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Poetry Workshop Ideas – 3rd Thursday Assembly



Need some poetry workshop ideas? In November 2013 we hosted a [3rd Thursday Assembly](#) around this topic. The talk was hosted by Nadia Chaney, PYE's Senior International Trainer and a professional poet and performer. Nadia has used poetry as a medium in detention centres, in places where she does not speak the local language, in groups of people with mental health challenges, in low literacy groups with very young children and with people who have never accessed poetry before.

We explored the sensitivities and preparation required when using poetry in your work with groups. Many groups have mixed literacy and language capacities so it's important to use poetry in ways that are empowering and easy-to-access.

Below is a transcript of the conversation along with some additional resources that poetry workshop facilitators might find useful:

Quotes

“Poetry, whose material is language, is perhaps the most human and least worldly of the arts, the one in which the end product remains closest to the thought which inspired it.” *Hannah Arendt*

“I think a poet is anybody who wouldn't call himself a poet.” *Bob Dylan*

Useful Resources

[Poetry workshop activities on the PYE website](#)

[REEL Youth video of Mike D and Nadia Chaney teaching a poetry workshop](#)

[Social Justice Poetry](#)

[Using poetry in USL](#)

[Spoken work and literary skills](#)

Practitioner handbooks from prison arts coalition:

<http://theprisonartscoalition.com/practitioner-handbooks/>

Transcript

Nadia Chaney: Welcome everyone. These are the goals for today's session:

- to understand the issues that are important when using poetry in mixed language and literacy groups
- to share challenges and successes using poetry as a medium for facilitated experiences
- to share activities that work!

Nadia: WHAT ARE THE MAIN ISSUES THAT YOU HAVE FACED OR IMAGINE FACING WHEN USING POETRY IN MIXED LANGUAGE (people speak more than one language) OR LITERACY (diverse or low levels of literacy in the dominant language) GROUPS?

Katie Jackson: I imagine that it could be difficult to keep everyone at the same level – some people will be charging ahead with finished poems that they are ready to share, while others will need one on one attention.

Robin Connolly: Also, perhaps a fear of participation or sharing and of being put down by others. I work with a group where the dominant and default attitude is one of 'tough love' among friends. They are quick to see each others' flaws. However, if strong agreements are set and the youth are interested in the goal of the activity, I imagine it could be successfully facilitated.

Nadia: So I hear that one issue is of pacing and another is of possible put downs, or an environment that doesn't make it easy to share. What other issues have people encountered when using poetry in groups?

Alvis Parsley: I think one thing, from the experience of a participant whose mother tongue is not English, is how to talk about English being a language of colonization, assuming that that's the main language that we use in workshops etc. How do we let participants know that it is not shameful to not know a word (like even now I'm trying not to triple check my spelling and grammar to not look like this is my second language!) and that other participants will equally support that. It's important to show that one is not more superior than the other or that maybe mistakes in language can make poetry more fun!?!

Sara Kendall: It takes time to leave the 'real' and 'normal' world and enter the permissiveness of poetry. Sometimes workshops are short.

Nadia: WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU HAVE PEOPLE IN YOUR GROUPS WHO WRITE/THINK/SPEAK THEIR POETRY AT DIFFERENT PACES? SOME MAY NEED MORE TIME, OTHERS NEED MORE STIMULATION...?

Robin: Use non-verbal poetry, such as a freeze-tableau style of improv? I actually had an experience with a tableau activity in the PYE CF 1 training. Two volunteers go up and assume a tableau (which can either involve or avoid TOUCH, depending on the agreements of the group). The rest of the group is an audience, and members of the audience volunteer one by one to go up and replace one of the members of the tableau, changing the context by assuming a different position while the other person who was originally there, stays in the same pose. Through a shift in their partner, however, the original tableau participant is suddenly part of a whole new story.

