

Writing Group in a Café

Background

Writing Group in a Café aimed to allow people who enjoy creative writing to come together to share their work in a non-judgemental environment. It was not set up to critique writing style but to think about the relevance of writing on our own lives. In line with *Psychology in the Real World* courses the group was open to all members of the community with an interest in sharing their own writing and took place in a community venue.

This group ran between January and March 2012 and was facilitated by Nicki Evans (Service User Consultant and Writer) and Stephanie Lock (Trainee Clinical Psychologist), with Guy Holmes (Clinical Psychologist) providing supervision.

Nicki provided the inspiration for the group and has previously co-facilitated two writing groups which ran at the Gateway Education and Arts Centre in Shrewsbury. Nicki has always held a keen interest in writing and its therapeutic benefits - for example, how writing can facilitate expression in a very clear way when we can't always find the right words to say things verbally. Nicki describes writing as: 'a literal lifesaver for me; it's helped me greatly through many of the difficulties I have faced when in the depths of emotional distress. My dark angst ridden journals and diaries of years ago are a reminder to me now of how I used to view the world. My writing progressed, changed and through it I began to figure out the world around me and get my feelings out on paper.'

The Story of Our Writing Group in a Café

Unfortunately the Gateway which had provided the venue for previous groups was fully booked and so we embarked upon a search for other suitable premises. After numerous telephone calls and viewings we found a suitable

venue in Frankwell - the Darwin Community Centre: it was a bright, quiet room with comfortable chairs and a small kitchen area for a coffee break.

Both Steph and Nicki met together to create the poster advertising the group and a further information sheet to send out to potential group members. Posters were put up at local colleges, shops and community mental health teams; written information was sent to people who had attended previous writing groups.

Advertising a group just before Christmas was certainly something to learn from as it quickly became evident that few people were going to sign up. Telling people that we didn't have enough interest to justify the payment of our selected venue, and that the writing group as we had planned could no longer go ahead left us all disappointed and the search for an alternative was initiated.

During supervision Nicki and Guy's local knowledge identified a potential venue - the Shrewsbury Coffeehouse in Castle Gates, a café promoting local artists, musicians and writers that holds events such as poetry and story-telling evenings. Friendly staff and the opportunity to reserve the 'comfy seats downstairs' sealed the deal.

We contacted everyone who had been interested in attending the original writing group and we were back in business. By the middle of January people who had noticed our posters before Christmas and noted down the telephone number or e-mail address began to contact us, and we were suddenly turning people away from our group as there weren't enough comfy seats downstairs in the café!

So, amongst the clattering of coffee cups and the faint sound of music drifting down from the main café, we created our writing group - a cluster of comfortable chairs, low tables and an average of five people meeting together to share their poetry and stories.

Between January and March 2012 for a period of 8 weeks, a maximum of 7 people including Nicki and Steph met together on a weekly basis. During this time people attended as frequently as they were able, with the majority sending apologies if they couldn't come. One person dropped out of the group after session 3. Despite slight variations in who attended each week, a regular group of three group members (five including the facilitators) emerged and the group quickly became cohesive.

The vibe of the café environment and reduced control over external factors, (for example, young people playing *Guess Who* in the corner which punctuated each silence with something like, 'does he have a beard?') set the precedence for a relaxed group where general conversation flowed between coffee, reading of poetry and stories, discussion of each piece of writing's meaning within our lives and talk about the pleasures of writing.

As group facilitators we had decided that Steph would take a facilitation role with Nicki switching between roles - both sharing her poetry and facilitating the group. As in previous writing groups we stuck to a pattern of each group member introducing their piece of writing, reading the piece aloud, followed by discussion of its themes and personal significance.

Group members shared writing from their past and some people wrote in between groups, writing anything from the topic of technology to experiences of being hospitalised. Many pieces were emotive and deeply personal. Anticipating a nervous beginning Nicki was on standby to share her poetry first, but this wasn't necessary; different group members offered to share their work, sometimes offering to read more than one piece during a session.

Despite some reservations about how comfortable people would feel to share their personal stories and opinions while surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the café and the risks of being overheard by others, group members described feeling safe enough to share information whilst tempering the level of emotional significance where necessary.

During the final session group members shared their experiences of being part of the group and feelings about it ending and about endings in general. Although as facilitators we had reflected on the group dynamics and processes, it felt important to get the feedback of the group. In keeping with the context of writing, group members wrote about their experiences of the group and shared some reflective thoughts on the impact of hearing each other's writing and meeting each other.

As facilitators we felt disappointed to end the group - we'd enjoyed our Monday afternoons listening to poetry and stories, and felt privileged to have met many talented and creative people.

Stephanie Lock and Nicki Evans (March 2012)