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AN INTERPLAY OF LEARNING, CREATIVITY AND NARRATIVE BIOGRAPHY IN A MENTAL HEALTH SETTING: BERTIE'S STORY

This paper describes selected findings from a research study exploring the use of a basic literacy/creative writing course provided in a community setting for adults with long-term mental health difficulties. It explores one case in particular, where long-term mental illness coupled with limited verbal articulation and low levels of literacy presented significant barriers to learning, creativity and the construction of narrative. However, whilst little movement or development could be discerned in some participant cases where recognisable barriers were less formidable, the case study selected illustrates a resilience and agency on the part of one individual which enabled incremental but significant development. The paper suggests that seeking the creative in the writing, or the meaning in the words was to overlook the actual creative act, which was the resilient, reparative process of coming to terms with a new identity and a new self narrative.

Keywords   narrative; literacy; mental illness; identity

Introduction

> Life can only be understood backwards. In the meantime it has to be lived forwards.
>
> (Kierkegaard)

The social context within which mentally ill adults with low levels of education can access learning opportunities offering scope for creative expression is fraught. Pressures exerted through the educational policy discourses of Widening Participation (HEFCE, 2000), Inclusive Learning (Tomlinson, 1996), Skills for Life (DfEE, 2001), and the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act part 4 (DRC, 2001) have urged educational and community providers to act upon obligations to offer learning opportunities to adults with disabilities and/or mental illness. Corollaries of Care in the Community (DoH, 1990) continue to highlight concern over what support is

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provided for the reintegration of mentally ill individuals into a society both hostile to mental illness (Cross, 2004) and increasingly unable to offer employment opportunities to vulnerable, less skilled individuals. Meanwhile, New Labour has promoted a discourse of social inclusion (Levitas, 1998) and is seen to have backed initiatives and strategies to increase participation. However, despite this climate within both health and education the socio-political context of this research appeared riddled with jarring discourses and beleaguered by eroded funding and ossified structural inequality. Whilst the learning needs of adults with mental health difficulties have, in the past decade, become the subject of increased concern at both educational and policy level and have triggered sometimes awkward marriages between the domains of education and health (Sagan, 2002, 2004), learning provision for mentally ill adults largely remains theoretically neglected, pedagogically unexamined and politically overlooked.

Many of the learning opportunities now accessible are designed, taught and assessed from within an ethos of education being instrumental in national development and commercial competitiveness. There is a heavy stress on technicist pedagogy and the aim of 'upskilling' the learner in ways most congruent with market demands. Both teachers and learners are subject to the audit anxiety which runs through heavily regimented provision (Cooper, 2001). This discourse, which collapses concepts of lifelong learning and social inclusion with an economic skills imperative (Barton *et al.*, 2004; Appleby & Bathmaker, 2006) circulates uneasily within the small, under funded community premises frequented by the long-term mentally ill participants in this study. Their concept of learning and writing was more tied to notions of day-to-day survival and the development and/or maintenance of a bearable personal narrative. Opportunities for social interaction were deemed important in breaking the isolation of mental illness, and the *concreteness* of writing (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) was highly valued, as expressed by one participant:

> … just … getting it down on paper, it makes me feel, better somehow to see it there … I know what I think then, when I see what I've said …
>
> Ben

Learning programmes are largely designed, funded and delivered with a fantasised non-gendered individual in mind, who is rarely consulted and seldom if ever considered as a whole person rather than a fragmented construction of 'bits' to be manipulated, medicated, taught and processed, the 'subject-positions' of Foucault (1980). This individual is situated within a contestable social construction of mental illness (Busfield, 1996) which, though clumsy, offensive and ill-representative of experience, nevertheless feeds popular imagery and fears, and contributes to a constrained set of identities being formulated by mentally ill adults themselves. Any notion of learning or in this case literacy and self-expression as inherently *creative* acts is absent. Indeed, if creativity can be posited, as it is in this paper, as an ability to integrate, to link, bring together (Segal, 1957) and tolerate disparate ideas and warring identities, then the atomised and fragmentary mode of thinking and operating within education for mentally ill adults can be seen as not only denuded of any *creative* thought, but actually constituting an *attack* on thinking (Rustin, 2001).

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It is within this problematic landscape that this research took place, seeking to catch a glimpse of whether such a terrain allowed space for individuals *not to discover what we are, but refuse what we are* (Foucault, 1982, p. 216) and make some attempt, despite all odds, at living life *forwards* through writing creatively.

