

On the 23rd April 2015 I attended the 3 day National Poetry Therapy Conference in the USA. I was fortunate enough to have my attendance, accommodation and transport funded by the FPSA and I am immensely grateful to them for this opportunity. The conference setting was very apt as it was based in Black Mountain, the sight of the famous Black Mountain College of the 1930's, with the principle that the study and practise of arts were indispensable within student education and developed some of the great artists of the late 20th Century.

The focus was to develop further understanding of the work being done in the USA and the therapeutic value of poetry to bring back to a young collective poetry organisation based in Nottingham. As the Pastoral Care Director of the company and a Dramatherapist I have been interested in the transformative power of spoken word and was interested in gaining further insight into this on an international level.

I was not disappointed with the breadth of speakers at the conference that offered both a holistic and scientific basis for the work being done. There was a great spectrum of workshops across the day that offered understanding of both the work and the method the practitioner used. Below is a short synopsis of workshops attended;

Journal Writing by Kay Adams

Outlined the importance of boundaries and intentions in personal journal writing. It looked at how to focus on re-writing and reflection of free writes and allowed development around writing prompts that could step you outside of the free writing. It underlined the importance of this when working with trauma allowing you to step outside the trauma rather than staying within it, leaving the potential of re-traumatising with each write.

Using poetry therapy to navigate the peaks and valleys of aging: by Perie Longo

Allowed a focus on discussions around ageing using poems as a stimulus for discussion and writing. Concepts around society creating the age we are vs how we feel and how to allow others' understanding of this through the written word.

Path to beloved community by Caryn Mirium – Goldberg

Focused on writing as a voice and how this creates around it a community and finding somewhere to belong. This section chimed with the work we do in Nottingham within the poetry collective.

Poetry/Creative Writing for Arts and athletics outreach programme – At Risk Youth by Nick Mazza

Focused on a University lead project which combined the arts and sports to raise aspiration in middle school children. Its primary objective was to increase social competence; interest in college; empower pro-social decisions; and to enhance youth sense of community. It focused on the theory around why young people engage with rhythm, words and metaphors as a tool for expression.

Embodied Stories by Katy Roy

Focused on the work in Quebec in a rehabilitation centre around the transformative possibilities of poetry including group work and mental imagery.

Wellness Metaphors – language and symbols for transformation in coaching and psychology by Nancy Scherlong

Looked at moving away from a medical model and illness to focus on wellness and positive psychology. Looking at how positive stimulus affects the writing and how group work can support the auxiliary ego

Survivors Story – Cheryl Buchanan

Focused on a project in Boston working with the homeless on identity and self – who are you when the traditional sense of identity (job, family, hobbies, home) are stripped away. Underlining the power of connectivity and story.

I was also able to attend a poetry therapy experiential group and to be directly involved in poetry as a therapeutic intervention within a safe and contained environment, experiencing first-hand the ability to open up and the insight that came from this work.

I was able to gain valuable insight into how you can work as a poetry therapist along with current training and expectations. You are currently able to train as a Poetry Therapy practitioner in America where this is a protected title

I was also able to connect with an Asheville-based poetry education group which has worked for 30 years across America and we shared learning about creating and implementing education programmes into schools.

The information allowed me to further understand the therapeutic value of poetry and offered me both further reading and training options, be they long distance or here in the UK. It also further developed my thinking about the progression and use of Poetry Therapy in the Midlands, the importance of training and thoughts around both the poems we use in our work and the subsequent activities as was stated at the conference “Anything that has the power to heal has the power to harm”. It has enabled me to be clear within the sessions we run for young people as a collective and about both development for us as a young company and career opportunities for the young poets we work with. It has also fuelled ideas for further study including the transformative value of performance poetry.

I want to thank the FPSA for funding the trip which offered such fertile ground for the growth of the company I work for and the use of Poetry Therapy within the East Midlands.

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