

**Creative, reflective and expressive writing workshops in a museum in Bath.
An evaluative and reflective account in three parts:**

One - Introduction

Two - My written account as facilitator, as commissioned by the museum for an exhibition highlighting educational projects held at the museum over the last twelve months

Three - Additional information including practical pointers for other facilitators engaged in / considering such work, including evaluative feedback from participants



'And it's a human need to be told stories. The more we're governed by idiots and have no control over our destinies, the more we need to tell stories about who we are, why we are, where we come from and what might be possible.'

Alan Rickman.

One - Introduction

In the Autumn of 2017 I was commissioned, as a facilitator of Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP) to run a series of creative writing workshops by a museum in Bath in partnership with Age UK. Age UK provide a lot of services aiming to support the social, educational and recreational quality of life of older citizens. They make particular effort to deliver services to those living in the rural communities surrounding Bath - areas which generally have less breadth of stimuli on offer than the city. The museum – No. 1, Royal Crescent - is owned by Bath Preservation Trust and has rooms featuring historic furniture, pictures and objects that reveal what life was like for Bath's residents – both upstairs and downstairs, during the period 1776-1796. This includes the basement servants hall which now functions as an education room, in which our writing workshops took place.

From the start I felt completely heard and supported by the excellent Learning and Engagement Officer, Polly Andrews, whose collaborative approach and pro-active spirit contributed greatly to the quality of the project throughout. She was canny enough to know that, for a pilot project such as I was offering, with its bias towards creativity for wellbeing, it was important to link the workshops to an event at the museum which might draw people in, in its own right. Words for Wellbeing, after all, is a new concept to many. Furthermore, she told me, these were to be the first ever creative writing workshops offered in the museum, let alone ones of the particular approach I offer. As part of the 250th anniversary celebrations of the building of the Royal Crescent, an exhibition had been curated to show significant events in the life of the iconic neo-classical crescent, and artists and photographers records of such events. It was called ***A view of the Crescent***. Participants were invited to come, free of charge, to hear a talk about the exhibition by its curator and view the exhibition in the light of her knowledge. This would be followed by refreshments and the two-hour creative writing workshop. We were told by some of the more frank amid those who signed up for the experience that the words 'free', 'talk', 'exhibition', 'museum' and 'refreshments' were enough to swing them around to venturing the workshop. What had they to lose after all....

Below is the evaluative and reflective account of the project that I was commissioned to write by Bath Preservation Trust, and which is reproduced here with their kind permission.

It is followed by some practical additions, explaining how the work came about, some further observations and themes in the feedback received from participants. I will end with an overview of my reflections on the project and a summary of what can be taken forward from this work to support future events, whether with the same organisation, or in other comparable situations in the future.

Two - my written account as facilitator, as commissioned by the museum for an end-of-year exhibition highlighting educational projects held at the museum over the last year, including the responses to the Autumn exhibition entitled *A View of the Crescent*.

When considering how to approach the creative writing workshops in response to the exhibition – ***A View of the Crescent*** – I had a mixture of anticipatory feelings. My hopes

were that participants would gain something valuable from the particular approach I use, where the emphasis is much more on enjoying creative writing as a tool for discovery – finding out what we feel, what we think, what we remember and how we respond personally and subjectively to stimulus, than on creating an immaculate, complete and honed end-product. My fears were that this approach might somehow be at odds with what I perceive as a more information-led environment, where 'getting it right' is the holy grail. My perception of museums is of places where fact-based, well-researched, objective truth is gathered, prized and generously and enthusiastically given to visitors. To my delight I discovered that these two cultures – my process-led approach and the museum's educational ethos - can be complementary, each feeding into the other. The key thing was framing the opportunity in a way that used the collection as a starting point, but allowing space for as wide range of exploratory interpretations and responses as possible.

In one part of the workshop we wrote in response to wonderful original objects from the museum's Handling Collection. The most prominent theme here was the questions, rather than the answers, that arose. Each question led to surmised answers rather than definite, 'right' ones. Our questions opened up further lines of enquiry. This stimulated our engagement with and curiosity around subjects and objects, fueling our imaginations, mining our memories, and encouraging forensic thinking, interpretive skills and guess work. We homed in on tiny details of daily, human experience in relation to a given object. We thought about the object's maker, its owner, its wearer or the servant who cleaned, mended or serviced it.

