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Out of the Ordinary: outcomes and processes in a community writing project

Introduction

In 1996 the Art in Working Life Committee of the ACT Trades and Labour Council published *The Heart of the Hospital: writing, photographs and songs from staff at Woden Valley Hospital*. Annie was the writer on the team of artswriters employed by the project which produced the material for a book as well as a performance and a photographic mural. Mary was the editor of the book.

The project was the second of its kind to take place at the hospital. (Annie and Mary had worked together on the previous one, and writing from this was also used in the book.) In the case of both projects the artswriters came face to face with a variety of issues. Many of these relate to drawing out and representing the wide variety of voices of the hospital staff in their distinct forms, and as part of a whole. The outcomes - the performance, the mural, the book - provided a frame for doing this, but a process of developing and shaping was also vital to the achievement of a multivoiced text which was something more than an anthology.

In his discussion of creative writing and authorship, Kevin Brophy (1998) cites a project that took place at Melbourne Zoo in which poet-in-residence Myron Lysenko worked with year 8, 9 and 10 students (41-42). He argues that the book which resulted from the project, *Poets and Other Endangered Species*, does not exist 'primarily as a site for recognising the literary work of several dozen poets or authors' but as 'evidence and record of creative activity' by the participants (41). The hospital projects are similarly examples of a writing context that 'relate to collaborative, relatively public, educational, shared activities' (42). The projects were not so much interested in individual authorship, as in providing an imaginative vehicle for a range of different voices and stories. And if their outcomes were designed to offer a record of collaborative creative activity they were also designed to work as independent creative productions.

As writers our interest is in the particular, perhaps unorthodox, method of developing writing in a public context with people who do not identify themselves as authors, and in finding a production shape that holds and highlights people's contributions. In this, our intentions are quite orthodox - to create an outcome which is 'true' to the interests and meanings it is made from, and which encourages the imaginative engagement of an audience.

In our book, *Out of the Ordinary*, we discuss our writing activities at the hospital and in other locations, with the intention of providing a practical resource for those interested in creative writing in public and community settings. In this paper, using the hospital example, we look at some of the issues involved in working with, and representing, many voices in a public setting dedicated to non-arts activities.

Our discussion focuses on methods of bringing material to the page and to a wider audience. It starts with our separate reflections on the first hospital project which are followed by Annie's discussion of developing writing in the second project and Mary's on editing material from that project.

Our presentation style reflects our interest in representing the distinct qualities of individual voices in a collaborative form. We have explored ways of creating this sense of relationship in a variety of contexts and here continue to look at ways of putting together each of our voices and those of project participants.

The first hospital project 1992 - finding forms, writing in public

The first project at the (then) Woden Valley Hospital was initiated as a short pilot project by unions concerned about the impact of amalgamation on hospital workers. We had about five days over three weeks to get to know the environment and collect material for a performance. The co-ordinator and musician, both skilled theatre performers, were also involved in collecting stories. Mary and I were concerned about collecting material that was in the form of direct speech - the voice rather than notes or impressions of people's working lives - in order to directly serve the needs of the performance that was to be offered at the end of our incredibly brief time at the hospital.

This experience presents a good opportunity to go further into approaches to working on the basis of brief encounters. In this case we look at the use of form and how it allows people to contribute with a sense of purpose to writing in public. In situations where we had just enough time to break the ice and get a group writing exercise going various aspects of listing were useful, as titles such as *Good Morning Neo-Natal Nursery and What Do Nurses Do?*

suggest. Brophy's reference to the use of 'a common starting point or the same structuring strategy' (42) describes the way we worked with writing in twenty minute periods when as many people as possible were free in a work area.

