

CTSP 551: Play Becomes Real

The Oaklander Approach to Gestalt Play and Art Therapy

“When I let go and can allow myself to imagine, I’m actually coming back to myself because they’re always projections...
fantasy gives us an access to our own real experience.”

Violet Oaklander, Ph.D.



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Thursdays, 1-4pm, York 116, January 26, February 2, 9, 16, 23.

Required Class Texts

- 1) Oaklander, V. (1988) *Windows to our Children*, Gestalt Journal Press, NY (0939266067) (available widely online. You will need a copy by the second week of class. I do have a few copies that I can loan out).
- 2) Mortola, P. (2006) *Windowframes: Learning the art of Gestalt play therapy the Oaklander way*, GestaltPress, NJ (0881634638) (Provided on loan in shared Google class folder)

Brief Course Description

In this course, we explore playful approaches and the use of drawing, clay, sand tray, music, and picture cards to understand their utility and application as “mediating tools” in the counseling and therapeutic context as applied to individuals and groups of all ages. We focus on the work of one particular internationally recognized therapist and author, Dr. Violet Oaklander, an early pioneer of therapeutic work with children and adolescents in general and Gestalt play therapy in particular.

Extended Course Description

Dr. Oaklander's 1978 text *Windows to our Children: A Gestalt Therapy Approach to Children and Adolescents* presented a model of working with children and adolescents in the therapeutic setting using expressive and playful approaches that has since influenced practitioners worldwide. Presently, this text is published in sixteen languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Serbo-Croatian, Croatian, Russian, Chinese, Hebrew, Korean and German. *Windows to our Children* is a popular textbook used in counseling programs at universities and colleges around the world, including Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil, Israel, Canada, the United States, and many countries in Europe. In exploring Dr. Oaklander's work, we will be focusing on accomplishing the following goals for the course:

- 1) gaining an introductory understanding of the theory supporting a Gestalt-based play therapy approach
- 2) gaining an understanding of the cross-cultural and cross-generational effectiveness of this approach
- 3) gaining a repertoire of methods to meaningfully engage clients through playful means utilizing multiple media
- 4) determining which media provide the best fit for you as practitioner and the populations with whom you work

Course Requirements

Professional Standards and Skills Evaluation

The rubric included on page 4 of this syllabus will be used to evaluate each student's performance in the course. Regular class attendance, completion of all class readings and assignments, and active participation in class discussions and exercises are expected and necessary to make this a rich and dynamic learning experience for all involved. Due to the brevity of our meeting time together, more than one complete or partial absence from class over the term may result in a failing or incomplete grade. I will expect you to contact me prior to class sessions or due dates regarding any absences from class or problems with assignment deadlines.

Practica Experiences

During the course, I will facilitate a "hands on" practica experience with various media. I will also usually demonstrate with an individual or small group how such media can be used therapeutically. Your participation as part of the demonstration with me in front of the group is voluntary and will not be counted as part of your grade. After I have demonstrated how to work with the media with an individual or small group, it will be your turn to practice this work. We will break up into small groups of two or three in which you will take on the roles of client, therapist and observer. Your active and engaged participation with each experience and media is expected in order to increase your own knowledge, likes and dislikes of various expressive arts materials. Your work in these triads is also an opportunity for you to demonstrate and practice the following skills of therapeutic practice: Attentive and reflective listening; Verbal and nonverbal empathizing; Accurately facilitating the therapeutic experiences as modeled in class, and Balancing helpful playfulness with appropriate seriousness.

PBR Reflection Notes

At the end of each week, students are asked to complete a survey and reflection (included on page 9 of this syllabus) which will help me to understand how the course is going as well as provide an opportunity for students to write about the day's learning and work.

Materials Collection

Each student is required to create their own collection of materials to be used in their own practice with children, adolescents or adults. This collection could include a stack of (optimally laminated) "talking cards" (to be described in class) but can also include an assortment of other materials (e.g. puppets, toys, games, art supplies, etc.) or a focus on a particular medium (e.g. Sand tray toys and table). During the last class session, students will have the opportunity to briefly present and demonstrate their collection.

Make-up Assignment

If you miss a significant amount of any class period, a make-up writing assignment is due at the beginning of the next class period: A three-page paper in which you describe what you learned from interviewing two class participants from the session you missed and reflect on what you learned by practicing with one of them using the material used in class that week.

