

Positive Words and Pictures

report by Julie Ward

PROJECT OUTLINE

Positive Words aimed to explore the positive effects that creative writing and linked image-making can have on unemployed people with mental health problems.

The project was co-funded by the Pioneering Care Partnership, an independent charity, based in Newton Aycliffe, Sedgefield Borough, County Durham. The PCP's overall aim is:

“To improve the health and quality of life of local people disadvantaged through caring responsibilities, disability, age or ill health and reduce inequalities in health.”

The prime activity of the organisation is managing a fully accessible ‘one stop shop’ purpose-built healthy living centre ‘The Pioneering Care Centre’ in Newton Aycliffe, supporting disadvantaged people to improve their health and well-being. We ran our sessions at the centre.

Matched funding from the PCP enabled the project to engage the services of a digital artist to work with the group to produce linked images to accompany their writing (in the form of a publication). It also enabled a ‘taster session’ to be held so that potential participants could meet the writer without feeling the pressure of having to make a commitment, and it paid for additional sessions at the end of the project which were used to explore sustainability and for an end of project get-together.

Level of Need

The prevalence of Common Mental Health Problems such as anxiety and depression are significantly higher in Sedgefield than the England average. Over 6000 residents are predicted to have diagnosable depression alone with all but 2 wards in the most vulnerable 50% nationally. Incapacity benefits claimant rates in Sedgefield are also significant with 44.3 people per 1000 population claiming solely as a result of mental health problems. This compares with 28.2 per 1000 population for neighbouring Durham and 8.5 per 1000 in lowest area in the country. There is no clear distinction between age groups 25-49 and 50-59, and higher claim rates can be seen amongst men in the majority of wards (for Incapacity Benefit /Severe Disablement Allowance combined). A range of other indicators such as income deprivation, teenage

pregnancy and long term conditions contribute to the vulnerability of Sedgefield residents to mental health problems.

Client Group & Recruitment

The proposal aimed to engage with hard to reach individuals who are experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) mental health problems, lacking in motivation and not linked into existing support structures and networks, i.e. hard to reach unemployed people, many of whom experience multiple barriers to employment and learning; young people who are not in education, employment or training; older people; people with disabilities.

Recruitment took place via an existing PCP project called 'Positive Steps' which applies a community engagement, grass roots approach utilising the existing voluntary and community sector infrastructure to engage with individuals. Positive Steps provides key workers to support identification of needs and goals, develop action plans and support to implement them.

These action plans tackle a range of issues including life skills, improving health, vocational skills and learning and one-to-one support.

We aimed to make Positive Words an additional element for Positive Steps participants - part of an overall pathway of action towards successful outcomes in terms of emotional health, learning and skills.

6 people attended the taster workshop, including one young man who did not return to participate in the ongoing sessions. The remaining 5 (all women) joined the project at the outset with a further 2 women joining a few weeks later. Four of the women attended all the sessions. Two of the women attended all but 2 sessions whilst one of the late joiners only attended twice.

These 7 women ranged in age from early 20s to mid 60s. 6 were existing Positive Steps' clients with the seventh being a friend of one of the clients.

The majority of these women were severely lacking in self-confidence, due to a range of factors, eg. economic migrant with English as a second language, loneliness caused by bereavement, memory loss due to stroke, lack of independent living skills. One of the women was hearing impaired, had experienced the bereavement of a close relative and was troubled by the burden of an elderly parent – however she did not display a lack of confidence, more a frustration with the troubles life had heaped upon her. The 'friend' did not appear to manifest any health problems although she too had experienced tragic bereavements. These 2 women did much to bolster the confidence of their peers and always helped to lift the mood of the group.

Although it was a disappointment that the young man did not return to participate in the regular sessions it is perhaps understandable. The collective energy of a chatty and diverse group of women can seem very impenetrable!

Project Structure & Course Content

The project was planned to run for half a day over a 6 week period. In effect this stretched to an 8 week period with the pre-course taster session feeling to all intents and purposes as if it was an intrinsic part of the course.

