

The Federation (TheFED): a network of writers and community publishers

An evaluative report

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Introduction

TheFED is a network of writers and community publishers set up in 2008. It is a group of writers and community publishers that communicates through the internet and an annual mini-fest held in November. The scope of this evaluation is to explore what members perceive to be the benefits of belonging to an organisation of this type and in particular to understand how it has managed to sustain itself without funding.

The evaluation draws on three studies. The most recent derives from a series of focus groups conducted with members of TheFED during 2009; the second set of data is drawn from an earlier focus group study with writing groups from the network's antecedent, The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP), which was made in 2001. Four focus groups comprising a total of 38 people contributed to the earlier study, three focus groups with a total sample of 22 contributed to the later study. A third element was a review of over 300 pieces of writing spanning the period from the 1970s to the present which explored biographical components of meaningfulness – this review excluded fiction and poetry to identify the elements of personal significance in community based writing.

TheFED emerged from a situation in which the FWWCP found itself in a precarious financial situation and had to dissolve in 2007. A number of the people involved in the FWWCP, despite no longer having an organisation or the means of continuing their activities at the same level, did not want to lose the opportunities they had shared, and recognised that it met the needs of a number of groups of people for engagement in

literature based arts activities. As a result they continued to meet and organise. In some respects TheFED is a reinvention of the FWWCP, but there are some principal differences which are perhaps summed up in the decision of the later group to cease using the term 'worker writing' and the loss of regular funding revenue, which the FWWCP had enjoyed since the late 1980's. The internet based communication on which TheFED is now reliant has also been a significant difference in accessible communications, and one significant difference has been that membership is expressed through individual belonging, rather than through group structures.

Summary

TheFED is a network of writers and community publishers continuing a tradition of vernacular and spontaneous literature based activities which has existed for nearly 40 years and has much earlier roots. Although there are many aspects of continuity, the organisation has accommodated a number of diversities and gone through several reinventions in order to sustain these activities; this is true of some of the individual groups themselves. These activities are organised according to the needs of a range of marginalised groups for cultural expression. TheFED represents people coming together from many different marginalised experiences and celebrates the resultant diversities they present. This is often expressed as a genuine interest which arises from the practical recognition of learning opportunities facilitated by the negotiation of differences.

Unknown, unheard, diverse and complex

This diversity has meant that much of what TheFED and its antecedents represent is unknown England – it is neither easily recognised nor easily accommodated in mainstream culture or pedagogy which requires separations, classifications, pigeon holed experiences which can be identified against policy objectives or marketing strategems. Diversity has been something which people in TheFED have learned to appreciate, though it has also been a source of complexity, which they have come to embrace.

Confidence through organic learning and experiment

The somewhat isolated (the extent to which it is now isolated is contested (Morley, Worpole and Pollard 2009) development of these practices has enabled TheFED's

members to pursue issues in much their own way, through which they express confidence and have been able to enable their organisation to survive despite major loss of funding at a national level and a broader experience of funding difficulties.

Identity and spin off activities

TheFED has a strong sense of identity through diversity, and the maintenance of that diversity has led to the development of new capacities in order to sustain and serve the activities which keep both the organisation, its groups and individuals engaged.

Experiences of struggle and hardship, cultural identity through action

Many writers in the movement have described personal experiences of struggle or difference, and it is sometimes these which motivate them to set down their stories. Authors write to record experiences that they believe might disappear but bear significance because of the struggle they represent to overcome difference or hardship. Community publishing and worker writing offer opportunities to discover and even develop cultural identity through the recording of actions over a lifetime, and through the actions connected with publication and performance. Without this focus around a local book or event, such historical information would be quickly lost. The intention behind some of the writing is to record something for future generations from times of rapid change.

Future – and significance

Experience has led TheFED's members to be positive about the future of the organisation or those like it despite current difficulties because of the proven capacity of many individuals in dealing with adversity, having to learn new skills and adapt.

The strengths and creative capacities shown by TheFED's members are frequently derived from these experiences and may be difficult to categorise and consequently difficult in some cases to recognise because they are not conventional.

TheFED is a largely untapped resource, but one which could easily disappear because records of ephemeral practices may not survive, something which participants in this evaluation are keen to address through developing archives. However, the significance of TheFED is as a living and autonomous organisation which sponsors literary production in the widest and most inclusive sense.