CTSP Department Attendance Policy

Class attendance is expected and required. Any missed class time will be made up by completing extra assignments designed by the instructor. Missing more than ten percent of class time may result in failure to complete the class. This would be 4.5 hours of a 45-hour class (3 credits), 3.0 hours for a 30 hour class (2 credits) or 1.5 hours for a 15 hour class (1 credit.) In case of extreme hardship and also at the discretion of the instructor, a grade of incomplete may be given for an assignment or the entire course.

Disability Services Statement

If you have a disability that may impact your academic performance, you may request accommodations by submitting documentation to the Student Support Services Office in the Albany Quadrangle (503-768-7192). After you have submitted documentation and filled out paperwork there for the current semester requesting accommodations, staff in that office will notify me of the accommodations for which you are eligible.

Course Calendar

The table below outlines information about each class session. In the left column, I list the readings due for class the week. In the right-hand column, I list the activities and media we will be exploring during our class time together.

	Weekly readings due before class	Weekly activities and media during class
1/26 Wk. 1	Syllabus Oaklander – Therapeutic Process Mortola - Windowframes - Chapters 1-3 (All readings with exception of Oaklander can be found in the shared class folder: 1 PBR SP 23)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lecture – 1 Introduction• Card Exercise & Demonstration• Pair Work & Processing• Video Demo – 1 Cards• PBR Reflection Notes #1
2/2 Wk. 2	Oaklander - Windows - Chapters 1-4 Mortola - Windowframes - Chapters 3-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lecture – 2 First Steps• Drawing Exercise & Demonstration• Pair Work & Processing• Video Demo – 2 Violet & Blake, Part 1• PBR Reflection Notes #2
2/9 Wk. 3	Oaklander - Windows - Chapters 6-9 Mortola - Windowframes - Chapters 5-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lecture – 3 Contact• Clay Exercise & Demonstration• Pair Work & Processing• Video Demo – 3 Violet & Blake, Part 2• PBR Reflection Notes #3
2/16 Wk. 4	Oaklander - Windows - Chapters 10-12 Mortola - Windowframes - Chapters 7-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lecture – 4 Emotions• Sand Tray Exercise & Demonstration• Pair Work & Processing• Video Demo – 4 Violet & Blake, Part 3• PBR Reflection Notes #4
2/23 Wk. 5	Oaklander – Windows - Chapter 5 Mortola - Windowframes - Chapters 9-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lecture – 5 Play• Music Exercise & Demonstration• Pair Work & Processing• Video Demo – 5 Violet & Blake, Part 4• PBR Reflection Notes #5

Professional Standards and Skills Evaluation Rubric

The following criteria will be used by in this course to evaluate student efforts in attendance, participation and professionalism. At the end of the course, the professor will be identifying both strengths as well as adding appropriate comments and goals that will facilitate further personal and professional development of the student.

Rating Scale: 0—Does not meet criteria
 1—Meets criteria minimally/Area for growth
 2—Meets criteria appropriately
 3—Meets criteria exceptionally/Area of strength

1	Student relates to peers, professors and others in a respectful, ethical and appropriate manner and values cultural, familial, and individual differences, including those involving age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status.	0	1	2	3
2	Student is thoughtfully and effectively engaged in all aspects of the class, makes the effort to contribute positively, and consistently shows strong and effective skills in verbal, nonverbal, and written communication.	0	1	2	3
3	Student follows professionally recognized conflict resolution processes, seeking appropriate consultation, is proactive in addressing individuals/groups involved, and demonstrates appropriate emotional self-regulation in interpersonal relationships with peers, supervisors, faculty, and others.	0	1	2	3
4	Student takes initiative, is timely, dependable and responsible, is concerned with their own personal and professional growth, and demonstrates the ability to receive, integrate and utilize feedback from peers and supervisors, and is able to give such feedback respectfully.	0	1	2	3
5	Student exhibits appropriate levels of self-assurance and confidence, balances this with a healthy sense of humility and openness to learning, and demonstrates a continuing capacity for openness to points of view, theories, experiences and perspectives different from their own.	0	1	2	3
6	Student demonstrates an ability to helpfully use attentive and reflective listening skills, as well as verbal and nonverbal empathizing skills in practice during class.	0	1	2	3
7	Student demonstrates an ability to accurately facilitate the therapeutic experiences as demonstrated, and demonstrates an ability to balance a helpful playfulness with appropriate seriousness in practice during class.	0	1	2	3
8	Student demonstrates an ability to satisfactorily complete the PBR Reflection Notes #1	0	1	2	3
9	Student demonstrates an ability to satisfactorily complete the PBR Reflection Notes #2	0	1	2	3
10	Student demonstrates an ability to satisfactorily complete the PBR Reflection Notes #3	0	1	2	3
11	Student demonstrates an ability to satisfactorily complete the PBR Reflection Notes #4	0	1	2	3
12	Student demonstrates an ability to satisfactorily complete the PBR Reflection Notes #5	0	1	2	3
	Totals	0	1 2	2 4	3 6

