

Poetry For Health

IMPROVING HEALTH IN LONDON CASE STUDY

Project title:	Poetry For Health
Location:	London wide
Date:	May 2003 onwards
Funding:	King's Fund Millennium Award

The context According to the mental health charity Mind, one in four people in Britain will experience mental ill-health at some point in their life. However, evidence suggests that many people with mental health problems continue to feel discriminated against and excluded.

This was one of the reasons why Millennium Award winner Dave Neita decided to set up his project, Poetry For Health, running poetry workshops for people with mental health problems and their carers in various locations around London. The workshops provide those taking part with a space in which to voice their thoughts and concerns, as well as offering therapeutic benefits, such as greater emotional awareness and self-expression.

The Millennium Awards scheme Between 2001 and 2004, the King's Fund worked in partnership with the Millennium Commission to offer grant-funding, support and training to 255 people working at community level to improve the health of Londoners. Each person received a maximum £2,000 cash grant from Lottery funding, and took part in a 13-day King's Fund leadership development programme designed to build skills in project management and networking.

This is one in a series of case studies exploring how individuals living in London have used the King's Fund Millennium Awards scheme to make a real difference to the health of others in their communities.



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Since childhood, Dave Neita had always found writing poetry an important way of expressing himself and his view of the world. Through sharing his poems with other people, he began to recognise some of the therapeutic benefits of poetry-writing. This led him to the idea of running poetry workshops for groups of people with mental health problems and their carers. He wanted to help those taking part to express themselves, and to become more aware of their own emotions and more understanding of other people. He also wanted to find ways of using some of the material coming out of the workshops to influence government policies on mental health issues.

The interview

Why did you get involved?

I have written poetry since I was a child. I was unhappy about the injustices that I saw in the world and wanted to put my concerns into words. Ever since, writing poetry has helped me to clarify and express my thoughts and feelings. As I grew up, I wanted to share my love of poetry with others. My sister, who is a nurse, worked on the psychiatric ward at the University Hospital of the West Indies. I used to visit her on the ward and spend time with the patients. On many occasions, I took my poems in to share with the patients. Watching patients who otherwise barely spoke getting involved, I began to realise some of the benefits that poetry might have for people diagnosed with mental illness.

A few years later, wanting to contribute to my community, I decided to run some poetry workshops. As a Christian, I am guided by Christ's teachings on compassion and inclusiveness. It seemed to me that poetry could give a voice to those who have been marginalised by society, helping them to effect change in their lives, and perhaps in society as a whole.

I started by running poetry workshops in schools. The feedback I received was really positive. Teachers told me that the workshops created a space in which pupils could learn to express their emotions in a healthy way, confident that they would be heard and accepted. I became increasingly convinced of the therapeutic benefits of poetry and was keen to run my workshops for those experiencing mental health problems. Becoming a Millennium Award winner enabled me to achieve my aim by providing me with the funding and support that I needed to take my project forward.

What is your project?

The focus of my project is on enabling people with mental health problems and their carers to write and perform poetry in a supportive group. So far I have run a series of workshops in a doctors' surgery, another series in a hospital, and ten one-off workshops in various locations around London – including one at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

I begin each workshop by reading a poem. After some discussion, people have a chance to write their own poems. Usually I suggest that they choose their own subject, while offering a theme for those who prefer more structure. For inspiration, I sometimes show interesting pictures, or take people on outings around London. So far, I have taken groups to see the Houses of Parliament, Lincoln's Inn, and the magician David Blaine when he was suspended in a box over the Thames.

During workshops there are opportunities for people to share their work with the group. I try to give everyone a platform where they feel safe to reveal themselves to the group, knowing that they will be listened to, supported and valued. In doing this I'm not offering any direct therapy, but I'm making the assumption that the process of writing and performing poetry in a safe environment is, in itself, therapeutic.

Asking carers as well as patients to attend the workshops is an important aspect of the project. When people create poetry together, they start to understand each others' perspectives. In these workshops, carers begin to see their patients' full potential, rather than viewing them only in terms of their illness.

Another aspect of my project has involved efforts to use some of the material emerging from the workshops to influence wider policies. When participants feel safe and relaxed, their concerns start to emerge in their poetry and during group discussions. Common issues include being forced to take psychoactive drugs, lack of counselling provision and racial discrimination within the mental health care system. Hearing these concerns, I thought it would be good to frame them into questions that could be asked in Parliament. I shared this idea with Oona King, the MP for Tower Hamlets, in whose office I have worked as a volunteer. She was really enthusiastic and has even offered to ask some of the questions in the form of poetry.