The following pieces of workshop writing illustrates this. First comes the description of the object - a kitchen utensil used for marking patterns onto pastry:

Light wood, elegantly turned, free-wheeling, zig-zag wheel, held in place by a darker pin. Smooth feel to the (gloved) hand. Ridges and a decorative, cracked, wheel, made of slightly darker wood, and fluted. It rattles when shaken. Loosely-held smells of wooden floors. Old dirt around the neck. Very even pattern of zig and zag. Wheel rotates when I spin it or blow it hard. Makes a raspy noise, like clearing the throat, when it spins. Feels freely spinning. I like it that it has a moving part.

Second comes the imagined 'interrogation', as we referred to it, of the described object:

Whose hands were you in? Who looked after you so carefully and stopped you getting broken? Who took pleasure in adding pretty lines to a pastry? What did it feel like to roll this onto raw pastry? What if I get it wrong? - Make a messy line, or wobble? I have deft hands and all my tools are familiar to me. I have routine tasks and know my trade well. Woe betide anyone who does not respect my tools and thoughtlessly handles them when cleaning. I am carefully dried and have a place where I live in the kitchen. I am not tossed into a drawer. I am laid out in my special place. The kitchen is inspected to make sure all is in its place and all is in order.

Notice how the writer flows un-self-consciously through different points of view – identifying first as interviewer, then becoming the imagined user of the object, then becoming the object itself, before writing from an apparent over-view of the culture of the kitchen.

This exercise demonstrated the power of giving close attention to a physical object – simply scrutinising it for long enough to notice tiny details and thence allow the mind free rein to bring

it and its story to imagined life.

Initially I struggled to find an experiential way of offering a creative, expressive and reflective exercise which engaged with the exhibition - **A View of the Crescent** - as per my remit. Then I hit on the idea of asking participants to respond to their own actual view of the crescent as seen from the withdrawing room of 1, Royal Crescent, in the following way.

Participants were given a 20 minute talk about the exhibition – 'A View of the Crescent' by the curator, Beatrice Goddard. We then had a chance to browse in our own time. I floated out a couple of questions to bear in mind while perusing the exhibits - What in particular catches your eye? Is there a particular artist's response you especially like or, conversely, dislike.

On the way to the basement Servants Hall where the writing workshop was to take place, we took a detour to the withdrawing room, whose window has the best view of the crescent. Participants were invited to take some quiet time just looking out at it, and to consciously allow the sight of it to impress itself upon them. They were asked to notice such impressions, or their thoughts, feelings and associations. Then they were given mini clip boards and asked to jot down up to three words or phrases which captured something that had taken their attention. The words could relate to the scene as a whole, or some small detail that caught their eye. I asked them not to share these aloud with others at that point but to keep them to themselves for later in the workshop.

Back in the Servants Hall, after introductions and preparatory explanations, we took it in turns to read our three words aloud. This brought a rich word-hoard into the room and opened up the subject through the impressions, feelings and imagery that words can conjure. Here is the collection of impressions from all workshops.

*Unapologetic Gracious Eternal Crows Monumental Frozen in time Spaciousness Open-ness Patterns Spacious Curvacious Elegance Grey roofs Lots of windows The famous yellow door Stunning appearance Perfection Magnificent Beautiful Wonderful Contrast of rough grass and lawn Imposing **Dark eyes (of the windows)** Lines and curves Community Green space Architectural beauty Modern buildings nearby Trees Yellow door Ha ha The vista Do we really need cars? Why is there a dark bush in front of one of the houses? Why are many windows blank (shuttered)? Grandeur Symmetry Memories Privilege Facade Time Sweet Embrace Ugliness Monumental Calming Concealing Grey Space-hopper Green Order Repetition Chimneys Mottled Smooth Tranquil Timeless Tarnished Spell-binding Majestic Openings Continuity Stillness Movement Stiff Constrained Backdrop Tonal Solid Gentle*

Participants were then invited to choose one of their three words and do some free writing in response to it – either in the context of the crescent or not, as they wished.

One person wrote:

Dark Eyes (of the windows)

Who is behind them. I can't see you. Is there anybody there? Or are you just veiled, protected, hiding? Are you keeping me out or keeping yourself in? Maybe you only look out when we are gone, show yourself when there is no-one to show to. Or maybe you appear to

*be present, on guard, on duty, but your attention is elsewhere. I like it when your eyes light up and you come to life, **and I can see in**, and there is movement, and colour, and activity.*

We shared our writing with a partner then chose a word or phrase or image from our first piece of writing and wrote in response to this.

