

REFRAME CULTIVATING EVERYDAY CREATIVITY CONVERSATIONS

Laura Riddell interview transcript

Kerry: Laura Riddell is an art therapist and creator she is passionate about connecting with creativity in herself and helping others to do so as well. Laura believes that creativity can help us to make healthier and bolder decisions that enhance the quality of life. Welcome Laura it's really delightful to chat with you today. Firstly, I'm going to ask you to tell us a little about yourself, you are an art therapist, what does an art therapist typically do and how did you get to be one?

Laura: Thank you for having me, Kerry, it is lovely to talk to you as art therapy doesn't get as much publicity as it perhaps needs or is due. It is a wonderful form of therapy where you can use your creative expression to tell your story rather than having to find the right words. I don't know if you have ever been in therapy but sometimes you feel overwhelmed by having to find the right words or the complexity of a situation is such that you can't explain the whole thing. Art and the visual expression of a concept or a problem is so much easier because its symbolic. So, you can draw a broken heart for example, and it can express a huge amount of things, how is it affecting you, where is it in your body, is it a concept, is it happening to you, is it happening to other people. So, one tiny little, three little lines, can mean so much and it gives a really good starting place for a therapist to work with a client if you are doing art as therapy specifically. But it also gives you an in to working with things that have happened when you were non-verbal, a lot of us have experiences when we were very young that we can't even necessarily remember but you can feel, and so you can use colour, you can use form, things like clay, building construction, to express those that you don't have the words for because you didn't have words when they started.

Kerry: That's really interesting, it such a fascinating area and many of don't quite know what art therapy is and we hear all these things about creativity being good for us, but as you said there are a lot of non-verbal things and underlying aspect, we are just not aware of. So, tell me, what led you to this path, I noticed that you are interested in glassmaking.

Laura: I'm a bit of a, I don't know whether you call it a late developer, my career, first career was in computers and running business, and when I was running my own business, I realised that a huge amount of work in managing a company, it was my own company with 100 staff, was people skills. I stopped and gave myself some time out and trained as a counsellor so that my people skills were better in managing the people that were working for me and getting the best out of them. And one of the things I learnt in counselling was to keep a journal and that led to me being more creative. And the glass making came out of that it was such a hard medium to work that it just suited my personality, you had to concentrate so hard to do it, and I found that very therapeutic. So, when I sold the last company that I owned I decided to retire and start learning again and this was 15 years ago now and studied art therapy because I wanted to put that counselling, people skills, and my passion for people, together with the creativity. So, the glass was my personal journey in exploring my creativity, but I also found it incredibly focusing because I couldn't think about anything else apart from the fact you would cut yourself if you did.

Kerry: You are bringing together all these elements, one which is your history and being an entrepreneur, the personal skills, and also the artistic practice, and the process, so they are sort of all things that kind of merge together, and obviously inform what you do in your art therapy.

One of the things I would love to chat to you today is some of thing about how we can be more creative. What are some of things art therapist use to get us in that zone of being able to be creative Particularly when we may have different roadblocks of thing it is something I think I can't really do.

Laura: One of the things that I, particularly when you've got new clients, but even I do quite a lot of teaching groups as well. So, facilitating mental health patients to do art. So, although it is art therapy, it's in a much broader stage, because it's really using art as therapy. Rather than doing all the analysis and trying to work out each individual story, it's usually using the creativity or the making of art as a therapeutic tool. And one of the things that I'm passionate about is not getting people started on a blank piece of paper, I think that is quite daunting for everyone, including artists themselves. And so, I will always engage the group or the person in an activity that gently gets them into it. And for children, often I'll give them a piece of paper that we've used before, or somebody else has used before. So, it starts off with some marks on it. And then that lets go of that perfectionist in you, and says, well, you know what, this is just for fun. This is just because, and, and really, we are so conditioned into the outcome in most things in the world, that we have forgotten how to just be in the process of doing something. So, it gives permission to become process driven, rather than outcome driven. And I think that's the biggest thing to give yourself permission to do is not to worry about the outcome, just to get started.

Kerry: That is really fantastic advice, I find that the inner critic, particularly when you are starting out something new is such a strong and powerful voice that it will actually stop me from doing something creative. And it we focus back on the process, I think that is a really interesting thing to talk about process rather than product and how, being in that process can be beneficial. Just talk to me a little about what you do when working with your clients getting into the process, how do we get there and what are some of the benefits of being there - in flow, in process.

