



Wanderings through the Land of Creative Writing

Zuzana Kucharová
Masaryk University (Czech Republic)
110382@mail.muni.cz

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990's when the non-official document „The Reform of the Psychiatric care“ was put into practice, the questions of quality of the psychiatric care and the place of mentally ill in the system of health and social care, have been opened and discussed.

In August 2002 Slovak Ministry of Health set the National Programme of Mental Health. The main aim of this document is „the creation of multiprofessional teams involved in the care of chronic mental patients and the integration of health and community services with the purpose of the widest possible integration of mental patients into the society.“ [4] Among the strategies the following are relevant to the topic of this paper: the participation of mentally ill and their family relatives in planning, realisation and evaluation of mental health care and the compliance with human rights and needs of mentally ill.

Mentally ill adults can access different learning and creative opportunities. They find them in day-care psychiatric units, daily centres, in different kinds of non-government organisations, or they can attend courses for the general public. Reading these information might assume our satisfaction that we are moving towards right direction, are not we? But what about the real practice? As the mental health professionals, are we creating really democratic atmosphere where everybody is treated with interest and respect?

Learning, creative writing and mentally ill: a map to the journey

Olivia Sagan [5] suggested „learning programmes are designed, funded and delivered with a fantasized non-gendered individual in mind, who is rarely consulted and seldom if ever considered as a whole person rather than a fragmented construction of 'bits' to be manipulated, medicated, taught and processed.“

Mentally ill adult is situated within a contestable social construction of mental illness [6] that feeds popular myths related with the mental illness, and contributes to a constrained self-image of the mentally ill.

Learning is always a risky encounter occurring at a place where the internal and external worlds meet. It demands the very capacities which are under attack when we are caught along the spectrum from emotionally disturbed to chronically mentally ill. Despite evidence that there is a link between some forms of mental illness and creativity [7, 8], the sad truth is that for many mentally ill the illness means a depletion of colour and taste, sensitivity and delight. It leads to emptiness and loss rather than to creation and self-realisation [5].

There is one another challenge for teachers and facilitators. As Sagan [5] claims: „Both learning and creativity request that we suspend reality, trust in a journey with an unknown destination and create an object able to hold and portray our abstruse intentions, yearnings and phantasies. This is a difficult task when our notions of self are undermined, our narrative fragmented, trust betrayed and faith in objects eroded.“

Finally we focus on creative writing. Creative writing can be defined, studied and practised in different perspectives. I will briefly introduce approaches important for our topic. In education teachers lead students to recognize and understand the laws of author's work, the esthetic and real aspects of texts or they try to enhance language competence, critical thinking and communication skills. In pedagogy of free time creative writing serves as a tool for relaxation and fun, writing process is always part of the group game. Finally, in psychology and psychotherapy creative writing is a diagnostic tool. Various methods (like journals, sent or unsent letters, dialogues with illness, etc.) help to reveal hidden, unconscious, traumatic experiences. Writing makes them visible and leads the clients towards better self-understanding and achieving healthier attitudes towards themselves and their problems. [9]

There is a great evidence of the positive effect of therapeutic writing on both mental and physical health [2, 3], yet we have to be careful. Writing process can become uncertain and dangerous. White space of paper or screen is a place where everything is possible. Max van Manen [10] claims „the writer must enter the dark, the space of the text, in the hope of seeing what cannot really be seen, hearing what cannot really be heard“.

It may seem quite paradoxical: the most important aim of mental health services is to try to get the mentally ill out of the darkness. On the other hand darkness is a place that can reflect our deepest thoughts: the darkness looks back at you, with glimpses of deep insights [10].

Action research: a travel guide to the journey

Action research can be defined as „the study of a social situation carried out by those who involved in that situation“ [11]. Action research is a process of putting one's theory into practice, „a way of learning from and through one's practice by working through a series of reflective stages that facilitate the development of a form of "adaptive" expertise“ [12].

Goals of action research include [12]:

- The improvement of professional practice through continual learning and progressive problem solving.
- A deep understanding of practice and the development of a well specified theory of action.

- An improvement in the community in which one's practice is embedded through participatory research. Action research is different than other forms of research as there is less concern for universality of findings, and more value is placed on the relevance of the findings to the researcher and the local collaborators. Critical reflection is in the core of action research and when it is based on examination of evidence from multiple perspectives, it can provide an effective strategy [12].

