

Write Communally, And Be Free:

Andrea Mason explores the potential of combining old and new technologies with a Case Study of the Literary Kitchen Zoom Lockdown Freewrite

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all those who participated in the Lockdown Freewrite, and especially to the fifteen participants who undertook this survey: Alan Russell (AR), Camille Phoenix (CP), Cath Barton (CB), Caz Morris (CM), Claire Frankland (CF), Dee (D), Denise Monroe (DM), Fiona Banner (FB), Karen Ashton (KA), Lily Corbett (LC), Lucia Helenka (LH), Marika Thorogood (MT), Melanie Manchot (MM), Peter Yeoh (PY), Sara Lyon (SL).

Responding to the Covid-19 Lockdown

This case study presents a communal writing activity offered via Zoom during Lockdown to the Literary Kitchen community. For ten weeks, between 30 March and 29 May 2020, I invited students and alumni to participate in a 4pm, five-minute, daily freewrite, offered as a drop-in activity. Eighty-one people signed up to participate, and in the first five weeks of the activity twenty people routinely participated. As lockdown eased in May the regular group reduced to sixteen and then to ten. Some participants dropped in once, or a handful of times, some not at all, some a few times a week and a handful of regulars participated most days. Answers to a questionnaire undertaken by fifteen regular participants find that undertaking a trusted practice via a communal online setting proves a unique combination of old and new technologies which encourage and develop a writer's stamina, confidence and flexibility.

I founded Literary Kitchen in 2009, offering termly 10-week short courses, manuscript and mentor services. Writing can be a lonely activity at the best of times, and for this reason, the founding principles of Literary Kitchen were face to face engagement, and recruiting students from a restricted geographical location, south east London, which afforded the students the opportunity to forge writing community in their locale. I fiercely resisted offering online courses, but when the mother of all trigger events strikes, a global pandemic, and in its wake a national lockdown, the only choice is to adapt. Alone-amongst-people activities: laptops in convivial cafes, writing on train or bus journeys, writing in breaks on a day job were no longer straightforward options. Against this backdrop it felt important to reach out to the Literary Kitchen writing community and encourage the participants not to forego their practice. If we couldn't meet in person, we could "see" each other online, and share the solitary practice of writing in this communal setting.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a technique that instructs a writer to write non-stop for a designated period of time. Usually 10-15 minutes. For the purpose of this activity I chose five minutes. Key to the technique is that, whilst writing sentences and paragraphs, the writer must keep the pen moving across the page, in order that they put their inner critic to one side, and in the process overcome fear of failure and procrastination.

Freewriting has long been recognised as an aide to creativity. In *Becoming a Writer*, first published in 1934, Dorothea Brande proposes that "the first step toward being a writer is to hitch your unconscious mind to your writing arm" (Brande, 1981: 69). With Brande's writing arm in mind I further recommended to participants that they use pen and paper, believing that the physicality of analogue tools encourages these processes of harnessing the unconscious mind. Furthermore, I recommended to participants that at the end of the five minutes, they screw up their sheet of paper, and throw it away. This act encourages writers to work unselfconsciously, and to trust the process. As Brande reminds us, "the ultimate worth of what you write is of no importance yet" (Brande, 1981: 72). Rather, in undertaking a regular, timed activity, the writer is now "truly a writer" (Brande, 1981: 75), and "will have [their] reward. The unconscious will suddenly give in charmingly, and begin to work gracefully" (Brande, 1981: 79). Similarly, in *The Artist's Way*, first published in 1994, Julia Cameron – who refers to the practice as Morning Pages – considers freewriting a foundational tool of writing, which "teach[es] logic brain to stand aside and let artist brain play" and Cameron would "no more abandon [Morning Pages as a daily practice] than breathing" (Cameron, 1995: 11-13). Natalie Goldberg takes the spontaneous element of the activity one stage further in *Writing Down the Bones*, first published in 1986, encouraging writers to set up a table and chair in a public setting and produce "Poems on Demand".

The activity

Freewrite participants were sent a list of how-to instructions (see Appendix I). Each Monday to Friday I emailed a Zoom invitation at 4pm. The activity started promptly at 4:03pm, and finished at 4:08pm. As lockdown conditions began to ease in May participant numbers dropped away. After ten weeks I felt it was important to take a survey of this extraordinary moment, and find out how the freewrite had helped the participants navigate it, in terms of their creative practice. I emailed out a questionnaire (see Appendix II) to twenty regular attendees, of whom fifteen responded.

