

## Introduction: Art as a bridge

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Authors	Prior, Ross W.;Kossack, Mitchell;Fisher, Teresa A
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# **Applied Arts and Health: Building Bridges Across Arts, Therapy, Health, Education, and Community**

Ross W. Prior, Mitchell Kossak and Teresa A. Fisher

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: Art as a Bridge**

By Ross W. Prior, Mitchell Kossak and Teresa A. Fisher

Although the formal exchange between disciplines is often limited and fragmentary, practitioners across a vast array of disciplines may encounter blocks to finding solutions and commonality when restricted by artificial boundaries and closed ways of viewing problems. The fields which draw upon the use of artistic processes to bring healing, foster prevention, and education have at their core ways of ‘depicting the human condition’ and ‘multiple ways of knowing’ (Kossak 2013: 20). In many respects, the call to metaphorically build bridges across disciplines (Prior 2018a) is simply to echo the holistic understandings of the ancients and to mend the bridges that have been broken over time. The long-standing acknowledgement of the therapeutic value of the arts is evidenced in the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus, a spiritual place visited by the ancient Greeks to pay tribute to Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing in ancient Greek mythology, and to ask the gods for remedies for their physical ailments. Epidaurus was built around the third century BC and it is adorned with a multitude of buildings, the most famous of which is the ancient acoustic marvel the ‘Theatre of Epidaurus’. Epidaurus was a healing centre as well as a cultural centre – the two purposes closely entwined in ancient times and these art-based healing traditions had an integrated function (Prior 2010: 3). However, over time the world lost sight of this vital connection. A disassociation between human activity and well-being became a somewhat accepted societal norm. However, since the early 2000s, there has been an exponential growth in academic and community reinterest in the use of art – all artforms – for health and well-being benefits.

Despite exponential growth, challenges continue and in 2020 the world was rapidly plunged into the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). The pandemic brought fear, enormous tragedy, and a cessation of many of the activities we had previously taken for granted. By necessity, we had to change how we went about our daily lives. Humanity reacted by finding solutions to the ever-growing range of problems that the pandemic precipitated. We relied upon creative responses to enable us to function as best we could. Although the impact on the arts and entertainment industries was profound, it was in and through the arts that we found comfort. Many activities moved to online platforms, which afforded opportunities of reaching new audiences and included more participants than ever before. Many of us navigated our way through the successes and failures of this ‘brave new world’ with and through the arts.

While the arts have provided much solace across a wide spectrum of disciplines, there continue to be barriers across the bridges that connect us. This book advances new relational accounts of normative concepts which challenge widely held assumptions that cause academics and institutions to compartmentalize thinking into discipline silos and into that of practice and theory. We start this book by articulating the central role of the applied arts to health but then broaden this view to bridge therapy, education, and community. It is within the applied arts and health movement that there has been an increasing blurring of self-referential practices to truly value and release the creative energies engendered through the use of art in all its forms. Multi-model expressive practices offer ways of connecting a variety of creative approaches, moving us from the narrow frames of reference that science alone affords and builds bridges between the two.

Connectedness is discussed throughout this book largely from an interdisciplinary perspective, encompassing theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence developed within the natural world. The cross-disciplinary emphasis on the substantial role of interconnectedness in shaping living systems and human communities is highlighted. Taking into account these interdisciplinary convergences and empirical evidence obtained from the various sources reported and reflected upon within this edited volume, this book is structured into four sections: Section 1: Artistic Evidence, Section 2: Understanding through Artistic Practice, Section 3: Working Together, and Section 4: Widening the Field.

In the first section, Artistic Evidence, the four chapters invite readers to consider how art is itself a form of ‘data’ that provides us with valuable information about how we engage with the world, make meaning of our varied life experiences, be it dealing with a health crisis, overcoming trauma, or a host of other situations. It begins with a compelling chapter from Shaun McNiff laying the foundation for art being the evidence followed by a chapter from Mitchell Kossak reminding readers of the importance of art in our lives. The section concludes with two chapters that ably demonstrate art-based research and argue for why this approach was so valuable for participants and researchers alike, highlighting just how and why art is the evidence.

The second section, Understanding through Artistic Practice, takes this discussion to the next logical step of exploring how we can learn through art rather than relying solely on surveys, interviews, and other such measures. The first chapter, from Malcolm Ross, offers a thoughtful and inspiring reflection on human existence that sets the stage for the three chapters that follow, each of which offers a discussion on a particular project. In these projects it was discovered that the exploration through art fundamentally shaped what was learned, was essential to the experience for participants and facilitators alike, and/or influenced how future work would be designed.