Background

The roots of TheFED are in the earlier Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP), a network which grew to 80 writers' and publishing groups worldwide over a period of 30 years from 1976. Though this report is about TheFED, it necessarily discusses aspects of The FWWCP and its practices. This suggests that TheFED represents a continuation of the needs served previously by the FWWCP, and one which clearly existed before 1976. Within the practices represented by TheFED there has been a long history of accommodation, negotiation and renegotiation, and TheFED is a manifestation of the capacity of community based writing and publishing organisations to reinvent and regenerate themselves. This process derives from the spontaneity which is at the heart of many individual group activities.

A few hundred organisations have at some point been FWWCP member groups, some of which, such as London Voices and QueenSpark, predate the foundation of the FWWCP. Both TheFED and the FWWCP it developed from have been largely composed of people who stood outside the mainstream of literary culture - people with writing difficulties, experiences of mental distress, working people, retired people and people on benefits. Many of them come from minority cultures within the UK. The thousands of publications they produced since the 1970s were just as diverse but often ephemeral: photocopied and duplicated broadsheets, tape cassette magazines as well as books and leaflets. This continues with TheFED.

For 30 years FWWCP groups developed writing, publishing, pedagogical and community activist practices, but the organisation lost its funding status in 2007.

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Many largely voluntary organisations, especially those with a radical left origin like the FWWCP, would simply disappear under these circumstances, but a number of the groups and individuals have kept in contact and worked to rebuild it under a new name. This evaluation explores the approaches community based groups develop to ensure their survival.

People have always made records of their activities, and much cultural content is concerned with storied or narrative accounts of them to an audience. The value of these shared stories is in the communication of experience to a group. Worker writing and community publishing is often concerned with the narratives that people develop for family, friends or their immediate communities. Frequently such records are responses to the experiences of social change (Vincent 1981; Ikiugu and Pollard in press) – unemployment, the demolition of old housing, arrival in a new country, changes in work patterns or the urbanisation of the landscape. Despite or perhaps as a result of the fact that they often contain accounts of hardship, difference and struggle, these scattered vernacular and often cheaply reproduced accounts are rarely recognised as serious documents compared to, for example, a client's occupational history which has been mediated and recorded by an occupational therapist in an assessment interview, and nor have they often been regarded as literary significant (Morley and Worpole 1982). In particular, they have not often been seriously regarded unless that serious regard has come from outside the practices of their production and has been able to construct them as 'other'. This situation has been replicated throughout the representation of vernacular arts and tacit knowledge, the processes of ethnography and anthropology. The FWWCP partly came to consider itself as a means

of resistance to other interpretations, and as will be evident, TheFED continues to indicate a strong value of cultural independence.

Writers' workshops of some form or other have a long history. It could be argued that the spontaneity of exchanging writing or competing in verse dates back at least to the bardic traditions of oral poetry, but in more recent times organisations like the Workers Educational Association have organised writing classes. Bromley (1988) noted how a growing consciousness of working class culture has been popularised in safely historical settings rather than in relation to the present. Vernacular voices are rarely allowed to speak for themselves and have to struggle for access to dissemination (Landry 1990, Worpole 1983). This existence on the periphery of established arts, education and culture practices also means that the FWWCP is often neither very well known beyond its membership, nor sometimes even amongst fellow writing group members. Rarely has working class writing and community publishing or the culture which support them been valued for simply being what it is, rather than ripe for some or other improvement determined by well meant advice.

Working class writers have been in evidence in past eras, often struggling to retain control of their work despite patronage to support its production, or else losing the vernacularity of their idiom to modes of writing more suited to their masters and mistresses tastes.

The class word

Working class and community based writing has often been very rich and varied in content. O'Rourke (2005) describes how some writing groups that anteceded the FWWCP had formed in the 1960s. Since the 1970s people have organised various

community based groups which involved a wide range of cultural and narrative exchange. The FWWCP was the most prominent working class and community publishing movement which developed from these beginning with eight groups in 1976. It included not only writers' workshops but also local and oral history groups, people operating community based printing presses and bookshops and literacy groups. Though the FWWCP's definition of the kind of writing its members promoted was based initially on class, member groups soon came to include those based around other marginalisations such as gender, race, ethnicity, geographical location, disability, experiences of mental distress and age. In this diversity many groups developed their own practices, for example of pedagogy or in relation to the redefinition of cultural concepts (Woodin 2005a, 2007). The FWWCP developed a set of practices of its own shared by many although not all members.

