

## Advances in phototherapy training

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### Abstract

Although phototherapy has been around in one form or another since the advent of the camera it has only recently, with the wider use and lower prices of computers and digital editing equipment, taken on more universal interest within the art therapy community as a viable new modality for art therapists who have not, in the past, had the resources available to implement a more traditional film-based phototherapy component in their practice. This paper demonstrates the integration of digital media into the training of phototherapists within graduate-level art therapy training programs. While the examples and illustrations given here are of graduate students enrolled in masters-level art therapy training programs, these exercises may be modified for use with various client populations. This paper addresses the need of those creative art therapists who are currently in practice and have not had the advantage of benefiting from the advances in digital technology that currently enrolled students have had.

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### Introduction

This paper will first present an historical overview of the development of phototherapy with specific emphasis on the integration of digital technology in the training of graduate-level art therapy students. A description of this training, including the use of online communication to complement classroom interaction and vignettes from student papers along with illustrative images, will be included. While the paper provides a listing of phototherapy techniques that have been used in this training, a discussion of ways in which these techniques can also be modified for use with a variety of client populations will be offered.

### Historical overview

For the past 30 years I have explored the use of photographic media within the framework of art therapy and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. My early work began with my affiliation with Marcia Schiff of the Polaroid Foundation during the 1970s and 1980s. As Clinical Director of the Henry Street Settlement School I received financial and equipment grants from the Polaroid Foundation to explore the use of the “instant” photographic media with troubled inner-city adolescents. The documentation of this work required annual reports to the foundation that evolved into a series of clinical case studies that were published in *The Arts in Psychotherapy* throughout the 1970s (Wolf, 1976, 1978). These articles were eventually condensed into a chapter in *Phototherapy in Mental Health*, edited by Krauss

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and Fryrear and published by Charles C. Thomas in 1983 (Wolf, 1983), followed by another article (Wolf, 1990) that began to document the use of 35 mm darkroom photography in phototherapy training and clinical practice.

In 1981, I left the Settlement and began formally teaching phototherapy to graduate art therapy students at the College of New Rochelle, using a darkroom with 35 mm black and white film media and equipment. We created a sequence of phototherapy and photography courses that, upon completion, allowed students to specialize in phototherapy training. This evolution, from Polaroid to 35 mm film, allowed students to work with larger format images than the original Polaroid film had permitted and to integrate creative darkroom procedures into their therapeutic work.

Over more recent years we changed over to predominantly digital media and technology, utilizing Mac/PC classrooms equipped with Adobe Photoshop software, at both The College of New Rochelle and now also at Pratt Institute. This transition allowed even further integration of creative elements that were not possible with more traditional darkroom photography. Realizing the need for practicing art therapists, who are no longer in training, to also have an opportunity to update their knowledge of phototherapy, I also offered a series of “Digital Phototherapy Training Seminars” to interested professionals in the New York City area. These seminars have been well attended and reflect a strong interest among practicing art therapists and other mental health professionals in learning about and utilizing this new modality. As it becomes easier to find funds for computers and software than it has been for setting up a full darkroom within an art therapy facility, more and more clinicians have turned to digital phototherapy as a new and viable creative modality. This increased interest has been the inspiration for this article.

Phototherapy is a relatively new specialization within the field of art therapy and psychotherapy. Although its initial use was predominantly documentary in nature—psychiatrists would take photographs of mental patients before and after treatment—we have evolved and integrated photographic media within the structure of the psychotherapeutic sessions enabling the client to create powerful visual metaphors that are then used to achieve deeper self-understanding and personal insight. Even as this article will concentrate on the process of phototherapy training for graduate art therapy students, it is important to be aware that many of the exercises described here may also be modified for direct use with art therapy and psychotherapy clients. By offering the opportunity to explore creative phototherapy projects and, as needed, providing the technical support necessary to develop proficiency in digital editing, we can demonstrate to students how these techniques work and provide *visceral* experiences that serve to inform them of the power of this modality on an *affective* as well as cognitive level (Wolf, 1990). We propose that an important part of an art therapy/phototherapy experience should involve the development of creativity and not focus just on pathology. This approach is consistent with the concept of self-actualization, as described by the Human Potential Movement spearheaded by writers/clinicians such as Maslow in the 1960s (Maslow, 1967) and ego psychologists, e.g. the Blanks, in the 1980s (Blank & Blank, 1979). Sublimation, which is what we are trained to help develop in our clients, is seen by ego psychologists as the highest level of ego defense mechanisms and as such, is the least restrictive. As art therapists we have a unique opportunity to help our clients focus on enhancing their emotional health through introspection and insight by helping to develop their creativity.

