

stories2connect

COLLABORATIVE FICTION WRITING WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS A PRACTITIONER GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

This Guide was devised with support from a Catalyst grant provided by AHRC. The funds enabled meetings between the two projects to exchange and discuss experiences, and the involvement of Amy Cooper (designer) and Laura Cross (illustrator) in producing the final version.

A group of people involved in two large AHRC Connected Community projects came together to share their experiences of collaborative writing of fictional outputs¹. In total, 11 representatives of community artists and writers, academics, researchers and administrators, contributed their perspectives. One project, Life Chances, produced a co-written fictional novel, and the other project, Stories2Connect, produced 48 short stories. Both projects also produced a range of other outputs (see project websites), but the focus here is on the co-production of fictional stories. These were seen as a means of conveying research findings to a wider audience than might normally be reached through more conventional academic outlets. In addition, both projects aimed to encompass and amplify voices that are usually talked over or distorted by those in more powerful positions. The use of *fiction* allowed freedom and creativity in the process, while also enhancing accessibility and longevity of the product. Both projects endeavour 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 groups and individuals, in an attempt to highlight the need for social change.

While acknowledging that there is no fixed formula for the kind of work we have all been engaged in, we attempt in this guide to provide some insight into the ways we have all worked, and a starting-point for others who may want to engage in similar projects.

We begin with a brief description of each project, followed by a fictional representation of some of our experiences, as observed by 'Yasmin', our earnest fictional researcher who loves stories and wants to work with community groups. In the final section, Yasmin summarises her observations and the conclusions she has drawn under the headings of WHO, WHAT, WHY, WHERE, and HOW of collaborative writing projects.

¹ The terms collaboration, participation, co-production, co-creation are often used interchangeably. In this guide we are using 'collaborative writing' as a broad heading, because it encompasses what both teams did, without making particular claims for the type of collaboration involved. See Needham and Carr (2009) for discussion of different forms of involvement.

DESCRIPTIONS OF S2C AND LC PROJECTS

Stories2Connect is a project funded by the AHRC Connected Communities programme from 2015-2018 (PI Candice Satchwell). A group of disadvantaged young people who had been involved for some time in a young researcher participation group at the University of Central Lancashire came together with a group of academic researchers. Over time a research project emerged which aimed to collect stories from other disadvantaged young people to draw attention to the issues they face and instigate changes in society. The young researchers learned about interviewing and went out to interview other young people. The process of writing fictional stories drew on young people's imaginations, life stories, and interviews, as well as researchers' observations and interpretations of writers and illustrators.

Life Chances is one project within the ESRC funded Productive Margins programme of research (PI Morag McDermont) exploring how people at the margins of society interact with regulatory systems. Productive Margins programme of research ran between 2013-2018 and was a collaboration between University of Bristol and University of Cardiff in partnership with seven community organisations. Life Chances (academic lead Debbie Watson) worked with families on low income who were recruited through two civil society organisations (Single Parent Action Network in Bristol and South Riverside Community Development Centre in Cardiff). Using a range of arts-based approaches including jewellery-making and song-writing, commissioned artists Close and Remote helped research volunteers to develop fictional characters based on their factual lives and these were co-written into a work of sociological fiction. The overall aim of this was to enable people to write their own experiences of how regulatory systems and services had impacted their and their children's life chances, and the project used Utopian thinking and methods to consider how the welfare system could be designed to better support families on low income.

The following section presents some fictionalised scenarios drawn from the teams' experiences, as witnessed by Yasmin who visits the two projects as they progress.

Section 1: A story of collaborative story-making

Yasmin has always loved stories. She can still remember vividly the characters and events of the stories her grandma told from the rocking chair when she was little. Now she has a plan. She wants to capture that power of stories to do something about some of the injustices she sees around her.

Yasmin has heard about some people who are also interested in the power of stories and who have created innovative projects. She has read some things people have written about stories and social justice; now she is setting off on a voyage of discovery to find out what she can learn from seeing projects in action.

She visits two projects that are approaching story-making in ways both similar and different. Making eleven different visits to activities she talks to the participants and learns about their work.



SCENARIO 1: A young researcher group is meeting in the informal social space of a university

Jasper is joining in a game with twelve other young people, led by Justin. Carrie is part of the circle, and Justin is explaining how to play Zombies. Yasmin looks around and sees loaves of bread and sandwich fillings on the table, and some of the young people are already eyeing up what's on offer. After this game, another one follows, with a girl called Esther taking the lead. Carrie holds up sheets of paper with different agenda items on them: the young people choose which activity to do first after the break: practising interviews, updating the website, or reviewing a new story. Then they descend on the food, buttering bread, opening packets of crisps, some searching out the gluten-free items, chatting to one another, and checking phones. A few adults are spread through the group: volunteers, students, and academics, but it's hard to tell who's who.

Yasmin realises that Jasper and Justin and some of the others have known each other for a while. They come regularly to this youth group where Carrie is always asking them what they want to do next. Carrie has a passion for the rights of children and young people and she is committed to doing research in participatory ways with different marginalised groups. Today Jasper reminds the group that he wants to help young people with autism to tell their stories so that people can understand what's special about them. Justin wants to tell people what it's like when you have a stammer and the funding for speech therapy is being cut. Carrie calmly leads a discussion about how they might do this. To do it properly they will need to join up with some other people to get funding.

Yasmin realises the games are a way of remembering names and having fun, while the food for some of them is clearly an important part of the proceedings. These young people are all different: some are behaving strangely, some are withdrawn, others talk incessantly. Yasmin admires the way Carrie manages the group in a way that almost means she is absent: the young people take charge where they can. The idea of telling stories clearly has meaning for them. What do they understand by stories, she wonders? Are we talking about fact or fiction? Do the adults have different ideas from the young people here?