Laura: I just thought of, you're probably not old enough to remember when you didn't have digital cameras, and the old, the old, taking a picture was a big deal. So given you now that digital, you're automatically going into that process of taking a photograph much easier, because there isn't that judgment of "Oh my God, I'm going to get it wrong". You've got a number of things, and there's no wrong because you can take a number of them. And so, for me as a as a facilitator, or somebody encouraging you to be creative, I want to give you that same permission, there's nothing wrong that you do. It's not about starting again; it's just going with the flow. And so, we're getting people out, we're getting them into to a safe environment that feels nurturing and unconditional, rather than the judgmental environment. And you can immediately see a person as they drop into that their whole sense of self calms down and quiets down, because they no longer on guard. And I saw this extremely well. I saw this very well demonstrated in a parent teacher interview that I did one time, we had a whole lot of parents at the school. And we got them to try and remember, any number of items on a tray. And then the next process, we, and they, and then ask them to tell us what they remembered, and there was agitation all over the place. Then we said, alright, well, while we just sitting up the next tray, we want you to colour in these, just with some crayons, current

colour in these children's stories. The difference in their personal being was remarkable. We never did set up the second tray. But it was to give them a felt experience of what it was like for their children from being judged to be non-judged. And it was exquisite because that whole calming down, not getting it wrong, this is an almost a meaningless task, but I can enjoy it because it's a process of colouring in was just a classic example what we trying to achieve.

Kerry: There are some many times that we go off to something an we sort of know that there is going to be a little bit of a hurdle or a task in front of us. For myself I am a classic stage fright sort of a person. I have noticed this often in groups too going off to conferences and workshops there is always people given a task that says ok you are all going to do something creative now, there are people who will just switch off and say, but I'm not creative and can't do it. Whereas just that lovely sort of thing, just pick up a crayon and colour something, it doesn't matter what it turns out or what it is, is a really nice way of leading people in, kind of around the corner.

Laura: Yeah, absolutely. And it actually is based in science, because the sympathetic system is set is heightened. When you go into that judgment situation, when you think that people are judging you or that even you're judging yourself, and it is yours. It's your fight, flight, freeze whichever word you use, or whatever response you have. And so, what we're trying to do is engage the parasympathetic, which is the relax the calm, the nurturing the healing part of you. And that is, is soothing to yourself. And that is why it's beneficial. And that's why when you're in a group like that, I see the hidden benefits of working in a group like that are people being able to engage when they're not in fight flight, they're actually starting to have a conversation or relate to other people, when their, their sense of threat is no longer there, or it's very low compared to what they normally living. And what I saw in a group of mental health patients is that they started engaging with others in conversations, which was unusual, because when there's a bunch of them in a room, it's everybody's sort of guarding and is guarded. And eventually, over a period of time, they're going, oh, that what are you doing over there, and their curiosity comes up, and their admiration, it comes away from being self-focused and threatened to opening that little gateway into saying, oh, I can look out for my place and see what's going on. And that's the beginning of learning about communications, learning about trust, learning about interactions, that are the very things that have made them isolated in the beginning, because they haven't been able to do that.

Kerry: That's a really interesting way of getting into some of things that if I said, I want you to be doing this, I want you to be talking to the people in this room. Again, there are some really nice ways that the process of doing something which you know is "creative" in a way, it could be a collage, or just picking up some pencils. But then this other element which I have noticed a lot that is coming up, and it is a word that I love, and would like to just explore with you and throw around a little bit is curiosity. So, curiosity is something we often associate with children, kids are always curious they are sticking bits of plasticine in their mouth, we tend to lose curiosity over time. But without curiosity we tend to shut some doors, so that's an interesting aspect of that is just that opening up. Could you talk to us a little bit about some of the curiosity response.

Laura: Yep, I love I love that idea because I think there's one be you up beyond curiosity too? I would say curiosity is the gateway that I'm trying to open for them for most people of saying, well, what will happen if, and children have it? They really do. They, they just they can't help themselves. But it

gets socialized out of you. Because you get to a point where either you are judged, or you judge yourself and sort of go, 'Oh, no, I can't do this'. And you put start putting filters and limits on you, when you have someone sitting alongside you. And often with my younger clients, and particularly I will draw with them. So, they start drawing, and I start drawing, and all we're doing drawing together, and we start creating, and then they get their confidence.

