

# Occupational narratives, community publishing and worker writing groups: Sustaining stories from the margins

Nick Pollard<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Many different kinds of groups are spontaneously developed through community based activities. Some of these groups may contribute to the life and culture of a particular locality for years but can easily be overlooked because their activity is largely unknown, sustained along the margins of mainstream culture. Informal and organic structures, very local organisation and the ephemeral nature of the materials which record their actions, contribute to their lack of visibility. Some examples are to be found amongst the groups which belong to writers group networks. This article, which is based on focus group interviews with members of worker writing and community based publishing organisations, explores how such groups organise, maintain themselves, and meet the challenges which arise from their marginalisation.*

**Key words:** *writing groups; community publishing; working-class writing; literacy; cultural politics; groupwork*

1. Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy

**Address for correspondence:** *Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Sheffield Hallam University, Room 203, Mundella House, 34 Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield S10 2BP. N.Pollard@shu.ac.uk*

## **Introduction**

The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) was a network which grew to 80 writers' and publishing groups worldwide. A few hundred organisations have at times been FWWCP member groups, largely composed of people who stood outside the mainstream of literary culture - people with writing difficulties, experiences of mental distress, working people, retired people and people on benefits. Many came from minority cultures within the UK. The thousands of publications they produced were diverse but often ephemeral: photocopied and duplicated broadsheets, tape cassette magazines as well as books and leaflets. For 30 years FWWCP groups developed writing, publishing, pedagogical and community activist practices, but the organisation lost its funding status in 2007. Many voluntary organisations, especially those with a radical left origin like the FWWCP, would simply disappear under these circumstances, but a number of the groups and individuals have kept in contact and worked to rebuild it under a new name: 'TheFED'. This paper explores the approaches community based groups develop to ensure their survival.

People have always recorded their activities, and the value of much cultural content is concerned with sharing storied or narrative accounts of these experiences to an audience, i.e. a group. I have had a long interest in working class writing and community publishing practices and their potential applications in occupational therapy. Worker writing and community publishing is often concerned with the narratives that people develop for family, friends or their immediate communities. Frequently such records are responses to the experiences of social change (Vincent, 1981; Ikiugu and Pollard in press) – unemployment, the demolition of old housing, changes in work patterns or the urbanisation of the landscape. These scattered vernacular and often cheaply reproduced accounts are rarely recognised as serious documents compared to, for example, a client's occupational history which has been mediated and recorded by an occupational therapist in an assessment interview, and nor have they often been regarded as literarily significant (Morley and Worpole, 1982).

Writers' workshops of some form or the spontaneity of exchanging writing or competing in verse date back at least to the bardic traditions of oral poetry, but in more recent times organisations like the Workers

Educational Association have organised writing classes. While O'Rourke (2005) describes writing groups which had formed in the 1960s, since the 1970s people have organised various community based groups which involved a wide range of cultural and narrative exchange. The most prominent working class and community publishing movement which developed from these was the FWWCP. Beginning with eight groups in 1976, the FWWCP included not only writers' workshops but also local and oral history groups, people operating community based printing presses and bookshops and literacy groups. Many of these groups began as Workers' Educational Association classes, but continued to meet during the summer holiday, or when the membership fell below the magic number of 12 which enabled the group to run as a class. Some developed from adult education groups, and yet others developed from community campaigns or individuals setting up a group in a local library or pub (Morley & Worpole, 1982). Though the FWWCP's definition of the kind of writing its members promoted was based initially on class, member groups were also oriented around other marginalisations such as gender, race, ethnicity, geographical location, disability, experiences of mental distress and age. In this diversity many groups developed their own practices, for example of pedagogy or in relation to the redefinition of cultural concepts (Woodin, 2005a, 2007). Many groups have an informal structure, some using the same person as a facilitator, and others varying responsibility for this role around the members. Some workshops might develop particular meetings in the month for exercises to stimulate writing, perhaps to a particular technique, genre or poetic formula; others simply offer a space for whatever people bring. The FWWCP developed a set of practices of its own shared by many although not all members, setting out principles (for example of respect for each others' writing and culture) in a constitution which groups were asked to read and agree to adhere to before joining. More was in the form of tacit understanding developed over years of workshop practice, that 'writing' need not be 'written', or that group members agree editorial decisions for their publications.