### **The structure of the phototherapy training**

#### *“ANGEL” intranet forum*

An important part of the course structure is the participation in our “online forum.” Students are assigned projects that they must post online on a weekly basis. At The College of New Rochelle we utilize ANGEL academic software that enables students to post images and descriptive statements of their work as well as receive feedback from classmates. Technical support and other types of feedback are also provided through this mechanism. We encourage students to offer their feedback in the form of “If this were my image it would mean . . . to me,” similar to the method of processing dream material proposed by Ullman. This technique provides a structure where students can receive supportive feedback in a non-intrusive manner and promotes optimal use of the online forum (Ullman & Zimmerman, 1987).

#### *In class critiques*

The online forum is used in conjunction with several in-class mini-critique sessions where students have an opportunity to present their projects in a finished form and receive face-to-face group feedback. The online experience gives students an opportunity to warm up for the more intimate in-class experiences. These in-class critique sessions are often profoundly powerful experiences for all participants.

### *Phototherapy training assignments*

As part of a series of phototherapy courses, offered within the graduate art therapy degree program, students are given a list of possible projects from which they are assigned or select several to work on throughout the semester. As part of a master's degree program, all students have been prescreened and are now ready for this type of intensive learning experience.

While it is beyond the focus and scope of this paper to explore this in great detail, it is interesting to think about how the following exercises may be modified for application with different client populations. The instructions might be simplified or elaborated for specific clients or groups but the actual processing would be where the therapist would need to evaluate a client's ego functioning in order to create an appropriate therapeutic environment, uniquely suited for their client. The client's capacity for insight, introspection and self-awareness would determine the extent and depth of this processing. Some clients would benefit from simply an ego supportive experience, while others might benefit from a more in-depth approach. Other variables also need to be taken into account when planning to implement any of the following directives with actual patients. First, their technical skill or ability to learn technical processes must be assessed. As this may vary from client to client, care should be taken to not overwhelm or frustrate clients. Potential for acting out must also be assessed and precautions taken to prevent damage to equipment. Also, availability and access to equipment may influence the actual structure of these experiences. If the number of cameras, computer terminals and printers is limited, the structure of these activities must be modified for practical reasons. The therapist may then need to take the photographs, print them out in hard copy and then have a group use traditional art materials to modify and elaborate the images. In these instances, the spontaneity of the digital technology, rather than the creative use of editing software, would be the main advantage over more traditional film photography.

Having graduate students experience these exercises as part of their training is to provide them with a powerfully significant emotional experience that will enable them to understand, on a visceral level, what their clients would inevitably experience. This prepares these future therapists to be better able to objectively evaluate and design appropriate modifications in the following directives, to best suit the needs and abilities of their clients.

### *List of suggested creative projects*

The following is a list of possible projects for our graduate students to choose from. While they are listed here in a digital format, they may be modified, as described above, to fit more specific client needs or equipment limitations:

1. *"Self" portraits*: Create a photographic portrait leaving space for a larger white background area. Using digital elaboration, write or draw a reaction to what you see, directly on the photo.
2. *Collages*: Use digital editing functions to create collages that express visual metaphors or express a particular feeling. You may wish to combine these photos with other art media.
3. *Creative constructions*: Create three-dimensional constructs using images printed on paper and then laminated to cardboard or foamcore. Explore various methods of construction and design some method to exhibit your constructs.
4. *Childhood snapshot reconstructions*: Re-photograph using a copystand or digitally scan a series of childhood snapshots then, using creative techniques, reconstruct the photos in a new way. Use a combination of digital editing techniques and visual art materials.
5. *True-self, false-self portrait*: Using a variety of digital editing functions, create a pair of photographs, one that represents aspects of your "true self" and one that represents your "false self."
6. *Self-image construct*: Using a variety of digital editing functions, create a photographic construct that symbolically represents your self-image.
7. *Creative concept elaboration*: Take one or more theoretical terms, such as transitional object or projective identification, and create a photograph that symbolically represents how you understand that concept.
8. *Creative dyad*: Pick a partner, set up and photograph a pose where you are both interacting. Digitally elaborate in a way that communicates or emphasizes some aspect of this relationship.
9. *Monster-self*: Using a variety of digital editing functions create yourself as a monster.