Tools

Of the fifteen participants surveyed, a majority, eight, used single sheets of paper, either A4, or torn from a notepad. One participant used a laptop. Three used a notebook. One participant switched between loose sheets of paper and a notebook, and one participant used an A3 layout pad.

In my initial instructions I proposed that participants would gain the most benefit from the practice if they wrote by hand, and screwed up and discarded the freewrite at the end of each session, proposing that they would feel able to attack the new sheet of paper fresh each time. This instruction may have influenced participants' choice of tools.



Fig. 1 (AR)



Fig. 2 (CM)



Fig. 3 (CB)



Fig. 4 (D)

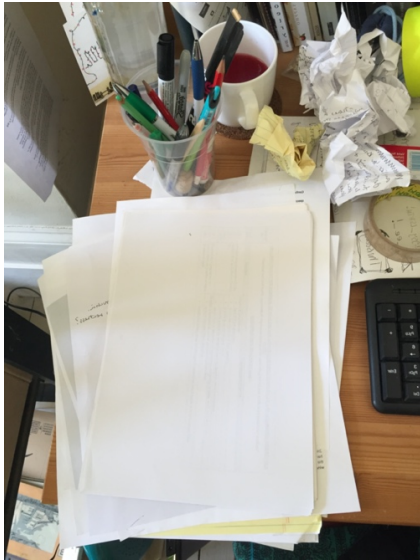


Fig. 5. (CF)



Fig. 6 (PY)



Fig. 7 (DM)



Fig. 8 (SL)

In answer to the question of whether the participants changed their tools across the ten weeks of the activity, it was an almost even split. Eight participants chose their tools at the outset and stuck with them. Seven participants played around with different pens or pencils, switched from paper to laptop and back to paper (FB), and from paper to laptop (MT). For these writers the experimentation around tools was predicated on the nature of the physicality of the act, and how the use of one tool compared to another influenced what was written. CF “used a pencil at the beginning, cos I was maximising the analogue feeling, but I prefer the speed and looseness of a pen” (see Fig. 5). MT found that “On paper, which I tried the first few times, I found I would write more deliberately and less subliminally. I switched to a laptop to get the words out faster and try to have less rational control over what I was writing”. For AR, having used any old pen initially, he settled on a deluxe Bic biro for emotional reasons: “my late wife loved those luxe Bics. [I realise] she might have bought this one for me” (see Fig. 1).

A ballpoint pen was the overriding writing implement of choice. Four of the fifteen participants surveyed experimented with pencil, but reverted largely to pen. Only one participant, FB, consistently used pencil.

“the chuck”

CF referred to the throw away action as “the chuck” which felt apt, so I used this term in the questionnaire. For twelve participants retaining the material proved too hard to resist. Of those twelve, AR, MM and LC did a “pretend chuck” as AR termed it, meaning that they screwed the paper up and chucked it whilst still on screen, and then retrieved the sheets and stored them, interestingly, in out of the way places: “top shelf” (AR), “shoebox at back of wardrobe” (MM), and “behind the bedroom TV” (LC). CF, SL, CM and KA (sometimes) did the chuck. As CF wrote “it felt great to let go”. There was a consensus, however, on not reading the freewrites until a significant amount of time has passed. There was also an orderliness in the retention, with both CB and CM retaining their work in date order.

For those participants who did “the chuck” there was an overriding sense of liberation. CF was reminded that “once I begin, I can always write [and] I took more risks with form and content as the days went on”. CM “like[d] observing the action of chucking the paper” which helped them to detach from what was produced and “hav[e] faith in the practice”. SL wrote that “the fact that [they]’d sat down to give time to [the activity], without having any attachment to the words [...] helped [them] to [...] focus more on the process than the product”. AR “loved the performance of [their] (fake) chuck” which they undertook as a communally supportive act.

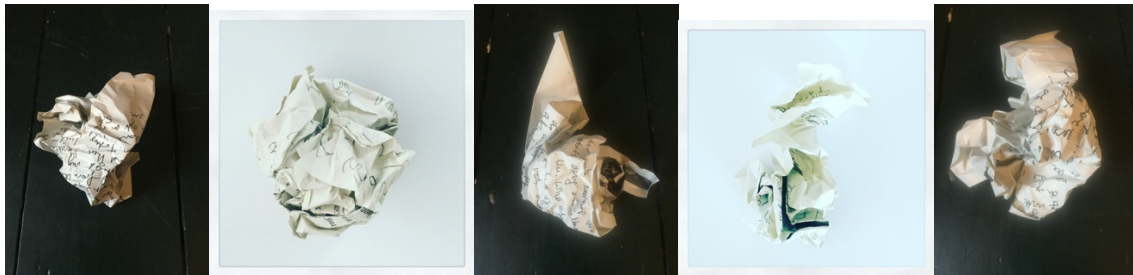


Fig. 9 Andrea Mason’s “chucks”