However, in 2007 the FWWCP had to dissolve when it was no longer able to meet its financial commitments. Despite this setback, a group of active members managed to maintain an internet based organisation and arrange annual festivals of writing.

Working class organisations like small trade unions (Tait, 2005), with

which the FWWCP had many affinities (Morley and Worpole, 1982) have often not been well researched because of the ephemeral nature of their passing. They are often set up for a local and specific purpose or even just a phase in a community or industrial struggle. They use rented premises or even cupboards in community centres. Records are often not kept, or lost when the person who has them dies and relatives do not think them worth keeping. While groups such as London Voices and QueenSpark predated the organisation and continue to meet and work in their communities, over the 30 year history of the FWWCP many others may have only existed for a few months or years.

Bromley (1988) noted how a growing consciousness of working class culture has been popularised in safely historical settings rather than in relation to the present. Vernacular voices are rarely allowed to speak for themselves and have to struggle for access to dissemination (Landry, 1990; Worpole, 1983). This existence on the periphery of established arts, education and culture practices also means that the FWWCP is often neither very well known beyond its membership, nor sometimes even amongst fellow writing group members.

Academic literature mostly makes references to the FWWCP in passing, often the result of brief encounters, rather than in-depth studies. Work such as that of O'Rourke (2005) and Woodin (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2009) has tended to explore the FWWCP's organisation around writing and cultural activities such as oral history or literacy. However, group processes have clearly played a significant part in the negotiation of cultural practices and their redefinition from the margins. These have often been informal and tacit, developed through experience and expedient rather than from an external body of practice (Parks & Pollard, 2009). Woodin (2005c) describes how racist working class group members came to respect the writing of their black counterparts and developed friendships and collaborations. Courtman (2000) describes how the FWWCP came to accommodate other black writing groups, despite their middle class perspectives, into a broader 'working class' movement.

It is through these group processes that knowledge and culture might take new forms and 'new intellectuals' may arise. Gramsci (1971) recognised this and proposed that people working across such margins might break down the barriers between different strata in a cultural hierarchy. In the FWWCP and the new network, 'TheFED', this work

has been done through a diverse group, including many people who through their disabilities, experiences of mental distress or marginal status may be outwardly perceived as 'service user' communities. As Woodin (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2009) has revealed, these people have often been innovators of practices.

From a group theory perspective these aspects of FWWCP and TheFED development are interesting. Robotham (2008) thinks that linear models may not describe the ways in which groups develop, and this 30 year perspective suggests that, at least for worker writing and community publishers groups, there is a more organic process at work. Indeed, the nature of worker writing and community publishing suggests as Robotham also notes, that individuals who are potentially, for example, workers, women, black, gay *and* writers, and often much more, belong to more than one group. This has some implications for group theory which will be explored later in the article.

## **Community publishing and occupational therapy**

Like Woodin (2009) I have also had a long involvement in the FWWCP (see Ikiugu and Pollard, in press) which has led to an interest in exploring the theoretical and practical applications of community publishing in occupational therapy collaborations with service users (Pollard, 2004a, Pollard & Bryer, 2002; Pollard et al., 2005; Pollard, 2007; Pollard, *Voices Talk Hands Write*, 2008; Pollard & Clayton, in press; Pollard & Parks, in press), and guidelines on setting up and sustaining writers workshops (Pollard, 2003, 2004b, 2004c; Parks & Pollard, 2009). FWWCP practices in the creation, publication and performance of occupational narratives strongly influenced some discussion of the social justice agenda in the occupational therapy profession (Pollard & Kronenberg 2008; Pollard et al 2008; Pollard, *Voices Talk Hands Write* 2008; Pollard & Clayton, in press); Pollard et al (in press). These practices are also connected to the emerging role of negotiating needs and working with community groups (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2005; Pollard & Kronenberg, 2008; Pollard et al., 2008; Pollard et al., 2009; Parks & Pollard, 2009). This emphasis has not been about the application of writing groups for narrowly 'therapeutic' purposes, but in a context that is more akin to community development. Examples

include the production of narratives about personal and community identity and applying these to achieve social change, for example in learning disability contexts (Pollard et al, 2005; Pollard, 2007; Pollard et al, 2008), experiences of mental distress (Pollard & Clayton, in press) and on the university campus (Abel et al, 2008).