Methodology

Immersion in the setting for substantial duration, typical of ethnographic research, was vital to being able to establish a working rapport and trust with the small group of individuals in this study. Comfortable, non-intrusive access not only to the writing sessions and work produced therein, but other activities and areas of the community setting, was essential to the gathering of data across a number of domains. The aim of the research was to observe what *use*[1] was made of a basic literacy/creative writing course which was provided for mentally ill adults with mostly low levels of literacy and limited verbal articulation.

All 11 individuals who took part in the three year study are long-term mentally ill and although they represent a range of diagnoses they all share the experience of debilitating depression for which they have been regularly hospitalised and are in receipt of numerous and varied medications. Ethical considerations were of paramount concern, particularly as the study progressed and I was told things informally, in the canteen, or on fag breaks, information which I considered important but for which I needed to gain renewed consent in order to use as data. Whilst both written and regularly re-requested verbal consent has been obtained for the information in this paper, all names and identities have been altered.

The research employed a critical ethnographic methodology (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003) primarily in its first phase, to examine a range of data and maintain maximum flexibility in a volatile setting subject to sudden funding crises; organisational restructuring and participant absence and/or withdrawal. In subsequent phases of the project the focus was on the biographic narrative interviews, which continued regularly throughout the three years. These interviews used an adapted form of the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (Wengraf, 2001) and aimed to elicit life story narrative from the participants in the study. Levels of articulation and verbal engagement varied dramatically however, and with two participants in particular it was not until the research progressed well into the second year that interviews began to contain more of the 'risky narrative' which was to afford insights into the identity work apparently being carried out.

It is the data from the individual narrative interviews which underpin the substantive focus of this paper, although other data in the form of session observation notes; interview notes (of the process rather than the content); course documentation and examples of participants' creative work are drawn on to substantiate and/or question the biographic data. It is from this tracing and juxtaposing that questions were raised regarding the narrative which was being performed in the interview setting, and how it differed in some cases quite strikingly from the 'self' portrayed in other domains. As the site of strenuous identity work, the course as a whole appeared to be 'used' in the psychoanalytic sense as a particular object, parts of which needed

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to be nurtured and kept good, while others were subject to various forms of subtle attack. Whilst the aim of the sessions was to help mentally ill adults write creatively, (even, or specifically from within the bounds of very low levels of literacy) this paper suggests that the creative impulse was being expressed through a diligent development, maintenance of, or defending against particular identities. I also suggest that creativity is a hard-earned luxury for the individuals in this research, whose day-to-day survival was a paramount theme throughout their narratives. This hard-earned luxury appeared to demand a high level of containment (Bion, 1967) on the part of facilitators, the group and the setting itself; it also demanded the sense of at least the *potential* for secure attachments (Bowlby, 1969). These prerequisites were partially met through the sessions and the research itself by dint of duration, stability and sensitivity to psychic traffic and inter-subjectivity on the part of the facilitator (French, 1997) and researcher. These were the very factors which were continually under attack as a result of funding constraints and un-fit for purpose curriculum demands specifically, and the 'instrumentalism within modern welfare services' (Froggett, 2002, p. 39) more generally.

Psychosocial questioning positing a defended subject (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000) was applied in an attempt to understand undercurrents in the emerging data and to keep alive a constant awareness of each individual being at once a product of a particular constellation of psychological factors *and* a subject constructed by a particular socio-political structure whose cultural and historic creation of mental illness is shifting and contingent (Foucault, 1991). The psychoanalytic concepts drawn on are those most closely associated with Kleinian, post-Kleinian and object-relations theorists, predominantly splitting, projective identification, reparation and containment. Within this framework particular attention is paid to experiences of anxiety and defending against it, and perceived loss, both heavily implicated in a psychoanalytic understanding of learning. It is this framework that appears, in my experience as a counsellor and educator, to have greatest fluency when considering the learning process of mentally ill adults, which is usually fraught, often distressing, and sometimes potentially harmful as destructive behaviours are revisited upon the site of learning and interminable knots of suffering are tied through failure and stasis. The case study from which I extract here, however, depicts a special resilience and tiny yet significant changes. This accomplishment supports the claim that holistic, therapeutic and containing welfare can support the conditions in which learning, integration and more creativity can take place, even amongst learners who present with a range of characteristics which constitute formidable barriers to development. Unlike several other cases studied where the individual appeared entrenched in a paranoid–schizoid position (Klein, 1946) wherein self-narrative was locked tight in a denial of past experience and inability to envisage a different future, Bertie's case offered a glimpse of a movement into the depressive position, where ambivalence could be thought, reparation begun and a new narrative of self spun.