It was initially planned that the writer and a digital artist would work with the clients to explore the use of words and visual image/graphics as a means of expressing different states of health and the link between the physical and emotional aspects of well-being. However, we did not overtly discuss health and well-being until much later in the project whilst reviewing some of the work which had almost accidentally dealt with darker themes. The digital artist joined the project in the later stages using a very simple technique of still-life photography to build images to accompany the poems.

At the outset I remained open to the possibility that the writing may take several different forms including poetry, prose, fiction and non-fiction, auto-biography, diary writing, etc. However, we essentially became a poetry-writing group, partly because the clients had enjoyed the process of making a group poem during the taster session but also because it was easier to explore the power of image-making through poetry.

During the sessions I aimed to develop individual clients' confidence to choose words, figures of speech and literary threads, and to play with form and the visual representation of text juxtaposed with images.

We did this in a variety of ways:

- group poems capturing the spoken word and idiosyncratic figures of speech
- cut and paste collage poems made up from newspaper text and graphics
- Japanese verse form – renga and haiku
- personal projects using free verse developed from individual renga offerings
- “I am.... (name a colour)” – a sensory writing game

The first group poem written during the taster session responded to a seasonal theme and demonstrated how everyday thoughts, words and perceptions could be organised in a poetic fashion. The second group poem was a spontaneous gift poem we wrote for a client's newborn grandson. (NB: I like to write for occasions as advised by Adrian Mitchell!) The third group poem focussed on darker themes but included exhortations to think and behave in a positive way.

I wanted to move away from the group poems and stimulate the clients to work on individual writing but they loved the sociable aspect of group work so I decided to introduce Japanese verse forms, demonstrating haiku in a group format before asking everyone to write their own. Renga gave us the opportunity to write individually and make offerings to the group work. I

mediated the Renga construction and ensured offerings not used would later become the raw material for individual writing.

The client who was a stroke victim found the actual process of writing very difficult so group work or one to one tuition was the only way to keep her involved. Her response to the haiku stimulus was particularly meaningful as she chose to write a 3 line poem about her distressing loss of memory.

The Slovakian client wanted only to write in English at first so she could learn more in order to pass an English exam but when I encouraged her to write in her native language she found much more to write about in a meaningful way.

As the weeks progressed the work began to dredge deeper, provoking powerful emotional memories. Frequently clients would cry at the words they were committing to paper. The group was incredibly supportive when this happened and we talked about the healing process of remembering and honouring our loved ones.

We often used the beginning of a session to re-read the work we had done the week before and the group loved to hear what they had achieved. We dedicated one whole session to simply reading all the work and planning what objects we would bring in for the still-life photography. When the digital artist came in to take the photographs it gave me the opportunity to give intensive one to one tuition time to everyone. This is when the individual poems finally came into being.

Documentation & Evaluation

The PCP already had systems in place for documentation and evaluation and have recently introduced a new model of evaluation called 'Impact Mapping' developed by the New Economics Foundation (nef), based on a 'theory of change' model helping them to link their mission, objectives and activities with what happens because of them.

This identifies projected outputs for each PCP project/service and which target outcomes they contribute to, and ultimately any wider impacts on national indicators and local priorities.

The PCP has also developed a set of indicators which aim to measure target outcomes and impacts. Outcome indicators are generally measured via self reported assessments done at the start of an intervention and again at the end and where possible one year later.

Together with the key worker Liz Godfrey, I adapted existing PCP forms to suit my purposes. When Liz and I met to discuss evaluation we both expressed our concern that the clients would feel intimidated by too much paperwork. The PCP had recently won a contract to co-ordinate an Arts and Well-being service and were about to embark on the using the Warwick Edinburgh Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). We looked at the scale and decided to introduce it to the group when we felt we had won their confidence.

They asked an interesting question “Do we put on here how we feel when we are here or how we feel generally?” In effect they were telling us then that the writing sessions made them feel better about things. I pondered the question and suggested that they use 2 different colour pens to answer the questions from both perspectives.

