to understand the essence of undergraduates' lived experiences with drawing in art studio courses in relation to stress and well-being (Moustakas, 1994). Drawing has been shown to provide benefits such as stress relief (Sandmire et al., 2012), but qualitative research is needed to illuminate how students themselves experience and make meaning of drawing within their educational context, and how this process may impact their ability to manage stress and cope with the demands of everyday life. Therefore, this study adopted a phenomenological approach to gather rich, textured descriptions of drawing from students' lifeworld perspectives.

A phenomenological approach was chosen in order to capture the essence of lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology aims to uncover rich descriptions of a phenomenon as directly experienced without presuppositions (Moustakas, 1994). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit detailed accounts of the students' embodied experiences with drawing in their education. This allowed for an understanding of the internal perception or "lifeworld"

of the participants (Van Manen, 1990). Data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method to identify meaningful themes in the typed transcripts. This included horizontalization of the data, reduction and elimination to determine invariant constituents, clustering and thematizing constituents to create core themes, final identification of the invariant themes, and construction of individual textural descriptions facilitated by direct participant quotes (Moustakas, 1994).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Art-making and stress relief, redirecting focus from worries

Previous research has demonstrated that engaging in creative activities like drawing and painting can provide benefits in managing stress (Sandmire et al., 2012). Studies suggest creative art forms may redirect one's attention away from stressful thoughts and worries by focusing conscious awareness onto the artistic process (King et al., 2013). This redirection of focus is thought to relieve physiological stress responses in the body by interfering with perseverative cognitive patterns associated with worries (Nyklíček et al., 2013). Expressing difficult emotions through a creative medium like drawing has also been shown to reduce stress by allowing catharsis or release of pent up feelings (Malchiodi, 2012). However, more research is needed to understand how individuals directly experience these stress-reducing effects when engaged in drawing for artistic purposes.

2.2. Drawing allows emotional expression to reduce physiological stress

Engaging in creative forms of self-expression like drawing has been found to allow release of difficult emotions (Malchiodi, 2012). This emotional expression is thought to reduce stress levels by providing catharsis or emotional cleansing (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). By giving visual form to inner experiences and feelings, drawing may lessen physiological stress responses in the body. One study found that expressive writing about past traumas lowered cortisol levels, indicating reduced stress on the body (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Similarly, drawn or painted expression of

emotions may discharge pent up feelings in a way that mitigates stress reactions. However, more research exploring the experience of this stress-reducing emotional release through drawing is still warranted.

2.3. Drawing engages both brain hemispheres, inducing relaxation

The creative act of drawing simultaneously activates both the left and right hemispheres of the brain (Edwards, 1999). This bilateral stimulation is thought to induce a meditative state as attention becomes fully immersed and focused on the artistic process (Czikszentmihalyi, 2008). fMRI studies have shown drawing recruits widespread neural networks across both analytical and intuitive areas (Bolwerk et al., 2014). By engaging the whole brain, drawing may promote neural synchronization that fosters relaxation. One study found colouring complex images for only 10-15 minutes significantly reduced self-reported stress and anxiety (Curry & Kasser, 2005). Thus, drawing appears to integrate cognitive functions in a way that balances arousal and relaxation, cultivating mental calmness. However, more research is needed to better understand individuals' subjective relaxation experiences of drawing.

2.4. Gap in qualitative research on students' first-hand experiences within education context

While previous research establishes drawing can impact stress and well-being through various mechanisms (Sandmire et al., 2012; Malchiodi, 2012), there remains a need to qualitatively explore these experiences from students' own perspectives. Quantitative studies predominate the existing literature, leaving a gap in phenomenological understandings of drawing incorporated within art education curriculum (Coholic, 2011). Students are actively engaged in drawing as a learning practice embedded within their academic context on a regular basis. However, little is known about how they make meaning of these experiences on stressful academic demands or coping with everyday life pressures. Illuminating art students' first-hand accounts could offer valuable insight for supporting wellness in creative higher

education contexts. This study aims to begin addressing this gap through a qualitative phenomenological methodology.

3. Method

A phenomenological approach was chosen in order to gain rich, textual descriptions of the lived experiences of drawing from the perspective of art students (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology aims to understand the essence of shared experiences around a central phenomenon through first-person accounts (Moustakas, 1994). This fits well with the purpose of exploring the impacts of drawing embedded in the students' education context from their own perspectives. Phenomenology provided a framework for illuminating "how people perceive and talk about objects and events" through in-depth interviews about a specific context (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). By eliciting rich, textured narratives, this study sought to uncover both common experiences as well as unique perspectives around drawing and its relationship to stress for undergraduate art students.