To re-read or not re-read

Of the twelve participants who retained their work, the majority, eight, haven’t yet reread the pieces, but plan to read them at some point. Five did look at some of their pieces, of whom one, DM, used some writings in a piece of university course work. One, FB, says she reread once and that “Frankly it was not as good as I thought it might have been, but there was some surprising stuff”. CM, CB, LC, AR D, DM and SL wrote diaristically, and/or reflectively regarding the current situation. Of these, most said they wouldn’t use the pieces for creative work. CP, PY and CF used the freewrite as an opportunity to escape the current situation and focus on their practice, either to generate new work or to write around their current work-in-process. CF didn’t keep the freewrites but allowed that what they wrote will have subconsciously “lubricated” their work-in-progress.

Unmute, mute

Initially I left everyone’s audio on, as I had the idea it might be encouraging for participants to hear each other’s pens and pencils moving. A few weeks in I switched it to a silent practice, as I realised that the background noise was distracting. When asked about this, the majority of participants wrote that they preferred everyone muted. However, KA enjoyed the “sound of writers writing” for its sense of “collective spirit” and FB enjoyed “the eccentricity of the sound of sharing the space”.

Combining old and new technologies

The combination of old methodologies – five minutes of blast writing on pen and paper delivered via Zoom – was felt to be “test-like” (CM), “comforting” (CB), “strict” as well as “weirdly close and familiar” (CF). D felt that “the new technology supported the old technology”, in that seeing herself on screen alongside her fellow writers gave her “permission to be non-judgemental about myself, because there was supportive company”. KA and MT also enjoyed the communality of the group but with a sense of distance which meant that MT “felt connected but also still in my own writing bubble”. AR summed up the simple benefits of the combination of technologies: “It’s brilliant! A pen and a blank piece of paper. How to start? On your own in a room. My writer’s nightmare. Then zoom creating that community with us beavering away together. Beautiful, simple, genius.” MM also enjoyed sensing others during the practice, and the positive use of handwriting which for MM defined this practice as distinct from other forms of regular writing such as writing emails.

What was learned

For CF, KA, MT, CP and MM the activity engendered a sense of freedom and even joy. For CF “it was a daily reminder that in the moment of writing I am *always* happy and free”. For LH, AR, DM and LC the main benefit was an adherence to routine and the discipline of the timed activity, which LH determined resulted in an “incredibly focused, exciting and surprising writing session”. For CM, CB, D, PY and SL the activity affirmed the fact of their being a writer, and reinforced the idea that to trust the process was important. For D the communal activity afforded a sense of solidarity with others and herself and they learned to “press on however one is feeling”. For SL the writing forwards aspect of the practice, not stopping to think, procrastinate or re-read, led them to an awareness that being overly precious can “inhibit growth in creative practice”. FB learned that there was indeed “the need for community [at this time] and that was humbling”.

Isolation is a framework for so much creative practice, but it is not in fact isolation, there is always a society of the mind and [the Zoom freewrite] plays with that, in a way that is tender and also conceptually punchy (FB).

Incorporating the freewrite practice

CM, LH, CB, CF, CP and PY will incorporate the freewrite into their writing practice as a tool to begin: as a “warm-up exercise” (CF) and to “just get cracking” (CP). For PY the freewrite process has become a “mental necessity because it makes [them] feel productive and creative even when [they] lose momentum”. Similarly, for DM, KA, MT, CF, LC, SL and AR the freewrite has become a tool by which to stay connected with their practice and to maintain the discipline of a routine. For MT “It [...] is a great way to step out of everyday commitments and tap into my creative zone”. For CF, on non-writing days, a five minute timed freewrite “will move [them] out of depressive moments and back into creativity”. And for D, like for Julia Cameron, perhaps, the freewrite has become a documentary tool, which D proposes that they “may try and do for the rest of [their] life”.

The Lockdown Freewrite “gave a structure to the days in early lockdown and allowed a small amount of time to focus on writing and thinking [...] It made me feel less isolated and created a moment of connection with other writers, which was really important at that time” (MT).

