

Somebody Has to Be Me:

Co-creating Space for Identity Exploration



Presenters:

Mary Krohnert - The LivingRoom Community Art Studio

Bonnie Pedota - Ontario Tech University



Land Acknowledgement

Oshawa's Ontario Tech University and the LivingRoom Community Art Studio acknowledge the lands and people of the **Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation**. The lands we are situated on are covered under the Williams Treaties and the traditional territory of the Mississauga, a branch of the greater Anishinaabeg Nation, including Algonquin, Ojibway, Odawa and Pottawatomi. These lands remain home to a number of Indigenous nations and people. We are thankful to be welcomed on these lands in friendship.

Introductions



Mary Krohnert

(she/her//they/them)

Art Therapist & Founder of
the LivingRoom Community
Art Studio



Bonnie Pedota

(she/her)

Mental Health and Wellness
Facilitator & Educator

The Art of Being Me Project Co-Creators & Co-Facilitators



Funmilola Ogunseye
OTU PhD Student &
Mental Health Peer Mentor



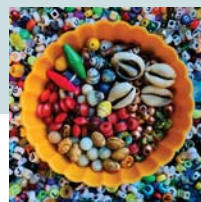
Sienna Smith
OTU Health Promotions
Coordinator



Jocelyne Pelletier
OTU Indigenous and
Cultural Advisor



Miles Horton
Multi-media Artist,
LivingRoom
Volunteer



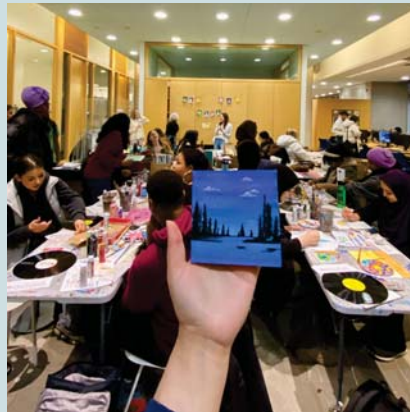
Community Partnership Origin

- The LivingRoom Community Art Studio Mobile Art Hive has been visiting OTU's campus since 2022
- The *Creative Wellness Hive* project soon followed, supported by a seed partnership grant from CICMH in 2023



The Creative Wellness Hive at Ontario Tech University

- A four-hour drop-in group provided by the LivingRoom, in collaboration with OTU Student Mental Health Services, and the peer mental health program
- On average, 50 - 75 Students make use of The Creative Wellness Hive each visit
- Of these, between 15 - 25 students return each week, for more consistent Mental health support



Scaling the Partnership for Equity Deserving Students

- The 2025-2026 CICMH Partnership Grant enabled us to respond to a need expressed by students who identified as equity deserving, for creative wellness programming that prioritised their needs and experiences
- In response, we developed a series of closed group, Creative Coping Arts Workshops intended for
 - BIPOC students
 - Indigenous students
 - 2SLGBTQIA+ students
 - Neurodiverse students



Needs and Opportunities

- Mental health challenges often emerge in young adulthood, making **post secondary intervention key**
- Delays in access to counselling services (4–6 weeks) can **create barriers to support**
- These **barriers increase** for students coping with experiences of racism, cis-heterosexism, ableism, and stigma-consciousness (etc), who may be less inclined to reach out for support when needed
- Group based, trauma-informed, creative interventions provided by those with lived experience of the issues explored, **have been shown to reduce the impacts of minority stress**

The proposal: to offer **low-barrier, culturally sensitive, arts-based groups to support equity deserving students** as a compliment to campus counselling services

Baams et al., 2015; Collier & Eastwood, 2022; Farquhar-Leicester, 2024; Frost & Meyer, 2023; Hingwe, 2021; Meyer, 2003; Russell & Grossman, 2015; Sonnone & Rochford, 2020; Sue et al., 2022; Talwar, 2019; Wood & Mckoy-Lewens, 2023



The Importance of Campus Partners & Collaboration

The planning and delivery of workshops was enriched through the involvement of those with lived experience and knowledge of the identities the project was hoping to explore with students.