And I can see in

I love to see inside, to catch a glimpse of the privacy. To walk along at dusk and steal slivers of intimacy – people moving, relaxed, having shed their shoes, their coats, their day, and I am inside their home, uninvited, but not shut out. I sometimes think people quite like to be viewed in this way. I sometimes do, and I sometimes don't.

I noticed some themes emerging, alongside the impression that the experience of writing individually, sharing our writing aloud and responding verbally to each others' shared writing proved surprisingly stimulating to some who had claimed to be shy or unaccustomed writers.

I was struck by the contrast in some peoples' responses to the same sight, for example one person appreciating the trees and greenery in and around the crescent, another objecting to a vigorous bush growing in front of one house; another person expressed a wish, had she lived on the crescent, for the grass before it to be for her (imagined) private use, while another relished the community use and reminisced that several generations of her family (her mother, herself, her children and grandchildren) had enjoyed using it. These observations were prompted by the painting seen in the exhibition entitled *The Beach*, depicting a view of a very informal and relaxed enjoyment of the grassed area given over for public use. One person wanted all the doors to be of uniform colour, while another delighted in the spirit of the woman who painted hers yellow, and fought and won her legal right to keep it so. It felt there was respectful space for different opinions to be held in this context without the need or expectation to be right, or convince others of a point-of-view.

Pleasure was expressed at hearing what other people in the group wrote about - how differently we each interpreted the suggested exercises. One person, writing in response to the sight of the space-hopper, became immersed in memories from the 1960s; another wrote a reverie on tranquility, painting small vignettes of it manifesting - 'a fretful child's face, now sleeping'; another on the powerful effect a carelessly damaging utterance has on another person. I was struck by how powerfully someone was affected and really examined their object and saw tiny details which suggested, for example, the way the wearer had worn down the back of the heel of the patten*, or the hand-stitching on the thick leather. Another, who had the second patten, remarked on how unchanged the design of the 200 year old buckle is to modern buckles, and that she could imagine the fingers of the wearer moving over the buckle in just the way that we handle modern ones. We enjoyed the questions that presented themselves as we 'interrogated the objects' and people could see where such questions would lead them easily into writing imaginatively, or factually, relating accounts from their own lives to pass on to children or grandchildren. One participant (who was one of the museum guides) expressed how privileged she felt to be able to handle these objects.

* A patten is a form of footwear that someone steps into, while already shod. It lifts them up

and protects dainty shoes from the muck of the street.

As each successive group reached the close of their two-hour workshop, it felt like we had all just warmed up, relaxing into the tasks and opening to each other. The sense of immersion, the sense of interest in what others had written and the discussions that arose had pushed aside misgivings or nerves that may have been owned to on arrival. I can see how a similar workshop could serve as a taster session which would lead naturally on to developing, expanding and deepening the possible lines of enquiry, in a series of sessions.

I enjoyed this pilot project immensely and am grateful to the museum staff, and to Polly Andrews in particular, for embracing it. We witnessed the participants' pleasure and enthusiastic response to the material offered. We discovered that there is real potential for such writing to enhance a participant's experience of the museum's collections and the knowledge it represents. I sensed how such an experience can also be a way to consider what it is to be human, in all our different ways, simply by giving our attention to it, in the spirit of enquiry. In this particular context we were able to compare and contrast our current lives with the lives of people who have come before us, using historical objects as a gateway to exploration and exposition. For some participants the exercises entered into suggested starting points for recording aspects and details of their own lives to leave as a legacy for their family.

On a personal note, and in response to one of the photographs in the exhibition as well as to one of the pieces of creative writing, I am now inspired to return to the crescent at dusk, when the lights are on but the curtains are still open...

Three - Additional information including practical pointers for other facilitators engaged in / considering such work, evaluative feedback and my reflections.

1. What led to receiving the commission.

In the Autumn of 2016, having heard of museums being a successfully stimulating starting points for writing workshops, I was inspired by a museum I visited, by chance, in the Cotswolds. I could envisage interesting writing workshops using this particular collection as a starting point to enhance visitors experience of the place, use the writing for wellbeing approach in which I am trained. I wrote to the museum and duplicated the email to a dozen or so other museums closer to home, introducing myself and my ideas. A handful of people acknowledged my email or said they would pass it on to the relevant person. Most of these exchanges came eventually to naught. One person however arranged a phone call and we talked through how what I was offering could be a fit for ideas she had in her work as education officer for a group of museums in Bath. She, Polly, had an idea for a collaboration with AgeUK in mind for 2017 and asked if we could carry on liaising while she established the funding and all the other preparations that a large organisation requires. This would be a new venture for both of us but we both recognised a shared excitement for the ideas and it was quickly clear that it would be a compatible collaboration.