Nadia: I like to give prompts that can branch out, so people can stick to the first prompt or keep going and flow on into the next one. For example: Create a acrostic (that's a poem that has a line that starts with each letter of a word...POEM: Parts Of Everyone Match) with a word, and then pick a word from that, and create another....so that a short poem or a long one is equally powerful...

Katie: I led a writing workshop where I cut words out from magazines and asked people to create nonsense poetry from them. It gave the reluctant participants a great confidence boost to see their words making interesting sentences and it distracted from the pressure of creation as they were using other people's words.

Robin: I remember doing that as a kid. Like ransom notes, but less scary!

Nadia: HOW CAN YOU LEAVE THE "RULES" OF PROSE AND OPEN UP TO THE WILDNESS OF POETRY IN YOUR GROUPS?

Nadia: I love to use nonsense in groups...sometimes there is a new sense that appears and blossoms in the room...

Robin: I'm curious about this one. Could anyone share some examples of activities where nonsense can be introduced to open the doors to wordplay?

Nadia: There is a great movement in poetry (started in Paris about a hundred years ago) called OULIPO. It's a series of tons of games that generate wonderful nonsense! I have some info on it, and there's lots online...

Alvis: This reminds me of [What Would I Say?](#) Maybe it can be a contemporary reference for young participants somehow?

Katie: This would be a great way to get people to start thinking about the words they use. It really gets people laughing and it's an interesting tool. Great way to tap into the interests of young people.

Nadia: Yes! I think the use of randomness is an important factor in making poetry feel...easy. One activity I really like, that I learned from Heather Isabella's dad Frederick, is to take a page of someone's writing (freewrite) and then have them cut up words and phrases, then give it to someone else and have THEM paste it all back together. Fascinating!

Shilpa: Just as a thought, it would be fun to make words by adding something to rhyme with a word, where actually one word need not make any sense like "higgy piggy" in kannada we have a few words like that "ulta palta" which means "upside down".

Nadia: That's wonderful bunderfool Shilpa Setty!

Katie: What a fabulous cantabulous idea.

Nadia: HOW CAN YOU MAKE A SAFE SPACE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE NEW TO WRITING/SPEAKING POETRY TO SHARE...(IT CAN BE SO PERSONAL)...?

Robin: offer something of yourself to start?

Nadia: That's beautiful Robin ...maybe working for a way to push your own edge/vulnerability by sharing something new or even making something up on the spot?

Alvis: I agree with Robin . maybe the "something" is not something that is too "sophisticated" or share two things that are of different style and reflect different phases of the facilitator's career?

Robin: That's awesome. Demonstrate that the artistic process is always a growth. We can let go of needing to be perfect.

Nadia: Does anyone have activities that make it comfortable to share in mixed language/literacy groups?

Alvis: In the first round of sharing, ask people to choose only two or three sentences from what they've written to share. That way participants who feel less confident can choose their "best" sentences to share. There won't be someone sharing a lengthy piece which can be intimidating for those who are less confident and ruin their experience in the workshop.

Nadia: Love that, Alvis. And maybe starting by sharing with a partner?

Neelam Khare: Sometimes I do a writing list, so you give a word, maybe it's their name, and they write whatever word they associate with that, and then continue with that new word, etc, it's generally low pressure and can go anywhere, and it's easier to share. I guess I am talking about writing icebreakers...

Rup Sidhu: Slow cook, some great ideas people! Be vulnerable yourself, speak about your journey with poetry, and I like the different ideas on the warm ups.

Robin: DOES ANYONE HAVE THOUGHTS ON HOW TO ALLOW A FULL SPECTRUM WHILE MAINTAINING A SAFE SPACE FOR POETIC EXPLORATION? FOR EXAMPLE IF THINGS LIKE ANGER OR OTHER STRONG EMOTIONS COME UP, HOW CAN WE PREPARE FOR THIS IN THE AGREEMENTS PORTION OF AN EXERCISE?

Alvis: do you mean upon hearing others' sharing or in the process of creating one's own piece?

