

# Poetry for recovery: Peer trainer reflections at Sussex Recovery College

Tessa Martina

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*To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.*  
(William Blake, 1803)

**P**EER TRAINERS contribute a personal or lived experience of mental health and a training qualification in paid employed posts within NHS Trusts (Skills for Health, 2011). Over the past eighteen months I have co-facilitated courses with mental health professionals on different topics at Sussex Recovery College. The pilot programmes have provided many exciting challenges, the most rewarding course has been 'Poetry for Recovery', part of the Well-being Strand from the college prospectus.

Evaluating and reflecting is part of the process of a trainer and practitioner; one I am familiar with after twenty years in education and as a practising artistic therapist before lived experience of mental health changed a full-time career and focus. The six-week course ran with a three week break in the middle. The Sussex Recovery College's *West Sussex Prospectus Autumn 2014* (Sussex Recovery College, 2014) outlines the aims and objectives agreed by the co-facilitators, with a focus on what students will get from the course:

*'Students will:*

- *Share personal experiences, associations and relationships with the style and content of the poems and prose.*
  - *Find a new way of using one of the following skills in creative expression: sound; image; words; collage or movement.*
  - *Participate in group exercises to write individual and group poetry and prose.'*
- (Sussex Recovery, 2014, p.22)

The student evaluation gathered before a course includes generic individual learning plans, with a self assessment form adapting the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale, with specific course feedback on the final session. Further evaluation will be possible next term when we strengthen the number of people completing the forms at individual learning planning meetings. This article focuses on the 'Poetry for Recovery' statistics and students comments within the specific forms, collated by Emogen Campbell, an assistant psychologist. It aims to integrate personal trainer evaluation on what worked and how it could be improved to consider why 'Poetry for Recovery' was successful from a Peer Trainer perspective, and whether these elements are transferable to other courses.

Eight of the twelve students attended regularly with 64 per cent mean overall attendance, which falls within national averages; all of the students had lived experience of mental health; 37 per cent were from non-English heritage; all 12 students thought the course was excellent. Comments included:

Most helpful –

*'The support and encouragement from the tutors really boosted my confidence in my ability to write.'*  
*'A safe environment to write and read poetry.'*

Could improve –

*'A longer course! So enjoyable.'*  
*'No idea – I enjoyed it just as it was.'*

The variable elements of the comparative course for a Peer Trainer include the students, co-facilitators, topic and content. The learning outcomes were flexible, encouraging people to enrol for diverse reasons (sharing mental health issues; a diversionary activity; starting a new activity; being creative; meeting new people; and developing an existing interest).

Both facilitators were nominated by a steering group, as poetry is appreciated as a healing power of language (National Association for Poetry Therapy, 2014) for people with lived experience of mental health, and both trainers had either a direct connection to poetry or to other creative areas.

Each session began with 'sharing' or 'ice breaker': poetry reading from selected poets or an individual's creation from the previous week. The structure for the group included shared stories of lived experience, daily life, challenges and celebrations. Facilitators brought a new theme each week, including imaginative exercises to engage visualisations, sounds, touch and smell, as a starting point to writing. Each week included writing opportunities for students and sometimes for co-facilitators. The sessions were wound up with suggestions for homework to maintain the focus for the week.

The role of the peer trainer is to provide elements of their lived experience related to the theme. Aspects of a psychotic experience some 18 months earlier, connected to writing and the word were illustrated with William Blake's poem.

One hundred per cent found the training facilitated by both peer trainers and mental health professionals helpful.

To talk about a reality that is not of the 'sense world' yet not nonsense either is an unusual opportunity as family, friends and professionals are often concerned that the person is returning to a time those closest to them wish to forget or divert attention from. The world of poetry is able to bridge this gap. During the breaks people would share previous 'non-sense' experiences too. These words would interweave into the writing.