SCENARIO 2: A young researcher training session in a university social space during the school holidays

Yasmin isn't sure what to do. She can see that James, a young man with autism, is interrogating Kirsty, who is beginning to cry. James doesn't seem to have noticed her distress and is continuing to ask her why she lives with a foster family. On the other side of the room, Dirk is looking distractedly around the room, apparently forgetting his mission to find out from Krishnan what he sees as a highlight in his life. Pedro and Petra are giggling over a mobile phone. Charlie is standing in the corner, talking animatedly to the wall.

"Right then." Carrie holds up a hand. "How about we make a set of instructions for these interviews? How are we going to keep people safe? What kinds of questions should we be asking? How are we going to make sure our friends are comfortable?"

Yasmin is relieved to see that the group stops and listens, and then they draw together their chairs in a circle and make some suggestions. By the end of the session a guide to interviewing has been designed, with one of the young people offering to type it up and bring it back the following day.



As she sits on the train home, Yasmin reflects on what she has seen. An intense workshop with lots going on – and the same tomorrow. How can you manage all these different young people with different needs? Carrie knows what she's doing – she is very attentive, doesn't raise her voice, and lets all the young people have their say. She knows them well and the young people might be very different but they seem to listen to and respect one another. The group clearly has some ground rules that they work to, although sometimes they forget to keep their mobile phones in pockets until break times. They all have their strengths and their challenges. Peer interviewing is a nice idea, but tricky to manage. Yasmin can see that group cohesion is critical, as is the support provided by experienced practitioners, sometimes on a one-to-one basis for these young people.

SCENARIO 3: A children's author comes to visit

A few weeks later, Yasmin returns to the university social space for a special event. A well-known children's author is coming to talk to the young people about what makes a good story. When she arrives, she sees a large circle of people, all laughing, apart from two young men whose gazes are fixed on the author's face, and who are asking serious questions. As before, she finds it difficult to tell who is who in the group, but she knows there is a range of individuals: young people with disabilities; children's charity workers; academics; student volunteers. The author is talking about beginning writing by remembering something that 'strikes you', working with memorable details and layering a story. This is demonstrated by a member of the group acting out climbing out of a window as a schoolgirl and describing how she felt as she ran away from a 'crime' she had committed (Yasmin realises later that this person was a professor – she would never have guessed). After some food and some chat, the young people set to work in ones and twos to create characters, thinking of a name, likes and dislikes, what they always carry with them, and where they like to go. In no time, with the help of some scribes, some stories are made around these characters. The end of the meeting is again full of laughter as the young people share their creations. As Yasmin listens to the stories, some wild and bizarre, others more pedestrian, she recognises that while these are fictional stories, quickly created, they are imbued with a sense of the young person who inspired them. Jasper has created a complex story involving a character on a quest to conquer copyright law; while Justin has made a love story about two young people who have difficulties speaking but communicate through interpretive dance. Amongst the laughter there is a recognition that these fictional stories allow the young people to express their own, very real, difficulties, hopes and dreams.

SCENARIO 4: A story-making workshop in a youth centre

On one side of the room the floor is covered with coloured pieces of paper and the young people are arranging them in rows. Then they throw bean bags onto different sheets and fall about laughing as they make up a story based on whichever 'characters', 'locations', 'challenges', and 'achievements' the bean bags select.

In a corner, a young man is in an intense conversation with a researcher, focused on a story arc which the researcher writes on as the young man talks. "So, what do you think Alex felt like when he moved to the children's home?" she asks him.

At a long table, several young people are making 'story dice' out of coloured card. In pairs they are sifting through snipped up interview transcripts, deciding which elements they think are important. They are making six dice, each one with six different characters, six locations, difficulties, sources of help, outcomes, and opportunities.

Later, when the glue has dried, a group of young people roll the dice and make up stories according to how they land. The young people present these as little dramas for the rest of the group. Much hilarity is involved, as one of the academics is persuaded to emerge from a cardboard box as part of the drama. But Yasmin can see the potential for young people to see that they are not alone with their challenges and that there are several alternative possible outcomes.

Yasmin is fascinated to see how the things that young people have said in interviews are being repurposed to create new stories. The young people sorting through the snippets looks like a real opportunity for collaborative data analysis. And then as the themes they draw out are used to create new stories, they are both understanding their own situation better, and helping others to understand it too.

SCENARIO 5: The writers and illustrators group

Yasmin is overwhelmed by the sheer size of the city bookshop she enters. She hasn't been surrounded by so many books for years, and is amazed and delighted by the displays. She follows the instructions to go to the third floor and finds a hidden room behind the café. About twenty people are sitting at tables, poring over papers and laptops. As she walks into the room she is welcomed by Marlene Bywater. Marlene explains that the members of the writers and illustrators group all spend most of their time working alone at home. Their monthly meetings are opportunities to share their writing. Yasmin nods. She used to write bits of poems and short stories herself, but never dared show them to anyone. Marlene tells Yasmin that when she joined the local Writers' Society she felt less lonely and it spurred her on to write something to share when they met. "Sometimes, though, it's difficult to decide what to write about, and how to make a story that will be meaningful for someone other than yourself.

That’s why it was great to hear about this project, working with transcripts from interviews with young people.” She explains, “For example, I was sent a conversation between two young people who have learning disabilities, and some of the things the young people said immediately struck me as ingredients for a story.”