How did you get people involved?

At first, I met with quite a lot of resistance to my project. It's quite difficult to break into the mental health field without prior experience. My break came when some of my colleagues on the King's Fund leadership programme asked me to do poetry readings for the groups they were involved with. These groups included people who were experiencing mental health problems. It turned out that one of these groups had just lost its resident poet, so I was asked to step in as a replacement. Having gained some experience working with these groups, I found it easier to set up my own elsewhere. As people started to hear about my work, they began approaching me to run workshops for their service users.

The way that I've attracted people to my workshops has depended on the organisation that I'm working with. When I ran the workshop at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the staff did all the promotion for the event. For other workshops, I've done my own advertising, sending out email alerts to local mental health service users, as well as putting up posters in nearby surgeries and community centres. I've also had some referrals from doctors in various surgeries.

What help did you need?

When I began my project I was not formally involved in mental health, so I decided it would be helpful to talk to some people already operating in the field. I therefore organised a community consultation. I invited Oona King along to provide a political perspective, as well as various people from the mental health community. The advice that they gave me was extremely helpful in clarifying what I wanted to do and how I might best go about it.

Once I started running the workshops, I realised that writing and performing poetry can be a very emotional experience for people. Increasingly, therefore, I have been asking a trained member of staff, such as a psychiatric nurse, to be present at my workshops to help me in supporting people through painful feelings.

What challenges did you face?

My first major challenge was to persuade mental health and community organisations to let me run workshops for their service users. Initially, people were quite sceptical of my abilities and uncertain of what poetry could do for their users. In addition, I think there was some resistance to bringing in an outsider – someone who might challenge how things were done, alter the status quo. Overcoming these barriers has been a bit of a struggle.

I also found that some organisations weren't happy about me spending money on comforts, such as grand venues and warm food. I'm trying to learn from these experiences. Not that I've changed my thinking on this – my aim is to make people feel as valued as possible – but I'm discovering how to approach such issues more diplomatically.

Another challenge has been overcoming the resistance of some participants. People have asked me 'Why poetry? What's this all about?'. They see poetry as something they can't relate to. I have to explain that poetry is for everyone. It surrounds us in everyday life – in everything from the beats and lyrics of pop music to the subtle rhythms of nature. Once into the flow of the workshop, the majority of people love it. Having never considered writing poetry before, suddenly nothing can stop them.



What lessons did you learn?

I've learnt the value of having a strong belief in what I'm doing, while remaining flexible enough to learn from my experiences and the people that I'm working with.

I've also found that my strengths lie in engaging people in the creative process, and making them feel valued in the creating and sharing of their art. I've also realised the importance of working collaboratively with people from other disciplines in order to deliver my project more effectively.

Where does your project go from here?

In November 2004, Oona King took part in one of my poetry workshops. During this workshop, the group began to frame some questions suitable for Oona to ask in Parliament. I intend to keep this process going with a view to influencing government policies in ways that will improve the well-being of people with mental health problems.

As a result of my project, I have been given an award by the Mayor of London for Outstanding Contribution to Life in London. With this formal recognition of my work, I hope to attract further funding that will enable me to continue running poetry workshops.

What advice would you give to others?

Before starting a new project, ask advice from people with experience of the kind of work you are hoping to do. They may be able to guide you in how best to proceed with your project and warn you of some of the potential pitfalls.

Also, bear in mind that running a project demands a huge amount of time and energy, so it is important that you are passionate about what you are doing. Otherwise you may lack the will you need to see it through. Finally, remember to call on the support of those around you – your idea can be greater if you pool your resources and expertise with others.

Interested?

The Millennium Awards scheme has now closed, but the following funding opportunities remain:

King's Fund grants We offer about £1.5 million a year in grants to London-based community organisations working to improve health and health care (t: 020 7307 2495, e: grants@kingsfund.org.uk, w: www.kingsfund.org.uk/grants).

Unltd This is a national body set up to provide grants, training and support to individuals working to make a positive difference in their communities (t: 020 7566 1100, e: info@unltd.org.uk, w: www.unltd.org.uk).

King's Fund

11-13 CAVENDISH SQUARE
LONDON W1G 0AN
INFORMATION 020 7307 2568
SWITCHBOARD 020 7307 2400
PUBLICATIONS 020 7307 2591
www.kingsfund.org.uk

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