Following diagram shows 3 stages of Action research cyclus:



Fig. 1 V.Prokopenya: System model of action research. [13]

The research journey

In the beginning we have to choose the destination. In this case it has the form of the research question: How can I facilitate therapeutic creative writing (t.c.w.) workshops to match diverse needs of participants? And if I set different methods of a workshop practice to listen members to describe their experiences, in what ways will this information help me to facilitate group better?

And now it is time to introduce the travelling group. We are the writing fellowship consisting of me, the facilitator, the guide, and a group of enthusiastic writers: I study PhD. with the main interest in therapeutic writing. When I started research I was looking for mental health services providing writing therapy. I found the literary workshop for mentally ill in Bratislava and there I met a group of people with experiences with the mental illness whose hobby was creative writing. It was both curiosity of researcher and sense of responsibility that led me to invite the workshop's members to learn more about their opinions on literary workshop and their needs and goals. Methods of interviews and questionnaires were used for this purpose. In data following aims emerged: literary aims (publication of members texts, enhancing literary talent, getting feedback), social aims (friendship, sharing and encouragement), personal aims (school of life, self-realization) and relaxation aims (positive atmosphere, way how to spend free time). Among perceived imperfections were: place and time is not favourable for everyone, insufficient time management and the lack of concentrated literary work (writing, reading and evaluating). I also found accenting particularly a prestige function of literature (declaring that mentally ill are as good as health population in this case) and asserting almost mainly literary criteria for text evaluation as not sufficient. We discussed findings with the leader writer but it seemed that she would not have enough will and energy for any changes. So I decided to lead the creative writing workshops to offer an alternative. Questions about participant's goals and expectations were asked (using methods of interview and questionnaire) with following findings: literary aims (to improve writing skills and to learn new writing techniques), psychological aims (to enhance creativity and fantasy, new views, to create in free, encouraging atmosphere), social aims (to know each other better, to see how others work), personal aims (creative writing is a challenge, it is a school of life, it helps to express, to enhance self-knowledge), relaxation aims (it is fun, it does not deter by criticism).

After realising the destination – goals we left for the journey. We (group consists of 3 – 7 participants) meet once in a month for 90 – 120 minutes sessions in the League for Mental Health (although we like going outside as well). Our relationship is based on friendship and reciprocal inspiration: listening to and learning from one another. We love writing and together with B. Ueland [14] we believe that „everybody is talented because everybody who is human has something to express.“ During workshop's sessions we like to travel through different lands (we worked with poetry, wrote stories about childhood, poems about paintings in the gallery, in the response to film, we tried collective writing, etc.).

I as the facilitator of these experiences show possible ways and transport vehicles. Along writing and reading our texts (this is voluntary but we like to share) we discuss whatever comes to our mind. Our communication then continues through e-mails and letters. We share and comment what we write at home (texts related to the c.t.w. or not).

Research journey findings

Research findings show that action research can be an useful way of achieving positive outcomes for people who would not feel sufficiently empowered to change mental health care services that do not meet their needs As one participant said: „It has been a long time since anybody has asked me what I really want...“ At first, participants comments were quite general and suggested not many ideas for desired change . To move from the general



concerns and aims to more specific issues, it was essential that open discussion and reflection was facilitated (through individual and group discussion and on-line communication). For me as facilitator the biggest challenge was to learn how to step aside, let group members to choose their own direction and tempo (provide enough creative stimulus for swift members and enough time for slower or more passive members) and yet „stay together“ as a group. Writing together with the group is a very helpful method. Gradually with the increase of mutual experiences and creation of a free and safe environment trust has emerged. At the time of writing this paper we are evaluating workshop second time. But from observation (observation sheet [15]) I can see that in the group there is a very friendly, supporting atmosphere. One member who returned to the group after 9 months claimed that she really liked „the family atmosphere, acceptance and expectations of others, that one opens in the group“. Members are more active, willing to participate on group dynamics and to declare their opinions.

Conclusion

Spanish poet Antonio Machado: „Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more, wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking.“ We can say the same about action research: it is made by methods and the practice we do. And it is true for creative writing too. The process of writing is often more important than texts. These processes give meaning to our activities and learn us reasonableness and flexibility. Finally, in the context of mental health system they could be a place where we can meet own 'otherness'. „If we cannot face and work with our own vulnerability, we will be too fearful of the vulnerability of others to be of much help to them“. [5]

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