Paddy, a middle-aged man, ambles over and holds out his hand slightly awkwardly to Yasmin. “I hear you’re interested in our new writing practice? When I started reading a transcript about the anxiety of a young man caring for his sick mother, I found myself remembering the plight of my friend – her husband has cancer, you know. It’s surprising how that made me feel as though I could connect with some of the issues affecting the young people’s lives, even though I’d never met them.” Marlene agrees, and waves her hand to indicate the rest of the people in the room. She explains to Yasmin:

“This new project has really brought us together – with the university people, but also as a group of writers and illustrators. Usually we tend to divide ourselves according to whether we’re writing for primary age, young adult, and so on, but this project has made us think in terms of *what* we’re doing and *why*, rather than who we’re writing for. Also the illustrators have been spending time with the writers in ways they didn’t before.”

“Riz has been fantastic. She worked out what to send us, and she was so helpful with the editing process. She made us feel as though we knew the young people – she gave us lots of details that helped us to understand the youngsters’ situations.”

Looking up, Yasmin sees another woman moving quickly towards them, weaving through the tables. As she gets nearer she says excitedly, “Do you know, I got to meet the young man whose story I wrote? It was amazing. Carrie introduced us at one of their meetings, and when I started to talk to him it all made sense. I told him, ‘Of course it’s you. Yes, of course!’ And he was so delighted. He was clutching the book with a huge beam on his face.”

So, thinks Yasmin, this is another way of making the stories, this time once removed from the young people themselves. An interesting way of bringing together completely different groups of people – adult writers, and young people with disabilities – through the medium of story-telling. People who might never normally meet, connecting through stories.



SCENARIO 6: Making and storying in the community

Yasmin arranges to visit a community group that she has been told are talking about being on low income, and she is intrigued to hear they are making jewellery. She enters a community building she has not been to before and walks past a nursery room with workers chatting and children painting at tables. One three-year-old girl asks to go and see her mum and Yasmin finds herself following the girl into a big workshop style room where there are lots of people sitting around a table, chatting and making jewellery from copper circles, beads, wire and fastenings. She joins the table and Heba the community worker hands her some interconnecting circles of copper metal, telling her to join in. Yasmin finds some brightly coloured beads and for a few minutes finds herself deep in concentration as she designs her necklace in her head and then tries to make her hands create it. Suddenly she notices that everyone around the table has started to talk about someone called Mona. “Who is Mona?” she asks quietly to Heba who has sat next to her. Heba explains that Mona is a character the group have been discussing and creating, part fact, part fiction. “She has had a really difficult journey from Somalia and we are trying to decide between us how she and her daughter will manage to get across from Italy,” says Heba. As Yasmin is thinking about this, Chris interjects, “It’s ok, we don’t need all the details if it is not easy to say. We can all help with this.” Yasmin turns to Heba: “Whose story is this?” Heba replies, “It is based on a real story of one of the mums in the room but she is scared of sharing some parts – she came here illegally, you know. So this way we can combine her story with others from the community. Everyone here knows a story of migration even if it is not their own. That way we can support each other to tell stories without being worried or telling too much personal stuff.”

Yasmin leaves the group later holding her piece of jewellery; she is secretly rather proud of it. Creativity seems to flow when you are in a supportive, relaxed environment. Some of them mentioned song-writing as well, and she can see how that would be another way of thinking about difficult issues. She thinks too about the importance of being in supportive groups but was amazed to hear that the parents at the workshop had only known each other for a really short time. Yet the jewellery-making seemed to make everyone relaxed, and when they were creating Mona’s story it was clear that people were contributing their own bits of knowledge (and probably memories) in constructing the character.

SCENARIO 7: The fictional social worker

Yasmin returns to the community group a second time and finds that one of the group, Jade, is shouting loudly at Marie, the researcher, about social workers. Yasmin makes herself very quiet and small as she finds a place at the table. Heba catches her eye and points to the fresh pot of coffee and pastries. Yasmin is intrigued by what is happening in the group: there seems to be quite a heated discussion building. Chris, one of the artists, looks around the group calmly and greets Yasmin. Then he turns to Jade: “So you seem to have had a hard time with social workers, Jade. What about anyone else? Good or bad experiences?” Jade raises her voice and says, “They are all the same, they think just because you are not White with loads of qualifications that you are a crap parent.” Marie steps in to the discussion and says, “Ok, so can you give us an example of something that has happened, Jade? We need to make sure the characters are as real as possible.” Jade looks to Hannah, her friend: “You know like that time with the tape recorder? When she came in my house and wouldn’t let me record the chat we were having? But she recorded it, and Hannah, you said your friend Amna had the social using it in court. That wasn’t fair, was it?” Yasmin is captivated: “So are you discussing a character here? Can someone explain her to me?” Chris replies: “We are devising the character between us based on experiences people have had with social workers, but we are struggling to agree. Some people want to make her White, middle class, living in a cottage with a cat – but that feels a bit of a stereotype, so we’re trying to explore what a social worker might actually be like. The project is looking at how people on low income interact with regulators, and social work is one of the systems we are discussing.” Marie then says: “You know, we could disrupt people’s stereotypes a bit, that might help us to think about social work differently. I could ask the academic lead, Eve, if she has any ideas – she works with lots of social work academics. Would it be helpful to talk to some, do we think?” “Would we be able to ask them questions? And would they get offended if we say we don’t like social workers?” asks Jade. “I am happy to if we can ask what we want,” says Amber.

Yasmin is buzzing with ideas as she bites into her soft pastry and contemplates how fiction is a fusing of fact, fantasy, individual and multiple narratives all rolled into one. She is mulling this over as she overhears one of the women saying to Heba: “You know that story I said earlier about my social worker – can I take that out of the notes? I don’t want my boy’s dad to hear that. I don’t have to leave it in, do I?” Heba speaks reassuringly to her: “Of course not – you just need to tell Marie and she will make sure

we don't use that bit in the novel or the project. You can decide what goes in and what stays out." Of course, thinks Yasmin, there are complex issues of confidentiality and anonymity here. Lots to think about.