But beyond curiosity, there's awe, and if you think of it, the pleasure that you get when you sit in awe, is completely soul food. It's the part of you that looks at a sunset and just, time goes away, place goes away, and you just sit, and you can absorb that unconditionality. So, curiosity is the way to it, but awe is the one that we really dropping into. And I think that's what comes from somebody, if they're prepared to be creative, we'll get a taste of if they drop into what we call the zone. Is that awe? Wow, did I do that? Oh, my gosh, I don't remember doing that. But look what I've got. So, we are talking in another language, I'm very, very much childlike view of the world. That's where we want to get back to.

Kerry: OK we can start with curiosity and see where that takes us, heading down and opening up to awe, one of those things we don't think about but think about but subconsciously we are seeking. Some of the benefits of being out in nature, so there are lots of different ways into that experience potentially, some artists talk about the when they have this moment of flow, and they just know that things are right. So, there is no one right way, but I know that working out in nature, or going for a walk can be particularly helpful for me, how do you find, or integrate, that being outdoors into your art therapy practice?

Laura: Absolutely, if even if I can't get them, get myself all the clients out into the outdoors, I often use nature as a stimulus. So, I'll do a whole term of work on something like trees, and we explore the whole aspect of trees, the growing-ness of it, the storytelling, the various ways of working with it. So, I'll often go to an element of nature to actually use it as a subject because it seems to ground the actual experience in a way that if you're doing something that is not natural doesn't.

All right, when one of the things that I was trying to do with, class of girls that were on the autism spectrum, was they teenagers, and they don't interact very well with each other social skills are very low. And the point of having this class of eight or 10 girls, was to let them learn how to interact with other teenagers and stuff. So, one of the examples we did was regard branches, and then all sorts of materials for them to actually make their own tree. And the strangeness that came out of the trees was so representational of the way they saw themselves and how they interacted with one another, even trying to stabilize their tree so that it would stand up, was giving them the grounds for what they were trying to do themselves. How do I where am I in space? Where am I my spatial concept of myself? How do I interact with other; can I ask somebody to hold this one I bind that? So, a lot of my time I do use nature because it has a truth that is in our souls.

I don't know if you know of a project that's going on at the moment. And this is so relevant to COVID. It's called the Northern Beaches, secret rocks. It's hashtag #NBSR. And basically, basically, it's a bunch of people have got little pebbles, and they painted them, and then they go hiding them on the Northern Beaches. So, when everybody goes out walking, they find these little hidden rocks and every, you don't have to be an artist to do it, you just paint a rock and then put this hash flag on the

back. And the delight and the wonder and the and what we were talking about the aura of work, going for a walk, and finding these hidden treasures, has, I don't know made so many people's lives better.

Kerry: That's really fun. We were talking a little bit before about the pandemic and how that has made most people are to isolate, many are having to isolate, or feeling more isolated just because the reduction in things we are able to do and the time we get to spend with one another. That is a lovely example of a social activity about some of those other things that you potentially get out of a creative endeavour, or just having some time to do something that makes you feel good. What are some of the benefits?

Laura: Yeah, there are so many benefits in the well, there are two sides to it, I think one of the one of the most important things is to feel that you're part of a community regardless of whether you're a normal functioning person in the society, or whether you've got disability, or you're marginalized, or whatever, your sense of community is incredibly important to your sense of wellbeing to your mental health, all of that. So, something that builds community is important, being part of a group. And in COVID times, I think this has become part of the problem actually, that people only associate being belonging is when they actually with someone. And we have to redefine what belonging means. And that's when something like this rock project or other community-based program projects become more and more important, because we've got to step into a new place of belonging in a in a virtual world, having the courage to say or join a group on Zoom or having the courage to do exercises or yoga to a Zoom meeting. And I think that's actually teaching or asking the teachers to take another step into almost a pastoral care part of realizing that when you interact with people on zoom, you need to still spend that five minutes and saying, how are you? What are you up to personalize it, instead of just walking in and assuming everybody's got what they need? Just straight away.

So, I think it is it's making us more aware of where we belong and what we need to do. And I think creativity gives you that structure. So even though you might be in a COVID situation, just to say to yourself or every day, I'm going to do a journal page. I'm going to...I can't draw. Okay, well, how about if I do a collage page every day? Or how about if I find the just a saying that I like to draw it and then colour it in? Or do something around it? Or how about if I do a new recipe once a week? You know, there's the little goals like that, that you can then expand out into a bigger community, because then you can say, oh, where else could I find people that are interested in what I'm doing? Because having a structure creativity can give you that structure. How about I do a journal page or a collage page. How about if I do a new recipe once a week, then I can expand out into a larger community and join those.