10. *Creative home*: Photograph your current or childhood home. Laminate photographs of the exterior and interior to cardboard or foamcore and make a miniature reconstruction. Creatively elaborate in a way that changes the environment.
11. *Creative portrait poster*: Create a full-size photograph of yourself holding a blank paper in front of your body. Once the photo is printed, using digital editing functions or art materials, draw in the blank space indicating how you see yourself or how you would like your body to look.
12. *Inside/outside self constructs*: Using photographs mounted to cardboard or foam-core, create box-like structures that reflect how you experience your inner self and also how you present yourself to the outside world, in one combined form.
13. *Creative story*: Tell something which you have never before been able to tell about yourself through photography. This may be done in one photographic image or several, in a “story board” format.
14. *Photo-book*: Using a sequence of photographs and digital art media, create a book that tells a significant story about yourself.
15. *First memory photo*: Using digital editing functions create a photographic image of your very first memory.
16. *Dream photo*: Using digital editing functions create a photographic image of a dream.
17. *Superhero*: Using a photographic image of yourself use creative digital editing functions to create a superhero and describe your unique super powers.
18. *Group/family portrait*: Photograph your family or group. Develop some creative way to have members react to themselves and/or other family members by elaboration on the photographic image with art materials or digitally.
19. *Transparency elaboration*: Print an image on a piece of transparent photographic media and creatively explore the material.

### *Integration of digital technology*

The following are just a few more detailed examples of how digital media and editing processes are integrated into these exercises. Students are simultaneously taught how to use digital editing software while exploring projects that are designed to elicit unconscious material.

#### *First memory or dream photo*

Use a variety of photographic images and art material to create an image that represents either a dream or your first memory.

Digital editing functions that may be used for this project:

- a. Open a photo to be used as a background for this image. Adjust the image size.
- b. Open other photos that you wish to add to the original background. Use the magnetic lasso or magic wand tool to select parts from the secondary photos that you wish to add to the background. Use the move tool to relocate these images. Use either the “Control T” (in a PC environment) or “Apple T” (in an Apple environment) key to transform the image to correct size and position.
- c. Use the Opacity function from each layer to adjust the visibility of each.
- d. Use the paintbrush tool to elaborate.
- e. Flatten layers.
- f. Use the Smudge tool to blend forms together.

#### *Body language exploration*

Choose a full body image of yourself. Remove the figure from the background. Place the image onto a new white background. Take a few moments to carefully look at the image. Imagine that this figure is NOT you. Examine the body language and let your imagination find a new place and activity for “this person.” Use your digital tools to elaborate on where this person is and what they are doing.

Digital editing functions that could be used for this exercise:

- a. Create a blank new canvas.
- b. Use magnetic lasso to outline the figure from your first image.



Fig. 1. Faces in a tree.

- c. Use the move tool to relocate the image onto the new blank canvas.
- d. Use the paintbrush to draw in a new background in the blank space left around the original image.
- e. Use Control “T” or Apple “T” Transform tool to resize and reposition the figure.
- f. Use the Liquefy function to add any desired distortion to the figure.

#### *Autobiographical book cover/CD cover design*

Select a photograph of yourself and use it in a design for either a cover for an autobiography of your life or a CD of music that you have written and/or recorded.

Digital editing functions that might be used for this exercise:

- a. All of the above tools in previous exercises plus the Typography tool.
- b. Go to “Filter” dropdown menu and explore the various creative functions to create artistic effects.
- c. Go to “Image” drop-down menu and go to “Adjust” to find another drop down menu. Explore the various functions available there, especially the “Levels,” “Posterize” and “Curves” functions.

#### *Sample of a student’s online project*

Some projects were assigned to students directly from the ANGEL website, completed at home, and posted back on ANGEL for feedback. In this example of a posting the student wrote:

“For my first online assignment I chose to create multiple images of my face growing from a tree, looking down at one of my faces falling from the tree (Fig. 1).

As I reflected on the image I thought of apples ripening and falling from the branches of a tree. When they are ready and ripe, they will fall on their own. I related the image and associations to my current stage in life as a graduate student. It was the beginning of my final semester of college. I was near the point of graduation and was nearly finished with my studies and internship. I was ripening and becoming ready to fall from the tree, which was symbolic of the nurturance I received from my classes and supervisors. I was becoming ready to provide nurturance to the clients who I will eventually work with. It also symbolized loss, as I was working on detaching myself from unhealthy personal relationships.”

#### *The challenge of the online forum*

Sometimes students found the online forum to be difficult to get used to. It can both stimulate resistance and/or promote self-disclosure. These feelings need to be expressed in order for students to use this forum effectively. The

anonymity and emotional distance created by the technology required some time to get used to. We encouraged its use as a way to warm up for in class processing and not as an alternative to this most powerful, face-to-face group experience.