SCENARIO 8: The castle experience

Yasmin has been met by Heba at 8am outside the community building. "The bus should be here any minute. Can you grab those bags with lunch in them?" A delicious smell wafts from polystyrene boxes and Yasmin takes a peep at falafels, couscous and salad, all nicely packaged up. Packed lunches have moved on since sandwiches and crisps. She says to Heba, "So why a trip to a castle?" Heba replies: "It was Chris's idea - you know, the artist? He wanted to get our two groups together and thought the castle was half way. And it is about different literary devices - he thought that the castle might let people explore fantasy and utopia and all that." The community bus arrives, members of the group start to appear, and a vibrant discussion begins about whose music should be played on the way. Nigerian drum beats it is then...

As the group arrives in the castle car park and are getting off the bus, a woman with two children approaches the group and asks Yasmin who they are. She thinks it looks like an "interesting" (ethnically diverse, perhaps? thinks Yasmin) group of people. One of the group, Aya, proudly steps forward and says, "We are the Life Chances project group – we are here to devise some characters and think about regulation differently." The woman smiles uncertainly and ushers her children away quickly. Jade giggles under her breath and pushes Jenny to get out, and they walk on to find the castle. Chris follows with Sofia, who says she is anxious about seeing the castle. She has read it had something to do with the slave trade, and she knows her heritage in Jamaica could be traced to slavery. Chris talks to her all the way and says she should use the anger she feels about being in the castle in her character. They walk into the ruins of the castle walls where the remains of a grand banqueting hall can still be seen. Sofia quietly says, "You know, I want to write about stuff that has happened to me at work, you know with my boss, that stuff about race. It has to come out in the book." Chris responds, "I can help you to write that and think about your emotions and how you want people to understand it." "Thanks," says Sofia. "I think about leaving my job, but who would feed my kids and pay for school trips and stuff? And there's my friend as well, you know, she is not very well and I help her out a bit too. But maybe my character could leave her job? Maybe she can tell that boss of hers what is what? She could tell her she is a racist and she could walk out with her head held high."

"But she would still be worried, wouldn't she?" says Chris gently. "Yeah, I know. So we would need to make the character have people around her. We need to make sure the characters speak to each other, if you know what I mean?"

Listening to these snippets of conversation, Yasmin realises that the group is constantly thinking about the relationship between fact and fiction. How you can make something happen in a story that you would *wish* could happen in real life. She thinks about the young people too, and how they were creating happy outcomes in the stories they created with the dice and the story arcs, even though this might not have been what had happened in their lives. Fiction has the capacity to help people think through problems and to see alternative ways out.

SCENARIO 9: Bullying at school

"But it was only 'cos he was a Black kid that the teachers took no notice," says Jade, as Yasmin walks into the community room where the group are having another workshop. Marie interjects: "So how do we bring that experience into your character, Jade? How do you feel the school should have treated Liam?" Chris comments: "Is this where we might bring the social worker character back in?" "Wouldn't they only be involved if they were concerned about your child?" says Shelley. "Yeah and that's the problem," says Jade. "I was saying he was at risk at school from those White bullies, but no one was listening." "Ok, so the social worker character is mostly involved with Poppy and her son Daniel?" says Chris, as Marie furiously keeps taking notes. Eve has been sitting quietly listening to the conversation. She says, "It would be great if we can build family relations and friends into the novel. That would make it more realistic." "Yeah, so Liam's friend could be Daniel as well. That could be another connection, cos their mums are friends in the story." Kate the other artist jumps in: "That's all great, but we also need to make sure we stick to a clear storyline. So I think the kids are probably a bit more in the background and we focus on how the mums come to know each other. Does that sound ok?" "But mums often know each other through their kids, don't they?"

Yasmin is trying to piece together this storyline and increasingly seeing the connections between what seemed to be a disparate group of people. She can see that the role of Chris and Kate the artists is crucial to keeping an eye on the fictional novel to be written, at the same time as wanting to remain true to the stories that these people need to be told. There are different kinds of experts here, and they are all have valid perspectives to offer.

SCENARIO 10: Stories in practice

Rachel is a social worker. One of the young people she works with is in tears, and Rachel is trying not to cry herself. Kirsty's foster home placement is not working out. Kirsty is clearly traumatised, but she is finding it difficult to explain what the problem is. Rachel wants to help. Kirsty has something to say, and Rachel wants to find a way for her to express herself. Yasmin looks through the glass porthole in the door and thinks about what she has learned. She knows that some of the stories have been made with young people in foster care, and that distancing from the immediate problem has been helpful for the child herself as well as for those who read or hear her story. When Rachel takes a deep breath and then emerges to fetch a cup of tea for Kirsty, Yasmin hands Rachel a piece of paper. Written on it are a series of questions: 'Think of a character – name, age, living situation. What is the character's problem? Who can help? What happens next?' Yasmin can see that the relationship between Rachel and Kirsty is strong enough for a story-telling method to work its magic. Rachel nods a thoughtful thank you to Yasmin. Then she pushes open the door with her bottom, holding the cup of tea, her paper and pens, and a smile for Kirsty. Tucked under Rachel's arm is a storybook called *'Things are looking up'*.

