Chapter 14 – My Year of Writing

Carol Ross

When my son asked me to write stories with him one half-term holiday (February 2005), I said yes darn quick – anything to get a boy writing! But neither of us could have imagined what it would eventually lead to. His story – There’s a Roman in My Garden – was written, typed and illustrated before he went back to school. Mine kept growing, and before long I had 14 chapters of a children’s book. And this after 20 years of doing almost no creative writing! Once I started writing creatively again, I came to realise the power writing has for making you feel better. I continued writing, and also began studying creative and therapeutic writing, counselling and personal development.

Then in September 2009, my employer (Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust) launched a competition similar to the BBC’s Dragons’ Den (BBC, 2012). When I saw the competition poster I had an idea for a writing project. I developed a proposal for a ‘Cumbria Partnership Year of Writing’, got shortlisted, pitched to the ‘Dragons’, and won funding to increase my hours for a year to undertake the project (Ross, 2012). The wave of adrenaline then abated, and the sleepless nights, hard work and long hours began! But it was all worth it – the project has touched so many people’s lives (probably over 300), and has changed my life.

Aims and scope

My hopes for Cumbria Partnership Year of Writing were that it would be inspirational, educational and above all inclusive. I wanted the project to benefit as many of our patients (service users), carers and staff as possible, and I wanted groups to meet on equal terms – with no sense of ‘us and them’.

I was sure that creative writing workshops should be included in the project, but most of all, I wanted to start writing sessions for patients in mental health wards (see Chapter 5). My hope was to inspire patients to start writing: to help their recovery; as a hobby for hospital and home; and so they might redefine themselves, if only in a small way, as writers rather than as people with this diagnosis or that.

To maximise the ongoing effects of the project, I felt I needed to include staff development opportunities, e.g., to develop skills in therapeutic writing. Through consultation with staff, I identified a list of workshop topics, and clinicians to lead them.

Events

The Year of Writing included 30 events: nine creative writing workshops (attended by 65 people; mainly service users, carers and staff of the trust and local voluntary organisations); five staff workshops (52 attended); 13 sessions in an adult acute mental health ward (20 patients each attended one to five sessions); two short writing ‘taster’ sessions (attended by 19 carers, 12 trust staff and two staff of a local voluntary organisation) and a conference (Ross, 2011).

Creative writing workshops

The programme I developed for the creative writing workshops comprised: introductions; brief explanation of the Year of Writing and how writing can benefit wellbeing; 5- to 10-minute ‘freewriting’ exercises (with or without verbal prompts); journal writing exercises; longer writing exercises using stimuli such as objects or pictures; reading aloud (with no pressure to do so); and group discussions. A warm, informal approach was adopted, with an emphasis on forming safe, caring groups to encourage sharing and a feeling of acceptance.

These are some comments from workshop attendees:

“This has been brilliant! I would love more of this and would love to encourage carers to access this workshop. The sharing of ideas by people in this group has been inspiring.”

“It allowed me to be reflective and look at where I am at and work out why I had spontaneously written what I did and what I needed to do.”

“Once I had started things came back to me that have been locked away for so long.”

“The written word can be very powerful, vicarious experience gained from reading a book can be the means for the release of a range of different feelings which may be not just be therapeutic
but also offers hope and solutions. Someone has to write the book, it is a shared intimate relationship between the writer and the reader. A particular letter or story can have meaning for the reader as long as it exists. It can be read a 1000 times. To write can be a most rewarding and fulfilling task giving a person a sense of self and achievement. The written word can exist without a reader, the simple fact of writing thus becomes an opportunity for self-expression.”

In the first workshop we wrote this collaborative poem:

**Life is...**

Life is breathing in and breathing out  
an amazing journey  
the road to your dreams

Life is so precious  
not a rehearsal  
full of ups and downs  
14 years and out for good behaviour

Life is going out to the pub  
the warm glow of a friendly fire  
a mixture of emotions  
complicated

Life is not what I expected  
an experiment for the next chapter  
the only thing that is truly yours

Life is what life is all about

To produce the poem I first asked each participant to write three lines starting with “Life is...” on strips of coloured paper. Then as a group we chose the line we liked best from each person. Finally my co-facilitator, Marilyn Messenger, and I arranged the lines into a poem, which we read aloud in the group and published in a Year of Writing newsletter.

**Ward writing groups** – see Chapter 5 (also Ross, 2011).

**Staff workshops**

The staff workshops included half days on writing for publication and running reflective practice groups, and a development day for 17 members of a community mental health team that combined therapeutic and reflective writing exercises with group work on writing good patient notes. Staff attending the team development day all made pledges saying what they had been inspired to do differently in the future.

**Writing in Healthcare Conference (held 18 March 2011)**

What was originally planned as a continuing professional development (CPD) conference for around 100 staff, ended up being attended by a marvellously diverse and enthusiastic group of 134 people, including staff, service users and carers. Many people have enthused about the day and said it was both enjoyable and inspiring. For me, it was a magical day, marred only by the sad fact that I can only be in one place at once and so was unable to attend all the workshops, which ran in parallel.