Overall course grading: A = 26+; A - = 24+; B = 20+; B - = 18+ (C or lower is a non-passing grade)

Student Total Points/Grade:

Comments:

THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS WITH CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS: The Oaklander Model

1. ESTABLISHING THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

I/Thou relationship; Boundaries/limits
Children who cannot establish a relationship

2. CONTACT

Established and evaluated at every session
The fluidity of contact; Contact and energy; The role of resistance
Contact functions: Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting

3. BUILDING SELF-SUPPORT

Experiences to strengthen the self & promote awareness of self:
Strengthening the contact functions; Engaging the body and senses;
Mastery; Making choices; Boundaries and limits; Power and control
Defining the self through self statements; Owning projections; Playfulness, imagination, humor

4. EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Contacting one's own "aggressive energy"
Providing self-support for expressing feelings
Providing exercises to help the child experience, express and "own" feelings
Talking about body states often described as feelings
Projecting feelings through drawings, stories, sand tray work, puppets, clay, etc.
Dealing with emotions related to past trauma
Learning skills for dealing with every-day feelings

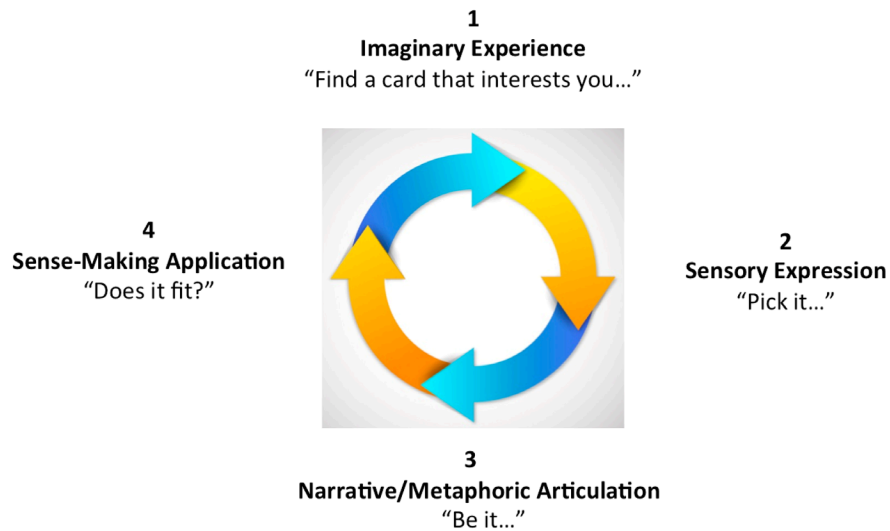
5. SELF-NURTURING WORK

Helping children become self-accepting and actively nurturing to the self

AGGRESSIVE ENERGY, ANGER & CHILDREN: Therapeutic Steps in the Oaklander Model

- I. AWARENESS: Talking about aggressive energy and anger
 1. What are they and how are they different?
 2. What are different kinds of angry feelings?
 3. What makes you angry? & How do you know when you are angry?
 4. How do you express it?
- II. EXPRESSING AND CONTAINING ONE'S "AGGRESSIVE ENERGY"
Building self-support (Using projective exercises)
Essential Elements for "Aggressive Energy" Work
 - a. In contact with therapist
 - b. A safe container with clear limits
 - c. A spirit of play
 - d. Exaggeration
 - e. Content not necessary
- III. ACKNOWLEDGING ONE'S OWN RAGE: "I'm angry!"
- IV. ACCEPTING THE ANGER:
It's O.K. that I'm angry. There's no right or wrong to it.
- V. CHOOSING HOW TO EXPRESS IT:
Learning new skills to cope with angry feelings
 - A. Direct expression – saying what you need to say to the person you need to say it to.
 - B. Private expression – anger energy must be expressed in some way to promote health and peacefulness.
- VI. WORKING WITH UNFINISHED ANGER