Woodin (2005a, 2007) and Courtman (2000, 2007) have shown how FWWCP groups came to quickly accept cultural diversity amongst its membership through a broad understanding of the term 'working class'. The term has always been a subject for debate, but has been retained much of the time because it denoted a way of expressing 'otherness' or not belonging to the cultural mainstream in lieu of a more satisfactory alternative. This evaluation report will in places continue to use the term 'working class' for example to describe some of the models of organisation, although this can no longer be strictly applied – and perhaps it never could – in terms of the content of the material members produce currently in TheFED.

Difficulties in development: reinventing the cultural wheel in the community

Working class organisations like small trade unions (Tait, 2005), with which the FWWCP initially had many affinities (Morley and Worpole 1982) have often not been well researched because of the ephemeral nature of their passing. They are not large institutions, they are often set up for a local and specific purpose or even just a phase in a community or industrial struggle. They use rented premises or even cupboards in community centres. Records are often not kept, or lost when the person who has them dies and relatives do not think them worth keeping. While there are groups such as London Voices and QueenSpark which predated the organisation and continue to meet and work in their communities, over the 30 year history of the FWWCP many others may have only existed for a few months or years.

In academic literature there are references to the FWWCP in passing, often the result of brief encounters, but few publications of in-depth studies. Because the FWWCP has been organised around writing and cultural activities such as oral history or literacy, work such as that of O'Rourke (2005) and Woodin (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2009) has tended to explore these perspectives. However, what is evident in the negotiation of cultural practices and their redefinition from the margins has been that group processes have played a significant part. These processes have often been informal and tacit, developed through experience and expedient rather than from an external body of practice (Parks and Pollard 2009). Woodin (2005c) describes how racist working class group members came to respect the writing of their black counterparts and developed friendships and collaborations. Courtman (2000) describes how the FWWCP came to accommodate other black writing groups, despite their middle class perspectives into a broader 'working class' movement.

It is through these group processes that knowledge and culture might take new forms and ‘new intellectuals’ may arise. Gramsci (1971) recognised this and proposed that people working across such margins might break down the barriers between different strata in a cultural hierarchy. In the FWWCP and the new group, ‘TheFED’, this work has been done through a diverse group, including many people who through their disabilities, experiences of mental distress or marginal status may be outwardly perceived as ‘service user’ communities. In fact, as Woodin’s work (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2009) has revealed, people with marginal experiences have often been innovators of practices.

Community publishing, occupational narratives, and occupational science

Like Woodin (2009) I have also had a long involvement in the FWWCP (Ikiugu and Pollard, in press) which has led to an interest in exploring the theoretical and practical applications of community publishing in occupational therapy collaborations with service users (Pollard 2004a, Pollard and Bryer 2002; Pollard et al 2005; Pollard 2007; Pollard, Voices Talk Hands Write 2008, Pollard and Clayton in press, Pollard and Parks in press), guidelines on setting up and sustaining writers workshops (Pollard 2003, 2004b, 2004c, Parks and Pollard 2009). FWWCP practices in the creation, publication and performance of occupational narratives strongly influenced some discussion of the social justice agenda in the occupational therapy profession (Pollard and Kronenberg 2008; Pollard et al 2008; Pollard, Voices Talk Hands Write 2008; Pollard and Clayton (in press); Pollard et al (in press)). These practices are also connected to the emerging role of negotiating needs and working with community groups (Kronenberg and Pollard 2005; Pollard and Kronenberg 2008; Pollard et al

2008; Pollard et al 2009, Parks and Pollard 2009). This emphasis has not been about the application of writing groups for narrowly 'therapeutic' purposes, but in a context that is more akin to community development. Examples include the production of narratives about personal and community identity and applying these to achieve social change, for example in learning disability contexts (Pollard et al 2005, Pollard 2007, Pollard et al 2008), experiences of mental distress (Pollard and Clayton in press) and on the university campus (Abel et al 2008).

Other occupational therapists have also explored community publishing as an expressive vehicle to document community development (Lorenzo et al 2002, Lorenzo 2003, 2004) and the use of narratives by clients involved in writers workshops to reveal rich detail about the experiences of people diagnosed with schizophrenia (De Souza et al 2005) and other mental health conditions (Schmid 2005, Griffiths 2007). Occupational therapists have also combined participation in community publishing with other celebratory arts events (McNulty 2008, Pollard and Parks in press).

