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A creative approach to improving literacy, thinking and behaviour

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I have been employing creative writing as an intervention technique as a youth offending team officer and then as a writer (employed in a residency in a YOI) for the last ten years.

My course is for anyone who works with vulnerable people and is interested in employing writing as a tool.

Below are a few examples of writing exercises and the results they can harvest. Permission was granted to use the examples quoted.

Automatic Writing

Ask the group or individual to draw a margin down the side of the page (landscape the paper). Tell them that you are going to say a series of nouns and they must write a sentence in response to each noun – without thinking about it too much. There is one rule: everyone must write something. If nothing occurs, they should write that. When running this exercise begin by using arbitrary nouns, colours, weather etc progressing toward more personal, provocative nouns, e.g. love, family, mother, regret, hope etc. Here is a straightforward example from an introductory session with a young person:

Green

Men in the army with their green suits on

Blue

The colour of my team. My uncle took me to a game.

Work

I'm getting too many warnings for being late

Shopping

I'm saving all my money these days so I can't go

Police

Never find the thieves.

Family

My family is useless

Forgiveness

I can't forgive them for a chunk out of my life

Help

That's not something knocking on my door

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Alternatively if you are working with a group or an individual and discussing something particular, you could choose nouns relevant to the issue or event as a trigger to write about it. Below is an example from a lad who'd just become a father.

Fear

I was scared of the birth that something would go wrong.

Pain

I remember the pain of thinking I wouldn't see my child because of what I did. I remember seeing my girlfriend in pain when she was in labour. Her pain made me upset. She wanted the midwife to pull the head out the pain was so bad.

Birth

My girlfriend ripped open. She felt her baby's skin on hers'. Then my baby was passed to me.

Love

The love for your child is different to all other types of love.

Holding

I couldn't stop looking at her. My girlfriend passes out and I bond with my baby. I didn't want to put her down.

Father

I remember thinking "I'm going to be nothing like my own father."

In this case the automatic writing exercise became less of a warm up and more of a basis for a specific piece of poetry.

Quick fire responses to nouns can be a useful tool to kick start any piece of writing; discussion and assessment also. Another automatic writing warm up is using a response to the senses for a particular environment, experience or memory. Below is an example from a lad I worked with during my residency in a Young Offender Institution. He had recently received a visit from his auntie and her new baby. It concerns the memory of that experience.

Sight

Sunlight in the room. The baby's face.

Smiling.

Sound

A Scouse girl's voice. The sound of the out.

Laughter.

Taste

You can always taste the dust in jail.

Touch

The touch of a child

Smell

Her skin was fresh. Fragrant.

I could see that the memory was a potent one and an experience in contrast to daily life on the wing. So I repeated the exercise for the wing. I then asked the lad to write down a few lines on how he was left feeling and we had the bones of the poem on the following page.

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The lad had never written a poem before, and maybe it shows. But what we have here is his voice; the sound of his thinking. It was the first of several pieces of writing that progressed to look at his offence and its impact. It was also good to have an expression of tenderness for the prison magazine, at variance to the hardened ethic within the jail.

The First Time I Saw

*The first time I saw my cousin
I felt the fragrance, the freshness of her skin
Like a bouquet, it made me shiver.*

*She was with her mother
A Scouse girl's voice, the sound of the Out
I heard words that made me feel at home
Sounds I do not hear in prison
Alarm bells, keys rattling
Straighteners* going off, a lad getting terrorised
Not friendly laughter, hearing a baby on a windy
day
Sounds that make me shiver.*

*The first time I saw my cousin
There was a warmly welcome in the room
Sunlight, delight on seeing a baby's face
The tiny touch of a child
Inexpressible, full on madness, beautiful.*

*All the touching in prison is always to do with
violence
But the first time I saw my cousin
The feeling was great.*

*fights

Once My Hand

Looking at what we do with a specific part of the body can be a great way to begin some memoir work with a person. This is a group of short exercises that I developed from 'Today my Hand', in Noel Greig's Playwriting; a practical guide (pub. Routledge 2005).

Ask the person you are working with to draw round their hand (just like we did at junior school). Ask them to write five sentences within each finger/thumb beginning today my hand... Each sentence must include a verb and an adjective. For example:

Today my hand ...

*turned the warm brown toast
wiped the cold damp window
turned on the television*

Repeat the exercise but this time the phrase is once my hand... and the writer must include a feeling in response to the action.

Once my hand

*was handcuffed and I felt frightened
... put money in a charity box and I felt good*

One day my hand will... and I will become...

*One day my hands will cook and clean
my own house, I will become free and
independent.*

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After using the above as a warm up with a lad, we then looked at a particular memory. I approached the memory by asking him to complete the following lines. I remember...I don't remember...You remember...You don't remember...Other people remember... The exercises together produced the piece on the right.

Again the piece isn't the Road to Damascus but it was a revelation to him. Writing as an intervention can achieve many things. If it is sustained it can begin to alter the basis of their self esteem. Through practical example and through illustration my course equips participants with a range of exercises to employ. We explore how writing can change as well as reveal attitude and thinking.

*I remember the royal blue seats and the deep brown wood
the perfume of the woman who handcuffed me while I stood
in the court. My hands sweating.*

*I remember the rustle of paper above the silence
the taste of the tasteless tea, the ink leaking off the indictment onto my hands.*

*I don't remember the judge's speech after the verdict.
I saw tears in the jury's faces.
They will remember me asking them why they were crying
when they had just found us guilty.*

*You were going to sacrifice your freedom for me I told you not to.
We will remember the smiles on the police officers' faces
the handshakes and the claps, after the verdict.*

*Today my hand turned on a television. It wanted something else to do. I felt bored.
Once it put money in a charity box, held shopping for my mother,
pulled a trigger.*

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For further information on Michael Crowley and his courses, please check out the training pages of our website at www.backstop.org.uk

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