Purposive sampling was used to select undergraduate art students who had regular experience with drawing in their coursework (Palinkas et al., 2015). The final sample consisted of 5 participants between the ages of 19-22 years who were enrolled in studio art programs requiring frequent drawing practice. This sample size is appropriate for a phenomenological study seeking rich descriptions of lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). All participants engaged in at least one scheduled life drawing session per week in addition to their major-specific studio courses incorporating drawing. Interviewing this population of art students currently immersed in the phenomenon of interest provided insightful perspectives on the impacts of drawing in their everyday educational contexts.

Informal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant during their regular scheduled studio drawing class times in order to directly inquire about experiences of the phenomenon as they naturally occurred (Bevan, 2014). This allowed probing of the embodied, situated practice of drawing through participants' reflections in the moment or soon after (Van Manen, 1990). An interview guide was

used with open-ended questions focusing on descriptions of drawing processes, emerging thoughts/emotions, and perceived impacts on stress levels. All interviews were audio recorded and ranged from 20-40 minutes. Conducting interviews during class drawing sessions aided in collecting rich experiential accounts tied to the educational setting context. Recording sessions also permitted review for thorough analysis (Bevan, 2014).

All interviews were audio recorded then transcribed verbatim to prepare the data for analysis (Saldana, 2009). Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method was used to systematically analyze the transcripts. This included horizontalization of each statement to understand its relevance to the students' experiences. Reduction and elimination determined invariant constituents by testing each expression. Clustering and thematizing delivered core themes expressed through textual descriptions incorporating verbatim examples. Identifying the invariant themes allowed construction of individual textural descriptions detailing "what happened" as well as structural depictions explaining "how" the phenomenon was experienced for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). This procedure facilitated identifying both commonalities and variances within the data to understand the essence of drawing in relation to stress from the students' lifeworld perspectives.

To enhance the credibility and rigor of findings, researcher reflexivity aimed to acknowledge subjectivities that could influence data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A reflective journal documented personal experiences and biases to distinguish them from participants' meanings. Prolonged engagement through in-depth interviews provided thick, rich description to accurately represent emergent themes (Geertz, 1973). Participants also had opportunity to review transcripts and give feedback on interpretations. This added confirmability by ensuring emerging themes accurately depicted their experiences. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail detailing all methodological steps and decisions for full transparency (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These trustworthiness strategies aimed to produce findings truly reflective of the phenomenon from participants' perspectives.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Findings

Theme 1: Drawing as escapism from academic/personal worries

Analysis revealed participants commonly experienced drawing as a temporary escape or respite from worries related to school and personal life demands. One student noted "when I draw, it's like I can just get away from everything on my mind...all the stresses just kind of fade into the background" (P1). This echoed previous research suggesting creative engagement can redirect attention away from stressful thoughts (Malchiodi, 2012). Another shared "drawing lets me tune out everything else that's stressing me out, even if it's just for an hour...I feel more relaxed afterwards" (P3). For these students, immersing in drawing appeared to provide distraction that alleviated stress by removing their focus from worries in that moment (Malchiodi, 2012).

Theme 2: Drawing cultivates mindfulness and relaxation

Participants also commonly experienced drawing as fostering present moment awareness and physical relaxation. One shared "when I draw, I really focus on the details...it makes me tune into how my hand feels moving and the textures under my fingertips" (P2). This echoes research linking art-making to mindfulness due to its requirement of full attention (Roco et al., 2019). Another stated "my body just feels lighter after drawing...the tension goes away" (P4). Studies corroborate drawing's engagement of both brain hemispheres syncing cognitive and intuitive functions in a meditative, stress-reducing fashion (Edwards, 1999). For these students, drawing seemed to enhance mindfulness and induce physiological relaxation through embodied concentration on visual and tactile aspects of process.