I am grateful to a lot of people whose support made the day such a success, in particular the workshop leaders:

- Reflective practice writing and therapeutic creative writing (Gillie Bolton)
- Write it out! The positive power of creative word-play. Creative writing for personal growth and stress management (Geraldine Green)
- I’m still me – the importance of the written word in life story work (Sandi Winterhalder and Helen Jackman)
• Working with narratives in child and adolescent mental health services (Alison Burgess and Jennifer Atkinson)
• Running a reflective practice group (Kathryn McDowell, John Masson and Shaun Cavanagh)
• Poetry and collaborative poems in group work (Nigel Peirce and Liz Fitton)
• Introduction to writing for publication (Dave Dagnan)
• Research presentation/research clinic (Angus Forsyth and Dave Dagnan)

Communications
Communications were key to the success of the project and in this I had the very welcome assistance of our Communications Team who helped me to develop a communications strategy and publicised the project through news releases.

I produced newsletters and reports and maintained web pages throughout the project to keep people informed.

Reflections
When the Year of Writing ended I was so wrapped up in the project that I found it extremely difficult to let go of the various activities I had been involved in. A period of reflection was needed, around what was best for me and my family, before I managed to decide how to proceed, i.e., which activities to continue, unpaid if necessary, because they were important to me personally, and which I needed to stop.

The activities I found the most personally rewarding and beneficial for participants were the ward writing sessions, so I was delighted when these re-commenced in April 2011 at the request of the Ward Manager. I have been added to the trust’s ‘bank staff’ as a Writing Practitioner and am now paid at an hourly rate for my writing sessions by individual wards/units.

In September 2011, I started to lead a weekly writing group in the Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU). I also now lead a monthly writing group for discharged patients and anyone else who feels that writing might help their health and wellbeing.

From my point-of-view, the Cumbria Partnership Year of Writing started in September 2009 when I wrote the bid for funding and ended with the Writing and Healthcare Conference in March 2011. But, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, my journey in therapeutic writing really began in February 2005 and it is still continuing. I have learned so much in the last six or so years, especially in the last 18 months, and I continue to learn more with every session I lead and every article and book I read on the subject. The Year of Writing project has turned a casual interest in therapeutic writing into my passion, and changed my life – thank you Dragons!

References
### Appendix: Year of Writing timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Events and Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2009</td>
<td>Cumbria Partnership ‘Dragons Den’ publicised Discussions with clinicians and service users Started to develop proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>Submitted proposal to shortlisting team</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2009</td>
<td>Informed proposal had been shortlisted Prepared presentation Entered the ‘Dragons Den’</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2009</td>
<td>Funding awarded to Year of Writing project Started attending relevant training courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>January – March 2010</td>
<td>Planning meetings held for all aspects of the project Developed detailed project plan Developed communications strategy Conducted staff survey about project scope Contacted ward managers about writing sessions Started identifying leaders for workshops Booked conference venue and main tutor Started promotion of workshops and conference Started developing web page and handouts</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2010</td>
<td>Year of Writing officially started Weekly writing sessions began in one ward Year of Writing newsletter issued</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2010</td>
<td>Planning and promotion of creative writing workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2010</td>
<td>First creative writing workshop (full day, Penrith) Staff workshop – writing for publication and reflective practice (full day, Penrith) Short creative writing session at a relaxation day (1 hour, Whitehaven) Creative writing ‘taster’ for staff (½ hour, Carlisle) Year of Writing newsletter issued</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2010</td>
<td>Staff workshop – therapeutic writing (full day, Penrith)</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 2010</td>
<td>Ward writing sessions ended to release time for organisation of conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2010</td>
<td>Creative writing workshop (½ day, Barrow-in-Furness) Staff session on reflective writing (1 hour, Carlisle) Creative writing session for carers (2 hours, Penrith) Year of Writing newsletter issued</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>Creative writing workshop (½ day, Carlisle) Creative writing workshop (½ day, Distington) Short creative writing workshop (1 hour, Barrow-in-Furness) Team development day held (Whitehaven) Issued a ½ year report on progress News release about conference issued (national) Article published in North West NHS Bulletin</td>
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<td>Month</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2010</td>
<td>Two creative writing workshops &lt;br&gt; (½ day each, Carlisle) &lt;br&gt; Writing ‘Taster’ session for a carers’ group &lt;br&gt; (½ hour, Carlisle) &lt;br&gt; News release about Year of Writing issued (local) &lt;br&gt; Item about Year of Writing published in Cumberland News</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2010</td>
<td>Staff workshop – writing for publication &lt;br&gt; (½ day, Carlisle)</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Priority switched to conference planning &lt;br&gt; Promotion of conference &lt;br&gt; Finalisation of programme &lt;br&gt; Taking bookings &lt;br&gt; News release about conference issued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2011</td>
<td>Creative writing workshop (½ day, Whitehaven) &lt;br&gt; Conference programme sent to printers &lt;br&gt; Conference bookings increasing &lt;br&gt; Planned arrangements with venue &lt;br&gt; Allocated workshops to rooms &lt;br&gt; Set maximum delegate numbers for each conference workshop &lt;br&gt; Article published in Cumbria Partnership Journal of Research, Practice and Learning &lt;br&gt; Year of Writing newsletter issued</td>
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<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Last minute planning for conference &lt;br&gt; Production of badges and handout packs &lt;br&gt; Photographer booked &lt;br&gt; News release about conference issued &lt;br&gt; Conference held &lt;br&gt; Short item about conference on local radio &lt;br&gt; Year of Writing officially ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2011</td>
<td>Priority switched to production of this book &lt;br&gt; Year of Writing web page changed to ‘Words for Wellbeing’ &lt;br&gt; Ward writing sessions re-commenced</td>
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