

Creative writing with male prisoners at risk of self-harm

report by Graham Hartill: writer in residence at HMP & YOI Parc, Bridgend

*A series of creative writing sessions, on a one-to-one basis, with prisoners at risk of self-harm at HMP & YOI Parc, Bridgend, in order to explore working processes, ethical matters and evaluation methods.*

As a writer used to working in health care and therapeutic situations, I identified a need for a pilot project specifically aimed at one of the most serious and under-acknowledged afflictions affecting prisoners in the UK. It perhaps goes without saying that self-harm and risk of suicide are not uncommon amongst prisoners, though there are no educational or creative programmes tailored specifically for those at risk. Work developing from this project could have benefits not only for the prisoners involved but also for those staff charged with a duty of care towards them by providing deeper insights into their psychological states; hence the project was undertaken in the context of the Creative Arts Department within Learning and Skills at Parc and close collaboration with the Safer Custody and Violence Reduction Manager at Parc, examining and evaluating it as an on-going process.

The work was undertaken with 6 prisoners recruited from the adult and young offender wings.

#### Structure of the project

50% funded by Lapidus Pilot Projects, 50% matched from my contracted time at Parc, the project was to consist of 16 days work from Jan to March 2009: 2 days: establishing the project: procedural meetings with staff; identifying and preliminary meetings with participants; 12 days: running the project: one-to-one sessions plus regular discussion with safer custody and arts and media supervisors; and 2 days: evaluation and report.

In practice, the timing was rather less orderly than that, prison being an unpredictable environment, in which many demands are made on prisoners' and staff time without warning. I was perhaps lucky that none of my participants were "shipped out" of Parc in the middle of the project!

In actuality, although the time spent on the project was fragmentary, the hours spent were closely compatible with the proposal: most face to face sessions were about an hour long, but there would often be preliminary meetings with participants and staff to prepare for them, and to ensure that they could go ahead as planned. (Influencing factors may vary from the prisoner being unwell or having an unpredicted personal or legal visit, the room we expected to use being taken over for another purpose, not an uncommon phenomenon working in an environment where security always takes precedence over 'interventions', or some other security issue.) I have kept in touch with the participants since they completed their parts in the project and in some cases continued to work with them.

A brief outline of the participants' background and involvement will give an indication of the wide variety of issues and approaches that were demanded. The names are fictitious.

*Chas:* Young Offender. Long time alcohol and drug user and recidivist offender. Cuts his arms. Writes poetry.

*Karl:* Young Offender. Several suicide attempts. Wanted to write his life story, leading up to and including his offence, an armed car-jacking.

*Jerry:* A young sex offender. As a vulnerable prisoner he must be kept isolated from the mainstream prison population; and as a youngster, he cannot live on the wing designated a VPU (vulnerable prisoner unit). So he spends his sentence in the Segregation Unit, usually reserved for prisoners being punished for some misdemeanour. Has never written before and doesn't know what he wants to write but wants to try it.

*Jimmy:* Adult prisoner on an ACCT (Assessment, Care and Custody in Teamwork) Plan because of the risk of self harm, which means that his time is closely monitored and notes are entered in a document – in Jimmy’s case, every 30 minutes. Has never written before.

*Peter:* Adult prisoner, emotionally distressed and obese, living on the Health Care wing, later moved to the VPU. Has written poetry.

*Jack:* Adult prisoner, under continual supervision on Health Care. Ex Class A drug user. Serious self-harm through cutting. Very keen to get into writing, to tell his story.

### Working Process

At initial meetings with Sharon Jones, the Safer Custody and Violence Reduction Manager, it was decided that the work should be done on a one-to-one basis, in order to prevent mutual encouragement of self-harming behaviour, something that Sharon was very aware of. Also, given the emotional vulnerability of the participants, it was considered that they would feel more confident working just with me in the first instance. I thought it best to work with 2 prisoners at a time, so Sharon and her assistant Becky, recommended some people to start with; Jimmy was later recommended by a counsellor working with adult prisoners.