The Oaklander Approach: A Sequence in Four Parts



Examples of prompts from the four-part sequence

Imaginary Experience and Sensory Expression: "Imagine it/Make it"

- "Pick a card that stands out to you or just one that you like..."
- "Pick a card to represent your past, present and future self."
- "Imagine yourself as a rosebush...now draw yourself as that rosebush..."
- "Draw a symbol to represent everyone in your family..."
- "Make a scribble drawing..."
- "Close your eyes and start making something with the clay..."
- "Make a figure out of the clay to represent everyone in your family..."
- "Choose characters and make a scene in the sand..."
- "Pick one puppet to represent your fairy godmother..."
- "Try out all the musical instruments, then pick one, close your eyes, and play it..."

Narrative/Metaphoric Articulation: "Be it"

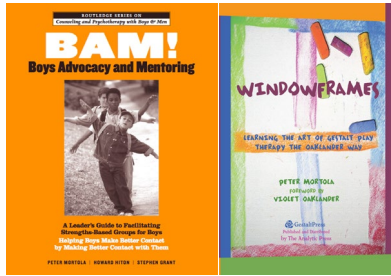
- "What part stands out to you? Speak as that part..."
- "Describe yourself: Say 'I am a [rosebush/whale/tree in the park]'"
- "What is your context, surroundings, situation?"
- "What is your experience like? Are you doing well?"
- "How do you feel being that part?"
- "Have this part speak to this part. Start a dialogue..."
- "Do you want to move, add, subtract something?"
- "Does anything seem to be missing? Speak as that..."

Sense Making Application: "Does it fit?"

- "I'm just wondering: Did any of what you said fit for you in your own life?"
- "Did anything you shared *not* fit for your own life or experience?"
- "I'm just wondering: Is your whale family anything like your own family?"
- "What part of your drawing did you feel the most connected to/emotional about?"
- "When you were talking as those bubbles, I noticed your voice changed. What was happening with you then?"

Play Becomes Real: Further References

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“When I let go and can allow myself to imagine these things, I’m actually coming back to myself because they’re always projections...fantasy gives us an access to our own real experience.”

Violet Oaklander, (1978) Windows to our children, Real People Press, Salt Lake City

“It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance...something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation.”

D.W. Winnicott, (1971), Playing and Reality, Routledge, London,

"Plato...sees the model of true playfulness in the need of all young creatures, animal and human, to leap. To truly leap, you must learn how to use the ground as a springboard, and how to land resiliently and safely. It means to test the leeway allowed by given limits; to outdo but not escape gravity."

Erik Erikson, (1977) “Toys and reasons: Stages in the ritualization of experience”, WW Norton & Co. NY

“...the question is why [the brain] must...continue to fabricate its way through nighttime dreams and daytime fantasies. The answer...is that if the brain didn’t keep itself labile, it might rigidify in terms of its prior specific adaptive successes.”

Sutton-Smith (1997) The Ambiguity of Play, pg 60, Harvard University Press

“Play is, as it were, a halfway house between the night and the day, the brain and the world...the normal presence of dream and play is associated with general mental health and their interruption is associated with dysfunction.”

Sutton-Smith (2001) The Ambiguity of Play, pg 62

“It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”

D.W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality

“The evolutionary significance of play is not that it maintains an already existing reality, but that it provides alternatives to it.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Some paradoxes in the definition of play, 1979

“...wherever playfulness prevails, there is always a surprising element, surpassing mere repetition or habituation.”

Erik Erikson, (1977) “Toys and reasons: Stages in the ritualization of experience.” WW Norton & Co. NY

“Play is the answer to the question: how does anything new come about?”

Jean Piaget, (1950) The psychology of intelligence.

“Play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse. At every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rules of the game and what he would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously... A child’s greatest self-control occurs in play.”