An interesting form which provided scope for anonymous playful contributions was that of an alphabet. It created a framework into which we could 'seed' words, inviting the wide variety of workers who approached it to consider what word they would put in. Words or phrases might be as workaday and local as *L is for linen room, lifts LONG PAUSE and Louise* or as reflective of the conflict being experienced in workplace change as *J is for job-design* and *Q is the quality of this hospital's care*. There was also room for the basic reality of being part of hospital life in *P is for pain*. As the piece of butcher's paper, blu-tacked to the wall next to the bain-marie in the canteen became fuller, people became more adventurous with filling in spaces where words were obviously missing.

The alphabet idea, modelled in the canteen, was taken up by a woman in the payroll section, a work area which dealt with surges of problems on the subject of fortnightly pays and often had difficult interactions with other members of staff. She saw the alphabet as a creative outlet for the particular frustrations of her team, as well as for concerns about the amalgamation the hospital was undergoing. She presented the challenge of creating a Payroll alphabet to her colleagues. As the instigator, she found great satisfaction in the problems presented by the variety of entries that came out of a collective process. These included difficult letters that no one else had found a way of working with and wrestling with getting the piece to scan. Payroll impressed all who read the alphabet with the unguarded, lighthearted yet powerful beginning of their piece

A is for administration of which there is none
B for bullshit of which there is some
C is for crap of which there is lots
D for delegation which drives you pots
E for exasperation that drives us to drink

The 'hospital project' with Mary and the other artswriters was the first writing project I had worked on outside the formal frameworks of adult education. There was a terrific sense of excitement at being given the author/ity to create with six others something which represented a sense of a working environment outside the previous experience of many of us. The alphabet idea came from Sue Gardener's *Conversations with Strangers*, a thoughtful account of the issues of espousing the value of collective intentions and outcomes from writing 'in the real world' (Gardener, 1987, p 5) and the demands of this practice. For me the title was highly evocative and influential. In reference to some of the meanings it has for her, Gardener speaks of 'walking into strange rooms and falling into conversations, often close and revealing ones, with people I had not met before'. This certainly situated the nature of the exchanges I was inviting from groupings of uniformed people at canteen tables. Gardener also addresses what I gradually found to be the identity-shifting aspect of this writing work when she talks of her title in these terms: 'when your words are down on paper, they are outside the setting of your face-to-face conversations, and they take you into conversations with people you may never meet at all' (ibid, p5).

Collecting words

The first hospital project was quite a milestone in the collaboration Annie and I had developed in our job-share position of Community Literature Officer in the ACT. It was an opportunity to extend our interest in finding forms appropriate to public writing situations - some of which Annie has described above - and to address some of the issues relating to our group writing and scribing practice. For me it was enormously stimulating - and challenging - to be involved in developing approaches to form that I had already been using on community writing projects through the fresh ideas and interests that Annie brought to them. In this busy, varied and pressured environment it was also a great advantage to be working together with groups and individuals and taking time to de-brief and discuss what had struck each of us as problems or opportunities.

For me the most experimental component was the form of 'publication' of material from the project. We knew it wasn't going to be a book. Though the theatre and music skills of the team suggested something theatrical, the kind of development that a play requires was neither possible or appropriate. The material we had generated gave a sense of the different demands and issues of the various work that made the hospital and the range of contradictory positions held by people in a workplace in crisis. Everybody groaned about 'Payroll' but Payroll had their own story. Some people had fallen into despair about the restructure, others saw union involvement as an active response to workplace change. I was interested in finding a very bare presentation form that would highlight the variety of perspectives and voices and hold them lightly but firmly together as a 'collection'.

On this basis, the arts team of seven developed a selection and arrangement of contributions as a staged reading. The simple shape of this presentation whose effect relied primarily on the use of our varied voices, allowed us to reflect the varying concerns and positions of hospital workers as a conversation. In this it did not offer an 'amalgamation' or closure, but held many tellings of the hospital story.