Robin: I was mostly thinking of in sharing, and I'm specifically thinking about youth in a housing project where I am working in Toronto. Like how do you hold space to make sure that vulnerability is totally ok, but without sliding into a space of too vulnerable, too fast?

Nadia: I always like to give people time to think. So, read over, underline the parts you want to share, share with a partner, then in a group, then some folks get the opportunity to share with the whole group. No one HAS to.

Nadia: HOW CAN YOU MAKE IT SAFE FOR PEOPLE TO LEARN NEW WORDS, LOOK UP WORDS, ASK ABOUT WORDS, MAKE UP WORDS, OR MIX LANGUAGES?

Nadia: What kinds of concrete actions can the facilitator take to make questions about language safe?

Alvis: In the intro/ice breaker to ask people to teach a word of their mother tongue. Sort of like the sound ball but word ball?

Sara: hey all – Alvis i love this idea if the group is already comfy and or if there are a bunch of folks who have a language other than English as their mother tongue.

Things I find work:

-in big and language diverse and or language-of-parents diverse groups: brainstorm ALL the languages that are spoken at home and/or spoken fluently in the room, then look at it and take that in, celebrate that as serious richness of the group. go into what multiple languages do for our brain expansion, our ability to comprehend more world views, our ability to see and produce that much more beauty. DO NOT: ask the speakers of other languages to demonstrate for the group (back to racist novelty reminders they have probably had enough of), put up languages that kids don't actually speak or their parents don't actually speak (this, in North America) in my experience is usually white kids and/or loud dominant voices who want to be included in the brainstorm and say they speak Spanish cause they know how to say Baño or say they speak Japanese cause they know the names of sushi. Gracefully acknowledge how useful it is to learn others language and that they are off to a good start – but get out of it otherwise you will have a bunch of non-authentic stuff up there and miss the chance for an honest honouring of the other languages that are primary in your participants lives. Anyhow – it's really fun to see the languages up there. Sometimes we do it with religions and countries of origin too, for other kinds of sessions.

-give explicit examples of how you DO NOT CARE about 'spuling' and about how grammar matter not for working the words.

-debunk poetry/writing, express how messed up it is that we are taught (in soooooooo many ways) that we won't be good at it so we don't even try. That its a major judgement thing in the world, give concrete examples from your experience and the school system, and examples of how some of the best writing comes from people who were the least 'schooled'... that usually warms up kids who have low literacy levels. They need to know you are on their side.

-likewise, talk about the stupid world domination of English. Look alive for participants who are not English-first-language who are glad you're talking about it and might want to chime in and share about that/ anything else (but like I said, don't pry for it, that is seriously tokenizing usually).

-intro exercises that are just about play with words, then integrate content from separate brainstorms into the same exercises (voila! poetry)

-if folks don't have enough English (or your other language the group is using) to actually get what you are saying while you facilitate, you are going to NEED a translator, that is only fair, so ask in advance about that and try to arrange it through the program or community connections.

Nadia: Sara you are amazing! Thanks for that amazing download! If you have a mixed group, can you think of ways that people could share something that would make them feel more included if they are working in a second language...?

Alvis: Sara that was a great point about picking up other people's language. I can see how the "word ball" can be tricky with your reminder, especially working with young people. I gotta think more about that. How to share without being exotified... and sharing now doesn't mean you can come to me after and speaking to me in my language? How to draw that boundary?

Rup: [This is a track in I think 7-10 languages](#) that I did with an amazing group of youth! We warmed up with sounds and rhythm and worked more towards using language on rhythm and rhyme, I let them decide what language they wanted to write in and made an honest invite for any and all languages in the space. I talked about the origins of hip hop and invited them to write about things that really mattered to them after a few warm up exercises. We did a brainstorm and really took our time for translation through the whole process. Even though i didn't speak any of the mother tongue's, I could help with putting the rhythm of the words on beat.

Want to join a 3rd Thursday Assembly? These take place every month on the 3rd Thursday of the month at 4pm London time (8am PST, 9.30pm Bangalore). Simply [join the Facebook group](#) to take part.

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