

COLLABORATIVE FICTIONAL WRITING

**A Report on Catalyst Project with Life Chances and
Stories to Connect**

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Written as part of the AHRC funded Connected Communities project
Stories to Connect

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Collaborative fiction writing with community groups: harnessing experiences from two Connected Communities projects

A group of people drawn from two AHRC Connected Community projects came together to share their experiences of collaborative writing of fictional outputs.¹

The PIs of the two projects, Candice Satchwell and Debbie Watson, had met briefly at events on narrative, fiction/literature, and community involvement, including AHRC Connected Communities conferences, where each was presenting. We followed up our connection in emailed conversations and meetings on Skype, to discuss our experiences of working with community groups to tell stories. A significant aspect has been the committed involvement of and unexpected insights gained from community artists, commissioned artists and writers, and children's book writers and illustrators whose involvement was initially unanticipated. Several of these artists and writers shared with the academics their reflections on the processes of working in the projects, noting in particular the unforeseen benefits for both artists/writers and those whose stories they are representing. From these reflections, conversations led to a desire to share the experiences of all involved, to contribute to an understanding of how successful community writing can occur.

The two projects, Life Chances based in Bristol and Cardiff, and Stories to Connect, led from the University of Central Lancashire, identified representatives to meet at Gregynog Hall, a location in Wales offering a venue equally accessible for participants from Cardiff, Bristol, and the North West. In total, 11 representatives of community artists and writers, academics, researchers and administrators, gathered together to contribute their perspectives on collaborative fiction writing in these projects. More participants from both projects offered contributions in the form of reflections on the project activities both before and after this event.

One project, Life Chances, has produced a co-written fictional novel (Poulter, Mellor, Evans, Hussein, Comrie, Trasi, Safiya, Saediya et al 2016), and the other project, Stories to Connect, has produced 48 short stories (24 of these are available as films on the project website <http://stories2connect.org/our-stories-2/>). Both projects also produced a range of other outputs (e.g. Satchwell 2018; Satchwell & Davidge 2018; Watson et al, 2016a; Watson et al,

¹ The terms collaboration, participation, co-production, co-creation are often used interchangeably. In this report I use the term 'collaborative writing' as a broad heading, because it encompasses what both teams did, without making particular claims for the type of collaboration involved. (See for example Needham, C. and Carr, S. 2009.)

2016b; Watson et al, forthcoming), but the focus here is on the co-production of fictional stories. These were seen as an effective means of conveying research findings to wider audiences than might normally be reached through more conventional academic outlets. It also became apparent during the projects that the process has benefits for the community participants, who feel more able to talk about real events when safely distanced through the use of fictionalisation. Both projects aimed to encompass and amplify voices that are usually talked over or distorted by those in more powerful positions. The projects agreed that use of *fiction* allowed freedom and creativity in the process, while also enhancing accessibility and longevity of the product. Both projects were attempting to address issues of inequality, inaccessibility, and lack of understanding around social issues. Both have used fiction to convey different perspectives, particularly the voices of marginalised individuals, in an attempt to highlight the need for social change.

The aims

The projects both recognised the power of what they were doing, but also acknowledged a lack of guidance in how to do it. While there is literature around using writing and fictionalisation in social research (e.g. Leavy 2013, 2015; Banks 2008), there is less produced from the point of view of the writers themselves. The aim was therefore to share our experiences and to highlight the knowledge co-produced along the way. We wanted to produce a 'practitioner guide' which would help others to learn from our experiences; we also aimed to produce an academic article for researchers and academics, with a focus on practical and ethical issues alongside the affordances of working with community groups through fiction. Both of the written outputs would demonstrate the art of collaborative writing while also writing about it.

The event

The group assembled on November 27th 2017 for a two-day event.

We began with short presentations from each project, to explore similarities and differences in the aims, processes, challenges and benefits of co-writing, and to understand the wider contexts of each project. These presentations were followed by initial discussions and questions about the significance of our combined work.