Other occupational therapists have also explored community publishing as an expressive vehicle to document community development (Lorenzo et al, 2002; Lorenzo, 2003, 2004) and the use of narratives by clients involved in writers workshops to reveal rich detail about the experiences of people diagnosed with schizophrenia (De Souza et al, 2005) and other mental health conditions (Schmid, 2005; Griffiths, 2007). Occupational therapists have also combined participation in community publishing with other celebratory arts events (McNulty, 2008; Pollard & Parks, in press).

As a member of 'TheFED' and the former FWWCP I had informal discussions with others in the organisation who are engaged in survivors' poetry and basic education organised by people with disabilities concerning the development of this project. Some of these arose through the process of maintaining and developing the current organisation where it was recognised that it might be useful to explore some of its group processes. A significant part of my personal occupational narrative has been concerned with writing and publishing in a community context. In some respects this is consistent with some of the perspectives within the occupational therapy profession. Examples might be the collection of oral histories of retired members (Wilcock, 2002); the use of narrative to convey information about practice (Detweiler & Peyton, 1999) and concern with client experiences in opposition to technical process of intervention (Mattingly, 2000).

A key difference between therapeutic uses of writing and the formation of writing groups in the FWWCP, has been group autonomy. The functions of the group, including responsibility for organising activities, are often negotiated and determined by the members facilitated rather than led by a convenor (Woodin, 2007) and have been sometimes determined through the active discussion of political theories in relation to cultural production (Morley & Worpole, 1982; Morley, Worpole & Pollard, 2009). In this study I wanted to see what tactics and strategies groups and individuals have employed to sustain

their community publishing and worker writing activities in the absence of a strong national organisation, in the transition from the FWWCP to 'TheFED'.

Other researchers on the writer workshop movement (e.g. O'Rourke, 2005) and working class organisations (for example, Tait, 2005) have noted that these processes are rarely recorded. Research has largely depended on memories. Material is quickly lost largely due to the combination of pressures in which current events take precedence over posterity. Often people do not see their small organisations as sufficiently important to bother with meticulous recording, or perhaps cannot prioritise this against other tasks. As Smart (2005), Smart et al (in press) and Woodin (2005a, 2007, 2008) discovered, many of the pedagogical developments in the writers' workshop and community publishing movement occur spontaneously as the organisation or its member groups generates practices in response to events. This mirrors similarly organic processes in other spontaneous community based groups (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2009) and is potentially a key value in action-based groups (Trevithick, 2005). As Abel et al's (2008) blog based transatlantic discourse shows, the arena of workshop and community publishing practices has shifted from print and geographically defined communities to the worldwide web and new technologies. It is the accessibility of these environments which have enabled 'TheFED' to survive, and people to remain engaged with each other despite marginalising issues such as disability, or living on benefits. Previous worker writing research has not yet explored this activity.

## **Literature**

A literature search explored what has already been published about sustaining writing workshop and community publishing practices and their relationship to occupational narratives. Searches used health and social science databases to reveal material with a therapeutic or occupational science emphasis, and educational databases as these practices also have a pedagogical element. Given the range of sources and research governance conditions under which these materials were produced, while every effort to verify ethical clearance was made it was inappropriate to apply blanket screening, except where studies involved

service users and therefore health or social services conditions for research applied. Studies where writing is used for psychotherapeutic purposes were generally be excluded as these would be unlikely to connect with the needs of community based groups.

Few references to community publishing were found in health and social care literature, while the larger availability of material in education databases rarely refers to disability or health issues. The search process was complicated by the diversity of groups which is integral to the identity of the 'TheFED' and FWWCP but defied easy categorisation. There was some overlap between the vernacular practices of community publishing organisations and worker writing groups and those of community literacy programmes (eg O' Rourke, 2005; Goldblatt, 2007; Dunlap, 2007). Those driven by educational programmes were distinguished from others which derive from the community members themselves, though this is a grey area, as Goldblatt (2007) indicates; educational initiatives are often responses to community demands and engagements with local social entrepreneurs.