Conclusion

For my part I’m delighted that the activity was fruitful, comforting, supportive, and for some revelatory, during the early weeks of the UK lockdown. Going forwards I propose that a digitally led communal activity could prove fruitful for all types of creative writing educational groups – whether a self-organised writers’ group, or in formal school, university or other educational settings – as a developmental tool, and with the added benefit of it being a soothing, therapeutic practice which facilitates working alone together.

How To Write Communally and Be Free

1. Establish a group
2. Choose your platform: Zoom/Microsoft Teams/similar.
3. Establish who will lead the activity.
4. Decide a time frame: time of day; how long is the activity; is it for a specific number of weeks or rolling?
5. Disseminate instructions – write non-stop for the designated time, preferably using pen and paper. Screw up and chuck the paper at the end of the time.
6. Propose that participants log in a few minutes ahead of the start time.
7. Timekeeper to shout “Start” and “Stop”.

References

Brande, D. (1981) *Becoming a Writer*. New York: J. P. Tarcher Inc.
Cameron, J. (1995) *The Artist’s Way*. London: Pan Books.
Goldberg, N. (1986) *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Berkeley, California: Shambhala Publications.

APPENDICES

Appendix I:

5 MINUTE FREEWRITE INSTRUCTIONS

You will write non-stop for 5 minutes. When I say “off you go”. And stop when I shout “stop”.

The freewriting technique asks that you **keep your pen moving on the page for the full 5 minutes**. You’ll soon see how much you write in 5 minutes, and be able to gauge how much paper you need per session.

Write whatever comes to mind. Don’t judge. Don’t analyse. Don’t overthink it. And don’t stop. 5 minutes will be up in a flash.

Afterwards, immediately screw up the piece of paper and put it into the recycle bin. If you prefer to keep the writings, then of course do, but I recommend that you do not re-read the material until the crisis is over. In that way you will gain the most benefit from the practice. You will be able to attack the sheet of paper fresh each time.

I feel that pen on paper is best for this practice, but if you prefer to use a laptop, that’s fine, of course.

I am not going to ask you to mute your mic, as I think it might be encouraging for you all to be able to hear each other scribbling. But if you find those sounds distracting then feel free to mute your mic. You’ll see a mic icon bottom left on your screen, to the left of the video icon.

I expect the whole process to take 15 minutes, to allow for people to arrive and settle, and for quick Chat feedback at the end for those who want that. I’ll end the meeting at 4.15pm.

Please do be ready to start at 4pm.

Thank you so much for participating.
I’ll run the sessions Mon-Fri, 4pm, for as long as we are in lockdown.
Enjoy!

Andrea 😊

Appendix II:

Questionnaire: (allow max 30 mins)

Name:

Or, if you prefer to remain anonymous, please write Anonymous.

1. what tools did you use for the freewrite e.g. pen/pencil/laptop? Single sheets of paper/notebook?

PLEASE SUPPLY AN IMAGE OF YOUR FREEWRITE TOOLS.

2. Did you change your tools along the way? If so, to what, and why? (a line or two)
3. Did you do “the chuck” at the end of each freewrite, or did you write into a notebook?
4. Did you start with “the chuck” and switch to a notebook? If so, why? (a line or two)
5. If you did “the chuck”, how did this practice support your creative practice? (max 4 lines)
6. If you kept the freewrites, did you reread them, or do you plan to? (a line or two)
7. How might you use the freewrites in your creative practice? (max 4 lines)
8. Initially for the Freewrite I left everyone’s audio on, as I had the idea it might be encouraging to hear each other’s pens and pencils moving. A few weeks in I switched it to a silent practice, as I realised that the background noise was distracting. Did you prefer everyone audible or muted? Can you say why? (a line or two)
9. Can you say anything about the combinatory effect of old methodologies and tools with new technologies? (a line or two)
10. What did you learn about yourself and your creative practice by participating in the Lockdown Freewrite? (max 4 lines)
11. How might you incorporate the freewrite practice into your creative practice going forwards? (max 4 lines)

Biog:



Photo credit: Luke Wolagiewicz

Literary Kitchen offers creative writing courses, mentor and manuscript services. Andrea Mason, director at Literary Kitchen, recently completed her Creative Writing PhD at Goldsmiths, where her research considered the impact of art practice on writing. In particular, her research considers writing as both a material and a physical practice. Her debut novel, *The Cremation Project*, shortlisted for the Fitzcarraldo Editions Novel Prize, 2018, is forthcoming with Inside the Castle, USA, in 2021. She is an Associate Lecturer at UAL and has delivered creative writing workshops at schools, festivals, universities, galleries and conferences. She is an HEA Associate Fellow. Twitter @Andrea_Mason

Andrea Mason, 16 October 2020