Now we're expanding our numbers
 Now we're cutting back
 Now we're slowly meshing
 Now there's a mess
 Now there's a lot more job satisfaction
 Now there's a lot of people in transitory situations
 Now all they can see is dollars and cents
 Now we don't know what's happening
 Now morale right through the hospital is very low
 Now admissions get sprung on you
 Now concepts keep going in circles
 Now its like being in an airport lounge
 Now people are getting to know us
 Now there's a lack of direction
 Now things are settling down
 (Combined Unions Art in Working Life Committee, 1992: 21)

***The Heart of the Hospital* - developing writing in groups**

As one of the artswriters on *The Heart of the Hospital* project, I was known as Write. The photographer and musician went by the names Click and Sing. Over a month we worked with some of the hospital's 3500 employees, in an environment of hostility towards management and to a certain extent unions, which had some bearing on the processes I describe below.

My work as the writer involved collaborating with groups and individuals. My role was to draw out stories and reflections from people with a wide variety of experiences of writing, many of whom had not had the experience of making something for an audience before. Here it was vital to be able to speak strongly for the possibilities of writing, books and the power of being read. Initiating conversations of this nature presented challenges in a hospital where such matters were obviously seen as quite unexpected, and often as completely out of place. However, I was willing to persist, knowing that it would only be by being able to situate what they were offering in a framework, which was directly about meeting an audience, that potential participants would come to see any point in making the effort, or in taking the risk to speak out. Alongside this nurturing of conviction about telling and being recorded, I also had to be ready to work with whatever was offered, to draw out detail and encourage engagement in terms of that person's particular voice and style of telling. Taking up these issues was central to shaping and creating material that was alive and true to people's experience of their workplace at that particular point in time.

Conviction and speaking out

'Taking care of stores business' is a piece that found its place in the 24 hours a day, 365 days a year part of *The Heart of the Hospital*. Before meeting the people who wrote it as part of a group process, I was aware that they felt angry, ignored, discounted and at the bottom of the pile in the hospital. The workshop had been arranged by the hospital's persuasive Workplace Training Coordinator who saw value in the group getting a rare chance to 'have their say'. It was clear from the participants' opening comments that like many other hospital workers, none of them had any reason to feel confident in writing as a medium.

I am not doing writing - no - pass.

I was nervous as I sat in a sterile hospital room beside the butcher's paper ready to start creating a piece of writing. I hadn't met any of the five storemen. Yet I held an understated but real faith in their lives and language. My experience as a writer in community enables me to speak strongly for the framework into which a group such as 'Stores' will be contributing their writing. In this case I knew that whatever they contributed would find its place in the book that Mary has described above. I had the advantage of having seen other such books and the impact their production had had on the authors. (For further discussion on the impact of contributing to a publication see Bolitho and Hutchison, 1998:117-131). I had been involved in the presentation which had been the outcome of the previous project. I knew that as the Stores blokes became involved they would be surprised by how their words came together to create new meanings about the situation they were in and that I would be in a position to reinforce their growing sense of 'this will be heard.' It was not that the Stores people were mute, but inward-looking, and in this context parochial. What I knew from working with writing in similar contexts was that the process of reflecting and composing with a view to a public outcome would assist them to shift their focus outward.

Working with what is offered

Tell me what happens in stores? Nothing much. There's nothing much to it. The blokes from Stores were constrained in what they had to say by a sense of being stuck in their basement routine, and tended to reiterate stock phrases over and over, unable to take off in any direction. In writerly terms the blank page was confronting them and me. It was hard for those men to speak of what they did. The power relations meant the biggest bully tended to talk for everyone. They were hostile and nervous, uncomfortable with words and writing. But the invitation to open up did start something. In this case it turned out to be enthusiastic accounts of bullying of someone they called Junior. I realised after a while that he was with us. He hung off at the side, laughing at everything the older men said.

