

Behind the Creative Canvas: An innovative trauma-informed art-based educational approach using an immersive learning pedagogy*



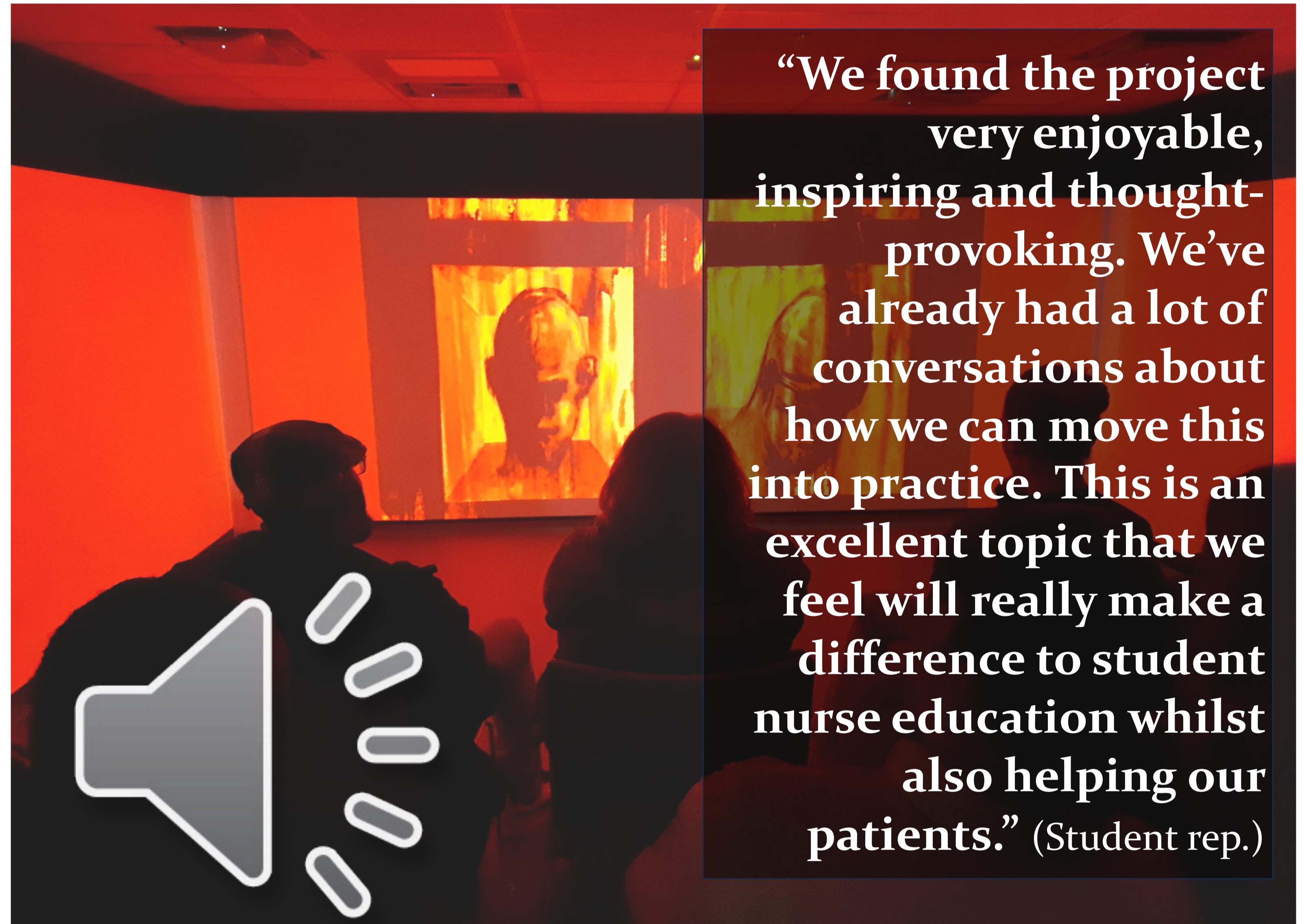
Dr Lucian Milasan | Lucian.Milasan@ntu.ac.uk
Lecturer in Mental Health at Nottingham Trent University
Institute of Health and Allied Professions

