

Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes – Work or Play? Research in Progress.

By Kate Pawsey

“For me play is a spirit, as much as a thing that we do. It is a spirit which encourages us to explore, to experiment, to follow our curiosity.” (Professor Richard Phillips, 2014)

I am a facilitator of Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP). I am not a psychotherapist, or a therapist; I simply facilitate people who wish to experience creative writing as a tool for their own well-being, self-development and - oh frivolity – pleasure.

My interest in possible links between play and CWTP began when I noticed parallels between the absorption that occurs when I am deeply engrossed in various forms of creative activity. I notice the absorption strongly when improvising musically with someone I find to be highly compatible to my way of playing or singing, trustworthy, and with whom I find an open channel of communication. I also found it alone, when writing. It got me thinking about the quality of this absorption, which led to a trail of enquiry into a possible correlation to the play state, where anything seems possible.

I was very impressed by Stuart Brown's studies on play in America. He founded the National Institute of Play (US) and made extensive studies on the consequences of severe play deprivation. In his TED talk ('Play is more than fun – it is vital') he illustrates a seven point taxonomy of play, much of which I recognised as potentially present in the CWTP sessions I have been trained to facilitate.

On the NIP website is the following taxonomy of play:

'Attunement, which establishes a connection, such as between newborn and mother.

Body play, in which an infant explores the ways in which his or her body works and interacts with the world, such as making funny sounds or discovering what happens in a fall.

Object play, such as playing with toys, banging pots and pans, handling physical things in ways that use curiosity.

Social play, play which involves others in activities such as tumbling, making faces, and building connections with another child or group of children.

Imaginative play (also called "pretend" or "fantasy"), in which a child invents scenarios from his or her imagination and acts within them as a form of play, such as princess or pirate play.

Narrative play (or storytelling), the play of learning and language that develops

intellect, such as a parent reading aloud to a child, or a child retelling the story in his or her own words.

Transformative play (or integrative), by which one plays with imagination to transcend what is known in the current state, to create a higher state. For example, as Einstein was known to do, a person might wonder about things which are not yet known and play with unproven ideas as a bridge to the discovery of new knowledge.'

(Brown, S.; 2005)

For writers, or people interested in writing, it is not hard to see the last four - social, imaginative, narrative and transformative play - as intrinsically present in creative writing groups, and I regularly access these modes in CWTP sessions. The social aspect in an adult session will of course be somewhat modified from that described above, but I witness twinkly eye-contact, playful communication and laughter in CWTP sessions, as well as more serious ways of communicating and sharing our experiences. Is playfulness simply a very fleeting experience of the play state I wonder.

In CWTP sessions the very first thing we do is to establish the ground rules for *safe enough* creative exploration, stating boundaries of such things as confidentiality and respectful listening, avoiding criticism and using the various functional parts of the session and the time frame as a holding boundary. We set up opportunities for creative writing, through themed exercises and prompts, and also opportunities for reflection, sharing and feedback on what we have written and experienced through the creative writing exercises. I see this as the establishment of Brown's first category of his taxonomy of play: 'attunement, which establishes a connection'.

I wish to know if there is also scope for accessing the second and third categories, of body and object play, in a CWTP session. Memory and imagination can connect people emotionally to embodied, rough-and-tumble play, or play which involves an object, such as hand and ball, or shaping clay, wet sand or water. This is the area of specific exploration of my current MSc research. I see it as being of potential benefit to people who, through injury, illness or simply the aging process, no longer have direct physical access to body-play or object-play.

Definitions

Defining play is not straightforward, and the more I research, the more I appreciate the definition given at the top of this essay - that 'play is a spirit, as much as a thing that we do.....which encourages us to explore, to experiment, to follow our curiosity.'

(Phillips, 2014)

In the world of psychology there exist a rather mind-bending array of approaches to defining and to categorising play, none of which I find as satisfying as Phillips', and Brown's, respectively. Play is generally held to be a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities, mostly associated with enjoyment and pleasure, and usually associated with children. I see intrinsic motivation as an essential quality; put plainly, enforced play is not play. At the risk of appearing unacademic I cite our electronically accessed adult figure (Wikipedia) which tells us that 'play is often interpreted as

frivolous; yet the player can be intently focused on their objective, particularly when play is structured and goal-oriented, as in a game. Accordingly, play can range from relaxed, free-spirited and spontaneous through frivolous to planned or even compulsive.'

Sample definitions of the word play from the Shorter OED include:

'1. Exercise, free movement or action.... Of living beings: active bodily exercise....Of physical things: rapid, brisk or light movement....elusive change or transition...free or unimpeded movement....Freedom or room for movement; the space in or through which anything can or does move..... free action; scope for activity..figuratively and generally – action, activity, operation, working, often implying the ideas of rapid change, variety etc.

/ Exercise or action for amusement, by way of recreation...amorous disport, dalliance....jest, fun, sport....trick, dodge, game...cessation or abstinence from work; the condition of being idle or not at work.

// Mimic action; a dramatic or theatrical performance.

/// Performance of a musical instrument.'

Its definition of work includes:

'1.To do, perform, practice (a deed, course of action, task, process etc)

2. To perform, carry out, execute...

3. To produce by labour or exertion; to make; to fashion.....

XIV. (Math. – work out)

XIV. a. to act upon the mind or will of; to influence, induce, persuade; to bring into a particular mental state **b.** to act upon the feelings of; to stir, move, incite **c.** in medicine: to take effect upon **d.** to practice on, to hoax.

XV. to move (something) in and out of some position, or with alternating movement, with some implication of force exerted against resistance or impediment....in figurative or allusive phrases expressing cunning management or manoeuvring.'

More juicily, Pat Kane, distilling his book *The Play Ethic*, explains: '... just like the work ethic, the play ethic is a set of feelings and principles. But the difference between the two is huge. Work is always (to coin a phrase) the involuntary sector - the realm of necessity, where men and women have to do what they have to do. But as Sartre says, play is what you do when you feel at your most free, your most voluntary.'

Many of the great names in psychology including Freud, Jung and Winnicott have viewed play as endemic to the human species. They all believed strongly in the importance of play in human development, to which their research attests and upon which a wealth of further studies of play have developed since.

Winnicott wrote extensively about the importance of play for social, physical, emotional and intellectual development and learning *in childhood* but he was also one of the first to recognise its importance for *adults* – through making art, or engaging in sports, hobbies, humour, meaningful conversations etc - as crucial to the development of the authentic selfhood. He says this is because when people play they feel real, spontaneous and alive, and acutely interested in what they are doing. Furthermore through example set broadly by the arts, play is increasingly seen as a 'useful', even productive, adult activity, to be harnessed, for example, in innovative business practice. Play is also recognised as occurring among other higher-functioning animals.

Winnicott viewed therapy, figuratively, as play in the presence of the mother, seeing the holding connection between parent and child reproduced in the therapeutic relationship. He was also interested in the 'transition space' between the outer and inner worlds, as a domain in itself. As a virtual world, he saw it as ideal for play and creativity. I believe that CWTP can offer conditions for accessing this domain, where we can move between the outer and inner worlds – outer, being in a room, with others, held by the structure, presence and skill of a facilitator, and the inner world, where we mine our own imagination, memories and experience through creative writing.

I need finally to look at the word 'or'. Is CWTP *either* work or play? Could CWTP be seen as being composed of interdependent opposites, or parts of a spectrum, or a couple dance? That work and play are mutually necessary, providing both the holding structure needed to contain safe enough play, and the playing which occurs in the creative parts of a session.

There is, to my mind, a rather neat history to the concept of the play instinct: Jung's ideas on play built on the work of the 18th century German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller who claimed that the two fundamentally opposing instincts (form/matter, thinking/feeling, spirituality/sensuality) could only be united by a third instinct which he called the play instinct. The instinct of play makes possible a communion between opposing instincts. An equilibrium, but not a perfect, static equilibrium.

My personal and professional interest in play

During my CWTP training my tutor gave me the following feedback: 'I like the emphasis on play, light-heartedness and mindfulness emerging in your work; it feels like a constructive and manageable channel for your deeper thinking as well as personal reflective practice.'

My experience is that being too playful in life, as an adult, is quite risky. I can make others feel uncomfortable with my spontaneous behaviour. I can give misleading messages - people have interpreted my playfulness as an unintended come-on. And I know that I can find excessive energy, enthusiasm, noise or excitement in others threatening or uncomfortable. I can be discomfited by the waiving of conventional mores and codes of behaviour. In circumstances in which I don't know or trust the situation, and don't know what the 'rules' might be (and I will talk a bit later about ethics of play), I have learned to rein myself in. I make myself less threatening, less loud, less unpredictable, more considerate one might say, to the impact of my playful behaviour on others. This observation was summed up neatly recently by a friend who said that they noticed that whenever someone goes into play mode, it automatically requires another person to take on the responsibility for the consequences of that behaviour. I

wondered perhaps that, being a single parent, they were more keenly aware of this dynamic, as their usual role is the responsible adult to their own child.

However, I know that when I do find the ideal conditions in which to play, it is a blessed relief – it is therapeutic. I love to feel the flow, the expansiveness, the joy, the excitement; and if this occurs with willing participants, especially when it occurs spontaneously, it feels amplified, and the rewards multiply again, as there is the joy of connection, freedom, shared and reflected pleasure.

In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihályi (1990) outlines his theory that people are happiest when they are in a state of *flow*— a state of complete concentration in which they are totally taken up with the activity and the situation in which they are engaged. This is a feeling everyone has at some time or other, and is characterised by a sense of deep absorption, engagement, fulfillment, and skill. The person is intrinsically motivated. Being in a state of flow renders people so involved in an activity that they notice no hunger, no awareness of time, no concerns outside the current activity, and have a reduced sense of the ego-self.

What happens when play or permission to be playful, is absent. Can it become subverted? Does it have the potential to go underground and become a little sinister, or acquire an edge when present in the following contexts: - that 'can't you take a joke?' dynamic; taunting, bullying, or a nasty journalistic tone?

Brown (1998) highlighted the importance of play by discerning its absence in a carefully studied group of homicidal young males, beginning with the University of Texas Tower mass murderer, Charles Whitman, and followed by a large-scale study of individual play histories. His study illustrated that in extreme cases childhood play deprivation has devastating consequences: 'He (Brown) posits that early interferences in the play of the child lead to the kinds of primary disturbances in the self-experience that are suffered by those with borderline personality organizations.' (Levy-Warren, Marsha H. 1994, p. 409).

Ethics of Play

In building my study I was faced with the question: 'What are the ethics of play?' How can we differentiate playfulness from real aggression and danger, or from sexual communication for example, which are serious, life and death sort of issues. How do we know when it is safe to play? I believe that Brown covers some of this when he talks about play signals in animals, but in human terms this is very much more subtle, and potentially confusing. I make a big distinction between what I call pure play, and games and sport, where a very comprehensive and sophisticated set of rules may be applied.

In this context I see that play is an important developmental factor in recognising the existence of ethics - what causes harm to others?

I see civility (mature, socially responsible behaviour, outlook and attitude) as what constitute good manners, courtesy, respect and consideration for others.

I see rules in games as the outcome of negotiating a set of guidelines for fair play - a complex weaving together of the principles of civility with what could, in some cases, be viewed as a substitute for fighting and warfare.

Mark Berkof's article *The Ethical Dog* asserts that dogs have the lead on ethical play, in that they 'play by the rules'. He shows how dogs give clear physical play signals, through bowing down, and thereby communicate when they are, and when they are not, in play mode. They can also signal submission, that they are opting out of the game, by rolling over, exposing their most vulnerable sides – their bellies.

Brown laments the lack of funding, historically, that has been allocated to scientifically quantifying the benefits of play in adult humans, but that this tide is turning due to such things as neurological scanning. He says that 'nothing lights up the brain like play. Three-dimensional play fires up the cerebellum, puts a lot of impulses into the frontal lobe – the executive portion – helps contextual memory be developed and, and, and...' (TED talk)

He says that a state of play has been established by MRI specialists and hard scientists such as neuro-endocrinologists, but this has not yet been done sufficiently to satisfy the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health (USA) – and we (UK) lag behind even them in this field. But the world is changing, even if it is changing slowly...

Brian Sutton-Smith says that 'the opposite of play is not work, it is depression' and Brown agrees, urging us to 'think about life without play – no humour, no culture, no movies, no games, no fantasy etc. Try' he says 'and imagine a culture or a life...without play. And the thing that's so unique about our species is that we're really designed to play though our whole lifetime'. He points to the fact that our species retains immature qualities into adulthood, making us 'the most neotenuous, the most youthful, the most flexible, the most plastic of all creatures. And therefore the most playful. And this gives us a leg up on adaptability.'

As each of our play histories is unique, and is not something we often have occasion to consider, what happens when we think about our own contemporary experience of play? Think, if you wish to, of a recent example of play in which you partook, either quite publicly, or in a personal and intimate context. Alternatively think of play you recently observed, be that in a child, or in an animal. In thinking about such an experience, what are the qualities of play that you notice? Such examples can be small and fleeting: I remember driving behind a car last summer and spotting a little hand sticking out of one of its windows, and twisting and turning in the passing air. I let my mind home in on this hand, identifying with the feeling it must be giving the the rest of the little hand's body. It gave me vicarious pleasure.

So it is this simple model that I build my research upon. I am exploring whether, through the creative writing exercises and prompts offered, a CWTP session creates an appropriate invitation to the presence of the spirit of play, accessing the feelings a play state or experience gives, via the memories and imagination of the participating adults. This seems to be so in the other creative therapies – drama, dance, music and music.

I have not found anyone on the UK directory of Play Therapists who currently works with adults, and the Play Therapist I am consulting tells me that there was no provision in his training for working with adults. And yet Stuart Brown has clearly demonstrated destructive outcomes of severe historic play deprivation, and Sutton-Smith tells us that, contemporaneously, the opposite of play is not work, it is depression. My consulting Play Therapist also told me that the play state is the natural state of the child, and that the work of Play Therapists is to assist when a child's access to the play state is

recognised as blocked, frozen, or shut down. Might this have implications for working with play and CWTP, when similar states are recognised in an adult?

Through such musings, and many others, I do not expect to discover definitive answers or to devise formulas which might claim to 'harness' anything as ethereal as a spirit. Yet I am curious to see if there are at least grounds to show that the field of CWTP has the potential to extend its awareness more explicitly, and develop its work, in the realm of play. And I for one feel drawn to explore and to experiment further.

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