### **Sample**

I was already embedded in the worker writer and community publishing movement, a precedent shared with Woodin and O'Rourke, both prominent activists and workers in the past. I had previously conducted a focus group study with the FWWCP (Pollard, 2001; Pollard & Bryer, 2002) and this method again seemed appropriate. 'TheFED' is mostly organised in groups which meet regularly and this appears to be how activities are sustained. Some publishing co-operatives support a part time worker working with the rest of the members. Woodin's (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2008, 2009) and Courtman's (2000, 2007) studies of FWWCP workshops and publishers were based on individual interviews, but I felt that rich data was likely to emerge from the discussion of group contributions to a shared process. Examples might be the decisions groups made about publication content, design and distribution. Given my established association with TheFED, I used a convenient sample of community writing and published groups negotiated through its Yahoo grouplist to obtain volunteers. This meant that there were no exclusion criteria as the groups using the list were all members of TheFED. Since group membership is usually informal,

with members coming and going as the group serves their needs or they are able to attend, groups were self defined – and all participants were members of the larger group, TheFED. Focus groups were conducted using a collaborative approach (Krueger, 1994) as part of the writers or community publishers' group meetings arranged by negotiation with their members on their own territory.

Themes from the literature were used to identify a schedule of key questions to stimulate responses from the focus group and allow participants to explore their own methods and skills in sustaining their activities. This may have presented some difficulties with the critical depth of the data: group pressures may operate, some members may influence others, and my previous and continued involvement in the worker writer movement may also affect responses and subsequent analysis. (Krueger, 1994). On the other hand my position facilitated access to the groups and in-depth understanding of the data (Silverman, 1993).

Focus groups took place with members of one member organisation, at a meeting of participants in several local groups, and at a small conference with participants from several FWWCP and TheFED organisations past and present. Consequently the sample of 21 had several axes of diversity, containing survivors of mental distress, people with writing difficulties, different ethnicities, workers, benefit recipients, pensioners, academics, students, 9 women and 12 men. Though it was originally intended to go beyond the evaluation point of three focus groups to determine whether theoretical saturation has been achieved (Krueger, 1994), after the third group had been transcribed this did not appear to be necessary.

## **Data gathering and analysis**

Focus groups were recorded on cassette and transcribed as this approach offers the best rigour in analysis (Krueger, 1994), particularly when one of the objects is to analyse for process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A grounded theory approach was applied since the data appears to be largely based in tacit forms of knowledge; this origin suggests that it will generate a substantive theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Worker writing and community publishing does not exist in a cultural vacuum,

it is responsive to the critical theory and stylistic influences from literary and popular genres and modes of dissemination. It is also derived partly from pedagogical approaches such as that of Freire (1972: see Morley & Worpole, 1982; Worpole, 1983; Woodin, 2007, 2008). These influences, along with my own experience and activism, have to be accommodated in the analysis, consequently, a reflective autobiographical approach was used to attempt to separate out personal experience (see Ikiugu & Pollard, in press). This was used both to comparatively analyse other data (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998) and make theory building explicit.

### **Ethical Concerns**

Though the sample is diverse across age, ethnic background and different experiences of disability all the participants are in self-constituted community based organisations independent of social services or NHS facilities, so approval from Sheffield Hallam University's staff projects committee was sufficient. Consent was obtained from all participants. No-one chose to withdraw from the focus groups.