Kerry: You know an area that's really interesting is ok where do we start, and some of the frameworks you are doing around that, let's think about a journal, maybe we do a page or a part of a page every day. Following some of those interests and hobbies already and how those things could be a jumping point that maybe starts with you and goes out from there. You mentioned before not starting with a blank page.

Laura: For people to be safe or feel safe, they need a structure, it needs to be quite a solid structure, a solid framework that is predictable and consistent. And so, for example, if I said to a six year old boy, write a story for me, and he'd get me here, forget it. I'd rather go play Lego. How about if I said to him, you know, the *Hungry Caterpillar* story every day, he goes on to eat something? How about we write a story together, and you can tell me what he's going to eat every day. So, in his mind, you've given him a structure, that it's seven pieces of food, it's something that he can tangibly visualize. And it all becomes possible to tell the story. And that's what we are talking about in art, how you can actually get around these blocks, and these blank sheets. I mean, one of the things that I mentioned to a young girl that was doing a journal, and she said, I don't know where to start, and I said, okay, how about you start at the beginning of the alphabet on the first page, put an A. And I don't know if you ever finished the whole alphabet, but it got her started on the first page. So that's where this holding or this framework gives agency to the person to start. And if you want to translate it, you could take it across into say, cooking and say, alright, make up a new recipe, but you're only allowed three ingredients. Wow. Okay. That's an opportunity for me to explore. Its curiosity again.

Kerry: Seeing what you can do with that it kind give you a sense of one a framework, or a set of limitations to work in. I have been quite enjoying one of the artists I follow online she has just produced a set of creative prompts around colour.

Laura: Yeah. Yeah. And that's really what I think, as a facilitator, as an art therapist, or any facilitators should do is create that gateway that people are encouraged to go through. Yes, it is a limitation, but it's also a gentle direction for them to explore themselves. And as I mentioned, I work quite extensively with children with autism. And to actually engage a child that's on or anyone that's on the spectrum is usually very difficult because they need just to survive. They need to live in their own little world. But what I realized is that I could adjust any of my art programs to them. So, it would give them that courage to go through too, for example of a little boy that absolutely loved cars. This was just his he liked lining them up and playing with them and everything. But the syllabus that we were trying to teach them at school was about bridges. And how do you go from cause to bridges? Well, you create a bridge that a car can go across. And so, he had a very 3D experience of what bridges were. But then from then on, and he was only young, he was four or five. From then on, he could associate bridges and cars, so it was safe to explore bridges. And he landed up three or four years later, doing the most beautiful skyline drawings, because we'd been able to get him from, from cars across the bridge to seeing buildings. And that's the sort of journey but it wouldn't have happened if we couldn't have got that first gateway open.

Kerry: So, getting gateways open, finding ways into curiosity, and the potential to lead to so many other things like making connections we may not have made before. We want to be able to implement them in our lives, some of the benefits to get experience that is rewarding.

Laura: Well, I guess the reward for me is that you're putting something that is internal, into an external form. So, a lot of stopping ourselves doing anything creative? Is anxiety, a sense of, I'm not good enough. I can't start it, whatever. So even if you start with that, and say, Okay, what does that look like on a piece of paper or in clay or let me go out and look in nature and see at all of those things that aren't perfect and photograph, every single thing that I see is not perfect, as a reflection

back to you. Because that gives you permission not to be perfect. So that one little child was a perfectionist, and I used to crumple the paper up before you started, and then say, alright, you've got to draw on that. And he loved being able to follow the creases.

So, it was giving permission to explore is probably the thing and the benefit, the benefit, the real benefit, is that they're working in a non-judgmental environment, so they're safer. And we need to feel safe in this current situation of COVID. Everything's about fear and isn't as terrifying isn't it awful. We need soothing, we need to calm down. We need our parasympathetic to be engaged. We need to have time to breathe deeply, and to take time to appreciate things.

Kerry: Beautiful, I think that is a lovely, lovely spot to wrap up our conversation. Thank you so much.

Laura: Thank you very much for talking to me, because as you can see, I'm pretty passionate about it. And the more people the more people get to try something, the more they realise that they're able to do it. And it's not about the outcome. It's really about the process.