**SCENARIO 11:** Policy makers playing a game

Yasmin has an early start this morning as she has heard the Life Chances project is doing something in London with policy makers and MPs and she wants to make sure she sees it. She has been told to go to Portcullis House and be ready to play a game! She knows Life Chances has written a novel and they have been selling it on Amazon and at festivals – a good read it is too! Quite political and they have some satirical characters including 'Ivan Dunhouse-Jones' who messed up the Universal Credit roll-out and MP 'Lunt' who made promises about NHS funding that never materialised... But a game of Life Chances? She needs to find out what that is!

Once she finds the right room, Yasmin is greeted by lots of familiar faces including excited mums and children from the workshops she has visited. Laid out on the floor are the letters A to H cut out in red plastic and placed in two interconnecting circles – she is reminded of the copper rings in the jewellery workshop. Over the next ten minutes about 20 men and women in smart outfits drift into the room and each is handed a 'character card' by one of the children who are helping their parents run the game. Kate and Heba then encourage everyone to go the starting point on their card (A for everyone) and read some information to the rest of the group about their character. Yasmin is carried back to those first workshops as she hears: "My name is Mona Ali. I came to England with my daughter and I am seeking asylum" and "I am Nadjma and I am a qualified Doctor from North Africa but I cannot practise medicine here as I cannot afford the English language tests". More people introduce their characters and Yasmin feels the emotion in the room, hearing about Rebecca who can only see her son in supervised visits, Dave who sofa surfs, Marlon who is being racially bullied at school, and Debra the social worker who does not seem to understand the families she is supposed to be supporting. She giggles as she is introduced to IDJ and Lunt and hears about G4N (Good for No-one) which houses the IT system for the Universal Credit rollout.

The game progresses as Kate asks people questions and they follow instructions based on their character's life chances. Heba gently asks people why they think they have not been able to move on in the game. People start to recognise the differences and similarities between characters: some are UK citizens, some have the right to work in the UK, many do not; some are well qualified but cannot find work that fits with their child care responsibilities; some have inherited wealth and property – most have not; some have health problems and are unable to work; some have worries about their children...

The 'game' takes about 30 minutes and everyone is engrossed. Some participants become angry; some begin to inhabit their character – the MP playing the owner of the Daily Saliva newspaper is particularly entertaining, thinks Yasmin – yet it was him who was amazed at how little money people on asylum support actually receive. The woman playing Nadjma was tearful when she finished reading about her situation with domestic violence. The man playing the character Amna was outraged that inaccurate real time assessments of Amna's husband's hours at work had led to their children missing a school trip and Amna having to visit that food bank...



Eve, Marie and some of the participants re-join the group and there is a lively discussion about the impact of the game on the players and how it could be used. One woman says she would be keen to use it as a diversities and equalities training tool with council workers; another woman says she wants it used in social worker training, and someone else is talking about getting it into secondary schools across the country to teach young people. There is a real buzz in the room and the children and families look quite overwhelmed as people ask them about how the game was made - who wrote the characters, how they decided on the storylines and what they got out of the project. Sofia speaks for them all: "I have told my story and all of you have listened and taken notice."

As Yasmin travels home from London that day she thinks about the journeys of all these stories: from people in the community who have really suffered, to people in high places, and to other people in need, like Kirsty. The potential for change through story-making is remarkable and Yasmin feels more excited than ever about what she has learnt. During the long journey home, she reflects on all of her eleven visits, and

all her conversations with those involved. Yasmin begins to draw some conclusions about collaborative writing with community groups, and she realises that she has been looking at a social practice. She always knew that all kinds of reading and writing are social practices, but the 'social' is especially evident in the social practice of collaborative writing. In line with the analysis of social practices in anthropology, and subsequently in literacy studies, the next section is organised in terms of the different elements of collaborative writing, divided into Who, What, Where, When, How, and Why.



Section 2: THE GUIDE

WHO: PARTICIPANTS

There are certain people and certain roles in this collaborative fiction-writing practice that are crucial. Yasmin had seen the parts played by youth workers, community artists, administrators, academics, illustrators, writers and the community participants themselves. Rachel the social worker, Kirsty the girl in distress, and the policy makers playing the game, represented the kinds of audiences that can be reached by this kind of practice. Yasmin reflected that people and relationships are crucial. People are writers and readers; people are also characters – protagonists, antagonists, allies and adversaries. So, for people interested in collaborative writing, questions to consider include: Who is our writing representing? How do characters relate to the project participants? Who is an ‘author’ or ‘writer’? And who are our audiences? These questions involve returning to the original aims of the work.

Both of the projects visited by Yasmin, Stories2Connect and Life Chances, began with the aim of hearing the stories of marginalised individuals. Therefore representatives of marginalised groups were core; without these voices and those that they have privileged access to, the stories cannot be heard, and the authenticity of the outputs is lost. In each project there was also an element of marginalised people telling their own stories to each other; the possibility for instant recognition. The relationships between these individuals and those in a more powerful position in relation to resources and the direction of the project are crucial considerations, both practically and ethically. Below the roles and responsibilities of team members are considered: WHO does what?

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Administrators are critical to overseeing the different contributors and relationships, maintaining contact among disparate members of the group, updating on progress, organising meetings, and keeping records. Maintaining records of participants requires special consideration when the participants are vulnerable, marginalised and/or minors. While aspects of the work can be shared out among the team, clear responsibilities and appropriate time allocation for all of the tasks are essential.

Editors can be either the contributors themselves (as in Life Chances) or participants who are allocated that role (as in Stories2Connect). Editorial processes can be never-ending, so a designated final editor, or editorial team, may be required.