Participants' transcribed voices were assigned coding numbers in order to preserve anonymity through the process of transcription and data analysis.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Unknown England**

Groups in working class organisations like the FWWCP and 'TheFED' operate in a kind of assumed vacuum, an unknown territory - in fact a 1985 anthology of FWWP writing was described as the poetry of 'unknown England' (cover blurb, FWWCP, 1985). This creative space was itself sustaining, because the rules were made up by the very people who were getting involved as they went along:

*P1 we were going to [...] a really run down wonderful space that used to let anybody in to do anything, basically. And we used to give readings and some people might compose songs and invite a guitarist along, and there'd be a bit of theatre, very knock-about stuff [...] that was the forerunner of things like young people getting up to do punk, [...] and rap [...]. I think the working class writing,*

*and the acceptance that everyone's a writer opened up the doors to all sorts of self expression.*

The spaces developed by these groups were also outside of the mainstream cultural imagination:

*P2 Benjamin Zephaniah, his earliest stage as a writer, he was involved in a café and writing group in Stratford. This is way before he got published, but that was his grass roots beginning and he certainly opened a lot of doors of people in terms of what is possible in terms of presentation, style, subject matter. And, I can remember Blake Morrison writing [...] in the TLS to the effect that Tony Harrison was the only working class writer [...] when there were lots of Fed groups, but lots of other people writing things, [...] this just shows the ignorance and narrow mindedness of the literary elite in this country.*

Consequently people tend to suppose that there is no organisation like them, and are not looking to become involved in one; the organisation and its benefits have to be discovered, happened on, and experienced in order to be realised. They were also organised in spontaneous ways that may now be difficult to replicate:

*P1 bombing up the motorway to Liverpool, there probably wasn't any seats in the back it was probably an old van. [...] we'd get caned from health and safety that we've got now, [...] all these London kids who'd never been past Watford [...] You'd meet similarly minded people from Liverpool and have a fantastic afternoon swapping poems and stories and get to know them and hurtle back down again all in the same day, [...] you ended up back in London at midnight. And it was a real eye opener [...] there were similar minded sort of people all over the country. It was the genesis of the Fed really, the idea that people could link up across the country, fantastic.*

### **Developing confidence through organic learning and experiment**

Thus the FWWCP and TheFED have grown organically, absorbing many different influences and coming to value diversity as sources of creativity, the enjoyment of meeting people, and the enjoyment of debate. Through this people have been allowed to realise that they can write and communicate to an audience – this development has

occurred over time in the process of experimentation with learning, performance or writing.

*P3 there was a lot of [...] learning in an organic way that could take place over five to ten years, not going to a class and you've learned something and got that bit of knowledge, it's like learning related to your own being as it were.*

It has also enabled people with low levels of confidence to gain skills literally through being around at the time to be involved and having to discover how to network, teach, volunteer. This requires open-ness and conveying a sense of security that they are not going to be judged by their performance.

*P4 There were people who didn't used to read and write and they went to the Fed where most people can read and write and that and start and tell them about the difficulties they have and things like that. They got involved in running workshops and that down there and getting on the committee and stuff like that.*

*P5 bringing up half a dozen kids and getting them all reading well and all out in jobs and that kind of stuff, they never realised it was a skill, and it IS a skill. [...] lots of other things are brought out and they can do a lot more things than they realised, and the support in [names group] and in the Federation itself was good because people would realise that what they had to offer...*

*P12 I said to him, 'you really like your poetry, don't you?' and he said, 'oh, it's nothing to do with the poetry, that's not why I come, it's because I'm accepted,' to me that says it all.*

*P7 you suddenly realise that you're a member of a group of writers and you meet up with other groups of writers and immediately you begin an exchange, a networking.*

This realisation was a very powerful experience, whether the individual was an adult learner or not:

*P10 it wasn't the sort of tokenistic thing as if there was a white middle class committee saying let's hear your story, your story and your story. Those people came and were part of the organising committee, that was a big difference. [...] I went to my first Federation AGM and I was just blown away with that, not just*

*people with different backgrounds but people with learning difficulties, and all sorts of people that a) I might not have met and b) were taking on positions of power in a way in an organization, and that was a really, really powerful important thing and challenged all of us [...] to work in different ways.*

### **Diversity and complexity**

Such diversity brings complexities and over 30 years the FWWCP and TheFED learned to resolve these through a tradition of robust debate. This was important in building diverse identities on the basis of class, gender or ethnicity

