

Writing therapy to writer

Peter Bates

Many day centres run creative writing groups as a therapeutic exercise. Sadly, few of the staff involved have thought through how participants could make the transition from writing for therapy to participating in the wider community as a person who loves reading and writing. People who have used mental health services could utilise their writing as a means to develop contact and build friendship with people in the wider community who have had no prior contact with mental health services. Here is a collection of ideas about how that transition could be made.

There are some recurring dilemmas, listed below, about developing creativity through writing.

- A focus on getting published may exclude people from the group – those people who write for self-expression but are unable to deliver to the standard required by the media.
- Some writers want to generate material about mental illness or psychiatric services, but others have an interest in other subjects and choose to ‘write their way out’ of mental health experiences, services or social groups. They feel that writing is an activity where they can leave their identity as a service user behind for a time.
- Non-mental health tutors may lead creative writing or oral history sessions but be reluctant to suggest autobiographical work or other material out of fear that it will lead to inappropriate self-disclosure or distress some service users. The tutor may feel ill-equipped to respond to the person in this event.
- What is the overlap between mental health problems and getting lost in the memories, dreams and fantasy of creative writing? Or factual investigation and obsessive – compulsive problems? How do writers compensate for the loneliness?
- The problem of ‘praxis’ – of integrating special experiences into daily lifestyle – is not unique to mental health service users. The poet, Ted Hughes, set up some Arvon Centres where writers do residential courses on creative writing, which are arguably the best in the country.

Some participants have a real difficulty in bringing the experience back home. This has some points of parallel with the problem of bringing mental health creative writing experiences into daily living.

The reality of these and other dilemmas means that groups should think clearly about the purpose and balance of their group and the consequences of shifting the emphasis.

Community based groups

There are many creative writing groups in the community. These vary enormously in how they are run, so if you don't like the one that is nearest to you, it's always worth trying to get to a different one. A few meet during the day, but most run evening sessions. The most satisfactory groups present a varied programme. This might consist of occasional speakers, open evenings when members have the opportunity to read out their own work, and time to share market news as well as members' own successes and problems. *Writer's Magazine* carries an annual guide to writer's circles in England, Scotland and Wales.

I heard about a women's group in one community that met each month to discuss a book that they had all agreed to read. Strong friendships had formed, as well as providing some shared interest in literature. The therapeutic group could invite a guest speaker from a community group like this to give a reading or talk about their group. This might lead to a mutual exchange of invitations, although some people would prefer to attend as citizens, rather than be introduced as members of the therapeutic group.

Has anyone in the therapeutic group ever attended a public poetry reading? Listening to a performance can feel safe for a newcomer who prefers to stay in the background, while an open evening might be a safe setting for performance and could lead to increased self-confidence and improved social skills.

Is the group on a mailing list for poetry events? When a guest performer is on the stage, a few friends from the therapeutic writing group might attend together, but they are unlikely to meet new acquaintances at such an event unless they attend regularly.

Radio 4 (helpline: 0800 044 044) runs an annual *National Poetry Week* and the nation's favourite poems are performed on a TV show. The therapeutic group could video the TV show and then watch it together and discuss the material which is presented. A Northampton bookshop arranges a poetry evening during *National Poetry Week* where people can gather to read their own poems, and this may happen in your local bookshop too. Bookshops may have information about other groups for readers, writers or poets.

Special interest groups can be helpful, often providing extra support and encouragement. For example, the Association of Christian Writers runs training events, postal workshops and a network of area groups, as well as producing a quarterly magazine, *Candle and Keyboard*. Contact them at 73 Lodge Hill Road, Farnham, Surrey GU10 3RB.

Business writing

Some people already have sophisticated skills in assembling a clear business letter or taking minutes, and others can develop these skills. This highlights the potential in business writing and opens the way into writing at work or for the neighbourhood newsletter or a local voluntary organisation. In other words, the pleasure of writing is combined with another interest. This enables the person to participate in an interest group and offer her or his writing as a gift to the other participants. For example, one might join a local neighbourhood watch committee or

charity by volunteering to write minutes of the meetings. This could be a way into friendship.

Getting published

Survivors Poetry provides a national forum for the publication of poetry by mental health service users – contact Lisa Boardman at survivor@survivorspoetry.org.uk.