The following description of this process was taken from a student's term paper:

I found that the online forum was a double-edged sword. There was a peculiar sense of safety, detachment, and distance to posting work online; I could be in the comfort of my own home, collecting my thoughts and then express them in an organized and effective manner. However, there is no substitute for human contact, non-verbal cues, and a group of people working together. At times I felt that the online forum was a way to hide and not participate as much, which bothered me a bit. But in a way it was good for me because I felt more comfortable. It was sometimes easier to open up when there wasn't a big group of people I didn't know, looking at me. It was beneficial to first view the material of my classmates online to get a sense of their style and content before working together in a group setting. Since I was already familiar with their work it gave me a chance to recognize their patterns. After some time, I found myself checking the forum on a daily basis; excited to see the artwork of my classmates and to read their comments to my postings. Photoshop grew on me, and I decided to purchase the program. I began to enjoy not having to clean up a mess after I had created artwork. It was more time-efficient with my busy schedule and I was able to distort and enhance images in ways that would not be possible with a paintbrush. I was especially happy when I was able to scan a painting that I had previously made and "enhance" it by using the advanced editing functions in Photoshop. Although it was originally of my own physical making, integrating it with digital technology made it even better. Working through the resistance of using the online forum and Photoshop was difficult, but well worth it.

#### *Further online project processing*

The student continued in her journal: "I created a collage of images for my ideal self. The image that I chose to post online was that of a bright outline of an angel against a black background, with a bird resting on its wing (Fig. 2). This image had significance for me."

Although the scene was dark and unknowing, she felt hopeful and able to support the bird, which symbolized freedom, hope and the ability to rise above situations. However, she was just an outline and barely visible. "I felt like I could put the image over myself, like a coat, and wear it as a protective shield from the darkness, which symbolized depression. One of my classmates posted a very helpful comment stating that if it were her piece, it would represent being secretive and hiding. The theme of hiding had surfaced again. Perhaps as a defense, I rationalized hiding aspects of myself in order to defend against my fear of rejection, judgments or abuse. My 'bad self' was an image of my face with a bleak and sad expression (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Angel.



Fig. 3. Sad self.

The face was white and surrounded by black. I took the photograph when I was depressed, and I hated the way I felt. I felt self-pity, self-doubt, self-hatred, pessimistic, trapped, angry, and lethargic. Depression has always been in and out of my life and my ideal self is able to fight it off, work through it, and have hope. My “bad self” is trapped inside of it; unmoving. I presented the collages to my classmates, and I became emotional for the first time towards one of my phototherapy pieces. The images on the “bad self” collage had to do with patterns of abuse that have been handed down, generation to generation, in my family. My grandmother was physically and emotionally abused, as was my mother, as were my sisters and as I was, when I had, in the past, chosen to involve myself in abusive relationships. I never want to go back to that place and I never want to repeat that pattern. I spoke about my sister and her addiction, my mother’s co-dependency, my father’s abuse towards her and my survivor’s guilt. The class was extremely supportive and offered compassionate feedback which helped me to see that it was okay for me to not make the same decisions that they made and continue to choose to make.”

#### *In class processing of student sample project*

The following is a wonderful example of how photographic and mental images can be integrated with other creative art modalities, such as drawing and dramatic role-play, and processed in the classroom in a way that facilitates an affective, visceral learning experience. This student wrote in her term paper:

This assignment was to depict a ‘first memory’ in the form of a photograph. I came to class prepared to do a piece about one of my few very early memories, of being 3 1/2, starting nursery school, standing apart, watching the other children play together, feeling overwhelmed by their energy and not being able to enter in. This vivid ‘snapshot’ memory is symbolic for me of the beginning of many years of alienation and feeling like an outsider, that made up my elementary school experience and imprinted me for future situations with groups.

As I tried to create an image of this, the piece evolved differently than my memory, more symbolically. I had to use what photos of myself I could find, not quite the same age, not wearing the right outfits, and seeing me head-on instead of from the back, as I originally pictured it (Fig. 4).

I had to draw the rest of the children and the room by hand. The black and white photo of me looks almost like a ghost, standing to one side of the action while the children seem oblivious. But the atmosphere of the room is orderly and peaceful, unlike my memory. It doesn’t feel right. In order to convey the sense of my alienation and separateness I drew a metal fence enclosing me; a barricade. The result is totally different from my spatial memory, a re-interpretation, a metaphoric truth.