It is very important to point out that writing and publishing practices in the community are perceived within the movement represented by TheFED as expressive actions which celebrate the right to cultural dissemination and *not* merely 'therapeutic'. As a therapist, my interest in worker writing and community publishing predates my professional education, and the value of this form of occupation is that it is far more than the limited scope of therapy. The publication of *The Republic of Letters* in 1982 (Morley and Worpole) was a sharp response from the FWWCP to the work of its members being dismissed by the then Arts Council of Great Britain as

being ‘of therapeutic value only’, and despite subsequent prolonged support from the Arts Council of England until 2007 remained a sore point. People currently involved in TheFED perceive their cultural purpose as being concerned with not only the pursuit of their own writing, but of sustaining and developing opportunities and activities in order to facilitate others. It is a participatory and continuously creative process, not a static one or one limited to ‘recovery’. This experience has been a very strong influence on my academic work and that of my colleagues within the ‘occupational therapy without borders’ movement, which has generated an international effect of encouraging therapists to engage in or reconnect with community development work (Kronenberg et al 2005, Pollard et al 2008, Kronenberg et al in press, Ikiugu and Pollard, in press). In the field of community literacy, the traditions maintained by TheFED are an emerging influence on US practices (Parks and Pollard 2009a, 2009b, 2010), just as the work of the FWWCP and its member groups has earlier been recognised in writing on education in school (for example distribution of publications through the Inner London Education Authority Booklist and National Association for Teachers of English during the 1980s, exercises in the National Curriculum for the economic use of English, based on FWWCP practices described in Worpole 1984), and especially aspects of adult literacy education (Mace 1995, O Rourke 2005, Courtman 2007, Woodin 2005b, 2007, 2008). The FWWCP has also been influential in the development of approaches to community publishing in the Australian state of Victoria and northern France, while the links with US practice have been sustained by TheFED. The capacity to be an influential resource for initiatives in linked fields has waxed and waned over the history of the movement, but is never absent and is sustained by the inherently progressive approaches to action embedded in TheFED’s current membership.

How this evaluation came about

The active consideration of the means of developing the organisation is a constant element in the movement. As a member of TheFED and the former FWWCP I had informal discussions with other people in the organisation who are engaged in survivors' poetry and basic education organised by people with disabilities concerning the development of this project. Some of these arose through the process of maintaining and developing the current organisation where it was recognised that it might be useful to explore some of the group processes which were occurring. The motivation for the first focus group study on FWWCP groups had been as a means of completing an MSc in Occupational Therapy, the second was to provide some material towards the completion of a PhD, the review was produced to provide evidence for a book written on the relationship between meaningfulness and occupation (Ikiugu and Pollard, in press). The report from the first study was given to the FWWCP, but in the case of the second study it was evident from the depth of the data that in combination with the earlier work a fuller evaluation could be developed. The bulk of the data and individual quotes used in this report comes from the second study, though reference is occasionally made to both the first, and the review.

A key difference between therapeutic uses of writing and the formation of writing groups in the FWWCP, has been group autonomy. The functions of the group, including responsibility for organising activities, are often negotiated and determined by the members facilitated rather than led by a convenor (Woodin, 2007) and have been sometimes determined through the active discussion of political theories in relation to cultural production (Morley and Worpole, 1982; Morley, Worpole and

Pollard 2009). This study was an opportunity to see what tactics and strategies groups and individuals have employed to sustain their community publishing and worker writing activities in the absence of a strong national organisation, in the transition from the FWWCP to TheFED.

Other researchers on the writer workshop movement (e.g. O'Rourke 2005) and working class organisations (e.g. Tait 2005) have noted that research has largely depended on memories. Material is quickly lost largely due to the combination of pressures in which current events take precedence over posterity. Often people do not see their small organisations as sufficiently important to bother with meticulous recording, or perhaps cannot prioritise this against other tasks. As Smart (2005), Smart et al (in press) and Woodin (2005a, 2007, 2008) discovered, many of the pedagogical developments in the FWWCP occurred, and are still occurring, in the 'TheFED' spontaneously as the organisation or its member groups generates practices in response to events. As Abel et al's (2008) blog based transatlantic discourse shows, the arena of workshop and community publishing practices has shifted from print and geographically defined communities to the worldwide web and new technologies. It is the accessibility of these environments which have enabled TheFED to survive, and people to remain engaged with each other despite marginalising issues such as disability, or living on benefits. Previous worker writing research has not yet explored this activity.