*P3 they were fierce debates, it wasn't comfortable like sitting round in a room, people were sometimes getting extremely uncomfortable [...] about class, about identity, about the academics who are here, what are they doing if they are? You could be kind of inspected as it were from a certain perspective about what you're doing here, what's your purpose? [...] uncomfortable at times but also creative.*

A consequence of debate is that groups working with working class, gendered and other minority experiences can derive strengths from the many divisions and difficulties they contain

*P2 [gives group name] were doing working class history [...] about the impact of Moseley's blackshirts in the area and some of the views and expressions that came out were really quite controversial and there was a huge row about whether at least one publication should be edited in a certain way. There were plenty of things that came up especially when these people were elders in the community, they were listened to with respect but sometimes they came up with stuff that people were not comfortable with, which was great actually because you can't pretend that the working class is one monolithic entity all sailing the same way.*

The resultant negotiation of diversity has made it difficult to categorise or communicate the benefits of participation to other bodies, for example funders.

P1 described how one funder

*couldn't get a handle on the Federation because it did include all these different*

*groupings of people. It had very earnest poets really working out their pieces, it had adult literacy students who were being creative and putting something down on paper maybe for the first time, it had history groups, don't forget the history strand, oral history, and all these sorts of things they honestly just couldn't put it in a bag, that's why they couldn't deal with it. And yes, I think that was the strength of the Federation and hopefully of the new Federation, they will have so many different elements, that it's more than literature isn't it?*

Perhaps a consequence of this argument and negotiation has been the recognition of the value of persistence and taking bold chances in order to find the means to continue activities. After failing to find any sources of funding for his group one participant went to see his local MP in desperation:

*P6 literally within moments – she'd picked up the phone and called the external funding officer from the local council and said 'sort him out'. That was her words. And within 48 hours he was on the phone to me and just falling over backwards to find us funding streams'. He also felt that funding shortages make groups competitive rather than co-operative, people tend to retain information rather than share it. 'trying to connect up with organisations in this particular overall sector has never been the easiest thing. [...] talking to other people, especially professionals, [...] everyone clings very closely to their own little bit. Everyone's afraid of losing what little they already have.*

But others were quick to disagree:

*P7 in this room today we've got an awful lot of representatives of an awful lot of groups [...lists six groups] so there's quite a lot of links here within all of this that involves also Survivors poetry and the Fed. And certainly when it comes to the minifest we're all there aren't we' Other participants described how they were networking and while as a result valuable information gets around by word of mouth, this is not always efficient.*

### **Communication with funders and partners**

Participants generally described limitations due to the lack of adequate funding, affecting not only important activities such as publication but more basic issues

*P6 funding is the main challenge because groups of our type don't usually contain too many wealthy people so it is a struggle to pay for the rooms, the tea and the coffee and that sort of stuff. [...] Without funding it's harder to keep the sessions going and virtually impossible to produce any publications which have a mainstream type appearance.*

Access to funds is further restricted where concepts have to fit changing arts or educational terminologies. Often the design of forms or the wording is intimidating or just too difficult to understand, the people operating the funding process are not always helpful, while the process of applying for funding is demanding for small volunteer led organisations who are just trying to keep themselves going, and unable to engage with complex processes. This is especially a barrier to Fed groups who involve their users/participants in the funding application process

*P5 all the funds out there are saying 'oh yes we must reach all these people, communities that never get involved and they're never going to because the language that they use is too high falutin' that it doesn't [...] involve the smaller group, it can't go out to a group of mother and toddlers and help them to fill out an application form [...] that's where these funders go wrong, they should have people out there, people who can give them that advice, not just over the telephone, but who can say 'look, here's an example..' or go out and talk to them about it.*

One development strategy of working with other groups to develop projects can break down because of a failure to communicate and recognise needs. Survivor participants described work with mental health services where changes in staff meant that their work was abruptly discontinued. P6 saw this as a failure

*on the part of the administration at the hospital. The turn-out was enormous and they really enjoyed themselves but it happened as a result of a phone call I received from the locum head of occupational therapy, she was really keen to get us in there.[...] we went and we entertained the mental health unit and the geriatric unit but the staff and the management, once the locum left, they just shut the place down. The next time we went it was all in darkness it was all locked up. They were not interested at all.*