Candice Satchwell designed some activities in advance, working with the notion of collaborative writing as a social practice that could be separated into different aspects, such as participants, audience, artefacts, space, place and time (see for example Ivanic et al 2009). The aim was to identify the specific components that could lead to successful collaborative writing. For example, the first activity explored the roles and identities of the participants in relation to their respective projects, but also in the rest of their lives. This would contribute to the section of the guide devoted to *Who*.

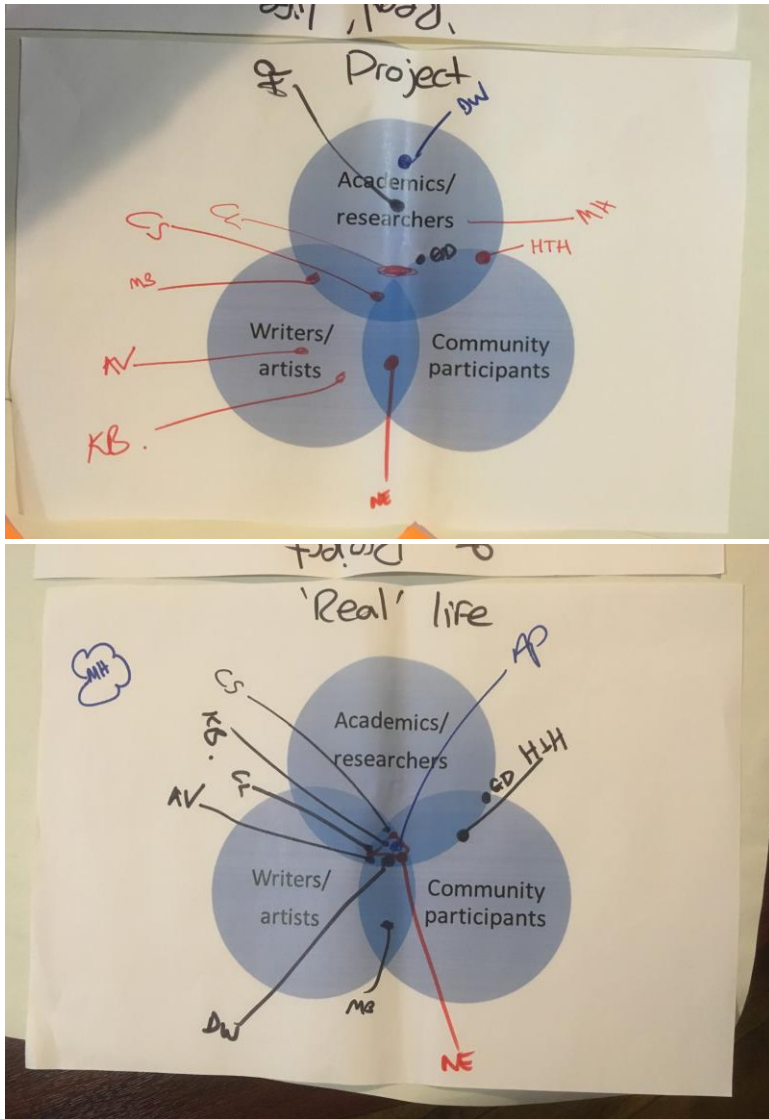


Figure 1: Roles and Identities of participants

Thereafter we considered aspects of *What* (content, subject-matter, materials and technologies); *Where* (space and place, real and virtual); *Why* (aims and uses); *When* (time, timing and duration); *How* (processes, uses of fiction). These prompts led to full discussions around all aspects of our experiences of collaborative writing, captured on post-it notes and a mapping activity.