I would then meet the prisoners in the company of one of the team and I’d tell them about the project. All were happy to be approached and expressed their enthusiasm for taking part. The first of three formal meetings would then be arranged with them and in collaboration with the team and any other necessary staff members.

The sessions themselves took place in a variety of venues, some more suitable than others. Often you have to take what you can get in prison; examples: a dedicated room in Health Care had an ominous bed left in it so we moved into a cubicle; a meeting room on an adult room would be gazumped by officers, so we’d have to work on the wing itself,

in a noisy public space; and on one occasion there was no available room anywhere to be found. But still we managed to get on with it.

I would sit with the participant and we would work together in a way which I deemed appropriate. Chas, Karl and Peter were happy to write on their own, so our time together would be spent discussing their work; Jerry and Jack wrote on their own but not prolifically: in Jerry's case we would sometimes write together whereas Jack and I are still working towards a productive process; and Jimmy would only write when in the session: we wrote together and read our productions out to one another.

At the beginning and end of each session, there would be check-in time, when we would talk about how their lives had been since we last met, how visits had been, or how their cases were progressing. There was also verbal evaluation of the session and the project as a whole.

I had 6 meetings with Sharon and several less formal meetings with other colleagues, including my weekly updates with my line manager, Laurence Bater.

### Evaluation Issues

It was decided at the outset through conversations with my project supervisors and Pam Thorne, that quantitative evaluation procedures would be difficult to apply to this project: the diversity of the participants, particularly with regards to their fluctuating medical and emotional conditions, their varied experiences of writing and even levels of literacy, and the peculiar and unpredictable conditions prevailing in the prison setting, rendering no clear baseline from which to measure change. A scale such as Ryff, for example, seemed to me impossible to apply for these reasons. In fact, the project may be seen as a good example by which to consider evaluation methods in chaotic and unpredictable situations. My intention is to develop my findings into a more detailed paper, based on individual case-studies, while grappling with the difficulties of trying to establish some kind of meaningful evaluation process.

For now, I would like to draw attention to some relevant considerations and briefly consider some difficulties arising when considering procedures of evaluation. In a nutshell:

- \* Prison conditions are by no means optimum environments for positive change – in fact, the class of ideologies (punishment vs rehabilitation) can be seen to actually militate against the very notion of optimum environment.

- \* Given the welter of discourses and personal factors surrounding the prisoners' engagement with any intervention, evaluation must be on-going and embedded in the writing process.

- \* Evaluation in such conditions will inevitably involve reflexive; issues of subjectivity and safety impact strongly on the facilitator.

- \* You can't always believe what you are told: issues of judgement, self-defence, guilt, loss, denial and delusion are all often present together in working with prisoners, especially those with mental health disorders. Given the sheer complexity and intensity of many of their lives, it is no surprise that there is almost always more than meets the eye – thus meaningful evaluation of the working process can only emerge over longer periods of time.

- \* There is no clear space in which evaluation can take place: there is a welter of other factors, many invisible to the facilitator, which can seriously effect well-being on a day-to-day basis.

- \* Low educational and confidence levels may mean that a client is incapable of responding meaningfully to questions about the value of the project in anything but the most simple terms ("Good", "Enjoying it" etc!), rendering straightforward questionnaires such as the "Poets Behind Bars" model too advanced for some, and begging the question

of course as to whether they would say this just to please the facilitator and gain credit for doing so. Such credit in prison can hasten a prisoner's release.

So, with all this in mind, evaluation was carried out through:

- 1) verbal check ins with participants before and after each session
- 2) regular check ins outside of sessions on the wings
- 3) meetings with supervisors and other staff involved with participants
- 4) questionnaires completed by clients towards the conclusion of the process in collaboration and conversation with myself
- 5) analysis of written material
- 6) my own journal of the process with regards to each participant

The aims of the evaluation were to assess:

- 1) the appropriateness of the methods applied
- 2) the value of the process to the participants
- 3) any difficulties arising for anyone involved in the process, including myself
- 4) directions for the future development of this or similar projects

### Findings

In summary, there were some dramatic effects of engaging in the writing process.

All participants valued getting heard non-judgmentally.

All valued getting the quiet time, and my undivided attention. This would involve actual contact time, but also typing up their work and bringing copies back to them, providing reading materials etc.