An alternative is to contribute items to a community publication, rather than a solely mental health publication. The further education college in Smethwick has a creative writing department that produce an anthology of work each year. This is selected, edited, typed, bound and issued within the college. Mental health service users have contributed items to the anthologies.

A number of studies have researched the pattern of mental health reporting in the press and shown how negatively biased this reporting tends to be (eg Gary Ward (1997) *Making headlines: mental health and the national press* London: Health Education Authority). As a result, Mental Health Media (tel: 020 7700 0100 ext 204) runs training courses to equip mental health service users to feed positive news stories to their local newspaper, and to survive the experience! Media work can begin with writing to the letters page of the local newspaper and grow into submitting a press release or a feature article. Mental Health Media also has a writer's code of practice on published items, including advice on the recommended language through which people should be portrayed.

One way of making a start is to focus on World Mental Health Day, which is held on 10 October each year. In 1998, newspapers and magazines wrote 480,000 words about this event. Suggestions about the day and guidance on how to contribute to the media is available from the mental health team at the Health Education Authority tel: 020 7413 1991.

Further guidance

Guide books and journals offer help to people starting out on creative writing or publishing. These include:

- the *Writer's Handbook*. An invaluable resource that should be available in your local library
- *Writing Magazine* is available from WHSmith every other month and carries interviews with writers, tips, 'how-to' articles and competitions
- *Writer's News* is available on annual subscription only from PO Box 4, Nairn IV12 4HU. The UK price is currently £44.90. Tel: 01667 454 441 for details of current joining offers and a sample copy. This is published monthly and carries international market news as well as competitions and articles
- *The New Writer* is available from PO Box 60, Cranbrook, Kent TN17 2ZR at £29.50 for ten issues or £15.00 for five. It carries market and competition news, articles and features as well as at least three short stories from the annual Ian St James award and a lively poetry section
- *Mslexia* for women who write, is a new quarterly magazine available for £18.75 from PO Box 656, Freepost NEA 5566, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE99 2RP.

Writer's courses

People who attend the creative writing group at a day centre may wish to complete other writer's courses. This can be eased by a range of strategies which allow people to move on when they are ready. For example, the creative writing tutor at one FE college also ran some groups in day centres. From this position she was well placed to inform mental health service users

about the opportunities in the college, and many writers made the transition from day centre to college. One mental health service user has just completed the mainstream creative writing course at the college. Courses vary in the extent to which they are responsive to mental health issues and to different learning styles. The tutor is also a founder member of a performance poetry group which is based in the community and open to anyone. A number of mental health service users joined the group, beginning as members of the audience and gradually moving into performance.

Other opportunities include:

- courses run by some universities under titles such as 'short courses in creative writing', perhaps during summer schools or within a continuing education department. The registry at the university or the marketing department may know what is on offer, or perhaps the registry for the faculty of arts
- the Workers Education Association runs a range of enterprising courses
- correspondence courses on creative writing are occasionally advertised
- many further education colleges offer courses for writers. There is a *National Association of Writers in Education* (contact Paul Munden at paul@nawe.co.uk or write to NAWE, PO Box 1, Sheriff Hutton, York YO6 7YU. Tel: 01653 618 429) and they produce a magazine called *Writing in Education* which is edited by Liz Cashdan. See their website at www.nawe.co.uk.

Libraries

Community Connections in Nottingham recently ran a mental health awareness training course for librarians, who were positive in their wish to offer sensitive and positive support to library customers with mental health problems.

The group could investigate which famous writers, past and present, have experienced mental health difficulties.

Finally, *Write Away* is a national penfriend club for adults and children with any kind of disability or special need, or with none. Contact them at 1 Thorpe Close, London W10 5XL. They work with pen and paper, video and audio tape, Braille and symbols.

To summarise, writing can be a means through which people make the journey from participating in mental health services to participating in the wider community. For this to work, focused effort is needed to connect what goes on in the day centre with similar activities in the community. This connection needs to be strengthened with information, lots of choices and personal contacts. The lessons learnt from connecting writing therapy groups to community opportunities are applicable to many other daytime activities offered to mental health service users.

* A shorter version of this article appeared in *Writing in Education*, issue 18, winter 1999/2000, page 5. The author would like to thank Ros Goddard and Sue Griffiths for their help with writing the paper.