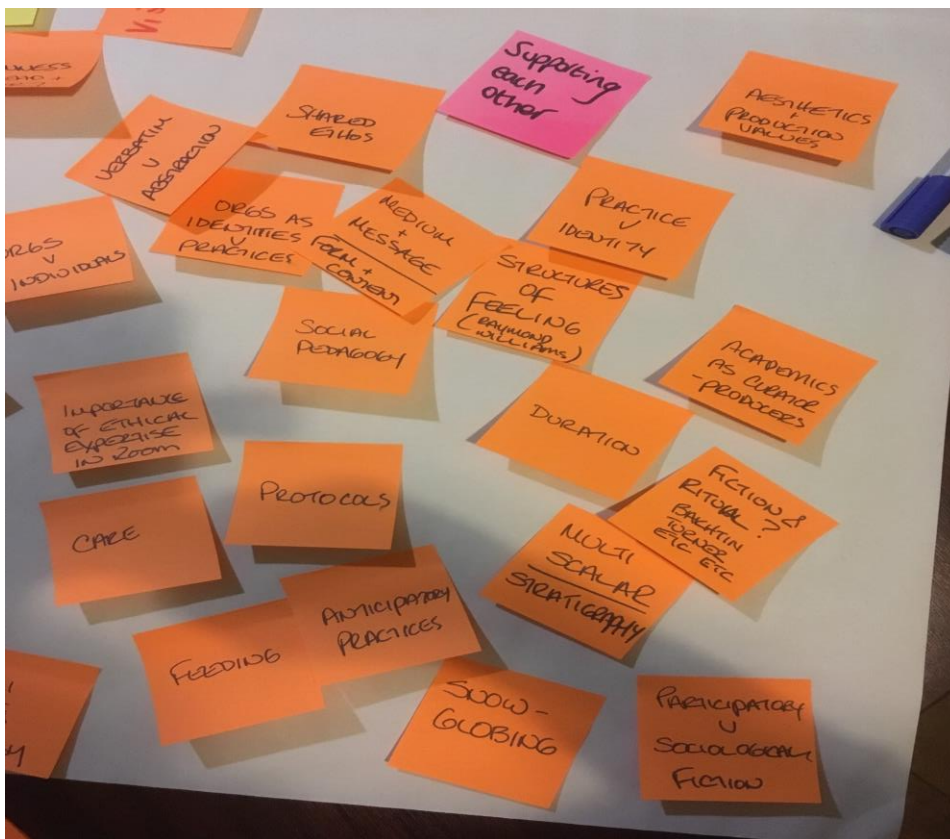


Figure 2: Capturing and mapping reflections

Later in the day we shared examples of our own fiction, produced from a range of collaborative methods: an extract from the novel from Life Chances, and a selection of animated stories from Stories to Connect.

After the full group activities, we broke into three smaller groups consisting of: (a) academics; (b) administrators; (c) artists and writers. We were aware that several of us spanned more than one group, so all discussions were shared amongst the whole group.

The smaller groups then engaged in focused writing: the academics contributed to one document through Googledocs and the other two groups had one person writing up notes of the discussions.

The following day we shared our findings and considered ways forward. It was decided that a practitioner guide would be drafted by Candice Satchwell from the combined notes. An academic article was also agreed, to be taken forward in due course.

After the event

Candice Satchwell drafted a document pulling together the contents of the discussions and writing produced at the event.

Subsequently Candice travelled to Bristol University to work with Debbie Watson for one day in June 2018 to progress the practitioner guide. We decided to create fictional scenarios as a means of illustrating and contextualising the points later made in the guide. The fictional character Yasmin would visit a range of scenarios to understand how collaborative writing in the community can 'work' and what guidance could be drawn from her experiences.

Candice Satchwell took responsibility for redrafting the document, and engaged an illustrator and designer to produce the final document. Both of these people had worked previously on producing the Stories to Connect storybooks.

The final version of the practitioner guide will be available through the websites of Stories to Connect and Life Chances by September 2018. There will also be print copies available, printed by UCLan Print.

The group has the makings of an academic article, which is intended to be written in the next 6 months. Candice Satchwell will take the lead on this, and the final article will be co-authored by participants from both projects, including artists and writers as well as academics.

We have aimed in both publications to employ the use of fiction to demonstrate the value of storytelling as a means of engaging an audience. The practitioner guide is aimed at a diverse audience of community groups as well as researchers, and we hope that the range of characters and scenarios we have created will help readers to see similarities to their own contexts.

Use of funding

The funding for the Catalyst project was used for:

- Conference facilities at Gregynog, including accommodation and meals for 11 participants.
- Travel for all participants to the two-day event.
- Travel and subsistence for writing day at Bristol University.
- Fees for illustrator and designer
- Printing of Practitioner Guide

This amounted to the total awarded, of £2968.

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