The third section, Working Together, builds upon the previous two sections to offer four specific case studies of art-based research in which project facilitators worked with the participants to move the work forward. These chapters help demonstrate the effectiveness of

building bridges in art-based research, particularly when facilitators utilize the art to identify participants' areas of interest and need when shaping the direction of collaborative work.

The fourth and final section, Widening the Field, explores the possibilities with the art-based research field. It begins with a chapter exploring how old folk knowledge once discarded in favour of evidence-based research has important lessons to teach us, especially for art-based research. It continues with a chapter in which five art-based researchers/mental health practitioners examine their practice and research looking at how they can expand and understand their work. The final two chapters look at how their art-based work can expand understanding in a specific area – the ageing process and reading as a form of building community.

Through building metaphoric bridges, the philosophy of inter-connectedness is considered by this volume's various authors as a crucial aspect of the prominent sources of meaning in daily life, as well as the core essence of meaning itself. This approach offers the possibility to explore applied arts from a unifying perspective, overcoming disciplinary boundaries and opening new avenues for research both inside and outside of formal education and practice.

#### *Defining applied arts and health*

Throughout this book, there is a reference to the term 'applied arts and health' which is a term initially used by Ross Prior in the first editorial of the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health*. In that editorial the term is introduced as a more precise nomenclature for the field than 'arts and health', explaining that: 'Arts which are applied to a purpose outside of their usual context can be termed "applied arts" which defines them more clearly than the use of the term "arts" alone' (Prior 2010: 4). The key to this definition is the intentionality of the application of art in and for health and was chosen as the title of the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* to best reflect this nuanced work. The journal, conceived in 2009 and first published in 2010, was a revolution in the field and firmly continues to be so today.

The origins of the term 'applied arts' were already well established within design art and craft where the application of a form to everyday objects gave them a function such as, for example, a teapot or chair. Subsequently the term 'applied arts and health' has come to encompass a broad and unified understanding that highlights the intentionality of the use of all art forms. Bringing about social and personal changes is at the heart of the work with art acting as the *invitation* (as opposed to the uncomfortable use of the term 'intervention' by some authors) to make those changes to improve health and well-being. The term 'applied arts and health' has offered deep resonance to those who work within the field who have a clear understanding of the way art heals and offers a stimulus for transformation. It also assists those from outside the field to appreciate the distinctive application of artistic forms and their creation to a process rather than viewing art as a resolved, finished and perfected product alone.

In a similar way, the term 'expressive arts' has given prominence to experience inspiration and enjoyment and to develop skills in art and design, dance, drama, language arts/poetry,

and music to recognize and represent feelings and emotions, both their own and those of others as a vehicle of potential change. 'Expressive arts' has always implied there is an interrelatedness between all art forms, each influencing and connecting to another; in a sense each art form has the potential to build a bridge to another. As Karen Estrella (2006: 183) explains, 'Expressive therapists use a multimodal approach – at times working with the arts in sequence, at other times using the arts simultaneously, and at still other times carefully transitioning from one art form to another within the therapeutic encounter'.

### *Art as a conduit for togetherness*

As we know, education and community health face many challenges in the twenty-first century as both encounter societal change and increasing personal isolation. These challenges have been made even more acute in our COVID-19 world both now and in the future. Art is well positioned to connect us and offer balance, multiple perspectives, and a rich exchange between feeling and thinking. Like bridges, art provides a conduit for 'togetherness' – spanning people, places, and methods of operation.

However, artists from a range of fields were challenged to find alternative modes of work during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The notion of togetherness during the pandemic was stretched almost to its limits. No longer could we physically be together for risk of spreading the virulent coronavirus, which was proving deadly to so many irrespective of age. As theatres and galleries closed their doors, academic conferences cancelled, art studios and workshop spaces abandoned, and places of education and training closed to face-to-face learning, the power of art was challenged. Traditional and much-valued practices of bringing people together had to be abandoned in favour of on-line interaction. Experiential artforms such as drama and dance, where interaction and working closely together is *de rigueur*, found alternatives challenging. As creative practitioners, there were many in the field who quickly responded by offering on-line concerts, and alternative assessment tasks within educational courses. However, a repeated cry was that something essential was being lost and these on-line measures could only ever be considered second best. But second best to what? In essence, it is the actual embodiment of being human replete with deficiencies that makes us who we are which are worked through when we come together. Mitchell Kossak (2013: 20) reminds us of 'the power that art making has in depicting the human condition through language, vision, spatial dimensions, sound, rhythm and movement'.