## **Ethos and identity**

Reaching out to other groups is integral to the ethos of worker writing and community publishing. The recognition of the value of this inclusive connection to literacy and to people who may have writing difficulties, who are not accommodated by recent changes in education provision, was strongly felt where policy changes threatened this engagement:

*P10 they didn't want people to come back year after year after year, or to gradually progress or have a community of 'well this is us writing our stories', what they wanted was, exactly, 10 week courses, enough to get people back into work. And there were some very patronising remarks like 'they don't need to come to this, they could just go to needlework, or they could just go to some craft activity, it's just a club, they don't need literacy'.*

In return, one participant described how some people continued to attend groups in order to be able to come to the FWWCP annual meetings.

Sometimes, however, members of educational groups were not seen as autonomous, able to make their own decision to join the FWWCP independently of their tutors:

*P3 At other times people in the Fed were very wary of that educational label, and wouldn't let some of those groups in because they weren't appropriate, they were too educational.*

The transition which the organisation had to make from the FWWCP to TheFED can appear to be mostly an adaptation to fewer resources. Generally there appears to be strong and important elements of consistency which paradoxically arose from the recognition of diversities combining in affinities:

*P3 If you look at history since the 70's there's been quite a few changes; if you come to any Fed event I always think it's got a similar kind of feel, kind of ethos, and the kinds of people that come and the kinds of activity going on, there's a awful lot of continuity, sameness going on which is very valuable, but I guess the biggest change in a way for me was there was almost a unique moment around the early 70's when so many different strands came together. You could identify other areas that aren't based around writing groups that might have an affinity, obviously local libraries tend to take over the autobiography, oral history type work.*

However the change from FWWCP to TheFED produced some concerns about the loss of class identity:

*P7 I don't know if we all like the name as it is now, a network of writing and community publishers.*

*P8: that's why you dropped the 'worker'.*

*P9: We have got community publishers in this area, or are they in our community?*

*P6: I don't know about community publishers around here to be honest, there are small – I was going to say publishers but they're printers aren't they?*

*P9: They're small printers.*

*P6: They're small printers but I don't know if there are any community publishers.*

*P7: So when we publish our stuff we are publishers then aren't we?*

*P8: [...] the booklets we have had produced are published by [gives group name] [...] So yes I guess that qualifies us as community publishers, if it doesn't well then I don't know what does.*

Other important factors were travel and physical access to buildings, whether meeting times include people at work or people who might not go out in the evenings and of the group size

*P9 small groups are important [...] you could have lots of small groups, but once your group has gone beyond the 15-20 mark you lose that input and that intimacy in a way.*

People also needed time in their lives to write, but some were inventive. One writer worked in a factory:

*P1 she'd be working on the machine and get an idea for a poem, write it down.*

*P10: hide it under the –*

*P1: The boss would come she'd have to hide it and carry on sewing.*

These barriers can be overcome with some pragmatic flexibility:

*P5 we had a couple that wanted to come along, but the only night they could come along was on a Thursday, but the daughter decided that that night she needed the children babysitting for a couple of months for her part time job, so the children were going to be a barrier, so we invited the grandchildren in. They were five and nine years old, 'so long as you look after them that was fine,' and that went so well that even the five and the nine year old ended up tutoring other participants on the computer course [...] giving tips to all these older people [...]. Nobody said 'you're a little smart-arse telling me what to do' - more than peer tuition, it was amazing to watch. [...] And if somebody came on the course one week in another three weeks they'd be tutoring another new person, and the confidence it gave them, because they knew how to do something they could show them, it was a big snowball effect.*

## **Futures**

Perhaps because group members are keenly aware that their narratives are not recognised in the mainstream they see the importance of establishing archives so that others can benefit from learning about how they ran their groups

*P5: I think that's most important, that they're kept and not just in paper and in boxes in cupboards and stuffed up in attics, they need to be digitised and made available on the internet so other people can say 'oh we could do that in our area'. [...] I think it's important to keep the ethos and the activities going.*