Contributors: Andy Farr (Visual Artist), Isabel Turnbull (Expert by Experience), Dan Scott-Purdy (Digital Curriculum Manager)

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Introduction

Psychological trauma is one of the main causes of severe mental health problems. It occurs following exposure to adverse life experiences caused by human behaviours (e.g. death or threatened death, physical and psychological abuse, rape or other forms of actual or threatened sexual violence, and wars), and natural factors (e.g. earthquakes) (APA, 2013). Trauma has been increasingly considered in mental health policies and strategies worldwide since the 1970s following a paradigm shift focused on the psychosocial factors of traumatic experiences (Goodman, 2017). However, the implementation of such initiatives into practice remains inconsistent resulting in a fragmented approach to trauma-informed care (Emsley et al., 2022). One explanation for the current state of trauma services is the unpreparedness of mental health nurses in line with emerging traumagenic theoretical frameworks (Goddard, 2021). This study addressed this gap by implementing a trauma-informed pedagogic project co-produced with people with lived experience of trauma. The aim of this study was to explore mental health nursing students' perspectives on the usefulness of an innovative approach to learning about, and working with, trauma using arts within a virtual reality (VR) environment.



“We found the project very enjoyable, inspiring and thought-provoking. We’ve already had a lot of conversations about how we can move this into practice. This is an excellent topic that we feel will really make a difference to student nurse education whilst also helping our patients.” (Student rep.)

Methodology

RECRUITMENT

10 mental health nursing students (4 male, 6 female, aged 26-50) who attended a co-produced arts-based teaching session on trauma** delivered in a VR environment were recruited (Mansfield Campus)

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative data were collected during a 60-minute focus group following the VR arts-based session on trauma

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) identifying codes; (3) identifying themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up. Member checking with the research participants.

**The project activities consisted of: (1) an introductory session to explain the project and develop visual literacy through interactive activities (1h); (2) an arts-based exploration of lived experiences of trauma in the Virtual Reality room consisting of a visual collage of multimedia based on Andy Farr’s artwork depicting narratives of personal trauma and recovery (see images above).

Results

One of the most prevalent themes in this study was centred on the potential of art-based interventions in mental health nursing practice and education. Art was portrayed by participants as a powerful and empowering tool that could potentially complement or even substitute, in some situations, clinical and conventional approaches to mental health care. Arts was perceived by students as a flexible and accessible platform for exploring experiences of trauma collaboratively with those who experienced it in a safe and non-judgemental way guided by individuals rather than the mental health professional.

The power of art

Authenticity

What is mental health nursing students’ perspective on the usefulness of arts for learning about, and working with, trauma?

Underutilisation of arts in mental health nursing

The art-based VR activity challenged students to think about working with trauma more authentically, in a way that is true to person-centredness, in line with the professional values and spirit of nursing. Students considered learning about trauma from, and in collaboration with, people with lived experience as essential for developing authentic insights.

In contrast with the potential of arts to enhance person-centred care by shifting the focus on individual subjective experiences as opposed to diagnostic labels, the research participants have emphasised that art-based approaches in mental health practice and education are undervalued.

Conclusions

This study explored the perspective of mental health nursing students on the usefulness of art-based approaches to learning about trauma, following a co-produced VR immersive learning experience. Authenticity, empowerment, and complementarity of visual arts to exploring, communicating, and treating trauma have been emphasised by the research participants. The use of an arts-based pedagogic approach elicited deep reflections and critical discussions on trauma which is a topic that may be challenging to address through conventional teaching methods. This approach addresses a gap in trauma-informed nursing education and has potential to instil changes in the way students perceive personal and professional trauma, and positively impact on their future practice.

References

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