Grassroots Creative Writing Programs Give Voice to the Silenced: Toward a Literature of the Oppressed

Emily Pohl-Weary

University of Toronto

Author Note

Emily Pohl-Weary, PhD Student, Department of Adult Education and Community Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. emily.pohl.weary@utoronto.ca

Introduction

This paper asks whether the community-based creative writing group Parkdale Street Writers (PSW) benefits young inner-city writers who participate. PSW is a weekly free workshop for "at-risk" youth between the ages of 16 and 29 in west-end Toronto. It runs out of the Parkdale Library Branch, a relatively neutral space in a culturally vibrant neighbourhood plagued by issues of poverty, violence, and the drug trade. The group is sponsored by arts councils and local businesses and invites accomplished local writers, hip hop poets, scriptwriters and performance artists to lead writing exercises, share knowledge and talk about their personal experiences.

The curriculum for PSW is based on principles of popular education outlined in books such as Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2007) and bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). As Freire says: "To exist, humanly, is to name the world. Once named, the world in turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence" (p 60). As such, PSW emphasizes the sharing of knowledge, the interests of people in communities of struggle, and working from participants' concrete experiences, some of the basic tenets of popular education (Crowther, Martin and Shaw, 1999). The workshop coordinator and the participants together shape the 10-month program and engage in an ongoing dialogue about the country's literary landscape, essential parts of a writer's toolkit, and how to develop a career in the arts.

This short paper is my first real opportunity to wrap my head around the question of concrete benefits for the writer-participants. It is based on a pilot I ran for a Qualitative Research course, which I used as a chance to scratch the surface of what will eventually become my thesis research, during which I hope to uncover tangible and concrete things, but conversely, was also

prepared to find out these were too ephemeral to identify. That said, since registration for the program remains at capacity, and the youth invite writerly friends to join us each week, it seems safe to assume there must be some positive effects.

Context

I founded PSW in 2008, in the neighbourhood of Parkdale, where I grew up, after a slew of street and drug-related violence impacted local youth, my brother was shot, and one young man was murdered by a childhood friend. The group started out as an attempt to share some of the experiences and information I'd learned along my path to becoming an award-winning author, and effect some kind of positive action that might help mitigate the sense of hopelessness that seemed pervasive among a certain stratosphere of the community.

Although I grew up there, I knew it would take a lot of work to be able to create a safe space for youth who participated. Our neighbourhood is a mélange of artists, new immigrants, outpatients from a nearby mental health centre, and upwardly mobile professionals. With so many perspectives, tensions can rise quickly. There had to be a platform of respect established.

Also, I benefit from a lot of privileges the youth who attend my workshop do not: my family is highly literate, middle class, and culturally diverse. I am white and can assume that people in authority (such as the librarians who run the building where we meet) will interact with me in a certain way and give me power. The youth cannot. To make the program truly work, we had to build addressing these issues directly into our writing exercises and our conversations.

After looking around for similar organizations, I discovered 826 National, a nonprofit tutoring, writing, and publishing organization located in cities across the U.S. whose work is

"based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention, and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success" (826national.org). Although their model works well, I wasn't looking to work as closely with the school system as they do and didn't have the estimated million dollars necessary to start up a Canadian branch.

PSW operates on a much smaller scale. I facilitate it with two youth coordinators and a "writer-in-residence" who is also a teacher. We bring in guest authors to enrich the experience. The goal is to provide a safe, neutral, cathartic space for creative youth during an important turning-point stage of their lives. I hoped to be able to demonstrate there's a world beyond discouraging "McJobs," and what it takes to build a successful career in the arts.

Methodology

The investigations undergone for this study included re-reading previous year-end evaluations, making observational field notes during a workshop, and conducting an in-depth interview with a participant. Since I was treating the research as a mini pilot project to test some of the methods I might use to complete my dissertation, I used it to narrow down my research questions and discover if some of the benefits identified in the year-end evaluations still held true.

The participants observed in my field notes were whichever writers happened to show up on February 8, 2011. There were 22 youth in attendance, and they were all between the ages of 16 and 29. Like most weeks, it was a very culturally diverse crowd: 12 African-Canadian, 4 South-Asian, 2 Native young men, 4 Caucasian. The gender breakdown was approximately 55% male and 45% female. A wide range of educational and socio-economic levels are represented – from homeless youth to people with Master's Degrees.