Bertie: when words don't come easy

A 65-year-old Yorkshireman, Bertie was well known at the centre, having attended on and off for more than 10 years. Stocky, with a plethoric complexion, pronounced

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limp and difficult breathing, Bertie came weekly to the centre to share a cuppa, get some lunch and chat with the other users. He had never taken up any of the recreational or educational services on offer: art classes; yoga; computing for beginners. Neither had he ever added his name to the waiting list for counselling:

> … No, not for me, not for the likes of me … I w, w, w, wouldn't know what to say, 'livia, wouldn't 'ave a clue …
>
> Bertie

Bertie came from what can perhaps be nostalgically and inadequately categorised as 'the traditional working class' — and his narrative is threaded through with the confusions and angers of a tribe displaced by a new work order (Collins, 2004) and demonised by a media which fails to recognise its own bigotry towards the British working class (Hari, 2007). Many of his comments regarding the changes he had been confronted with in his neighbourhood expressed fear and anxiety about not knowing or understanding the 'newcomers' and not being able to 'say nuffin' in case he was branded a racist. A disjointed cultural allegiance seemed to be further confounded by the ravages of mental ill health, which splintered chronology and memory, and demanded that Bertie reposition himself as mentally ill first and foremost, rather than a labourer, a father, a grandfather or an ardent Tottenham Hotspur fan who dreamed of going to Majorca. Bertie suffered with several serious medical conditions, was diagnosed with depression and acute anxiety, and lived in a studio flat on a council estate notorious locally for its declining standards and disgraceful levels of noise, dirt and despair. When he put his name down for the literacy/creative writing course, it came as a surprise to staff and volunteers at the centre who, while liking Bertie for his affable character, nevertheless saw him as a 'revolving door' user; one who due to his age, history and general low level of education and articulation would never really improve or progress therapeutically or educationally. Gradually however, over the course of our interviews and interactions in the writing sessions I observed, Bertie began to speak, through his stutters and malapropisms, of his contempt for the poverty in which he grew up, and the heavy burden of what he termed his 'dysleptic' (sic) problems, i.e. his lack of ability to write, which he put down to dyslexia (undiagnosed). Despite all predictions, over time he also improved his writing ability and began to broach the idea of self-expression — how this was achieved is reflected on below.

Bertie: Fords, fags and reparation

Observations of Bertie over the first year in which he took part in three 10-week courses show very little movement in terms of the educational progress required by educational providers and their funders, in this case the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). His rigidly upper case writing remained stubbornly at the level of a nine year old, void of punctuation and with a vocabulary predictably poorer than his verbal vocabulary. He often stuttered and stammered when taking part in the gentle group discussion around themes the group were encouraged to write about, and he frequently resorted to slap-sticky jokes and puns. Early interviews were a difficult 20

minutes to half hour, with Bertie responding to questions but unable or reluctant to elaborate, perhaps because he remained incredulous that anything of his life, of him — 'thick, or mad, they've called me, or white trash, something like that' — would be of interest to anybody. However, at the end of the second year, there were some shifts across the domains of writing, group session and the biographical interviews, and I want now to describe these shifts and to detail to what I believe them attributable. I will then suggest what the ramifications of these shifts may be in terms of the creativity of Bertie's pursuits, and what the messages are to emerge from this in terms of educational provision and creative processes for mentally ill adults with low levels of articulation and literacy.

Although Bertie made frequent jokes about his being 'dysleptic', too old to learn, that writing wasn't for him — 'I leave that up to my daughter, she's got lovely handwriting, she 'as …' — the developing biographic narrative told a private, harrowing story about an upbringing in a charitable religious boarding school for boys which was riddled with humiliations, physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Much of the humiliation and bullying focused on his being 'thick' and not able to learn; and the stories Bertie gradually told me through stutters and stammers and wheezes suggested a bank of memories involving schooling and its loathsome authoritative figures. This bank, while long relegated to some distant and safe part of Bertie's mind, nevertheless had left him with a sense of unfinished business regarding learning, regarding literacy and writing in particular, which he felt as a noticeable absence in his life: 'if I could say it, like, get it down on paper … it'd be out there …'.

Bertie had a heavy emotional investment in learning which was two-fold; firstly, if he could learn, in the basic sense of moving from one point of knowledge to another, he stood to settle some old score with those who had written him off. Secondly, writing, literacy, the physicality of its presence on paper, would somehow restore validity to his stories which Bertie did not deem them to have without 'proof' — a written *proof* of a subjective experience (Milner, 1950), granted to those 'with letters' but denied him, who had few. For Bertie, the gap between an inner subjective experience and an expression of it had widened, for while his life had changed and circumstances had shifted, Bertie had not had appropriate spaces in which his verbal articulation and literacy might be allowed play and development. Milner (1950, p. 132) suggests this gap is what expressive pursuit seeks to address:

> … there is (also) a gap between the inner reality of feeling and the available ways of communicating what we feel … it is a gap that is bigger wherever the conditions of our living are changing rapidly so that the old forms for describing our feeling experiences become no longer adequate.