The point where there appears to be no going forward or only movement on not very useful terms can be very important in working with a group who aren't accustomed to putting their experience in words. Despite my discomfort with what had been offered, I had to take the words about the abuse and read them back as if it was a gift to have them to hand. Taking a dispassionate position and accepting what has been offered is a key to generating interesting material in a community setting as it is to any individual writer. One has to hold the confidence that what develops from these beginnings will be different, that the framework of meeting an audience will later provide a different angle from which to look at everything that has come on to the page. To reject what has emerged from making a start may well suggest that one is not actually interested in this person or group's experience and their talk. People are likely to be put off if they feel that the writer is only interested in filtering their experience through her screen of experience or values. Moving along, inviting the idea of development may in fact be informed by insights yielded by strong first offerings. 'What else do you say to each other?' as a next move can reflect the fact that relationship is important to these strangers, even if it is not on terms I feel comfortable with.

*Who's pinched the milk crate?
Who's got the smokes?
Anyone getting coffee?*

Further suggestions - such as: 'Help me to see what your area is like', 'What exactly is a day like down there?' - made it clear that detail mattered. 'What kind of paperwork do you mean? What fridges?' In this one workshop my listening closely, giving them their words back to listen to, and their growing capacity to listen to each other changed their way of speaking of themselves. They heard the movement of the gerunds, the trolleys and deliveries, the pallet jack riding. They heard their own boredom with the fridges, the forms in triplicate, and the whole place.

The bullying spokesperson who 'tells the chefs to go and get s..' gave way to others who had something to say. Amongst the mixed range of contributions his frustration was revealed - the boss above him, 'on his back again.' Everyone took on the process of deciding how the random phrases and sentences would be grouped. At this stage the bullying references were dropped. Junior got his real name - Tony, inept at pallet jack riding, but a person. Their ending stressed the repetitious nature of the job.

*Thank God it's Friday
Back Monday to do it all over again.*

The making of a very different piece about issues related to the hospital restructure allows exploration of the issue of working with what is offered in the context of a more articulate group. The setting for this collaboration was the very first introductory workshop of the project, organised by the project coordinator to present the artswriters and provide a suggestion of what they had to offer. Union delegates had encouraged people to attend and a small group had responded from work areas as disparate as administration, the kitchen and health promotion. There was also a roving ward assistant. It was the first time any of them had met, let alone on the basis of what they had in common at that time, that is, the restructure. Even before we had got to our opening comments all present had identified photography as the medium they were interested in working with. Nonetheless I was to develop a piece of writing with this uncertain and relatively unwilling group as a form of demonstration of the other dimensions of the project.

For some time people offered cautious and generalised beginnings. 'Well, you help people' and 'You're responsive - it takes all different forms.' They were understandably unwilling to expose their politics on the restructure. Some stronger views emerged. I was drawn to the contradictions I heard in what they offered as I wrote up what was said on the whiteboard. What people had to say tended to fall into two categories - experiences from a normal day and experiences from living under the stress of review. One person contributed a martial inner voice saying 'Take responsibility here - we don't know what tomorrow will bring'. People were surprised when I showed them what I had noticed. As they went about shaping the piece it was clear that they were actively putting together a representation of what up till then they had experienced as a passive takeover of their ordinary working lives. There was heated discussion about the current almost violent sense of hiatus. A refrain emerged.

*It's a perfect day
You smile at people you talk to people, you laugh
You do a good day's work.*

You help people
 You're creative
 You're responsive - it takes all different forms
 It's a good feeling being able to help people.

Take responsibility here!
 We don't know what tomorrow will bring.
 Prepare yourself before they prepare you!

*We hear rumours they might privatise our area
 It's a process to them
 It's a stress we can live without
 It doesn't make us work any faster, better, smarter ...*

The group called the piece *It's like living two lives*. They were struck by the way their ordinary voices as workers were set against the drumbeat of the approaching restructuring army, saying 'that's just like it is.' They were nervous about letting the piece go up in the hospital canteen, even anonymously, but also displayed a creative defiance towards the forces of restructure and review. The piece did go up and a number of the people who had written it later contributed their own pieces.

Sing (Chrissie Shaw) found the line 'Prepare yourself before they prepare you!' powerful and took it to the singing group. This is some of a song that Nick, Chrissie, Phil and others composed and called Prepare Yourself!