As we learn new ways to move and connect during uncertain times, one of our challenges is in building bridges not only to the technologies that bring us virtually together but also making sure we can make our way back and forth between digital and face-to-face work. To paraphrase what Brett Eagan (2020) wisely noted during his 15 May 2020 keynote address during the virtual TYA/USA conference (Theatre for Young Audiences), many of us are forced to use technologies to engage with our clients, students, and co-workers when we are unable to meet with them in person, but prefer face-to-face contact because that is the most effective way our work can be done. But some of us will find through this new engagement that technology enhances the work we are doing in ways we did not imagine. We must be open to seeing new paths in applied arts and health that we did not know existed.

Being human distinguishes us from artificial intelligence or digitally mediated phenomena. It embraces uncertainty, mistakes, unease, spontaneity, curiosity, faith, joy, sorrow, and all the other qualities that not only make us strong but also make us feel fragile. Little surprise then that literature is alive with characters containing tragic or fatal flaws. The Greek word for the tragic flaw is *hamaratia* or *hamartanein*, meaning to err. Aristotle first introduced the term in his work *Poetics*, relating this essentially to an error of judgement, particularly on the part of a hero, that brings his downfall. Similarly, a tragic flaw is also called a ‘fatal flaw’ in literature and in film. It is in *Hamlet* that we see the tragic flaw that determines the title role’s downfall in this well-known Shakespearean play. Hamlet’s tragic flaw is his indecisiveness, which is due to considerable thinking about whether vengeance is right or wrong, and whether or not to kill his father’s murderer. In the end, his relationship with his mother is damaged and Ophelia, Hamlet’s potential wife, commits suicide.

Whilst the classics present the stuff of high drama in teaching us moral lessons, it is the inveterate human condition that unites us all. As social creatures, we are mostly driven to connect with others and/or search for a sense of belonging and purpose. Art in all its forms can, and does, bring us together. If we take the time to build sufficient trust in each other, we can share powerful moments of honesty and insightfulness, facing our own insecurities and fatal or tragic flaws. Leading art-based researcher and expressive arts therapist Shaun McNiff has long advocated for the strengthening of the integrated use of art for individual and societal health. In discussing the transformational environment created through the integration of the arts, McNiff (2009: 29) states: ‘New ideas and expressions spring from the “communal conversation” of creativity that offers much more than an individual mind working alone’. In his slightly earlier work, McNiff (2003: 38) asserts, ‘the basis of imaginative expression is often located in a relationship with an intimate other’ taking us out of ourselves. It is a reciprocal relationship that McNiff highlights as a way of taking us to ‘places of discovery’.

In recent years, a philosophy of working advanced to help better serve education (Prior 2018b) is encapsulated in the term *communitas*, which can simply be defined as inspired fellowship. In her book *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, which continues the work of her husband, British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, Edith Turner (2012) outlines the importance of *communitas* to human personal, spiritual, and social well-being. *Communitas* is evidenced in a group’s pleasure in sharing common experiences and identified as being ‘in the zone’ – as in the arts, sport, and work; ‘the sense felt by a group when their life together takes on full meaning’ (Turner 2012: 1). *Communitas* is characterized by purpose, spontaneity, and raised spirits and is a ‘group’s pleasure in sharing common experiences with one’s fellows’ (Turner 2012: 2). Artists have long understood this notion which is evident during the act of play, music, and dance, but *communitas* can also be found in church, sport, festivals, and in times of stress and disaster as we saw with on-line connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As noted, the origins of the notions of *communitas* can be found in Victor Turner's work. In 'Betwixt and Between' (Turner 1964) and in his book *The Ritual Process* (Turner 1969), Turner makes the insightful connection between what he saw as the joy of *communitas* and rites of passage. In building upon this legacy, Edith Turner (2012) develops the liberating function of *communitas*, stating: 'When *communitas* appears, one is conscious that it overrides psychological and sociological constructs' (Turner 2012: 3). An important feature is that:

[...]in *communitas* there is a loss of ego. One's pride in oneself becomes irrelevant. In the group, all are in unity, seamless unity, so that even joshing is cause for delight and there is a lot of laughter. The benefits of *communitas* are quick understanding, easy mutual help, and long term ties with others. (Turner 2012: 3)

Given that art is a conduit for togetherness, employing art-led *communitas* in education and community work can allow students and others to develop that sense of unity and pleasure in creatively sharing with each other (Prior 2018b). But what about those who prefer working alone? – the artists toiling away in their studios, for example. This call to *communitas* is not meant to diminish the creativity and reflection that comes from working alone. Indeed, McNiff fully acknowledges the need and benefit in working alone, but he also promotes the distinct advantages of collective creation:

Teams of people working together offer something completely different than solitude. They have a chemistry, dynamism, and generative power upon which the most experienced creators depend for new and fresh insights. Most of us need injections of creative and life-affirming energy from teams of people. The input of others sustains us. (McNiff 2003: 41)

The challenge is in building a 'life-affirming' community that helps support one's creative output. This is perhaps even more vital in a post-pandemic world in which our communities reeled from the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic wrought. As children's author Mo Willems expressed with respect to the pandemic to the *US Tonight Show* host Jimmy Fallon in a 14 May 2020 interview, 'Right now, art is essential. Science is going to get us out of this. Art is going to get us through this' (Willems 2020).

In order to find those communities, we must build them and there is perhaps no better place to do that than in educational settings. However, whilst primary and secondary schools incorporate arts into the learning process, this is less prevalent in higher education. As colleges and universities regroup and rebuild in a post-pandemic world, there is perhaps no better time to break ridged discipline boundaries and explore creative processes to foster a sense of communal and personal well-being. Curriculum structures can be modified to include artistic approaches that enhance and invigorate the learning process. 'Collective problem-solving and creation, negotiation and collaboration, unity of purpose informed by both individual and negotiated creativity are some of the key tenants of art-led *communitas*' (Prior 2018b: 134), both inside and outside the curriculum.

### *Art bridging health, education, and community*

Today, arts in health models are being employed in many community settings including hospitals, mental health clinics, community centres, schools, elderly centres, with special needs populations, and in houses of worship to address physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual issues. The applied arts are also presented in a plethora of challenging situations such as working with those who are struggling with substance abuse, in disaster relief, with those who have been displaced, preventive programmes, arts for disabilities, and support for those living with life-limiting or life-altering conditions. Artists, educators, community organizers, consultants, and art-based therapists are all offering applied arts and health, for wellness, awareness, and transformation.

Looking at some of the research on the viability of art to address social, medical, and psychological issues, Stickley et al. (2017) undertook a four-part seminar exploring the state of arts, health, and well-being in the UK conducted by researchers from eight different Universities funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This study looked at the current state of research, theories, methodologies, and applications. Over the course of the seminar programme, 200 academics, postgraduate research students, and practitioners from across the UK participated. While this venture was promising, affirming that the arts are effective tools across the lifespan to address health and well-being, bringing many disciplines together to try to find a common language and common ground of understanding, particularly through the lens of research and what constitutes evidence was understandably challenging. One bright note from the research study was it specifically marked the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health (JAAH)* as one of two premier peer reviewed journals in the field. Yet unfortunately or perhaps inexplicably, it did not specifically name art-based research and its relevance in advancing the field of arts, health, and well-being. This omission highlights the pressing need to further raise awareness of applied arts and health. To that end, since 2010 *JAAH* has been committed to serving the larger applied arts and health community around the world, publishing some of the most ground-breaking art-based research and indicators of what is happening in the field today. *JAAH* acknowledges the importance of *art as a primary language of discovery, insight, and evidence*.

Simultaneously to the Stickley et al. (2017) study, there was also a comprehensive report by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) inquiry on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (2017), which also mentions the *JAAH* as the premier journal in the field. As Mitchell Kossak (2018) noted in the editorial to issue 9:1 of the *JAAH*, this very comprehensive 180-page report covers a wide range of topics including defining arts and health, well-being, health policy, research, funding. The report references numerous programmes serving a variety of populations including arts in marginalized communities, and programmes from birth to hospice care. The report also reviews much of the current research. It highlights the positive impact on health and well-being that creative and cultural activities are shown to have, including that this work saves money in health service and social care facilities. The overall conclusion of this impressive report is that the arts play a vital aspect in the health and well-being of communities across the spectrum. As stated in the report:



The arts can be enlisted to assist in addressing a number of difficult and pressing policy challenges: strengthening preventative strategies to maintain health for all; helping frail and older people stay healthy and independent; enabling patients to take a more active role in their own health and care; improving recovery from illness; enhancing mental healthcare; improving social care; mitigating social isolation and loneliness, strengthening local services and promoting more cohesive communities; enabling more cost-effective use of resources within the NHS; relieving pressure on GP services; increasing wellbeing among stays in health and social care; creating a more humane and positive existence for prisoners; enhancing the quality of the built environment; and ensuring more equitable distribution of arts resources and better access to the arts for people who are socially or economically disadvantaged. (APPG 2017: 5)

Contemporaneously in the United States, the National Organization for Arts and Health (NOAH) published its own white paper in 2017 which provided a comprehensive overview of the state of arts and health and included scholars and practitioners from across the US highlighting the ways arts are being used to enhance the healing environments and patient experience as well as giving support to families and caregivers. In addition, the Arts, Health & Wellness report (Americans for the Arts 2017: 79), also chronicles the attributes of arts and health across communities and cautions:

[...]a growing shortage of healthcare professionals will lead to a shift in tasks to adjacent professionals and a restructuring generally of the healthcare team. Art and artists have a high potential to become more fully integrated into the healthcare team, entrusted with the care of our citizens, through design, arts-based therapies, and preventative exercise regimens.

The report also states that there is also quite startling data supporting the need for arts with the elderly, as baby boomers come of age, and as the statistical data shows that the number of dementia and Alzheimer patients will double by 2050. This report further notes growth areas including arts and civic engagement (<http://www.animatingdemocracy.org>), arts and education, arts and business (<http://www.partnershipmovement.org>), and a 'New Community Visions' initiative to generate dialogue on a national, state and local level, to create and sustain healthy communities and to lay the groundwork for a collective movement forward over the next decade (<http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org/CommunityVisions>). In terms of economic viability, the report also reveals that 82 per cent of Americans believe arts and culture are important to local business and economy and 87 per cent believe that arts and culture are important to the quality of life, while 72 per cent believe that the arts unify communities and help to better understand cultures.

In communities across the globe, there does seem to be a marked increase in social engagement through art. Social activism is on the rise through the arts at the local, national and international arena helping to name, highlight and challenge cultural, racial, political, and economic divides. A recent report stated that the arts economy contribution to the US economy is more than double that of mining, agriculture, forestry, and fishing combined

(Whyte 2020: n.pag.). It is also reported in a study by the Massachusetts Cultural Council that children who study the arts have higher GPAs, lower dropout rates, and score better in language and mathematics. Doctors in the United States and United Kingdom have started prescribing the arts as a way to manage ailments ranging from anxiety to eating disorders to chronic pain.

Art challenges our sensibilities in ways that verbal exchange alone cannot. Art exposes what is hidden, poses new ways of being, and models new forms of action. Art of all types is integral to the lives of all people and essential to health and well-being. The broad transformative power of art as a means to help create solutions to a broad array of social and economic issues is a big part of the value of the arts in today's communities.

### *A question of evidence*

In recent years, we have heard calls for evidence-based research, which comes from the scientists who remain sceptical or lacking in confidence about the efficacy of other ways of knowing. Regrettably, approaches borrowed from science and social science tend to reduce the art experience to words and possibly even worse, to numbers. The unease at not being able to measure everything has led many researchers into virtually meaningless quasi-scientific results. In the applied arts and health field we have seen the unfortunate pressure from the health sciences to provide 'evidence' that fits their own frameworks of reference. Each year, the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health (JAAH)* receives submissions of articles that include charts and tables outlining the statistical data gleaned from interviews and surveys from art-based work whilst overlooking the rich 'data' from the artistic research collected. By ignoring the evidence that art itself provides, these submissions are frequently unable to be published by the *JAAH*. Less successful articles tend to exclusively focus their research using the qualitative and quantitative approaches the authors were themselves taught to privilege as researchers, perhaps unintentionally neglecting the artistic research that could teach us so much more. In this respect, many researchers are simply overlooking the obvious.

Research funders, government bodies, and universities have compounded the problem of altering the discourse 'through the necessities of research assessment, become re-engineered to conform research model[s] based on the "scientific method", becoming "systematic; rigorous; critical and reflexive; and communicable"; or having "objectivity, reliability, and validity"' (Butt 2017: 72). Researchers feel compelled to follow the status quo and who can blame them when their funding depends on providing post-research reports that fulfil funders' pre-conceived expectations!