Very significantly, despite the disruption experienced by the loss of the FWWCP's financial position and several similar difficulties affecting other prominent member groups in the movement in recent years, despite a long weeding out of radical left organisations especially counter cultural survivors like the FWWCP, and attrition in adult education and literacy, participants had a positive outlook because of the networks that have enabled them to retain a group identity, both as individual and as extended groups

*P6: with the links that we've got to external groups and with the number of people that attend centres like the one that we're in here, the future does look quite good for the actual numbers of people and figures of people to get involved in creative writing and poetry writing in general so that it's fairly good really.*

*P1 there's always scope, [...] people are learning but it's not what we would call education, it's much more it's about life as it were.*

*P2: I think that what [---] said, that little phrase 'more than literature', if we want a new slogan, I think that would be a good one to go with. As for realism and realistic now 'demand the impossible, achieve the impossible'.*

*P11: I think nationally within the department of health there's a real interest now in terms of making a linkage which is there between creative writing and improved mental health. There's a very new organisation which is looking to provide community input into the development of a national policy in arts and mental health. It's something I feel that the Fed might want to get involved in.*

## **Implications for groupwork**

As a whole the groups involved in the FWWCP and TheFED are very diverse. The focus group sample, consisting of members of a co-operative college, survivors of mental distress, people who had belonged to a number of writing groups and community publishing organisations through the previous 30 years in addition to their present group membership, shows no consistent pattern. Just as the pedagogical processes in some groups showed an organic development, it is also clear that the group processes which operate are organic in a similar way to those explored by Maidment and Macfarlane (2009). Decisions are usually made pragmatically around the needs of the group and thereby sustaining its continuity. Perhaps one of the contributing factors to this was the FWWCP's initial insistence that groups joined not because the facilitator or tutor had decided it would be a good thing, but because the members of the group wanted to be a part of it (Morley and Worpole, 1982). This foregrounding of active debate, decision making and commitment to diversity may to some extent have protected the larger

organisation of the FWWCP and TheFED from compliant 'groupthink' (Janis, 1982; McCauley, 1989), even though some members felt there was a good deal of continuity. One of the key factors in maintaining this sameness of feel in worker writer and community publisher events appears to be the challenges (Robotham, 2009) which arise from wanting to retain both a cultural diversity and an approach to writing which is more inclusive than dominant culture. This problem of developing and maintaining a group ethos is quite different to that of operating group processes *within* an institutional culture which is unresponsive to diversity, for example as Singh (2008) found in the new South African educational system. The FWWCP and TheFED have been interested in countering dominant and institutional cultures, and some of the accounts given have been about confrontations with them – from a position of group practice which is outside these cultures. Participants often expressed values about inclusion and resisting barriers and strictures to the way they wanted to develop writing, take it to other marginalised groups, or develop literacy. Consequently their experiences, the publications and the group processes of writing and producing them may be valuable in meeting the need for multicultural resources and approaches in groupwork (O'Neal, 2006).

## Conclusions

The worker writing and community publishing movement represented by the FWWCP and TheFED has been the sponsor of practical approaches to groupwork negotiated around writing, literacy and publication and diversity. Despite being a relatively small movement and despite the obvious fragility of both aspects of their organisation and the records and publications it has produced, the people involved in these groups have developed a strong sense of group identity. This is evident through the expression of their presence as part of their local cultures and also, to a varying extent, in terms of the larger movement of which they are part.

There is a strong sense of struggling to represent experiences which are outside the cultural mainstream which has served to pull together diversities, of working with small resources and developing capabilities as a result, which people talk of with affection and with a sense of

having achieved something. The participants have many examples of how they have worked to enable each other, learning organically through discovery, even through disagreement. They are confident in their perception of the movement's difference, the knowledge and experience they have, its values and their ability to share these, even though - perhaps because - it remains difficult to obtain recognition for them.

This experience has been developed through debate and practice steeped in the cultural politics of class, gender, ethnicity, disability and mental distress survivors (which has sometimes questioned the role of professionals and educators) through self determination. A small study can only outline the richness of experiences the movement contains, but its members appear to have a lot of tacit knowledge and resources which can benefit groupwork practices, especially where they involve marginalised groups.

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