Yet it was not until the second year that Bertie began to show some changes in his writing, which, while remaining rigidly prosaic and arduous to execute, showed some embryonic signs of development in terms of subject matter. His writing become more autobiographical and included a moving short description of his many years at the Ford factory where he tumbled, as a result of ill health, from semi-skilled worker to floor cleaner. It also suggested he accessed more control and choice; words would be substituted for others — 'that's better, aint it, it says it better' — rather than the first

option being hurriedly settled for. Bertie's relationship to the product itself also changed. Whereas once torn up or stuffed into a pocket, his morning's work would now be carefully placed on the table for collection, or smoothed out and put inside a folder. By the end of the third year he was learning to word process his short paragraphs and poems and this also appeared to give a private sense of pleasure to him which was nothing short of moving to observe.

Simultaneously, Bertie's engagement with the interviews was deepening. This engagement I suspect was possible because whilst within the framework of the BNIM (Wengraf, 2001) interview Bertie was invited to tell me his life story, our time together was not flooded with the preconceived ideas Bertie held about what constituted counselling, ideas which jarred with his image of himself as a white, working-class man — an image which had been steadily under attack through ill health, divorce, changing socio-political circumstances, and the depletion of a local population to whom he felt affiliated. 'Doing the research' was bizarrely something he felt he could say to his mates downstairs during fag breaks, when they asked why he was late; 'Doing the writing' was also, just about acceptable — whereas 'doing counselling' sat less comfortably.

Bertie's interviews gradually deepened in scope allowing for a flooding of feeling and unearthing of memories. He spoke, still through stutters and stumbles, puns and quips, about his early life at the convent, his class allegiances about which he felt betrayal, and latterly his fears of aging and dying. The interviews became more poignant; strikingly candid; there was a sense, for me, of a childlike, 'true' expression: 'It is speech as true self, the verbal equivalent of Winnicott's ''squiggle'' or the moment when, according to Lacan, the subject discovers his own voice, revealed through slips of the tongue and curious wordings' (Bollas, 1999, p. 72).

This good use of the interview space and time was striking (and not mirrored by all participants) — but it took time, much more time than the short-term counselling Bertie would have had access to through the centre. This use was also augmented by the domains of the group sessions and the writing itself. So while Bertie was busy dissecting certain experiences in the interview setting, 'safe' parts of this could be taken into the writing sessions — without the fear of the emotional content of the work spilling out uncontrollably within the more public domain. In exchange, the potential loss felt in the sessions through the development, in writing, of a new narrative supplanting an old, fractured, obsolete but still habitual one, could be articulated back in the interviews — 'it's good, yeah (the writing) but it's not me, not like … I've never really written nothing, never been good with words …'.

This containment within which new subject positions could be taken up and new identities explored, appeared to be alleviating anxiety within the writing sessions sufficiently to enable firstly, some actual slow, hard learning to occur, and secondly, further strengthening of a new narrative as week after week Bertie saw stories of himself build up in the concrete form of writing on paper.

Furthermore, as his work slowly, incrementally progressed and his attendance stabilised, Bertie's connection with the group and his identity as a member in it strengthened. Bertie became well known as the group joker, with other members referring to previous jokes and quips within the new history of their time together:

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… Bertie, remember the one you told us about the tea, the mobile phone and T mobile? Tell it again — go on!

Observation notes (Cathy)

The affinity and empathy within the group was specifically aided through the weekly public demonstration of a shared weakness in writing. Although some members were clearly more adept than others, the combination of joint discussion of personal themes with the challenge of writing about these appeared to bind the group to itself in a private and intimate way not shared by other social groupings and cliques at the centre.

This time together spilled from the group sessions to fag breaks, to informal get-togethers — spinning its own history and narrative which fed back into the bank of memories to which the group itself began to refer. This particular group dynamic offered a personal supportive domain as learning came easily to none of them and all members shared a knowledge of the ravages of mental illness on words, self identity, memory and self-expression. It supplied Bertie with yet another arena in which *to be* and to try out a new identity. The containing function of the writing and the interview space which could ultimately hold the emotion and pain seemed to free up the site of the group sessions. Bertie could relax and be the joker without, for once, the jokes masking parts of himself which had nowhere else to be. Finally, but significantly, there was an unexpected and deepening companionship over the two years between himself and another user at the same centre with whom he discovered very similar shared experiences of class, whiteness, mental illness and the onset of older age.