On reflection, sharing lived experiences at this level was more personal and deeper than

on any of the peer content on previous courses I had attended. On occasions, this also brought forth experiences which students had also not shared before. Student comments on feedback reflect appreciation of the approach:

*A great dynamic between the two trainers; friendly, encouraging and supportive.*

To build a connection within the group during the planned break of three weeks, the 'cut up technique' (Burroughs, 1963) was applied. For many participants and trainers this group poem became the highlight of the course. Each person shared a meaningful event from the week and then wrote an individual poem on the topic. These were read out in small groups before each line was cut into strips and a collective meaning created. With the negotiations complete, the strands were stuck together on a large sheet, the final poem was named, and one person stood to present it. The title of 'Immigrants' was agreed by the creators seconds before presentation (see Figure 1).

This poem caught the mood of the day, which followed the 2014 local elections with a significant increase in UKIP's votes. There was a tangible resonance within the room, which was given space to 'breathe' before the group was able to move on. The bond built during this session spanned the break of three weeks in the middle of the course and spontaneously produced two small buddy groups meeting or e-mailing poetry to each other, creating support and resilience:

*Enjoyed hearing each others stories, the group poem was a fantastic bonding opportunity.*

Poetry enables a deep expression of soul. These inner resources include the shadow, or dark side, and owning it through expression can transform the power of negative emotions. Sharing difficult experiences through poetry brought laughter, tears and strength to the group.

Based on data from the student feedback forms, 80 per cent of the group found the

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course useful or very useful in everyday life, as represented by the following comments:

*'It was a lot of fun, got away from being "bogged down by mental illness". I loved it.'*

*'A better understanding of what makes a good poem, knowing anyone can write and how it can help manage moods and feelings in recovery.'*

Also, 80 per cent of participants reported the course increased their knowledge and skills moderately or a great deal:

*'A huge confidence boost and a new way to express emotion.'*

*'A better understanding of what makes a good poem, knowing anyone can write and how it can help manage moods and feelings in recovery.'*

Additional comments included:

*'I had no idea what to expect, I came with an open mind and wasn't disappointed.'*

*'Well done for delivering an excellent course. I would love to do a similar course again in the future.'*

Recovery College aims to integrate participatory recovery with course management and delivery with the freedom for students to select, attend, participate and graduate (or not) from any course. The Peer Trainer role of 'guide on side' rather than the 'sage at the front' was evident during 'Poetry for Recovery' and the student feedback indicates the course was a success.

Empathising with the deep connection between my lived experience, words and poetry and then sharing this with others, combined with co-facilitating a structure that created a bond for the group extended personal and professional development are the elements I would like to apply to other courses. This next step is a challenge I welcome.

### Author

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### Figure 1: 'Immigrants'

Distant sounds of other humans  
Lump of clay heavy in my hand  
Talented, deeply feeling,  
Willing to share.

Dry, brittle, fallen twigs  
Crunching under foot  
Dark clay no longer soft and malleable,  
Hardened by time, holding a fierce grip on its treasure

Offering pieces of themselves.  
Feeling of being alone, after hours  
Quiet.  
The same but different, each with their own challenges.

Too thin and non-descript to even cast shadows  
But still standing where others have fallen.  
A second chance to reach up to the sky  
And be a work of art.

The ebb and flow  
Humans arriving, the wounded retreating  
Bare limbed  
Snap of skinny, wooden arms

From the sea, rough edges smoothed off  
Small but perfectly formed  
A rainbow of browns and greys  
Focused, insightful, prolific,

The limitless collisions of diversity  
In between.

Other more vibrant things around me  
But the fragility of this catches my eye

Searing pain of effort to accommodate  
Rejection  
And wonder why  
Painful to walk on bare-foot

Boundless hope in trembling hearts  
Ground down to bleeding shards  
The same sky hovers over all  
Many feet tread the same

Compounded earth  
Many 'brothers,' many sisters – all part  
of one family.  
Thoughtful, kind, unassuming yet receptive

Accepting and openly loving,  
The rare glow emanating from the  
Harmonious waves,  
Fits in the palm of my hand

Peaceful.

**(Jo Harris, Roxy Mullick, Sam Turner, Janine Woodland,  
plus Dave Hemphshall & Tessa Martina)**

### I am the song

*I am the song that sings the bird  
I am the leaf that grows the land  
I am the tide that moves the moon  
I am the stream that halts the sand  
I am the cloud that drives the storm  
I am the earth that lights the sun  
I am the fire that strikes the stone  
I am the clay that shapes the hand  
I am the word that speaks the man*  
(Charles Causley)

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