The interview subject was a participant, Ali (his name has been changed), who started the group at the beginning of this year and had come to most workshops. Ali is 25 years old, of Pakistani-Indian background, and his family immigrated to Toronto when he was 7 years old. He seemed like an ideal person to interview as he had been vocal with his opinions about the group, interpersonal dynamics and workshop suggestions in the past. My focus for both the interview and the observations was on personal benefits, group interactions (how youth related to each other), and how they responded to our workshop leaders (myself included).

When I was casting out my net for potential interview questions, I ended up taking direction from anonymous year-end evaluations in which participants were asked how they'd benefitted from the program. Several indicated that it helped them gain confidence, meet like-minded people, develop professional skills, and become better writers.

Findings and Discussion

Many themes emerged during the interview with Ali. The three main benefits he identified as having received from being part of the group are: 1) gaining confidence in himself and his ability to write, 2) developing a set of skills for evaluating and improving his writing, and 3) processing trauma and life's stresses. I'll focus on them in this discussion section.

Gaining Confidence in Yourself and Your Writing Abilities

The theme that arose most often in the interview with Ali, and which was echoed in my field notes, was that being part of PSW contributes to developing greater confidence in one's own work and by extension, oneself in a larger sense. For Ali, this process began by literally

mimicking guest artists he respected, such as the dub poet who led our first workshop, Lillian Allen. Her work is political, highly rhythmic in nature, and plays with the sounds of words.

One of the writing exercises Allen tried on the group was performing a piece of her own work and then asking the youth to transform it into something new. Ali remarked that he took her writing "and remixed it in a way that is new. Putting my own [thoughts] into it, but at the same time having confidence that these turns of phrase are good, because I stole them from her, and they're not my bizarre things" (pg 4).

Another way that the workshops help boost confidence was the way Ali's work was received and critiqued by the group. A number of participants have remarked to me over the years that this was the first time they'd ever shown anyone their writing, and here they are showing it to a room full of people who take the craft seriously. This was Ali's experience. Sharing opened a door inside his mind: "Until I started coming to Parkdale and got feedback, I always thought everything I wrote... Even if in my head it was pretty good, I was sure everyone else would think it was shit. Thankfully, from the limited amount of feedback I've gotten recently. that's not the case" (p 12).

There's a process that participants who stick around for many months seem to go through of gradually opening up and sharing more of their work. Because I emphasize that it's a safe space for everyone, by and large the response to people allowing themselves to be vulnerable is that the group rushes to affirm and support them. Every new writer has a unique inner voice and stories to tell. Honing their craft simply means honouring that voice and letting it shine. In Jamilah Malika's workshop, for instance, she spent a good deal of time talking about this and explaining that she herself uses writing to "work through stuff" (p 3). Ali mused: "I've found that – thanks to certain people [indicating me] – I actually have a voice for writing, despite the

fact I've been doing it for a very long time, never thought I did, and never took my own ability seriously" (p 12). What he's talking about is that same process of validating one's writing voice.

In an organic fashion, likely because of exposure to many kinds of writing and writers who explain their vastly different approaches to the art and to completing longer projects like novels, participants learn to form opinions about their own writing styles and make more informed choices. Ali notes: "I've never been confident in my writing because I've always been an avid reader, but I'm also a critical reader. I read a lot of books and think: what an asshole. I don't want to be that guy who has a sucky book"(p 12). He also talks about developing the ability to discern what's working in his own writing and to talk about how he works:

> [Lillian Allen] said on the first day when she's writing, she won't stop. Even if she has a point where she says in her head: "That sounds ugly," she won't change it until after she's done the whole thing. I've tried to do that, but I find I can't. If I see something where I think it's ugly, I'll change it right away and then that will disrupt the flow of writing, but for some reason I can't stop myself. (p13)

This critical thinking is crucial to the process of making choices that work for the individual and improving their writing abilities.

Developing Skills and Tools for Improving Your Writing

The second theme that emerged was the impact the group has on expanding the toolkit of skills available to the young writers like Ali. In a sense, this leads directly out of the previous theme, in that confidence develops as they begin to understand why they make certain choices, and then develop the words and rationale to defend those choices. One of the main skills we focus on is learning to accept critiques and edits. This demonstrates: "what it's like to accept feedback and work from it… work with it, knowing that's in your best interest in the end" (pg 1). As a writer, I learned early on in my career that there's no way to improve if you aren't getting this kind of constructive support. Building a community of like-minded peers who respond generously and

critically to my writing is a free technique for achieving this. It's a key reason I found the courage to keep writing when I was starting out.