Aesthetic quality controller. Someone may need to take on the role of ensuring that the writing meets not only standards of presentation, but also some measure of artistic or aesthetic value. Given that this is arguably down to subjective judgment, this role involves a degree of trust from all participants. The role might be combined with that of editor or may require another individual to work in close collaboration with the editorial team. For example, the artists in Life Chances took on this role and also recruited a TV script writer to ensure the novel was engaging and used appropriate fictional devices to maintain reader interest. Stories2Connect employed a consultant literary expert and two published children’s authors, who offered advice on editorial issues and aesthetic quality.

Writers may be participants or contributors, external or internal to the core of the project. While writers were ‘recruited’ in S2C during the course of the project, it would be advisable to have a clear idea of who they will be from the outset. Life Chances adopted a more ongoing team approach where research volunteers, artists and academic team members all contributed to the writing using Google Docs to enable multiple contributions and edits.

Illustrators’ roles should be carefully considered at the planning stage. Through talking to the illustrators involved, Yasmin realised that the role of illustrator was not always fully understood. If illustrations are an integral part of the fictional outputs, then the illustrators should be on board early in the process, not simply brought in at the end to enhance someone else’s work. The illustrators in Life Chances were also the artists who facilitated the writing. Whilst they encouraged views on the illustrations from the wider team this was also an area of artistic licence where they devised the illustrations and then checked for appropriateness.

In both projects, there were overlaps across all of these roles. Although these roles are important, the serendipity, discovery of talents and hidden passions, chance encounters and daisy-chains of connections, could also be said to contribute to the ‘magic’ discussed below. If Yasmin had learnt anything, it was that a certain fluidity and openness to opportunities was crucial to the success of these projects.

WHO: AUDIENCE

WHO includes the question of ‘Who for?’ Are we writing for policy-makers, practitioners, the general public, adults, children, or all of these? What are the advantages of fictional writing for these audiences? For academic researchers, written outputs include a range of formats, including academic articles, books, conference papers, policy papers, resources for educators, resources for practitioners. Fiction may have a part to play in all of these, and members of both projects have produced examples of academic publications which include fiction. Indeed, their claim is that fictional stories can cross boundaries that other writing practices may remain within. Although publishers tend to have fairly fixed ideas about readers in terms of ages, genders, abilities, and interests, this approach of collaborative fiction writing refuses to differentiate specific audiences. The work is attempting to disrupt some of these assumptions, and therefore the focus here is not so much who it is for, but how it can reach audiences that more conventional academic formats do not even consider.

In the case of both of these projects, the audiences were manifold. For example, Stories2Connect aimed to produce stories by, with and for young people. The stories were intended to be relevant for young people in similar situations to the participants: children in the care system; young people with disabilities, including learning difficulties; children from marginalised communities. As such, the stories could also be relevant for adults who work with such young people, for example social workers, teachers, counsellors, community or charity workers. And further, the young people wanted everyone to hear these stories, and to make them freely available to the general public. The use of community-located phygital artefacts (see the Stories2Connect website for examples) was a means of fulfilling this aim, providing novel but accessible ways of reading, hearing, and seeing the stories in video formats.

Life Chances aimed to inform policy-makers and people who work with low-income urban families, refugees and asylum-seekers. They wanted to enhance understanding of the situations of these marginalised groups and, like Stories2Connect, to increase empathy for their experiences. In particular their aim was to demonstrate the impact of regulatory systems on such people’s lives, and by engaging with policy-makers to make changes in social policy.

Maurice Sendak, author of *Where the Wild Things Are*, said: “I don’t write for children. I write. And somebody says, that’s for children.” Although the creative writers in Stories2Connect sometimes asked for a target audience age range, it was difficult to specify. Some of the young people who inspired or created the stories were in their early twenties; yet the issues they faced would also be relevant to much younger children. For example, a story about travelling independently on a bus or a train would be appropriate for any age where this was a significant challenge.

Therefore the question of ‘who for?’ is an important consideration, but it should not dominate the production of the work.

WHERE

Yasmin had visited a university social space, a youth club, a community centre, a bookshop, a castle. She realised that these places all had something in common. They were communal, non-threatening, and accessible. It was clear that a safe space is crucial to a productive writing process. For both projects the safe space came about both literally and metaphorically as a result of many meetings, in which relationships were formed, and trust was built. Safety is needed for creation, negotiation, falling out and reforming. A great deal of the time creating the safe space was not spent writing, but playing games, eating shared food, talking, laughing, coming to know one another. Yasmin could see that the projects needed:

- A physical space which does not privilege one element of the collaborators and can be regarded as the domain of all. Examples included: spaces in organisations that were participating, as well as completely neutral spaces such as conferences and trips to different venues together.
- A range of virtual spaces for communication and friendship, and for writing. Examples include: the use of editing spaces such as Google Docs and closed social media groups/ messaging as it became apparent that not everyone is comfortable communicating through email or phone. The spaces for communication must be accessible and tailored to the participants, sometimes resulting in multiple platforms and formats to cater for individuals, while trying to ensure no-one is excluded.

WHEN

When does the writing begin? Does the source material influence the writing practice? For these projects, the writing of the novel and the stories were means of putting together the research data. Therefore the fictional writing began *during* and *after* the collection of data in the form of interviews, arts workshop activities, group discussions, and observational fieldnotes, covering a year or more of working together.

Is the writing done all together at the same time, or individually as suits different people's circumstances? Technology allows combinations of these practices. Given the emphasis the projects placed on the individuals involved and the relationships between them, it is clear that technology can be employed as and when it benefits the process, and the potential for allowing different people to contribute at different times in different ways is invaluable. It is also important to note that some of the participants bounded their contributions as only being in the space of the workshops or data collection times; whilst others were keen to write in their own time using technology or on paper and bring it back to subsequent sessions.