It can be clearly seen from the completed WEMWBS forms that in all cases the clients felt better about themselves when in the creative writing class, than they did in their general daily lives. For example, one client stated that she felt relaxed “all of the time” in the class but rarely so in her day to day life. The same client stated that she felt loved “none of the time” in her day to day life but “some of the time” in the class.

In general, the WEMWBS forms completed at the end of the course show an improvement in all areas of measurement. What is marked is the way in which the clients also appeared to feel more positive in their day to day lives, evidenced by them often ticking the same boxes for how they felt in the class and in their day to day lives. This was true in all cases except for the client who had experienced a stroke. On the WEMWBS form she completed early on in the course she chose to tick the same boxes for both her day to day life and for how she felt on the course. This apparent sameness may be an inability to distinguish certain things due to the effects of her stroke. However, by the end of the course she appeared to make more distinctions between the two, scoring her experiences in the writing group higher.

Only one client marked one experience in the class as less positive than in her day to day life. This was the ‘friend’ who stated that she “often” felt useful in her day to day life but only felt useful “some of the time” in the class. By the end of the course this had reversed.

The most interesting evaluation happened half way through the project when quite spontaneously the group began to talk about how the sessions made them feel. Although we had not planned to capture their in-depth feelings at this point, I wanted to capitalise on the unprompted comments and so I asked the group members to simply write down what they were saying or what they wanted to say. Here are the results:

“It opens my brain, nice to work with a small group, interesting to hear other people’s thoughts and feelings. In this group I don’t feel alone. I feel as though I belong somewhere. The creative side is very good and the sharing of words is too.”

“A chance to focus and enjoy my Positive Thinking of great moments we share as a group. Share life experiences. Great thoughts, brain works, enjoyment. Sharing our thoughts using great Positive Words.”

“I enjoy this course because I feel very comfortable. I meet very interesting people and learn new words. I do something different. I like to listen to what people say around me. It pushes me to think about different things.”

“I enjoy it – something different. It makes you think. My life is solid busy so these two hours make me relax. I enjoy the creative tasks but I don’t like writing things down – it’s hard for me. I like the group – it’s not just talking. It’s more than that – we discuss it between us. You can do that so easily – the shared ideas.”

“I enjoy being part of a group of people that I have never met before – all the different personalities. It makes me relax and opens my mind to new things.”

“Gives me a focus, something to get motivated for – to get out of the house. It makes me more likely to come, if I enjoy something - and I do!

Creative Writing makes me think of words, thoughts, pictures and feelings that otherwise I wouldn’t.

I find it very inspirational when I hear other people’s thoughts and images, and what they develop into.

It has changed my definition of the words “Creative Writing”. I now know it can be brief, short, and it doesn’t mean there is a ‘wrong and a right’.

Everyone’s opinion, suggestions and writing are all personal and meaningful.”

“Coming here has made me think again about restarting poetry writing. I find my mind is thinking about the haiku and especially about my sister and how she affected my life, and life without her. It also had me thinking about happy Easter times, hot sunny days and with that seeing the pictures of the past very clearly in my mind. I also enjoy being part of the group and exchanging ideas.”

It was intended to use digital cameras to document the project but this was not practical. However, the PCP established a system of personal folders for each group member. Working in the Learning Suite with computers on hand meant that we could type up and photocopy the work to give to group members so they could take it home. I also gave out copies of Renga schema for the group to keep.

We hoped the project would contribute to the following outcomes for the participants:

- Greater independence, choice & control
- Increased knowledge & skills
- Improved confidence, self esteem & well-being
- Improved psychological/emotional health
- Increased social inclusion

An accompanying report from the PCP Key Worker gives an account of the project from the host organisation’s perspective and a summary in respect of these outcomes. There is also an Impact Mapping document compiled by the PCP.

Here is my summary (based on the return of 6 evaluations) by the clients:-

None of the clients had ever tried creative writing before, although one said she had done it at school.

Reasons for joining the course included –

“I want to improve my English”

“To improve my writing.”