*They came from the offices, oh, so high,
 They came from the hospital, my oh my!
 I've got this feeling of deja vu
 It's budget time again and we're under review.*

with backing lyrics

*Prepare yourself before they prepare you!
 We're always under review!
 It seems like we're in the poo!*

Satisfying collaborative developments such as these between Write, Sing and Click marked a movement from the beginnings of the project towards a creative outcome which would show the hospital from a range of perspectives that the Canberra public and indeed many of the workers had not considered before.

Editing *The Heart of the Hospital* - multiple forms and voices

In editing material from *The Heart of the Hospital* project for a publication I was involved in working with a wide range of forms - these included photographs and songs as well as variously shaped written material - and content. There were also a number of different interests involved - those of participants, members of the arts team, the Art in Working Life Committee which managed the project, and hospital management. Within this context my job was to realise a double intention: to make visible the many and varied voices of hospital workers and to offer a documentary record of the project itself.

Compromise - the Supervisor's Job, On the Switch, The Starship Florence Nightingale, Shit happens - then you answer the page - the wardsman's lot, A day in nutrition, Payroll's Alphabet, The Medical Records' Lament.

The first intention concerned looking behind the doctors' and nurses' commonplace of hospital work and drawing out its variety and complexity. It also concerned the industrial politics of work at this hospital at this time (both projects coincided with major workforce upheavals) and the impact of certain events on the workforce. As far as the project itself went, there was a desire to offer insight into its process as well as to display its outcomes. This included giving some substance to the response of participants, the experience of the artswriters, and how these components changed over time.

*These are the funny artists from the funny project
 I told you about them, I did!
 I told you that while you were off the ward we'd had these special visitors.
 I thought you were joking!*

I took the view that the material I had to make a book out of was dense and many layered. It would not speak to me of itself and the more I could understand its context, the more I would be able to represent it in a way that would

speak to a wider audience. Meetings with the arts team during the course of the project gave me a sense of how the material was coming together and how hospital workers, a large potential readership, were responding to the idea of sharing their work stories. This was useful background to later framing and selecting, as was learning how each of the artswriters saw their artform in the context of a publication.

My close knowledge of Annie's methods of working with story was particularly important. When it came to me, the majority of the writing already had shape and focus through her scribing of stories and conversations, or through collaborative workshop activities. I did not have to edit these structurally but ensure that they were accessible outside of their immediate context. That I was aware of the form but not the content worked well for us both. The stories and poems written by individual participants were another matter. There was neither the framework nor the expectation for further work with these individuals. Here Annie's knowledge of the genesis and intention of these pieces helped me think about including and presenting them.

The key to resolving issues of relationship between material, providing a balanced range of forms and content, and achieving the intentions of the book was establishing a strong but flexible framework. For me this meant a framework in which the distinct qualities of voice and varying positions of contributors could be heard as both individual and interrelated.

A large component of the material reflected the variety of everyday work dedicated to keeping the hospital going '24 hours a day, 365 days a year'. This strongly descriptive phrase used by hospital workers to name their collective task suggested a way of bringing this material together in a way that was instantly recognisable. But it wasn't the only story hospital workers had to tell. The major workforce issues of 'amalgamation, renovation, restructure, review' represented another substantial amount of material, and there was also the story of the 'funny project'.

I first selected material that represented as many different work areas of the hospital as possible and arranged it into four separate chapters, each called '24 hours a day, 365 days a year'. The material that concerned the amalgamation of Canberra's two public hospitals and subsequent restructures came together into two chapters which I placed as 'interruptions' to the everyday work chapters. Finally I arranged the funny project material as three parts - 'what's this project all about?', 'you've got to go out and beat the drum', 'it was incredibly satisfying' - and wove them through the whole. Having photographs and songs as well as writing lent dimension without repetition.