Timing for the project was important in that the funding was finite. Although both projects gained extensions and some further funding, it was important to manage expectations and build in an understanding of the time-bound nature of the project. It was also important to ensure that continuation activities were available for the participants. Having built up trusting relationships within the groups, these could not be jeopardized by the end of funding.

WHY

The purpose of any project clearly affects all other aspects, most particularly WHO and HOW. That said, the purposes can be manifold, and benefits may not all be apparent at the outset. In both projects unexpected benefits and outcomes came to light: for example participants gained noticeably in confidence, communication skills, self-esteem, being able to travel independently, and being able to speak to new people, as well as valuing the recognition, validation and confirmation of their stories. This in itself became a good reason for doing the projects and involving the young people and community groups in telling their own stories. Yasmin gathered that participants in both projects were inordinately proud of the stories that they were involved in producing, and their own and their families' responses to the final product reinforced this as a legitimate aim of the project. (The young people's pride in their stories led to ethical dilemmas relating to authorship and confidentiality - see section on Ethics). In Life Chances some volunteers discovered that they had talents in jewellery-making, song-writing, music, spoken

word poetry, and all of these were given space to develop through the workshops and contributed to a wider set of project outputs. The researchers also encountered a number of misunderstandings about regulatory systems and it became important to gently feed into people's learning about the asylum system and social work practices.

The wider question of WHY one should engage in this kind of work relates to issues of social justice, re-balancing power, and critical literacy. Ultimately, the aim in both projects was to draw attention to the perspectives of those whose voices often go unheard, to uncover injustices and instances of maltreatment that are often unnoticed, and thereby to instigate momentum for change.

A belief in the power of literature – or at least of stories – to convey meaningful messages is also fundamental to answering the WHY question.

Why use fiction? These projects suggest, along with a range of literary critics, literary psychologists, and therapists of all kinds, that reading between the lines, or coming at an issue sideways, can be effective ways of understanding both oneself and other people. In addition, the process of writing about a fictional character allows freedom from the self and provides possible alternative scenarios and outcomes. The process of fictionalisation can distance the protagonist's real identity from the reader, with the real inspiration for the story disguised as a character. At the same time, fiction allows connections to be made between reader, character, and writer(s). There are also many claims that fiction enables the reader to appreciate the life and experiences of others and to cultivate empathy for experiences that are unfamiliar (e.g. Keen 2006; Djikic and Oatley 2014; Finlay and Stephan 2000).

Therefore the *process* of writing can be seen as equally important as the activity of reading the fictional outputs.

HOW

The crux of the question in a guide such as this, is *how* is it done? What is the process that leads to a piece of fiction that can be described as collaborative? What makes it fiction? Below are descriptions of the process on the two projects as examples, leading to some common themes.

STORIES2CONNECT used two main methods:

1. Creating a story directly with a young person or in a small group
2. Assembling a story from transcripts

Both methods evolved on a continuum, and involved differing amounts of input (or interference) from the writer(s). They also included different balances of ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ – although one could argue that all (good) fiction relates to truth.

1. When working up stories directly with the young people the project used a range of methods. They constructed story arcs or storyboards, creating characters, settings and events apparently out of the young people’s imaginations, but always linked to their own experiences. They also used drawing and modelling, using pens, papers, textiles, pipe cleaners, sequins and so on. Occasionally the young people engaged in drama, creating and enacting a story. Some of these stories were written up by ‘creative scribes’ after the event (See Satchwell 2018).
2. The project also involved peer interviews among the young people, asking one another, and their friends and acquaintances, about their lives, challenges, successes, and transitions. Thereafter, the transcripts of these conversations were used in a range of ways. These included:
 - (A) Creating story dice based on characters, challenges, aids, and outcomes that emerged from the transcripts:
 - (B) Making storybags containing extracts from transcripts and a collection of objects to represent characters and their likes, dislikes, difficulties and achievements. The story dice and story bags were co-created and used in small groups to create narratives. For both of these, the emergent stories were noted down and then worked into written stories by a ‘creative writer’.
 - (C) Extracts or sometimes complete transcripts were presented to a volunteer writer as stimulus material for a story. The writers – and also illustrators – were given both guidance and freedom by the research team, who selected extracts

which they felt ‘went together’, along with an idea of a theme to develop, such as independent living, dealing with bullying, or surviving in the care system. The writer then constructed a story, sometimes without ever having met the young people whose transcripts they were given. This method is clearly unscientific and relies on the integrity and perceptiveness of both researcher and writer. Returning the stories to the young people in question was a means of ‘quality control’ and a way of checking authenticity of the account, even if it was a fictionalised account.

Life Chances used an iterative process of co-writing in creative workshops, with research volunteers and the artists working together over a period of nearly a year. The artists introduced a number of provocations and activities to enable the volunteers to think about the regulators in their lives and their interactions with welfare systems in particular. Jewellery was made in a process of sitting and making and this enabled people to have open conversations about their ‘character’ and the story lines that they wanted to develop together. The characters and the regulators were all added to storyboards and the plotlines and literary devices debated in workshops. Writing continued by some volunteers outside of workshops in Google Docs and everyone was encouraged to edit all the way through the process.

Clearly, when changes were made to one character’s story this impacted upon other characters and so the artists retained overall editing control of the whole novel and introduced fictional characters, such as politicians and regulators, and they wove the characters and stories into a coherent novel.

So, what common themes can we draw from these accounts?