This book is aimed at liberating researchers from those unhelpful imperatives and asks for greater respect and acceptance of art-based research and a more informed understanding of it. The chapters contained within add to the very clear call for those in health, education, and community-work to more fully understand the nature of art and be less inclined to view art in purely instrumentalist terms or a medical equivalent to a pill of some type. Artists cannot afford to yield to methodologies that in point of fact work counter to aesthetic imperatives and thereby reduce understanding of deep personal engagement. Susanne Langer, the great

American philosopher, writer, and educator, was well known for her theories on the influences of art on the mind. She spoke clearly of art as articulating the very shape of human feeling in a way that words can never do (Langer 1930).

As editors of the *JAAH*, we see the struggle many have in knowing how they should best evidence their research. Two key reasons for establishing the *JAAH* were to clarify our applied practice and to raise the quality of research through a very conscious effort to develop our understanding of evidence. The 2010 editorial reported:

Evidencing applied arts practices has been variously dealt with but has largely been ignored in the scholarly canon. To these ends there appears to be a significant, but not insurmountable, tension between the arts and health sciences. [...] The nature of how we evidence the effectiveness of applied arts practices is very much at the core of this journal. In fact, the very idea of what actually constitutes ‘evidence’ is a particularly interesting one, and we hope that we will see lively scholarly debate within future editions of *JAAH*. (Prior 2010: 5)

In that first issue of the journal, an important defining quality was highlighted that ‘alongside the arts is recognition of the powerful affect they can have for health; after all feelings are intertwined with mental, physical, spiritual and social health’ (Prior 2010: 4). Feelings resist measurement and sometimes even the ability to know in words. Michael Polanyi ([1958] 1998) believed that creative acts of discovery are charged with strong personal feelings and commitments which form tacit knowledge – knowledge that is richly embedded by experience but not readily communicable in words. Aesthetics are to do with feeling and are therefore deeply personal. ‘Art is powerful as it leads us to the deepest places of human feeling, provides enlightenment and raises the human spirit’ (Prior 2017: 266). This type of knowledge, by its very nature, resists scientific enquiry of an unmeaningful kind.

Since 2010, we have seen a range of approaches employed in order to evidence the outcomes of applied arts projects, some more satisfactorily than others in terms of honouring the evidence intrinsic to art and artistic processes. Equally, we have seen a growing number of books in recent years (McNiff 2013; Butt 2017; Reason and Rowe 2017; Prior 2018c; Mateus-Berr and Jochum 2020) that raise explicit questions about how we might more fully appreciate how art provides particular research approaches and ways of knowing or gaining understanding.

### *Conclusion*

It seems that even more than a decade on, the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health (JAAH)* has more work to do in reaching those who still need to fully appreciate and understand the applied nature of all artforms in, through and for health. However, we can with confidence celebrate the significant accomplishments of the *JAAH* and how the articles within it continue to inspire and inform us, emphasizing the impact and evidence that the arts, and only the arts can impart.

Moreover, we hope that this comprehensive book, along with the many encouraging signs pointing the way towards instilling the arts in all aspects of well-being, will continue to ‘build bridges’ across all sectors. We also strongly encourage the ongoing overt acknowledgement of how we may honour art as research and art as the overwhelming evidence, giving art the authority as a research methodology it deserves.

To use a bridge-like metaphor, there is only so far you can bend, force, and stretch something before it loses its integrity. Whilst we can extend a bridge more widely, we cannot afford art, of all types, to lose its integrity in favour of scientific research methods. Those of us working in art must resist the unhelpful dictates from outside our field and help build bridges in assisting those who have most to gain from understanding that the empirical use of art is a valid research method. Similarly, better bridges must be made with the healthcare professions to enhance their understanding of evidence. It is best summed up in Shaun McNiff’s (2019) four keywords – ‘art *is* the evidence’ (emphasis added). We should not need to keep proving ourselves.

As a concluding vision of optimism to this opening chapter, we propose that the conceptual convergences that can be observed across disciplines – which if we look hard enough – point us to the potential usefulness of a more comprehensive and less discipline-bound view of meaning as a substantial feature of the inter-connectedness of life itself. So, with this holistic view in mind, let us continue onward, building bridges together!

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