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Abstract

In this paper I present different ways of approaching play as an active stimulant to creativity, and to creative writing specifically. Set in the context of facilitated sessions of creative, expressive and reflective writing for therapeutic purposes, I draw out threads from my recent MSc dissertation and illustrate the article with pieces written by the volunteer participants. The title of the study was *An investigation into what happens when I, as a facilitator of Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP), conduct a single research session entitled 'Exploring Play Through Creative Writing' with adults in Britain.*

This paper presents contrasting ways to approaching using play as an active stimulant in facilitated sessions of creative, expressive and reflective writing; one is more direct than the other. Each has its merits and risks.

The inner playground – stimulating adults' creativity through writing. Kate Pawsey.

I facilitate adult groups and one-to-one sessions of creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) and use the word facilitate in preference to the word teach. I am not alone in seeing a link between creativity and play. Lyn Gardener's article in The Guardian is an account of the April 2016 symposium and exhibition called *Playing Up*, hosted by Tate Modern. The account of the event links play, art and creativity, children and adults, stating: "Even the title is a provocation, offering a framework for behaving badly and breaking established rules. Which is what live artists do all the time." "The event" Gardner continues "certainly provides the permission needed for adults to get playing and exploring their inner child."

I believe that something which, ideally, we had free access to as children – exploration and self-expression through play and experiment, building and enjoying developing our skills - can be engendered, encouraged, supported, and stimulated, throughout our lives. Maybe this *is* teaching creativity. I see it more as nurturing something that is latently present, to a greater and lesser degree in each of us, depending on our life experiences.

My belief was strengthened through conducting my MSc research which formed the final year of my vocational training to become a practitioner of CWTP, delivered by the psychotherapy training organisation – Metanoia Institute. I was interested to follow a hunch that CWTP could provide an arena for inviting people into a state of creative flow akin to the play state that was our birthright as children, and which is known to be vital for all aspects of growth and development throughout childhood; research spearheaded by US National Institute of Play founder Stuart Brown over recent decades, shows this to be also relevant throughout adulthood (2008). *Play is more than just fun* [online talk] Available at http://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital [Accessed 23/05/14].

The late play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith said "the opposite of play isn't work. It's depression."

(Estroff Marano, 1999, pp.36-42). This is much quoted in the serious world of play. I wondered if the arena of CWTP could provide something to promote emotional connection to that jouissance, energy and freedom associated with play – through creative, expressive and reflective writing within a facilitated, structured framework.

I had been told by a UK play therapist that the play state is the natural state of the child and that things happen to children, either gradually or traumatically, to cause them to become frozen, stuck or shut down. Sexual, physical or emotional abuse, or neglect can cause such things, causing play-deprivation and the attendant lack of developmental opportunity.

My regular sessions are nothing as edgy or played out as the Playing Up event, quite the opposite in fact; the bulk of the action is experienced in our private writing - our inner playgrounds - which is shared, if wished, as much as any individual feels comfortable in doing so. I often find myself inviting people to experiment however, to explore and follow their curiosity, to play with possibilities, perceptions, approaches and perspectives. I find the effects to be powerful. Exercises are consciously contrived, but I witness that in such circumstances creative outcomes are not only possible but at best are organic, therapeutic, transformational and life-shifting.

Something that began to form in my mind while I was training on the CWTP certificate and diploma, was how rarely I felt at ease or liberty as an adult to express my most playful side, out loud. My partner and I had moved twice from my long-term base in West Wales. New acquaintances could find me a bit much in my playful mode. I was struck by the fact that, although I rarely drink (I tend to become overexcited for about ten minutes, then fall asleep) I *could* keep up with the uninhibited antics of other people while they drank, without touching a drop myself. What was considered acceptable, uninhibited behaviour after a few drinks was what, apparently, I had access to freely when I was in *encouraged, approved of* playful mode.