Literature

A literature search explored what has already been published about sustaining writing workshop and community publishing practices. Given the interests of the researcher this included their relationship to occupational narratives. Searches used health and social science databases to reveal material with a therapeutic or occupational science emphasis, and educational databases as practices also have a pedagogical element. Given the range of sources and research governance conditions under which these materials were produced while every effort to verify ethical clearance was made it was inappropriate to apply blanket screening, except where studies involved service users and therefore health or social services conditions for research applied. Studies where writing is used for psychotherapeutic purposes were generally excluded as these would be unlikely to connect with the needs of community based groups.

Very few references to community publishing were found in health and social care literature, while the larger availability of material in education databases rarely refers to disability or health issues. The search process was complicated by the diversity of groups which is integral to the identity of the TheFED and FWWCP but defied easy categorisation. There was some overlap between the vernacular practices of community publishing organisations and worker writing groups and those of community literacy programmes (eg O' Rourke 2005; Goldblatt 2007; Dunlap 2007). Those driven by educational programmes were distinguished from others which derive from the community members themselves, though this is a grey area, as Goldblatt (2007) indicates; educational initiatives are often responses to community demands and engagements with local social entrepreneurs.

Sample

I was already embedded in the worker writer and community publishing movement, a precedent shared with Woodin and O'Rourke, both prominent activists and workers in the past. As I had previously conducted a focus group study with the FWWCP (Pollard 2001, Pollard and Bryer 2002) this method again seemed appropriate.

'TheFED' is mostly organised in groups which meet regularly and this appears to be how activities are sustained. Some publishing co-operatives support a part time worker working with the rest of the members. Woodin's (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2008, 2009) and Courtman's (2000, 2007) studies of FWWCP workshops and publishers were based on individual interviews, but I felt that the richness of the data was likely to emerge from the discussion of group contributions to a shared process. Examples of this process might be the decisions groups made about publication content, design and distribution. Given my established association with TheFED, I used a convenience sample of community writing and published groups negotiated through it's Yahoo grouplist to obtain volunteers. Focus groups were conducted using a collaborative approach (Krueger 1994) as part of the writers or community publishers' group meetings arranged by negotiation with their members on their own territory.

Themes from the literature were used to identify a schedule of key questions to stimulate responses from the focus group and allow participants to explore their own methods and skills in sustaining their activities. This may have presented some difficulties with the critical depth of the data: group pressures may operate, some

members may influence others, and my previous and continued involvement in the worker writer movement may also affect responses and subsequent analysis. (Krueger 1994). On the other hand my position facilitated access to the groups and in-depth understanding of the data (Silverman 1993).

Focus groups took place with members of one member organisation, at a meeting of participants in several local groups and at a small conference where there were participants from several FWWCP and TheFED organisations past and present. Consequently the sample of 21 had several axes of diversity, including survivors of mental distress, people with writing difficulties, different ethnicities, workers, benefit recipients, pensioners, academics, students, 9 women and 12 men. Though it was originally intended to go beyond the evaluation point of three focus groups to determine whether theoretical saturation has been achieved (Krueger 1994), after the third group had been transcribed this did not appear to be necessary.

Data gathering and analysis

Focus groups were recorded on cassette and transcribed as this approach offers the best rigor in analysis (Krueger 1994), particularly when one of the objects is to analyse for process (Strauss and Corbin 1998). A grounded theory approach was applied since the data appears to be largely based in tacit forms of knowledge; this origin suggests that it will generate a substantive theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Worker and community based writing and publishing does not exist in a cultural vacuum, it is responsive to the critical theory and stylistic influences from literary and popular genres and modes of dissemination. It is also derived partly from pedagogical approaches such as that of Freire (1972, see Morley and Worpole 1982; Worpole

1983; Woodin 2007, 2008). These influences, along with my own experience and activism, have to be accommodated in the analysis, consequently, a reflective autobiographical approach was used to attempt to separate out personal experience (see Ikiugu and Pollard, in press). This was used both to comparatively analyse other data (Clandinin and Connelly 1998) and make theory building explicit.