Jerry expressed heightened well-being and confidence: “I’ve never been able to talk in this way to anyone before”. Peter said: “After our session I told my family about my offences openly for the first time.” He left the isolation of his cell for the social life of the wing and said, “Before this I felt this tall (that is knee-height). Now, through the poetry, and passing it out and getting positive feedback from the other blokes, I feel much much better.” Jack, who was self-harming seriously when I met him, following a session with a counsellor and his first conversation with me, was moved out of healthcare and onto the wing; his nurse reported a dramatic change: “he’s like a new man.”

All reported a sense of achievement and enhanced self-worth; for some this was by sharing their work with others.

Deeper analysis of the actual writing, and conversations about the writing, lead to much deeper insights on a participant by participant basis. Space does not permit anything other than examples here, but I will be exploring the process and outcomes in detail in my intended paper.

### Examples from the Work

Chas progressed from gothic generalisations and genre pastiche to far more complex and considered metaphors in his poetry.

*Dark Domain.*

*Anger Pain.*

*Fear Hurt.*

*hatred Slain.*

*In your mind I engrave my name.*

*(from ‘Shadow’)*

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*Smoke and ashes here I fall*

*feeling safe in my own self destruction  
burning bridges I once stood tall  
but there was mutiny in my own construction*

*(from 'Smoke and Ashes')*

Having completed his collection *Through the Shadows* during the project, he left the prison to spend some time in a secure unit. He discovered that he wanted to write and play and that he could set his poetry to music. I hope he's bought that guitar he was talking about. He was hoping to find people to play with through MIND when he gets released.

Karl began to explore his relationship with his father. He is defensive and possibly in denial about the truth of this relationship, but his book made a start perhaps. Recalled on license, I hope to continue with Karl where this project left off.

*I got told my dad got arrested for sexual assault on my two older sisters. With my father in prison. I was in bits. I didn't know what to believe... With my father in prison and the family destroyed I started writing letters to my father... When my father got released I always said I wanted to live with him because at the time me and my mum were arguing about stupid things. My mum always said that I couldn't and we had arguments all the time. Constantly fighting.*

Jerry is exploring the relationship of fact and fantasy in his life. He is writing poetry and stories in a way that blends the truth with fiction, providing him with a safe way of opening up and dealing with his turbulent inner life. He writes movingly about the death of his brother in a car crash at the age of ten; Jerry was sitting in the seat next to him at the time.

*...all I remember is waking up in the hospital until the Friday, I remember I was told you was dead on the Wednesday, I later found out you had died on the Sunday so before the Wednesday I thought you was alive I never imagined or thought you had died I remember asking how you was and when could I see you...I was told you had died I remember crying then I remember going to see you in another part of the hospital I had to be pushed in a wheelchair I was taken to a room and there you was on a bed not moving or breathing...*

Jimmy's task was relatively simple – to write down anything, having never done so! In practice he loved discovering that self-expression was not beyond him. “He just lit up!” said his counsellor.

*I remember going out on motorbikes with my 4 friends. We all had motorbikes apart from my one friend who had a trike. One day we all met at my house in Cilfynydd and then we all made our way to the Mountain. We all took food and drink because we were going to stay there all day. We were all having so much fun...Gareth was the one with the trike. It was really nice. It was bright red in colour with 3 big chunky tyres on it. It was very fast...It was a part of the fields with very long grass and weeds we had to ride through. Gareth used to go first to make a pathway...*

Peter, I've mentioned earlier. Though he felt upset about writing prose directly about his father, his comic poetry provides a safe container for deeper insights and resolutions. By working with metaphor, he grew a plant from a “cell”, and discovered that the weight he was carrying physically was also emotional –and that it wasn't just his own.