- **Indigenous Education and Cultural Services**
- **Student Engagement and Equity**
- **Mental Health Peer Mentor Program**

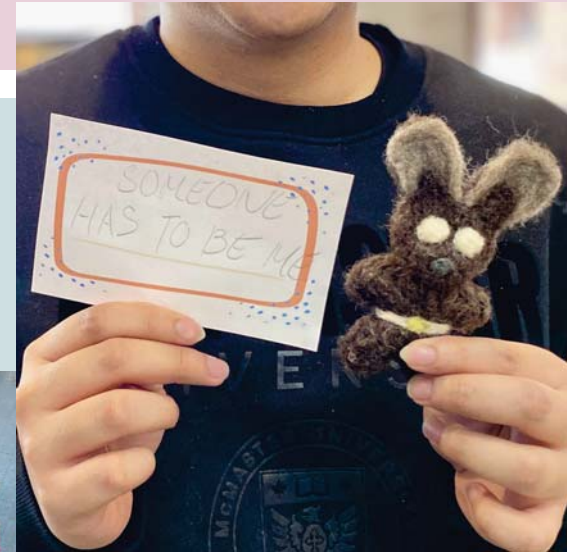
These Campus Partners assisted in the development and delivery of workshop activities, assisted in promotion, and referred students for participation. They were an integral part of the project's success.



The Plan and the Pivot

How *Creative Coping* became the *Art of Being Me* through embracing challenges as information, inspiration, and learning to:

- **Let Go:** allowing ourselves to be responsive to emerging needs and adjust what was no longer working
- **Open Up:** Shifting from registration only to drop-in open-studio format, for friends and allies as well
- **Simplify:** Reducing the number of workshops, but extending the time of each
- **Decenter:** relocating to meet students where they were at, instead of asking them to come to us



Spreading the Word About the (new) Project

- Ontario Tech Communications team:
 - On-campus digital signs
 - On-campus paper posters on billboards
 - Online campus events calendar
- Handbills and promotion at Creative Wellness Hive
- Advertising a library “De-stress Desk”
- Email to student-facing staff
- Staff / faculty referrals
- LivingRoom Community Art Studio social media
- **Student word of mouth**



The Revised Schedule

All workshops were 3 hours long, offered from 11:30 AM - 2:30 PM

Dates	Population honoured	Art activity
Tuesday January 20	BIPOC students	Beading
Tuesday January 27	Indigenous students	Painting
Tuesday February 3	2SLGBTQIA+ students	Weaving
Tuesday February 10	Neurodivergent students	Sculpting

How the Workshops Worked

- **Setting Up:** placemaking in institutional, academic spaces
- **The Invitation:** welcoming with art supplies, introducing ourselves
- **Group Guidelines:** sharing group intent and specific theme, negotiating consent
- **Getting Started:** participants gather supplies and choose the table they wish to sit at alongside facilitators
- **Supporting Process:** Facilitators introduce activities in greater detail, creating alongside students and being guided by them
- **Making and Sharing:** Students invited to reflect on and share their work through creating Artist Statements, documenting work, and providing feedback



Why the Workshops Worked

- **Open studio, third space approaches**, informed by Community, Peer, and Public Practice Art Therapy processes, enable students to recognize themselves as part of a process
- **Affirming participant agency**, students are reminded that they are in control of the experience, and can share as much or as little as they feel comfortable, and ask for what they want and need without judgement
- **Normalizing conversations about mental health**, Campus Mental Health resources and peer vetted services are openly discussed
- **Feedback is welcome, but not required.** Students are invited to document work, inform next steps, and complete surveys - or not



Exploring Identity, Not Defining It

Identity as an awareness of:

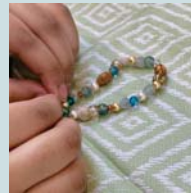
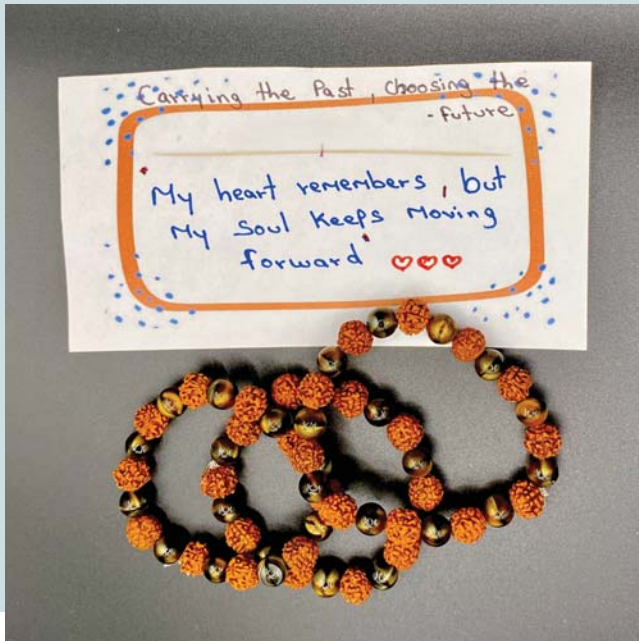
- A multiplicity of self-aspects that can emerge and evolve throughout life
- The Intersectional nature of these aspects, in relationship with others
- Pressures to label or define one's Self that often arise in response to the identities one is assigned
- What one understands and values as true about one's Self, that which is unchanging and unchangeable



Exploring BIPOC Identities Through Beading

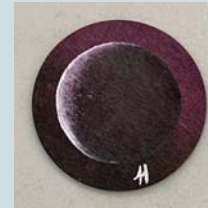
A workshop co-facilitated by **Funmilola Ogunseye**

“Carrying the Past,
Choosing the Future”



Exploring Indigenous Identities Through Birth Moons

A workshop co-facilitated by Jocelyne Pelletier, inspired by the Thirteen Grandmother Moon teachings.

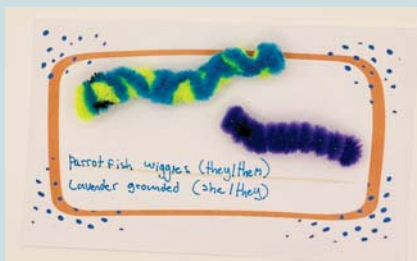


"Stars, moons, the ocean, everything in nature is connected to each other. It's important to remember that."



Exploring 2SLGBTQIA+ Identities Through Weaving

A workshop co-facilitated by Bonnie Pedota

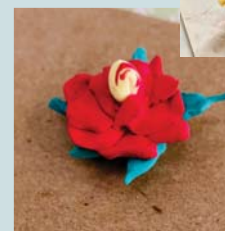
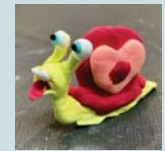


Exploring Neurodiverse Identities Through Sculpting

A workshop co-facilitated by Miles Horton



“Putting the pieces together. Today I decided to put a few shapes and colours together. I got to speak with an awesome group and express myself artistically.”



What We Learned From Student Feedback

Responses Related to Identity Exploration

- 49% felt part of a **unique** and **valued community**
- 46% felt free to **express themselves without fear of judgement**
- Over half of participants were **allies**

Responses Related to Mental Health Support

- 90% of respondents found the use of **art materials to be soothing**
- 90% of respondents found the art workshops to be **“very” or “extremely” important in supporting their mental health**
- 89% would participate in a drop-in art workshop of this nature again



Observations to Carry Forward

- **Drop-in workshops** saw increased student participation and engagement (vs. pre-registered)
- **Meeting students in their spaces** allowed students to self-refer, provided a sense of safety/anonymity for referred and curious students
- **Friends and Allies** play a role in supporting equity deserving students through witnessing burdens, honoring difference, and sharing common ground
- **Art making** is an important part of a stepped-care approach



Students Sum it Up

“I just wanna say thank you for having these workshops. They’re a great place to just sit down and be free and not have to stress for a while. It’s also an amazing place to connect with other students/people.”



How to Connect With Us

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Q & A Time

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