2. Impact on the participants.

Polly took part in the first of the series of workshops so experienced it at first hand. She also heard and recorded the feed-back from those participants. These were, for the most part, over 60 years old, and were predominantly women. From then on we devised some simple before- and-after evaluative forms so that people could write anonymously about their experiences, in addition to the verbal opening and closing rounds. Below is a sample of the most representative themes. One additional theme arose conversationally and really struck me. Several people who voiced that they had not written creatively since their school days which, they freely admitted, was a long time ago. This made me very curious, but I will have to wait for another opportunity to explore this with them. One person had worried that we were going to be writing for a full two hours, which made me think of sitting in an exam room. She expressed pleasure and relief that we wrote in short bursts, but that the things that supported the bursts of writing – the warm-up, introduction, sharing and feedback to hearing each others' words - helped to bring focus, energy and significance to things people wrote about.

Main themes in response to the question:

i) Any thoughts and / or feelings at the start of the session?

Interested. Nervous. Terrified. Worries of the unknown. Anticipation. Apprehensive but excited.

'Will I cope? Will my mind be a blank?'

'Looking forward to expanding my limited writing skills.'

'I'm rather nervous. Don't know what to expect as creative writing is something I never really do. Looking forward to a new experience and maybe insights.'

'Delighted to be here. Good to finally see inside No. 1. Full of anticipation of what lies ahead.'

'Feel rather emotional. Curious as to what kind of direction the session might take us in. Glad that I chose to do a creative writing afternoon. Thinking of writing in the future.'

'Apprehension. Trying to switch off the critical / analytical mind and become more subjective.'

A sample of representative answers in responses to the question:

ii) Any thoughts and / or feelings at the end of the session?

'It was a very interesting course and I enjoyed the exhibition of photographs and paintings of the buildings. The objects provided for us to look at were very stimulating for exploring my potential creativity.'

'I really enjoyed the workshop. It made me think about things in a different way. Thank you.'

'It's made me think about other times, other lives, and also enjoy other peoples' approaches to the activities. Easily enjoyable. An interesting way to start a story starting with an object.'

'Challenging. Enjoyable. Stimulating. Interesting range of responses to the tasks. I should do more of this.'

'Invigourating. Informative.'

'Intrigued and inspired by other peoples' approach. Interested deeply by the stories untold. It was great to share perspectives. Great fun – simple, un-

intimidating, stimulating.'

'Great fun and very encouraging. You created an atmosphere where everyone felt safe and confident (your warmth) to share. Well done Kate. I liked the C.R.I.S.P. working alliance*.'

'Very well structured and covered different aspects and approaches to observing feelings, objects, environment and developing it from a starting point in writing. Not taking things for granted. Great to share with others.'

'Ironically, I feel very tranquil, which is the word I chose from the writing prompt. Glad to let some creative juices flow.'

'Fascinating. Loved the variety of views and opinions and people, Polly's organisation and Kate's professionalism - a very gentle introduction to creativity. Have lost the fear!'

'Exhibition was very interesting but for me the most important section was to express our thoughts and feelings into words. I believe I have learned a lot in a such a short space of time.'

* **CRISP** acrostic used as our safety alliance (thanks to Fiona Hamilton for introducing this to me)

Creativity – here is an opportunity to take some liberties and stray a little from the hard facts that surround this crescent and its history;

Respect for each others' words, as there is permission here for subjective, personal responses, notions of right and wrong or good or poor writing are less important than where an individual's words may lead him or her – to memories, experiences, people and places:

I – own what you say ('I feel / I think');

Sensitivity to others, and to your self eg, follow a thread of exploration, as far as it is comfortable to follow, and if something unexpectedly powerful surfaces you have a choice in how much you go into that. Also no obligation to share if things you choose to write about are very personal – one can, for example, choose not to share or just to allude to the thing in broad terms;

Privacy – anonymity or confidentiality, as agreed by group.

3. Useful information for other practitioners considering this sort of work in related contexts.

- Be prepared for a relatively long-term period to set-up any given project. You may have to wait for the right time in an organisation's calendar of planned events.

- Be prepared also to broadcast a generous handful of seeds initially. They will all fall on different terrain, some more receptive to your ideas than others.

- If you have had promising conversations with a given contact, don't forget (or be afraid) to nudge the contact for this project to enquire how preparations are going and keep it live.