Otherwise my writing was the place that was most safe for me to express this. It was *my* inner playground. This led me to deliver a short presentation at the Arts in Health South West conference in 2014 entitled *CWTP: an opportunity for adults to play while remaining sober and fully clothed*.

Approach to the research

As my study was to be gently pioneering - a “what happens when” approach - I decided to employ Grounded Theory and conduct it as a phenomenological inquiry – I was looking at the *experience* of individuals taking part in a play-focused CWTP session. This experience would include those of my volunteer participants, and, to a degree, myself. This approach, which was breaking new ground, necessitated identifying any possible risks involved in advance and making adequate provision for them, such as considering any relevant safety implications and appropriate interventions. I intended the study to be small-scale, qualitative, reflective and reflexive, employing thematic analysis on the creative writing produced during the session, and an evaluation feedback questionnaire for participating volunteers.

Originally I had planned, as an inexperienced CWTP trainee, to involve experienced CWTP practitioners as co-researchers. It quickly became evident though that the degree of detail and sensitivity that my envisaged plan required was not going to be easily or adequately met.

This realisation came *after* I had submitted my first research proposal and received the go-ahead. Luckily for me though, since finishing my diploma in July '14, I had launched my own private CWTP practice called *Writing Time*, and had, by January '15, successfully delivered half a dozen taster sessions and a full eight week series to a group of nine people. To my amazement, once the first series ended, seven out of the nine group members signed up again for a second eight week series. I then re-thought, and re-submitted my research proposal. I received the go-ahead very quickly with a couple of additional conditions to cover the fact that I was acting in the dual role of researcher *and* facilitator. This involved recording the session and making a transcript, and inviting a professional witness to sit in on the research session. I invited volunteers from my *Writing Time* group to take part in the research session and began preparations for the single 3 hour research session entitled *Exploring Play Through Creative Writing*. I delivered this session to five participants on March 28th 2015. My research therefore was completely practice-based – a combination which proved very beneficial for me professionally, for the quality of the research and the quality of my practice.

Method

Having invited my group members to apply to volunteer to attend a free, three hour long session, I created a time slot immediately after our regular *Writing Time* sessions leading up to the research session, where I presented advance information about the research. I invited questions, discussion and clarification around the research. This included gaining individual permissions to use material produced in the research session, and the booking in procedure.

The research session followed the standard pattern I use as a holding vessel for all my CWTP sessions, making deliberate use of the functional parts of the session – welcome, introduction, safety alliance, opening round, warm-up and then two main exercises, with a coffee break between these two, closing round and finish. The themed material had been carefully considered and discussed at length with my supervisor. I introduced the professional witness, who was then seated out of the sight-line of the participants. I offered a very basic warm-up exercise, asking them to jot down firstly what they understood subjectively by the verb “to play”, and then by the word “playfulness”. The three specifically chosen poems for the first main exercise were *The Railway Children* by Seamus Heaney (1988), *No Ball Games* by Sophie Hannah (2015) and *Skipping Without Ropes* by Jack Mapanje (2004).

The exercise chosen for part two of the research session was one I had offered other CWTP groups but never in such a long session, nor to so well-established a group, allowing us to enter the process deeply. The exercise involved inviting participants to recall a recent example of whole body play or hand-and-object-play (ie playing with a ball, or clay or some other object), witnessed or experienced by them. They would then write about it, particularly noting the qualities of this example of play, being warned of an ensuing plenary share. They would then be invited to write about how the writing and sharing to this prompt had made them feel, and share again in plenary, before a closing round.

My choice of stimulating material was filtered through who I am, my life experience, my experience of CWTP, and of this particular group. I had no sure-fire way of knowing where the poems might land with them. I knew that I was not aiming for them to revert to child ego states but rather to invite them to connect with the qualities and spirit of play, as adults. My supervisor encouraged me to keep the level of stimulus simple and safe. I voiced a concern

that my exercises might be *too* tame or unstimulating. She pointed out that my participants would be fresh to the subject, whereas I was already well immersed and thereby acclimatised. This was helpful in finding the right balance between adventure and safety. I resisted suggestions from my play-therapy consultant to introduce an actual sand-tray, water-tub, ball, or clay, at this stage. I would keep the emphasis on an *imagined* and/or *remembered* connection to play, based on a central principle of CWTP, that writers can conjure things, events and feelings, apparently out of thin air.

I recorded the whole session and gave out evaluation forms to be completed and returned to me within a set time. I made arrangements with the participant I refer to in her chosen name form - Ruby. She was the sole participant who decided to take up my offer of a follow-up correspondence about her experience of the research session, offered for the following month. I wrote reflectively throughout the preparation and follow-up to the research session and engaged in a reflexive correspondence with Christine Hollywood, then chair of Lapidus and our professional witness.

There is not scope to give a complete account of what happened in the research session here. This is available on my website and includes, in the appendices, all the creative, expressive and reflective writing produced in the session, full thematic analysis of two participants' creative writing and the results of all participants' evaluation and feedback. It showcases one participant in particular, referred to throughout as Ruby, illustrating her experience through her ongoing reflective correspondence following the research session.

What was revealed

During the research session, I was already noticing some emerging themes, grounded in the experience of the research session and the written and spoken material produced during it. These themes became clearer to me during further reflection, from conducting the thematic analysis of participants' creative and reflective writing, examining their evaluative feedback, and from considering the correspondence both with Ruby and with Christine Hollywood. Two stark themes emerged clearly from the creative material and the written and verbal reflection: appreciation of and connection to the sheer joy of play, and sadness at its absence in adult life.

Flying (AC)

*Growing up in London,
'Don't talk to strangers, don't go far'.
Limitations which I didn't understand.
I didn't think these things were worth knowing.*

*But flying was worth knowing,
Sailing on my bike in Mayow Park.
Excitement fizzing in my chest like a shaken can of lemonade.
Little bugs hitting my face, sacrificing their lives for my pleasure.*

*The smell of grass almost suffocating me at speed.
My legs powering the wheels so that I could take off.*

*Literally flying from the restrictions of my parents fear.
I was fearless in my flight.
The runway was in Mayow Park.*

Fearless (AC)

*Imagine you can be whatever, whoever, wherever you want.
What, who, where would you be?
I would be fearless - not afraid to experiment, get things wrong, look silly.
When did I forget how to do all of these things?*

*Playing and laughing and attempting and seeking fun – fun in everything.
Getting a grazed knee, crying and getting up again.
Trying again – not caring to keep the other knee safe.
Fearless and free.*

This echoed my previous findings where a participant had said “I mourn the loss of play.” More explicitly, the sessions elicited in Ruby strong feelings around not having played freely as a child, due to her mother’s mental illness. In her feedback to me after the research session Ruby wrote:

“When I think of my childhood, I don’t have a sense of freedom, space, growing, exploring, excitement. I feel constrained, controlled, dark, isolated, less than. The session was hard because it brought me face to face with those feelings. Listening to other people’s happy memories made me feel the loss even deeper. I feel a very deep sense of loss and anger that my childhood and my innocence was taken. This happened because of my mother’s mental health issues and ongoing childhood abuse from a family member.”

A third theme was an appreciation of play as both an indicator and a tool for bonding and building trust. This was reflected in an account of the relationship with an adopted daughter, and also with a once-feral cat who had lost trust of his owner after acute illness required many visits to the vet.

Then (HP)

Bucket and Spade

How unprepared I was after the Preparation course

*For our first family holiday I bought the bucket and spade
You didn’t enjoy your first encounter
with sand;
didn’t understand what was expected of you*

*All children like the seaside
Don't they?*

Now (HP)

Now look how far we've come

*You gave me a conspiratorial smile when we packed
the bucket and spade
the frisby, the bat and ball
Our joys met*

*Nothing prepared me for you being you
I am still preparing,
still learning
not to make you wear culottes or woolly tights
but to watch your bare legs run free on the sands*

Playing with Theo

*My annoyance dissipates quickly
How can I be cross when he's so eager?
Theo loves his morning routine –
breakfast first, then grooming, then playtime
(although he's no kitten, now)*

*Sometimes we play with the ping pong ball
I gently let it drop across the table
Tap tap tap with each light bounce
He leaps
The ball ricochets from his paw, scuttles under the sofa
and he launches into the kill
The ball rolls against a sofa leg, changes direction,
He pounces*

*The string game is however, Theo's favourite
It has to be more of a thick cord rather than string
He ate a string once,
the consequences were unmentionable.....*

A fourth theme was one for which I was heartily glad to have made provision and preparation

in advance. Ruby connected with the fact that she had been sexually abused by a family member in childhood. This manifested in her writing about watching a girl, a stranger, continuously and strenuously washing her hands, for far too long, before going on stage and performing apparently confidently alongside Ruby's elder daughter. Ruby had been fairly reticent throughout the session, voicing tentatively that she felt she had not been able to write "correctly" in response to the creative writing exercises offered, so chose not to read out her writing, just describe it. Towards the close of the session however, she came forward a little, and was encouraged to share what had been going on for her. She did read out all her pieces, and shared tentatively what she had been experiencing.

Hands - part one (Ruby)

*She stood at the sink
and washed her hands
and washed them again
and again.
What invisible stain was she trying to
scrub away?*

*I saw her next
under the spotlight.
The contrast struck
and moved me.*

*She stood
alone,
in front of the crowd,
speaking her words
with head held high.*

*Her bravery
and courage
lit up the dark.*

Hands - part two (Ruby)

*In my mind,
I carefully
fill a sink
with warm,
lavender-scented bubbles.
I take her hands
gently in mine
and wash them
with my own.
I smooth them dry*

*with a soft,
sweet smelling
towel.*

*I hold her hands
for a while
in my own.*

In the closing round, four out of the five participants expressed heart-felt appreciation of the experience, and enthusiasm for exploring opportunities for more play, as adults. Two participants used the word 'saturated' to describe how they felt. Ruby voiced that she knew that she had to process her experience, and didn't really know what to say. It became clear that she was holding in a lot of strong emotions, which we debriefed a little, privately, immediately after the session. We arranged to stay in touch and had a deep but spacious email exchange over the following month. I was glad to have built in safeguards, including offering the cost of a counselling or therapy session if required.

Conclusions

I deduced that there could be two principle ways of approaching play in the context of CWTP sessions.

The first is to do as I did in the research session, with a group in which cohesion exists between the group members and a trust has grown for the facilitator and their approach, culture, exercises and presence, through an ongoing series of sessions. The risks here are that such an approach, where I invited participants to engage directly in their relationship with play through the exercises and prompts I offered, can expose historical abuse - sexual, emotional, psychological, or otherwise - as it did with Ruby. I was fully aware of this possibility and so put in place the relevant contingencies described (see 'method', above). Under advice from my supervisor, I deliberately approached the subject of play obliquely and in a light-touch, almost indirect way, inviting consideration of our relationship with play through the writing exercises, rather than promoting a confrontation with participants' relationship with play, through play itself. Participants were invited to remember some observed or partaken in examples of play. I did not give them a hula hoop or a sand tray and say 'now play, then write about it'. This felt too me too direct, too imposing, too unprepared and, above all, patronising. It was never my intention to revert participants to their child ego states. The invitation was for the adults in the room, to explore play, through responding to questions, exercises, prompts which stimulated this, without confronting them too brutally with their relationship with play. Nobody knows another's relationship with play. I did not know theirs. And neither, it turns out, did they.

Additional safety features were: payment for a counselling or therapy session if something that happened in the research session re-triggered trauma, and discomfort was greater than I was equipped to support; providing sign-posting to relevant organisations if required; making myself available for supportive contact during the month following the research session. This took place, with Ruby, via email, which was her chosen medium.

Imaginative play, narrative play, story-telling and transformative play were evidently at work in the room. Add to this the holding provided by both facilitator and group, and there was attunement present. I invited participants to specifically recall whole-body play and hand-and-object play, and both of these had been getly stimulated in the physical and verbal warm-ups at the start of the session. Feedback offered by my professional witness was that we all have the choice about what we write about, whatever the stimulus, and that Ruby, consciously or otherwise, grasped the presenting opportunity to begin to examine her childhood traumas.

A contrasting conclusion is that my approach, as just described was too direct. Play, like therapy perhaps, is a subtle phenomenon, requiring an even more subtle approach. We do not need necessarily to name play in a CWTP session for it to be present. To confront a participant with their disrupted relationship with play, even if done relatively obliquely, as in my research session, could, in other circumstance, have precipitated further trauma to any given participant, and a loss of their trust in the therapeutic process.

Another approach, therefore, based on the findings of my study, is to include play in an even more subtle way, as an inherent part of CWTP. To do otherwise carries the possibility, without adequate time, experience and skill on the part of the facilitator, to set someone back in their healing journey, through triggering trauma and thereby compounding the original experience of an enforced, non-consensual activity. My thesis provides a story which highlights the delicacy and fragility of the therapeutic tight rope which I walked with Ruby. Happily, the amount of input necessary to satisfy a masters research proposal was enough to achieve a positive and beneficial outcome for all who took part in the research, including myself and Ruby.

I am confirmed in my belief that CWTP is a natural and ideal setting for adults to express themselves playfully and to explore play in a 'safe enough' arena, in their own time and way. Winnicott talked about the value of being a good enough mother – not perfect in every way, but doing the best they can with what is available at the time (1953). In my training we talked about safe enough holding – the best one can provide in the circumstances without protecting the participant from their own process. Being held by a facilitator and in the relatively safe, un-critical culture engendered in the session, adult participants do have access to imaginative and narrative play. They can even access the emotional connection of remembered or imagined physical or hand and object play through their creative, expressive and reflective writing, even if we, the facilitators, do not expressly name it as play. CWTP sessions provide an opportunity to enter an inner playground, while writing silently alongside others. I have come to think of this play state as flow, in the Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi sense:

“...a theory of optimal experience based on the concept of *flow* - the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it...for the sheer sake of doing it.” (1991: 4).

Approaching it in such adult terms side-steps some of the risks in cornering someone with a disrupted sexual or play history, without barring them from the beneficial outcomes of playing, in this context. Awareness of the potency of play, as an act, a realm, a mode or a spirit, on the part of the facilitator or teacher would influence the session content and culture, and the consideration of safeguards they could weave into the session framework.

A playground for the imagination can be accessed alone of course. The experience can be enhanced greatly however by what I describe here, in a group which is led / taught / mentored / inspired by a well-prepared, safe-enough “other”. Such a person can enable participants to explore, experiment and follow their creativity and balance risk-taking with self-care. Feedback from the volunteers who took part in my research reflected an appetite for new, external experiences - the embodiment, I believe, of play and playfulness – as well as fuel for further inner adventures, through continuing to develop their creative writing outside of the session.

I am keen to conduct further, quantitative research, employing questionnaires for CWTP practitioners delivering sessions in a wide variety of contexts and settings. I am in discussions with a colleague, who loves number-crunching (I don't), with a view to some collaborative research in the future. I would welcome feedback and input from those of you who already use an approach in tune with, or complementary to, the ideas introduced here.

In this respect I intend to allow play to continue to stimulate me creatively both professionally and personally in the terms I have adopted:

“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.” (Phillips, 2014).

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