“To have fun with writing – do something different and as I read all the time I thought creative writing might follow on.”

“To gain more confidence and meet new people.”

“To explore, have fun, learn and meet new friends.”

Two clients stated that they had joined the course because they had enjoyed the taster session.

The kinds of things they hoped to achieve by the end of the course was as follows:

“Be able to express my thoughts clearly – have fun.”

“Learn new skills.”

“Lots of confidence – to look at life more better (sic).”

“To be more confident – I want to pass my English exam.”

“Maybe to start writing poetry again – I stopped at school but keep getting ideas so this might just get me started again.”

At the end of the course all the clients stated that they now have more confidence to write about their feelings and would try some creative writing in a social group. 4 out of 5 said they would try some creative writing on their own and 2 said they do some creative writing daily or weekly.

What they enjoyed most about the course included:

“Everyone pulled together – we had a good laugh.”

“The friendly atmosphere, learning new skills, the fantastic tutor.”

“The friendship, socialising.”

“Learning new skills while meeting nice people and your confidence grows.”

“I have met new friends. The creative writing has been interesting and different. Very helpful teacher and classmates.”

“I feel it brought out my creative side and I enjoyed the group as a whole and discussing ideas and doing the Japanese poetry. I have really enjoyed meeting the group of girls.”

When asked what they enjoyed least about the course the responses were variations on “Enjoyed every minute,” with one client responding as follows:

“This course could have gone on a lot longer but had to finish.”

In assessing the positive effects creative writing has had on their health and well-being, the clients responded as follows:

“I feel more confident to speak with my new friends and more confident in myself.”

“Relaxed atmosphere, switching off, learning new skills makes me feel good.”

“More positive - thinking more positive than negative.”

“I’ve looked forward to coming, it has lifted my spirits.”

“It has made me feel positive in myself and gave back a lot of my self-confidence. I have enjoyed meeting new people and found the course staff incredibly helpful.”

“Given me a focus, a feeling of achievement, met new friends, enjoyed learning writing skills and reading the results.”

The relaxed and friendly atmosphere that everyone refers to is due in no small part to the care and consideration given to the clients by the PCP Key Worker. The room was always laid out ready for us when we arrived, with pens, paper and sweets on the table and a trolley of tea, coffee and biscuits. The project file, class attendance register and the clients’ personal folders were also ready and waiting.

The centre is a large, light, airy and pleasant building. It still feels new and bright with lots of wood fittings, quality tiled flooring, stained glass artworks and friendly community café. The building has a friendly atmosphere and the staff all seem to love their work. Going to the Pioneering Care Centre does not feel like going to a health centre. The place has a character all of its own which is quite unlike any other health setting I have worked in.

Unexpected Outcomes

The project will be used as an example of best practice in the PCP launch events for their county-wide arts and well-being service. (NB: Jack Drum Arts

– run by Julie Ward – won a tender to be a willing provider for this service, so ongoing collaboration with the PCP is certain.)

The digital artist discovered an excellent template for the making of individual or short-run books (blurb.com). The poems and their accompanying photographs have been assembled into a bespoke volume with a full colour cover. Clients all received one copy and have ordered more for friends and family.

One of the additional sessions was dedicated to a group discussion about how the participants might be able to continue meeting and sharing the process of writing. The group discussed possible themes and resources they could use and how they might run the sessions, perhaps with one or two people taking responsibility for planning and directing the activities. (NB: I have agreed to collate their ideas and write them up into an informal curriculum.)

Additional Notes

The PCP has become the host organisation for the new Local Involvement Network for County Durham, enabling local people to have a voice in shaping health and social care services locally. Initially it was felt that work created as part of Positive Words and Pictures could feed into this process via published, performed and/or exhibited work. However, the location and timing of both projects has not made this possible.

An Occupational Therapist in the Community Mental Health Service covering the area expressed an interest in working closely with the project. Again geography and timing did not make this possible but the Chief Executive of the PCP has assured us that the OT will be informed of the project's work in order to follow up.