In the contexts that I generally work in, the process of editing is not only the stage for checking and clarifying with those who have contributed, but one where people claim and validate authorship, either as groups or individuals. As Brophy points out, the collaborative context in which such claims take place may not mark individual authorship in traditional literary terms. For instance Annie and I generally see scribing as a collaborative process authored by the teller who has the final word on the written content, shape and publication of the telling (Bolitho and Hutchison, 1998: 57-76).

In the case of the hospital projects many of those who were intrigued by the scribing process and delighted to hear or read their stories, asked not to be named. I've found that attribution has an important role in collections featuring many and varied voices, and variously sized and shaped pieces of writing, so the widespread desire for anonymity was something of a challenge to me. In the event I introduced titles as a key organising device.

*Compromise - the Supervisor's Job, Occupational Health and Safety- the Risks in Everyone's
Job, After the Damage - Return to Work*

and further highlighted content by using a type of margin note convention on some pages. Small comments, used alongside more discursive pieces, reflected on the main text.

*OH&S is to the 90s
What stress was to the 80s*

The songs often examined in depth a theme that was dealt with across stories and conversations. There were fewer of these and I selected and placed them to punctuate the broader material and draw out issues with more intensity.

*Marco was in maintenance, he worked in the basement
Of the hospital, tending the boilers and other machines.
After years, the noise of the motors still rang in his ears
That's all he could hear. In his dreams
He heard laughter, the rustle of clothing, but awake
Just the whine, the perpetual ringing
Drove him mad, and he said, 'The bosses don't listen
To what we've got to say about our conditions
Till it's too late for some of us, our work life is gone...*

So what now?'

(Chrissie Shaw, "So What Now?")

The photographs offered another dimension. Full page photos were used on the title pages of chapters, offering a visual invitation to the particular content. They were also used in the margins to highlight and reflect, and were occasionally run across a page to make a bridge between different workplaces and concerns or just to open out the reading space. Most strikingly they gave physical shape, though not specific identity, to the voices on the page.

The consistent use of simple conventions seems to me crucial in making unconventional writing inviting and accessible. Similarly, in working with multiple forms of material, design elements which connect rather than separate are vital. In this instance, a graphic suggesting the moving line of a heart-beat monitor was used across the bottom of all the pages. This resonated with the title and lightly joined the diverse voices and points of view represented in the book. Again, although the multi-layers of material lent themselves to the current design penchant for overlaying visual and textual information, distinction between forms and generosity with white space enabled a more engaged appreciation of the diversity of form and content.

Conclusion

In her essay on Kelly Thompson's (1996) exhibition, *Passages and Postcards*, Anne Brennan (1996) writes of the encounter, represented in one of Thompson's weavings, between an English sailor and a Maori chief. These distinct and particular bodies as drawn by a contemporary observer, in Thompson's weaving 'float above the mapped terrain. Their feet are not planted in the soil of contested ground. Instead they occupy a middle distance, their feet seeking another kind of foothold...' (Brennan, 1996: 9).

This other kind of foothold in the social relations of you and me is the promise of what Mary has termed 'writing self, writing community' (Hutchison, 1999: 1). The hospital productions provided an opportunity for participants, and other workers, to re-encounter themselves in relation to each other, as hooks (1991) says 'with no will to colonise or possess' (58). In this context 'we' may take on new shapes, and different stories of me in relation to others may become apparent.

The process and outcomes of public, collaborative work responds to the demands of context and participants as much as to demands of writing. What is made springs from attention to relationship, rather than discreet individual intentions. In this paper we have detailed some of the problems and possibilities related to form, content and approach in creating and presenting this 'out of the ordinary' writing. We suggest that the 'different' and diverse stories and voices it accommodates within a collective frame allow for a public representation of elements of connection and disjunction experienced by hospital workers, in both the routines and upheavals of their collective working life. In this way people who were seen by 'number crunchers' as expendable were able to make a telling and visible statement about the human realities of workplace change.

Actually there's a lot of positive things have come out of The heart of the hospital

At first it was very negative

'Not again, we've had this kind of thing before' - all that kind of humdrum

But no, I think it's helped people to see.'

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