We can see from these different processes that the concept of ‘collaboration’ has occurred on a continuum. Rather than try to categorise each as a ‘template’ for future users, we suggest that each situation will lend itself to a place along that continuum, depending on the particular participants involved, their circumstances, (dis)abilities, their passions and talents. The important considerations in HOW collaborative writing is done are:

- Fostering trust, with relationships based on sharing ideas and achieving consensus, rather than correcting errors
- Making use of the different talents and enthusiasms available

- Combining resources (people, data) in creative ways
- Trying more than one method
- Allowing people to both step back and step forward according to their comfort
- Being willing to spend time editing, re-drafting, honing
- Maintaining a sense of teamwork, even when the team is disparate
- Ensuring overall control is distributed.

MAGIC

Sometimes in Yasmin’s discussions with the participants about their experiences of collaborative writing, they resorted to words like ‘magic’. Magic can operate where it finds a space to enter. Perhaps this space is made by the openness of the participants, more likely to occur when they accept and trust one another enough to let in something else. Alternatively, we could think of it as the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Either way, if we are offering advice here, magic can only enter the equation if the participants are committed to the aim of writing with and for the community members at the heart of the project. At the same time, the participants need the freedom to ‘create’.

The magic of fiction is that it works on people (both writers and readers) in ways that a report or an article may not. Emotional responses are part and parcel of the reading of fiction; and it is the inherence of feelings and emotions that sets stories apart from other texts. Humour and satire can be employed in ways that are less acceptable in more formal genres.

ETHICS

Yasmin saw that ethical dilemmas arose frequently. Ethical considerations for any project of this kind include:

The use of fiction – particularly co-created fiction – may be a means of addressing issues of **anonymity and confidentiality**; yet the naming and recognition associated with ‘authorship’ require careful consideration and negotiation when stories are released into the world. Resolution of these issues might be to use first names only, to use pseudonyms, or to create a group identity for authorship rather than naming individuals.

Literature often relies on **tropes** such as the hero, joker, trickster, ally, villain. When casting characters in these roles we need to be aware of ethical implications. For example, who are we casting as villain, how, and why? How do we deal with characterisations that are not flattering of individuals?



How to manage **conflict** or disagreement in a group. Who makes the final decision? All of these issues could be regarded as relating to power and hierarchies, stereotypes and assumptions. Given that any project on stories and social justice will be actively aiming to challenge all of these notions, they are likely to be at the forefront of the participants’ minds. The stories discussed here are deliberate attempts to overturn assumptions about what people are like; whose knowledge is privileged; whose voices are heard. Ethical dilemmas need to be confronted with these same questions in mind, in a spirit of collaboration. There are no fixed answers, but the experiences of these projects suggest that a thoughtful and vigilant approach, constantly talking things through, and the maintenance of supportive relationships and group dynamics are essential.

References

Banks, S. 2008. *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research*, Sage Thousand Oaks, CA.

Djikic, M., and Oatley, K., 2014. The art in fiction: from indirect communication to changes of the self. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 8 (4) 498–505.

Durose, C., Beebeejaun, Y., Rees, J., Richardson, J., Richardson, L. (2016) *Towards Co-production in Research with Communities*, AHRC Connected Communities. Available at: <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/connected-communities/towards-co-production-in-research-with-communities/>

Finlay, K. A., and Stephan, W. G. (2000) Improving intergroup relations: the effects of empathy on racial attitudes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 30 (8), 1720–1737.

Ivanic, R., Edwards, R., Satchwell, C. Barton, D., Smith, J., Fowler, Z., Martin-Jones, M., Mannion, G., Miller, K. (2009) *Improving Learning in College: Rethinking literacies across the curriculum*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Keen, S. (2006) A theory of narrative empathy. *Narrative*, 14 (3), 207–236.

Life Chances website: <https://productivemargins.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/projects/life-chances/>

Needham, C. and Carr, S. (2009) *SCIE Research Briefing 31: Co-production: An Emerging Evidence Base for Adult Social Care Transformation*, London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.

Poulter, S., Mellor, S., Evans, N., Hussein, M., Tye Comrie, A., Trasi, Safiya, Saediya et al (2016) *Life Chances: a work of sociological fiction*. Bristol: Life Chances.

Satchwell, C. (2018) Collaborative writing with young people with disabilities: raising new questions of authorship and agency, *Literacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12146>

Satchwell, C. (forthcoming) Fictionalised stories co-produced with disadvantaged children and young people: uses with professionals, in Jarvis, C. and Gouthro, P. *Professional Education with Fiction Media: Imagination, Engagement and Empathy in Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Satchwell, C. and Davidge, G. (2018) The mismeasure of a young man: an alternative reading of autism through a co-constructed fictional story, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Special Edition on Creative Representations in Qualitative Research. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1430208>

Stories2Connect website: <http://stories2connect.org/>

Watson, D.L., Poulter, S., Mellor, S. & Howard, M. (2016a) Life Chances: Co-written re-imagined welfare utopias through a fictional novel, *Sociological Review* blog: <http://www.thesociologicalreview.com/blog/life-chances-co-written-re-imagined-welfare-utopias-through-a-fictional-novel.html>

Watson, D.L., Howard, M., Hussein, M., Evans, N., Mellor, S., Poulter, S., Tye Comrie, A., Trasi and the wider group of community members (2016b) *Life Chances: re-imagining regulatory systems for low-income families in modern urban setting*, Policy Bristol: University of Bristol

Watson, D.L., Howard, M., Piccini, A., Poulter, S., Cohen, S., Evans, N., Hussein, M. & Mellor, S. (forthcoming) 'Thinking with art to generate new understandings of low income situations' in McDermont, M., Piccini, A. & Cole, T. *Imagining Regulation Differently: co-creating regulation for engagement*, Policy Press.





IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Illustrator: Laura Cross
www.lauracrossillustration.com

Designer: Amy Cooper Design