*8 weeks ago I weighed 393 pounds  
that's 28 stone 11lb to you and me  
now I weigh 25 stone 2  
I feel like I am “free”  
I give in – the diet's working!*

*I've got no reason to be bitter  
my health is so much better now  
and I'm really feeling fitter  
I sometimes still get aches and pains  
but that's to be expected  
through illness and plain laziness  
my body's been neglected  
I'm starting to turn it all around  
things are starting to go my way  
I am feeling much more positive now  
and I look forward to each day  
I have got to get it right this time  
and have less food for my dinner  
and instead of taking second best  
maybe I'll be a winner!*

*“Life Changing”*

In conversation, Peter admitted that his weight problems had their genesis in his trouble relating to women: the weight was more than physical, and he was carrying others', not just his own.

Finally, Jack's work is slow but important in that it has spurred him out of isolation into the social world of education and interaction. His journal will hopefully take him out into the world and aid in a healthy and un-traumatic reflection on the life that led him into custody. Our work is only just beginning.

**THURSDAY**

**SORE SHARON BRIEFLY IN H/C CORRIDOR SHE TOLD ME THAT SHE HAS FAXED A COMPLAINT... WITH REGARDS ME BEING BULLIED. SORE SHARON AGAIN ALONG WITH THE RESETTLEMENT MANGER OF CHARLEY BLOCK BUT THIS**

*TIME IN CELL...4 CHAT WITH ME ABOUT MOVING OVER THEIR WHEN A SPACE COMES AVILABLE. HAVE A VISIT IN THE EVENING FROM A M8 WHICH I WILL CALL JOANNE. WE HAD A GOOD CHAT 4 AN HOUR WHEN SHE HAD 2 GO...*

*SUN*

*WENT 2 GYM AND THAT IS ABOUT O YEAH MANAGED TO GET A DECENT MUNCH AT DINNER TIME AND I CRYED ABOUT 1 OR 2 THINGS IN EVENING ALSO ENDED UP FALLING ASLEEP...*

And myself? The project has been absolutely fascinating and enormously complex; I have been left with several worlds to explore:

- \* a close analysis of texts to explore their metaphors and structures
- \* a consideration of the use of narrative enquiry in this work, especially in the light of what I have come to call “narratives of deceit” and partial narratives, – the hidden agendas prisoners so often have, asking hidden to who? And why? But also the constructive blending of autobiography and fiction. And the meta-narratives of judgement and guilt, out from under which the prisoner’s creativity struggles to escape
- \* poetic enquiry – thoughts about genre (Chas), about literacy, and about ‘word salad’, verbal slippage etc
- \* the text and the body; metaphor and masculinity

Emotionally, I have not been drained but stimulated by this work. As a man I have encountered others whose experiences have challenged my ability to empathise but demanded that I do so. As a writer I have been fascinated and uplifted by the ability of truth and joy in language to assert itself in spite of the most condemning circumstances.

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I have received excellent support from my project supervisors and have regular meetings with them to discuss the work. Although the unpredictability of prison life is often itself a stumbling block to fluent working processes, the project has gone pretty smoothly: there is always more demand for your time than can ever be met, especially as all the men I have worked with so far have responded extremely positively to the work (this in itself being perhaps an indicator of their need for non-judgmental attention). I was delighted that Pam Thorne was able to visit Parc to discuss the project with myself and colleagues and meet some of the inmates, and greatly appreciate her insights and comments.

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### *The Future*

Several big themes have emerged from the work: the relationship between truth and falsehood in a situation where often it is not in the clients' perceived best interests to disclose the whole truth, the relationship between cutting and writing as forms of display, and the importance of witnessing, are some highly significant areas for further research and practice. I believe that creative writing can get in touch with the lives, and the offending behaviour, of participants in a deeper way than the legal discourse by which they are used to be described. Future work will involve research on issues of self-harm in society at large. The results will be contribute to the literature on both the subjects of self-harm and prison arts.

And of course, it's not just the prisoners themselves that benefit, but also their families and communities, not to mention those potential victims who will never even know that's what they were.

*Suggested reading*

*The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics – Arthur Frank, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1997*

*The Language of Injury: Comprehending Self Mutilation – Gloria Babiker and Lois Arnold, The British Psychological Society, 1997*

*The Foucault Reader – Paul Rabinow (ed), Penguin Books, London, 1984*

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*The body is moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythm of work, rest and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances... It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.*

*Michel Foucault – Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*