Lev Vygotsky, (1933) Play and its role in the development of the child

"All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand, either materially or ideally... The arena, the card table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court...are all in form and function, playgrounds...isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain."

Erik Erikson, "Toys and reasons: Stages in the ritualization of experience"

WW Norton & Co. NY 1977

"The playing child inhabits an area that cannot be easily left, nor can it easily admit intrusions. This area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world."

D.W. Winnicott, (1971) "Playing and reality", Routledge, London

"When we see a child playing with a flower, or in the dirt, or skipping or playing tag, we should remind ourselves that what we are looking at is the child-like result of a deep and irresistible urge to interact with and have knowledge of the world and everything in it."

Bob Hughes, (2013) Evolutionary playwork (2nd ed), Routledge, NY

"In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it."

Simon Nicholson, (1972) "The theory of loose parts", Open University

"Children come to see toys as vehicles of social acceptance rather than launching pads for imagination and fantasy."

David Elkind (2007) The power of play: Learning what comes naturally, Da Capo lifelong, NY

"Playing naturally is not simply contained in a precious sense of caring for the environment, but as a real and immediate experience of playing uninhibitedly among the diversity and potential that such spaces afford."

Lester and Maudsley (2007) Play naturally: A review of children's natural play, Play England/NBC

"I work to build the child's sense of self, to strengthen the contact functions, and to renew her own contact with her senses, body, feelings and intellect"

Violet Oaklander, (1978) Windows to our children, Real People Press, Salt Lake City

"Full humanity requires the ability to sense and be sensed in turn... We need to find our way in a tactile world again. We need to return from head to foot, from brain to fingertip, from iCloud to earth."

Richard Kearney, (August 30, 2014), "Losing our touch" NYTimes

Sample Short Session

The following is an excerpt from an online session with a sixth grader, Anya, as part of a small group setting (4 children) on Google Classroom. I had lead the group through the "plant drawing" exercise and was facilitating each student's turn to speak. To me, this is a good example of how the Oaklander Process works, not only in an online setting (where the children did not turn on their cameras), but also with a child who finds it uncomfortable to speak about herself.

Peter: "Okay, I'd like you tell me five things about yourself, Rhododendron" **Anya:** "I'm a rhododendron plant and I'm well kept, I have friends (they are fern and moss), I get enough water, I am located in two people's backyards, I live in moist soil. My life is calm." **Peter:** "Does anyone take care of you or are you a wild plant?" **Anya:** "I have people who take care of me." **Peter:** "Are you healthy?" **Anya:** "I'm really healthy." **Peter:** "Are there other critters around you?" **Anya:** "There are bees around and they help my flowers stay alive by pollinating." **Peter:** "If you could have anything added to your world, Rhododendron plant, what would that be?" **Anya:** "To have Caterpillars." **Peter:** "Why Caterpillars?" **Anya:** "Cuz I could see them turn into butterflies and fly away." **Peter:** "Wow, Anya, you said a lot as this Rhododendron plant. Out to everything you said, tell me what fit for you in your own life and what did not fit." **Anya:** "I feel safe, I'm healthy, I like being depended on sometimes, but I don't think it's that calm and I don't like getting admired. I don't like people looking at me and I don't like talking to people." **Peter:** "It's surprising to hear you say you don't like talking to people because you said so much as the Rhododendron plant. Was it more comfortable to speak as the plant?" **Anya:** "Yes, because I was playing a character."

CTSP 551: Play Becomes Real - Weekly Reflection – Spring 2023

Name: _____ **Program:** _____ **Media:** _____

1) As a client this week, my play (i.e. “as if” experience) became real (i.e. related to content from my own life):

Not at all	Somewhat	Substantially	Profoundly So
0	1	2	3

2) As a client, this practice was helpful in providing me with awareness, insights, possibilities, and/or options:

Not at all	Somewhat	Substantially	Profoundly So
0	1	2	3

3) Please add specific and further comments about your responses to questions 1 and/or 2 above:

4) As a therapist, I found this work to be helpful or effective in working with and engaging my client:

Not at all	Somewhat	Substantially	Profoundly So
0	1	2	3

5) As a client or therapist this week, this experience was suprising to me:

Not at all	Somewhat	Substantially	Profoundly So
0	1	2	3

6) Please add specific and further comments about your responses to questions 4 and/or 5 above: