

# Rhythm 'n' Blues Bringing poetry into groupwork

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**Abstract:** *What has reading and writing poetry to offer groupwork? Groups are set up for many different purposes, yet there are, perhaps, some commonalities, the aims to develop communication skills and confidence; to encourage empathy; and to promote self-awareness and a degree of mental well-being. What role could poetry play in any of this?*

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Words gush out of his wrung soul's roots,  
and wrap life's to a stranger's pains.  
'The Poet's Poem' by Kama Kamanda (Gallas, 2002, p. 52).

It was about ten years ago that I was invited to run some creative writing workshops for people suffering from a mix of mental health issues at a drop-in centre in South London. I went, rather naively I would say, eager to share my passion for poetry. It didn't take me long to realise that there was something very different going on with this type of group from the continuing and community adult education classes I was used to facilitating. I have since gone on to explore this through training, reading, experience, conferences, supervision and the like. At present I run two linked ten week courses of groupworkshops, creative writing for good mental health, for people with depression and anxiety. Participants can self-refer and be referred by their GPs and other health professionals. And here I want to make the case for poetry being a part of any groupwork where encouraging good communication, self-reflection and self-esteem are central.

### **Poetry an art therapy?**

Self expression through art is considered to be therapeutic. A brief review of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence website turns up a number of small scale qualitative research projects which support this view. They found that participation in art therapy groups had a positive impact on people in terms of their sense of empowerment and well-being and also in lessening feelings of isolation (Heenan, 2006; Lloyd et al, 2007; Hacking et al., 2008). Self expression using words is also considered to be beneficial, psychotherapy, counselling - the 'talking' therapies - rely upon this. So what about something which brings together the power of art and the power of words: poetry?

There have been some attempts to measure the therapeutic value of creative writing. Professor of psychology, James W Pannebaker, for instance, asked two groups of students to keep a regular journal; one just noted what had happened to them each day, the other wrote about events and associated feelings. Initially, the latter reported emotional difficulties. However, 'Four months later ... the students writing about

events and feelings reported that their spirits had improved significantly - that their writing had helped them resolve a difficult issue. ... Later studies showed that the more days people wrote, the more beneficial were the effects from writing. And these benefits occurred despite educational level.' (DeSalvo, 1999, pp. 19-21).

In 1996, Dr Robin Philipp, a consultant in occupational and public health at the Bristol Royal Infirmary, reported that three-quarters of patients attending a programme of poetry workshops said they found them helpful and cathartic, while 7% were able to come off antidepressants all together (Evans, 2004).

From such tentative beginnings is it possible to make a case for poetry as an art therapy and for its use in groupwork generally?

## **What is it about poetry?**

Writers, critics, anyone who reads poetry, and many who don't, will have an opinion about what poetry is or ought to be. However, brought down to the essentials, poetry uses words, word sounds and rhythm, often along with metaphor, to communicate. Words are one of the essential currencies for human beings, they help us bond, share information, define our selves and our story. Poetry invests this base coinage and creates a treasure trove.

But even before we attach words to it, a poem is an idea which often seems to bubble up from 'nowhere' (as the participants in my workshops would have it) or perhaps the unconscious. The poet Seamus Heaney, cited by Hunt, describes the process as continuously dropping a bucket into a well until

one day the chain draws unexpectedly tight and you have dipped into waters that will continue to entice you back. You'll have broken the skin on the pool of yourself. (Hunt, 2007, p. 4)

Goldberg talks about

burn[ing] through to first thoughts ... to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel' and 'explor[ing the] rugged edge of thought. (Goldberg, 1986, p. 8)

This is raw, visceral stuff which can look chaotic and messy when first committed to paper. Then we bring the focus, the concentration of poetry to it and, as Jacques Derrida suggests, what may be felt to be 'monstrous' becomes less so when we shine a light on it and see clearly (Hunt, 2007, p. 4).

A starting point for much poetry is a sense of playfulness with words and word sounds. Winnicott describes this type of playfulness as the creation of a potential space or a space for potential (Stacey, 2008). Winnicott saw the play that every child (if allowed) indulges in as an important creative step in their defining their self and their world. Picasso said: 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remind an artist once he grows up.' (Cameron, 1995, p. 20). Messing about with words and images through writing poetry allows us to return to a child-like (rather than childish) delight in what is within and around us. It is a way of remaining open to the possibilities of connections that we have not consciously been aware of, to images and meanings which have hitherto been obscured.

Another aspect to poetry is metaphor. We all naturally use metaphors (Sullivan & Lawley, 2005) and metaphor is central to poetry making. A poem is built round the image which can be unpeeled, layer upon layer, to eventually reveal the kernel of truth at the centre (Dobyns, 2003). In poetry we are trying to touch a universal truth, rather than a 'but this is what actually happened' truth. In the end none of us know what actually happened, we only have our own perspective to rely on, but through poetry we can connect, however briefly, with an understanding of our common humanity. That is why people particularly turn to poetry at overwhelming moments in their lives when grieving, dealing with loss or profound change.

Poetry ... is a series of intense moments - its power is not in narrative. I'm not dealing with facts, I'm dealing with emotion. (Carol Ann Duffy cited in O'Driscoll, 2006, p. 151)

Poets will spend a great deal of time, years sometimes, on choosing the words they eventually use. They are constantly striving to put 'the best words in the best order' (Dobyns, 2003). A poet's words do not start off this way, they begin in a jumble as stray phrases, perhaps even as single sounds. It is in the crafting, the putting together, the selecting and tussling over, that the poem appears and begins to make sense.

And it is the words that we feel most strongly about - which we want to keep or 'boot out' - which are the most significant.

Also in the crafting comes the focus on rhythm; the beat of the poem which may mirror the emotional content or disrupt it. Originally most poetry would have been sung, it had a strong rhyme so that people could remember it without it being written down. Though there is now much more freedom in choosing poetry form, one thing which remains constant is its musicality. Poet Julia Darling talked about poetry being

all about music and rhythm, and music comforts and lulls us. The process of writing poetry can be described as a way of bringing different parts of someone together, of literally creating harmony. The cadences and rhythms of poetry calm us and allow us to relax. (Darling & Fuller, 2005, p. 12)

Black and Enos (Fesel, 2009, p. 17) suggest that an individual's view of reality and the self is always relative and constructed by circumstance, it is not fixed as individuals are not. And, therefore writing poetry, an act of construction and re-construction can help a person gain a different perspective on what has happened to them and on who they are or might be. Sometimes, in the end, the only sense we can make of life, may be that there is no logic, there is no reassuring pattern, indeed pain is a necessary part of it. Poetry is able to capture this knowledge succinctly and once it is known it perhaps becomes easier to bear.

To bind up a problem in a particular form of memorable words is not to solve it, but it does confer a certain power: the primitive magical power of naming, which is at the root of all poetry. (Forbes, 2003, p. 9)

## **Writing it down**

Poetry, then, can help members of a group come in contact with themselves, gain perspective and express what is going on for them. But surely all this might be achieved through talking? Is there something special about the writing down? Brain scanning research suggests that talking is something which comes naturally to humans whereas writing (and reading) is something which needs to be learnt (*Why Reading Matters*, BBC4, 16th Feb 2009). Many more parts of the brain

are brought to work in consort for us to write in comparison to when we talk, this effort appears to endow the written word with greater resonance. Seeing what we have perhaps been able to put to one side in our minds presented on the page in front of us, gives it a concreteness, a permanence which can be unnerving, but also allows for re-working and reflection. Continuing to write over time, shows our capacity for redefinition as well as our sticking points.

Writing is above all else a private activity, until we choose to share it at a time which suits us. The ever accepting and available page does not judge the words which are written upon it (Bolton, 1999). This is a particularly useful aspect in groupwork. Though other types of creative therapies - art, music, drama - can equally help us to express, clarify and re-work on our self and world concepts, in a group it is difficult to keep the early stages of this undisclosed. This may be tough going for those who are very anxious or shamed. In contrast, with writing the participant can get a feel for the process in their own time and only reveal what is happening when they feel secure enough to do so.

Poetry is ultimately a communication between the writer and the reader or listener. Initially the reader or listener may also be the writer, and the poetry is a transmission to the self. Later it may become a communication to others. The writer can choose how direct their message will be, perhaps to start with there is the need for obliqueness until the audience is tested and found to be receptive. Metaphor can be both subtle and powerful, allowing both writer and recipient the space to safely digest and understand before responding.

One important aspect of communication within human society and in an individual's relationships is empathy - the ability to get a true sense of what another is feeling. It also assists in the formation of effective groups. Rosthchild writes about the discovery of 'mirror neurones'. When a monkey watched a researcher take and peel a banana, the motor neurones in the monkey's brain were activated *as if* it was making the exact same movements, even though it was only observing. The connector cells which caused this to happen were called mirror neurones and seem to be involved in our capacity for empathy; so that when we see someone smiling, we smile and feel happy, when we see tears, we can experience sadness. (Rothschild, 2004). Being with another person and having these mirror neurones activated is one thing, but it appears that they will also fire up when we read (*Why Reading*

*Matters*, BBC4, 16th Feb 2009).

So reading poetry by published writers is a way of opening up our capacity to empathise and take on other perspectives. It is also, in my opinion, a channel into our own feelings as we are touched and moved by the poet's words. Reading is an interactive process which invites the reader to interpret and develop what's on the page using their own experiences and emotions and to go beyond their own feelings and viewpoint by delving into another's (Knights, 1995).

There is a wonderful, simple conversation encoded in all poems worthy of the name: 'You've felt this, too, haven't you?' (Carol Rumens cited in O'Driscoll, 2006, p. 90).

## **Is poetry therapeutic?**

I have argued that writing poetry is good for us, however there are others who would put a different point of view. In his 2004 TS Eliot Lecture, poet Don Paterson said,

The systematic interrogation of the unconscious, which is part of the serious practice of poetry, is the worst form of self-help you could possibly devise. (Hunt, 2007, p. 3)

Certainly artists of all kinds tend to have a greater propensity towards mental illness than the general population and poets are at the highest risk of all (Alvarez, 1990; Post, 1996).

The poet Robert Frost said that his work came out of suffering and a sense of wrong. 'If you wish me to weep, you must first grieve yourself,' he wrote. 'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.' (Meyers, 1996, pp. 84-85). However, whether the writing of poetry causes the mental distress or is, in fact, a strategy for mitigating it is unclear (Alvarez, 1990).

Paterson appears to be suggesting that all there is in the unconscious are difficult feelings which quite frankly deserve to be repressed. I and others (Hunt, 2007, p. 4) would argue that the unconscious can also be a source of delight and a creativity which sparkles and is healthful. And, furthermore, the expression of feelings, whether they be comfortable or

not, in a safe environment can be considered therapeutic, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis has been built on that precept (Howe, 1993).

It would be foolish, however, to dismiss the power of poetry writing and to ignore what might be dredged up. Most of my work has been with people with depression and anxiety, and I have become interested in how what I do might be adapted for people suffering from dementia. However, I would be cautious in suggesting poetry as a panacea in all mental health fields. And as with any activity which invites people to get in touch with possibly challenging material, we should equip ourselves with the skills, the insight and the supervision which enables us to facilitate the endeavour.

For the moment, in this country, therapeutic poetry/creative writing, does not have the same training or regulatory structures as other art therapies. Lapidus, the national organisation which brings together people from diverse backgrounds who are interested in this area ([www.lapidus.org.uk](http://www.lapidus.org.uk)) suggests three essentials for facilitators: that they should be developing their own writing creatively; that they should have training in facilitation and a basic understanding of the precepts of counselling and the promotion of good mental health; and that they should have good supervision through their work.

## **Integrating poetry into groupwork**

Writing poetry is often seen as a solitary activity, so why do it in a group? As with the findings of the research into art therapy groups previously mentioned, the power of the group dynamic is to increase self esteem, the sense of being heard and understood, of not being alone. I find in my groups that there is the fruitful exchange of ideas, one thought from one person seeding one in another, until it all blossoms into something which is greater than the sum of its parts (Doel and Sawdon, 1999). A study of writing collaborative poetry in a group for adolescent girls showed a deepening of interpersonal communication (Fesel, 2009).

So I have suggested that poetry writing and reading has benefits for the individual and also for the cohesion of the group in terms of developing empathy and channels for contact between participants. Are there effective ways, then, of integrating poetry into general groupwork? I believe there are and that poetry is perhaps simpler to bring into



sessions than other creative activities, since the only resources required are pen and paper and because of one of the key aspects of a poem: it is mercifully short, compact and concentrated.

Reading a well-chosen poem is one place to begin. There are many anthologies which give an array of styles and subject matter, the Bloodaxe collections *Staying Alive* and *We Have Come Through* and the Daisy Goodwin selections (1999, 2001) are only some examples. There are also Survivors Poetry ([www.survivorspoetry.com](http://www.survivorspoetry.com)) and Smith and Sweeney's *Beyond Bedlam: Poems written out of mental distress*. I have noticed that it almost doesn't matter what the starting point is, poems are so open to interpretation, that they will often spark off in the reader what they need to address at that moment. However, it is important for the facilitator to be comfortable with the choice they have made, to have a sense of the poem, but also to allow others to take what they want from it.

Ask participants to read through the poem for themselves and to underline a word or a phrase which particularly strikes them. Then, if possible, have it read aloud. Hearing a poem gives a different complexion to it. If you have a number of nervous volunteers, they can just read one line each, going round consecutively until the poem is done. The chosen line or word can then be shared and/or discussed in pairs, small or large group, depending on how open the participants are likely to be. The point is to focus on the emotional content of the poem, rather than on any literary critique or technique.

This reading, choosing and sharing could lead onto some individual writing. It is usually key to encourage participants to free up their writing hand. This can be done through free writing, writing sprints of 3 minutes, where we write whatever is in our heads in as muddled up or disorderly fashion as possible (Goldberg, 1986). Grammar, spelling, making sense, logic, is immaterial at this stage, it is just about getting the words - the raw materials - out onto the paper. A number of words can be chosen by scanning through the sprints, the words which appear figural or strange or funny or startling, and they become the words which are played with and then crafted into something which a person may choose to share at a later date. A list of words is perhaps all someone will end up with, which is fine.

Free writing takes practice, especially if someone has a particularly blocked attitude to writing from negative experiences in the past,

at school perhaps. It can be combined with mind mapping or little illustrations or sketches if someone is particularly visual in the way they work. The free writing, the picking out words, the playing and then the crafting are the key steps in this kind of explorative writing.

Another exercise which can be taken into groupwork is the use of metaphor to explore an emotion. This can start off collaboratively with everyone giving images associated with, say, anger and then choosing one of them to explore in more detail through writing. Or participants could be asked to anthropomorphise an emotion, for example choose an animal which represents anger, imagine that animal in a zoo and write the explanatory sign for it. Where does this animal normally live? What does it eat? When does it sleep? What is it prey to? How can it be tamed? And so on.

Metaphor and imagery have a power of their own. In one of my workshops, one of the participants wrote about drowning. We then began to look at what might be preventing her from 'going under' and she wrote in some 'buoyancy aids'. We worked out that these were her friends and that she needed to ensure that they were safely tethered to her.

A fundamental aspect to encourage in all this writing is the use of all the physical senses - what we see, hear, smell, taste and can touch. This not only gives richer and more tangible images which are more effectively communicated, but it also opens people up to experiencing the world in all its splendour.

As with many aspects of groupwork, the facilitator's role in introducing all of this is crucial. An ease with and a connection to poetry, would be essential for anyone weaving it into their practice. Though, of course, this is true for any material or approaches we may choose to use.

The aim of this paper has been to offer a taster of what poetry can bring, both in terms of encouraging self expression and self exploration to the individual, and of assisting the development of a healthy and empathic group dynamic. And to share some of the passion I feel about bringing poetry into the very diverse groups I work with.

My heart in concert  
with another's through just words;  
equals poetry.  
(unpublished Haiku by Kate Evans, October, 2009)

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