Other skills include understanding different genres of writing enough to make decisions about what form works for a particular situation. Ali demonstrated the beginnings of that awareness in his comment that "short stories really provide me an opportunity to write in a form that's still really kind of concentrated, so I can focus on one particular point, you know not drag it out" (p 3). He also went on to clarify why he might write a story as opposed to a poem when he's just considering one point, by saying that he would pick the form because it's "not so contingent on formal considerations" (pg 3) and that he prefers:

> to have the opportunity to be very unstructured. When I have to think about things in a structured fashion, my writing is the worse for it, in that I don't enjoy it as much and I don't get engaged in it as much, because it's so hard to fit stuff into very, very small concrete boxes. To me, it's not what writing is about (pg 6).

Jokingly, he even demonstrated an awareness of where he needs to go to develop his skills in the future. His desire was to accomplish an ambitious piece of writing (a novel) that combines a range of his interests, and this is how he approaches the subject:

> I don't think I've grown up to the point where I can combine all those things together in a way that I would find satisfactory. So at the moment I just try to write them all separately, and maybe in a couple years, when I'm a little bit better I can write a novel… children's story about war and violence and political resistance featuring superheroes and unicorns and things of that nature. (pg 3)

Processing Trauma and Life Stresses

The third major theme was that writing (and by extension PSW, because it encourages and enables him to write more effectively) helps Ali process trauma and life stresses. Due to previous knowledge, I knew Ali had suffered post-traumatic stress disorder at more than one point in his life, for different reasons, and that he was dealing with other potential undiagnosed mental health issues. He mentioned using writing to get through difficult times in the following way: "I have a

small tendency of being a bit bipolar, like I told you before, so I have these kind of drops… highs and lows… where sometimes at a low, I'll be writing about something really dark (pg 3)."

He also hinted at using writing it to process difficult and very personal things a second time. At first, he actually seemed to be saying that he wasn't able to do that: "for a lot of people, the inspiration for their writing comes from those turmoils and personal tribulations that they have. But I've found that for whatever reason, I couldn't translate that into writing when I got there" (p 10). But then he made the following observation:

> I'm pretty open, but there's always things you hide. I guess those are the most interesting things to write about, but you're never really sure you want to put them down on paper until you can seal that paper in a box that no one will ever see in your entire life. And I don't have any boxes that can be sealed (p 11).

This spoke to the issue of trust and being afraid that someone might read what he wrote. I inferred from the statement that he hoped to be able to open up more, but had trouble pushing through the walls that keep him from being vulnerable. One of the things I tell the group is that they should try to write what terrifies them, because it will keep them engaged enough to write well. He may have been thinking about that advice.

Conclusions and Future Research

As Freire says, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "To speak a true word is to transform the world" (p 86). Perhaps the act of naming our problems is the fundamental power of writing. When we externalize thoughts, we learn how to frame experiences and they gain a legitimacy beyond simply being "a feeling."

For this reason, it isn't surprising that the main benefit Ali gets from the group has to do with developing confidence. A clear part of being confident in a given situation is the awareness

that you have the skills necessary to respond and understand the context, so this also seems to make sense, given that the program is ten-month crash course in different styles, genres and kinds of writing. Increased confidence and connecting with professionals and like-minded peers were also identified as benefits a year earlier, in the anonymous evaluations. It seems as if I can safely make the assumption that these might hold true for other members of the group.

I'm less certain how and why writing and being part of the group helps to mitigate trauma and process difficult life experiences. To better explore this theme, I'll have to do more research and reading into processing and healing from trauma. Next time I interview a program participant, I'll include some questions that will address this.Ali's interview was a little less clear in this area, and it would have been good to do more follow-up and digging to get to the heart of them. However, the range of topics broached in the workshop the week I observed speak to the fact that many participants use the group for cathartic purposes. Participants wrote about the death of a young man, life passing too fast, sensuality/fear of insanity, caring about other people, being prejudged, a bad breakup, among other things (p 4).

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