Fig. 4. Nursery school I.

I wanted to try again, so I did a second version for the next class to try to get a better sense of the jagged energy that I remembered. Instead of drawing, I created the room and children from a cut-paper collage, in bright colors, again a symbolic representation repeating the caged child motif. A different photo, even younger, makes my vulnerability more visible. The contrast with the hard, bright jagged shapes, increases the tension. The environment is flat and decorative, unlike the deep perspective in the first drawing. But I am 3 dimensional in my box. So only I am ‘real’ (the opposite of being a ghost at the scene.) And the bright zig-zags are chaotic and frenetic. The children are more active and energized. The little girl feels like a soft person, the environment like threatening energy. I liked this version much better.

In class, I was the first to offer to work with my two images. I usually don’t offer to work in classes, feeling I don’t belong there either! So it was perfect that the theme of my early memory was that of being an outsider in the group. Recently, the same theme had come up in another class: the role of the watcher, the defense of superiority, the fear/shame of revealing needs. Yet, amazingly, this hadn’t been conscious when I chose that memory for this project.

In the discussion some interesting details came up: the ‘accidental’ cut off arm of my father holding me in his lap and the significance of his “over-holding” in constructing this identity of mine, intensifying my fear and caution. I saw how much his overprotection (as Bob pointed out, in contrast to the archetypal role of the father) prevented my taking risks as I grew up. Bob also noticed that my cage had gotten smaller and less emphatic in the second image (Fig. 5).

Then he asked me if I’d be willing to do an “enactment.” I hesitated, fully expecting his intention to be to recreate my childhood trauma. I imagined that I would be confronted by boisterous or attacking students and would have to find the courage I never had as a child, to push through the challenge instead of being defeated by it. I didn’t want to do any ‘overcoming’ that morning, but I was also curious and said I’d give it a try. Bob asked me to leave the room and wait outside until invited back in. When I came in I was greeted by a very different kind of experience: It wasn’t me that was expected to change, it was my environment. Bob had instructed the students to greet me with pleasure and enthusiasm, with words of joy and affection. I was not expecting the sweetness and simplicity of just being welcomed. It took me by surprise. I’m familiar with the concept of corrective emotional experience in therapy, but I didn’t expect it for *me*, especially from a group. In classes I’d perpetuated my ‘outsider’ experience by not asking to work; not asking for help; not expecting the group to want to take time with my needs; only presenting my strength and my intellect and rarely my vulnerability.

I was very touched by this experience. It was a sweet, gentle lesson. It was also a wonderful example of how to quickly and skillfully take the art experience to an even deeper level through dramatic enactment, which I see has the potential to be extremely powerful and transformative in its directness.





Fig. 5. Nursery school II.

### *Final term paper*

The final paper is a summary of the students' experiences during the semester. It contains reflections of the online and in-class processing of projects, interactions with classmates and discussions of experience in learning the new technology. This serves as an opportunity for reflection and integration of what has been for many an emotionally powerful and intensely challenging learning experience. The following is a segment taken from a student's final paper:

"Writing this paper was more helpful than I thought it would be. I was very resistant to the process of digital phototherapy, learning Photoshop, and writing this paper. It was challenging to deeply analyze my own work and integrate it into my consciousness. It was well worth it because I feel as though I understand myself and my art more deeply. My images touched other people and their's touched me as well. Learning the stories of other people's lives can touch us in deep ways because we can feel profoundly and empathically understood. This experience also provided inspirational insight into others. I cried and became very emotional when I processed some of these pieces.

At first, with some projects, I did not feel anything. Perhaps I wasn't ready. I learned that if I feel numb towards something it's most likely my way of hiding or covering up feelings that I don't want to experience. I learned that new things are often difficult but if I persevere, there can be great rewards and a sense of accomplishment. I got to "play" and make artwork in a way I hadn't known how to before. This process was very interesting and unlike any other I had ever gone through."

### **Summary**

Phototherapy has been around in one form or another since the advent of the camera. It has only recently, with the wider use and lower prices of computers and digital editing equipment, taken on more universal interest within the art therapy community as a viable new modality. In the past, the implementation of phototherapy within a therapeutic environment required the physical establishment of a photographic darkroom, and art therapists typically did not have the resources available to implement this type of film based phototherapy component in their practice.

The illustrative vignettes described in this paper have demonstrated the integration of digital media into the training of phototherapists. While these examples and illustrations have been taken from graduate students enrolled in masters-level art therapy training programs, the exercises offered here may be modified for use with various client populations in a variety of clinical settings.

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