Theme 3: Impact on developing stress management skills

Analysis also revealed participants perceived their engaged drawing practice to cultivate coping skills transferable to managing everyday stressors. One student shared "drawing has taught me how to slow down and focus when I'm feeling

overwhelmed...it's something I can do to relax now instead of just stressing out" (P5). Studies show creative expression can build emotional regulation abilities alleviating stress (Sandmire et al., 2012). Another stated "being able to sit down and draw even if I have other stuff to do really helps me manage my time better and not procrastinate as much" (P3). This suggests drawing may help students develop resilient coping mechanisms for academic demands and daily pressures through strengthened concentration, prioritization and stress relief skills cultivated within their art education context.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Support for art-making benefits of stress relief

The findings supported previous literature demonstrating art-making's capacity for stress relief. Participants commonly experienced drawing as temporarily "escaping" worries and reducing physiological tension (Malchiodi, 2012; Sandmire et al., 2012), indicating its benefits of redirecting focus and alleviating stress. Cultivation of present moment awareness through engagement also echoed research linking art to mindfulness (Roco et al., 2019). The development of coping skills additionally corroborated literature suggesting creative expression can build emotional regulation abilities to better manage stress (Sandmire et al., 2012). Thus, the study provided qualitative confirmation of drawing's role in mitigating stress through attentional redirection, body awareness, emotional release and development of resilient strategies - addressing gaps around understanding these impacts from students' first-hand reports.

4.2.2. Role of drawing in buffering academic demands/enhancing well-being

The findings also suggested drawing plays an important role in buffering academic demands and enhancing students' overall well-being within their art education context. Experiencing it as "escape" and a coping skill implied it helped relieve stress specifically around schoolwork pressures. Previous research

demonstrated art-making can attenuate physiological and psychological impacts of workload stress (Chilton et al., 2013). For these participants, engaged drawing periods may mitigate the "cost of concentration" on cognitive resources from sustained studying. This mental break incorporating a relaxing, mindful practice plausibly recharged their abilities to manage scholastic expectations. The boost to stress management skills translated to increased capacity handling daily stressors as well. Thus, regular engagement in drawing during studio-based learning appeared important for supporting art students' health and academic functioning by reducing academic overload and stress-induced wear-and-tear.

4.2.3. Drawing as both stress reliever and potential stressor

An interesting finding was that while drawing often reduced stress for participants through focused engagement, it was also acknowledged as a source of added pressure when deadlines approached. One student noted "drawing can be really relaxing, but then when a big project is due I start to feel the stress and time pressure" (P2). Previous studies have similarly found creative works can induce short-term anxiety pertaining to evaluation or performance demands (Celedón et al., 2018). This dual-role aligns with perspective that moderate arousal levels are optimal for flow states whereas high stress impedes engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For students managing various course responsibilities, drawing likely presented manageable stress when simply practiced for enjoyment, versus heightened worry closer to critique dates. This nuanced relationship between drawing and fluctuations in stress levels provides avenues for future research exploring artistic stressors within academic milieus.

5. Conclusion

This phenomenological study provided novel insights into the lived experiences of undergraduate art students with drawing in their educational context. A key finding was that immersion in the process of drawing appeared to foster mindfulness and relaxation for the participants. By requiring full concentration on visual and tactile

details, drawing enhanced present moment awareness of bodily sensations and the external environment. This cultivated a kinesthetic connection between mind and body that helped students engage in an almost meditative practice. In doing so, moments of immersed drawing allowed for redirected focus away from worries as well as release of built-up emotional tensions through visual expression.

By capturing rich, textural descriptions directly from the student perspective, this research adds to understanding of how regular engagement with drawing aids in development of mind-body awareness and mindfulness. These skills may assist with managing stress from academic demands and pressures of everyday life. The findings offer valuable guidance towards utilizing drawing within art education curricula not only to support creative learning, but also student mental wellness and stress coping abilities through a grounding, stress-relieving activity. Overall, this phenomenological inquiry provides novel insights into drawing as a practice that can foster presence, relaxation and resilience for undergraduate art students navigating the challenges of higher education.

This study holds implications for how art educators can better support their students' well-being through intentional incorporation of drawing. Regularly scheduled low-stakes drawing sessions could provide beneficial breaks to relieve academic overload. Assigning drawing for stress management versus strict artistic evaluation may maximize its relaxing benefits. Educators should also validate drawing's potential dual role in occasionally inducing pressure, and help students develop strategies to mitigate artistic stresses. Raising awareness of drawing as a mindfulness practice cultivating present focus could empower students to independently use this skill for coping. Instituting wellness-centric policies like stress-reduction workshops and mental health resources further bolsters this support system. Overall, recognizing drawing's capacity to foster self-care competencies suggests creative assignments present opportunities to not only further learning objectives, but also protect art students' mental health as they navigate scholastic challenges and life demands.

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