So what was going on? I am not suggesting that Bertie was accessing a 'true self' nor that he was co-constructing (through his interaction with myself in the interviews, the individuals in the group sessions, the facilitator or the writing) a new, 'truer' narrative. The delightful, if frustrating challenges of postmodernism wrought upon the modernism of psychotherapy have highlighted hierarchical notions of 'truth' inherent in discourses which suggest a truer self is accessed through practices of therapy, creativity and autobiography. So the written Ford story, the development of Bertie the Joker, the painful narrative being unwound in the interviews, do not *in themselves* represent either more valuable, more articulate or in any way cathartic self narratives, and we need to be mindful of the danger *of reducing meaning to that which can be narrated* (Frosh, 2002, p. 134). What they do imply is that the gaps and leakages of the different practices and the challenges, for Bertie, of engagements with other ways of being — offered moments of both *frisson* and disjuncture. These could be experienced and tolerated by Bertie from the vantage point of the depressive position, partly because they were being contained within a sufficiently robust framework. This included not only the writing and the group sessions, but the research activity *itself*; the corrective emotional experience offered through Bertie's newfound form of companionship, and small changes in his socio-economic standing which opened the possibility of, quite simply, greater quality of life. A space was opening up for Bertie — and in this opening up, this man, with his stuttering, limited articulation, his slow and cumbersome handwriting, and his dreams of watching the world cup live, was thinking not only of the immediate, two-dimensional now, but of the past,

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repopulated with richer stories and encounters, and of a future which held other than sheer fear — in Kleinian terms the mourning and reparation achieved were enabling the embryonic beginnings of creative activity (Klein, 1988). The words Bertie used, either in the interviews or his short written pieces, were now less populated with the intentions of others (Bakhtin, 1981) and more full of his own. Bertie's negotiation of the rocky terrain of frisson, disjunction, gaps and leakages *was* the creative act. It demanded tolerating ambivalence and the shock of the new; a capacity for symbolisation and the making of the reparative acts of remembering and recreating — it involved living life forwards.

Learning how to spell 'creative'

Learning, always a risky encounter with 'difficult knowledge' and necessary unlearning (Britzman, 1998, 2006) occurring at a place where the internal and external worlds meet, demands the very capacities which are under attack when we are caught anywhere along the spectrum from emotionally disturbed to chronically mentally ill. These are the same capacities which are denuded or eradicated in a paranoid–schizoid mode of being and operating.

At the same time debates surrounding what constitutes creativity seldom take place within the confines of policy and practice regarding mental health and adult literacy. Notoriously ill-defined and subjectively apprehended, creativity is regarded by the participants I worked with as something out of reach — 'not for the likes of us' was a term much used — because of their class, because of their illness, because of the myriad of needs in the quest for a day to day survival which are more pressing.

Despite persuasive evidence that there continues to be a link between some forms of mental illness and creative outpourings (Jamison, 1993) the sad truth on the ground is that for many mentally ill individuals their illness means a stripping away, a depletion of colour, sensitivity and delight, and a narration always 'dissonant with the experience intended by its account' (Stone, 2004, p. 19) which amounts to vacuum and loss rather than creation.

So both learning and creativity seem to request that we suspend reality, trust in a journey with an unknown destination and create an object able to hold *and* portray our abstruse intentions, yearnings and phantasies. This is a tall order when our notions of self are undermined, our narrative fragmented, trust betrayed and faith in objects eroded. Whilst creative pursuits and learning can also *restore* or recreate a sense of identity, narrative, trust and faith, this study suggests that both learning and creativity have a list of demands as prerequisites to their magic. These demands — which are pedagogic, psychodynamic, social — exceed what is on offer, both from the welfare sector and the education sector. What is on offer is usually something very different — the provision of a mechanistic course with a tick list of learning objectives complying with a scheme dreamt up in an adult education co-ordinator's office. This scheme, oblivious to the human waste caught up in its limitations, is designed in accordance with the spurious guidelines laid down by a government for whom Bertie, at the end of this food chain, is a faceless, mentally ill 'hard-to-reach' statistic in danger of social exclusion.

Note

1   'Use' here has the double meaning of (1) how participants used this provision, e.g. as a social, educational and/or recreational activity and what role it came to play in their lives, but also (2) what use was made in the psychoanalytic sense of 'object use' (Winnicott, 1969).

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