- I made efforts to research the relevant contact for each organisation (education officer, or similar job title) but organisations get re-structured or people leave etc. If the initial recipient expresses interest but needs to forward your email to another employee in the organisation, follow this up if you don't hear back from them with a month or so. The trail easily goes cold without input.

- writing reflectively throughout the process had a dual function. It helped me process, evaluate and build on my experiences as the project developed and was delivered. It also provided me with the material for an evaluative account which serves several useful purposes.

4. Practical things to consider next time

- I now have an illustrated, evaluative account including feedback from participants and commissioners. This could be used to demonstrate the value of any proposals I may choose to make in future to other museums, or to those I made introductory contact with originally.

- Being a pilot project and drawing on a rural population, the number of people who applied varied quite considerably from one workshop to another. On one occasion we had twelve, on another only one person from the invited Somerset village signed up. AgeUK decided that this could not justify the cost of the minibus and the workshop was canceled, even though we could conceivably have filled the free workshop places by advertising to the general public in Bath. This flagged up that I must agree in advance a cancellation fee with the commissioning organisation. My contact at the museum was very approachable about this and agreed that this would be more fair in future.

- I have learned that I need to cost preparation time realistically and, for example, explicitly cite travel costs including costs for preparatory visits and meetings.

- If a museum or host organisation asks for services over and above the agreed work such as a written report (as included here as Part Two) I know I need to re-negotiate the cost for this. Better still, in future I will remember to raise this as a possibility in my initial talks about the budget. I was lucky that I felt comfortable doing this with my contact and she responded positively.

5. Feedback from the commissioners.

In our post-project meeting, Polly told me how pleased she was with the way the project had developed and with its delivery and reception. She also asked me to consider another collaborative project with her in the Spring at the same museum, to which I have readily agreed, which felt like the proof of the pudding. It would appear that we both feel lucky to have found compatible collaborators in each other, ready and willing to make the project flow. For me, this is a key ingredient in any collaborative project and I express my thanks to her and to the Bath Preservation Trust for investing time and resources in this work.

6. My reflections and overview.

I was pleased because feedback received from participants (both oral and written) demonstrated that the workshops had met or exceeded peoples' expectations. I was able to introduce the essential principles of writing for wellbeing, with its focus on content, discovery and quality of experience in preference to polished form and presentation within a setting where presentation is a very visible priority, alongside education. We were able to create a culture in which there was more than one 'right' answer, and our not knowing what a particular object might have been, allowed our minds to enquire, guess, imagine, come up with different possibilities, in an atmosphere where the freedom to get an answer wrong was an enjoyable part of the process of finding out, or even inventing alternatives. People left with more knowledge both about themselves, as well as the objects and places they had considered. In addition they had learned of the perspectives of fellow writers, in an environment where we could be with newly-met strangers in an activity that was perhaps deeper and more revealing, without being exposing, than a more cursory exchange. We were all in this creative and exploratory experience together and it seems we felt the richer for it.

The demographic was drawn from older people, living in rural communities outside of Bath. Loneliness and isolation can erode peoples' wellbeing and it felt that this activity fed a sense of meaningful interaction (as well as providing opportunity for other exchanges over tea and biscuits). It opened the door and gave some demonstrable routes in to creative, reflective and expressive writing. The shared experience boosted feelings of connection, confidence, empathy, creative satisfaction, pleasure and a sense of having traveled imaginatively, collectively, as well as individually. Participants took home with them practical pointers towards ways of fulfilling harboured ambitions of 'writing', 'writing more' or writing about their lives to share with children or grandchildren for the sake of family posterity. The urge to write can be summed up in the exhortation of the the 13th century Persian poet Rumi:

'Don't be satisfied with stories of how things have gone for others. Unfold your own myth.'

In the wider context, a preliminary report conducted by The National Alliance for Museums, Health and Wellbeing, called *Museums for Health and Wellbeing*, states that:

'This is an exciting new era for the (museums) sector, which is leading the way in demonstrating how culture can actively contribute to prevention of ill health, quality of life, healthy ageing and human flourishing.' (2016, John Orna-Ornstein).

It feels constructive to build on the practice of introducing the less familiar experience of writing for wellbeing through a partnership with museums. Such institutions, which are relatively familiar and unthreatening to most people, offer the added bonus of the treasures of their collections, their buildings, their experienced personnel and educational resources. It seems a natural and symbiotic arrangement that it would be wise and fruitful to develop.

Kate Pawsey
November 2017

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