Ethical Concerns

Though the sample is diverse across age, ethnic background and different experiences of disability all the participants are in self-constituted community based organisations independent of social services or NHS facilities, so approval from Sheffield Hallam University's staff projects committee was sufficient. Consent was obtained from all participants. No-one chose to withdraw from the focus groups.

Participants' transcribed voices were assigned coding numbers in order to preserve anonymity through the process of transcription and data analysis.

Findings and discussion

Unknown England

Groups in working class organisations like the FWWCP and 'TheFED' operate in a kind of assumed vacuum, an unknown territory - in fact a 1985 anthology of FWWCP writing was described as the poetry of "unknown England" (cover blurb, FWWCP 1985). This creative space was itself sustaining, because the rules were made up by the very people who were getting involved as they went along:

P1 " we were going to [...] a really run down wonderful space that used to let anybody in to do anything, basically. And we used to give readings and some people might compose songs and invite a guitarist along, and there'd be a bit of theatre, very knock-about stuff [...] that was the forerunner of things like young people getting up to do punk, [...] and rap[...]. I think the working class writing, and the acceptance that everyone's a writer opened up the doors to all sorts of self expression."

The spaces developed by these groups were also outside of the mainstream cultural imagination:

P2: "Benjamin Zephaniah, his earliest stage as a writer, he was involved in a café and writing group in Stratford. This is way before he got published, but that was his grass roots beginning and he certainly opened a lot of doors of people in terms of what is possible in terms of presentation, style, subject matter. And, I can remember Blake Morrison writing [...] in the TLS to the

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effect that Tony Harrison was the only working class writer [...] when there were lots of Fed groups, but lots of other people writing things, [...] this just shows the ignorance and narrow mindedness of the literary elite in this country.”

Consequently people tend to suppose that there is no organisation like them, and are not looking to become involved in one; the organisation and its benefits have to be discovered, happened on, and experienced in order to be realised. They were also organised in spontaneous ways that may now be difficult to replicate:

P1 "bombing up the motorway to Liverpool, there probably wasn't any seats in the back it was probably an old van. [...] we'd get caned from health and safety that we've got now, [...] all these London kids who'd never been past Watford [...] You'd meet similarly minded people from Liverpool and have a fantastic afternoon swapping poems and stories and get to know them and hurtle back down again all in the same day, [...] you ended up back in London at midnight. And it was a real eye opener [...] there were similar minded sort of people all over the country. It was the genesis of the Fed really, the idea that people could link up across the country, fantastic."

Developing confidence through organic learning and experiment

Thus the FWWCP and TheFED [the speaker above was referring to the FWWCP, which was affectionately called ‘the Fed’, hence the new name] has grown organically, absorbing many different influences and coming to value diversity as sources of creativity, the enjoyment of meeting people, and the enjoyment of debate.

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For some people the educational and personal development possibilities this offered were much more significant than the narrow class debate.

P11 "I was interested and really excited about writing as a form of personal empowerment and the ability of creative writing to transform people's lives, it doesn't matter what class they were from. [...] I was quite excited about the opportunities that community based writing groups provided for people who hadn't previously engaged with writing.

Through this people have been allowed to realise that they can write and communicate to an audience – this development has occurred over time in the process of experimentation with learning, performance or writing. Clearly this is something which people in TheFED have come to value because it has been built and organised in responses to their own experiences, needs and recognitions of others accommodated within the diverse wider groups to which they belong. These processes could not have occurred through a top-down arts or pedagogical process but had to be negotiated through mutual participation.

P3 "there was a lot of [...] learning in an organic way that could take place over five to ten years, not going to a class and you've learned something and got that bit of knowledge, it's like learning related to your own being as it were."

It has also enabled people with low levels of confidence to gain skills literally through being around at the time to be involved and having to discover how to network, teach,

volunteer. This requires openness and conveying a sense of security that they are not going to be judged by their performance.

P4 "There were people who didn't used to read and write and they went to TheFED where most people can read and write and that and start and tell them about the difficulties they have and things like that. They got involved in running workshops and that down there and getting on the committee and stuff like that."

P5 " bringing up half a dozen kids and getting them all reading well and all out in jobs and that kind of stuff, they never realised it was a skill, and it IS a skill. [...] lots of other things are brought out and they can do a lot more things than they realised, and the support in Pecket and in The Federation itself was good because people would realise that what they had to offer...

P12 " I said to him, 'you really like your poetry, don't you?' and he said, 'oh, it's nothing to do with the poetry, that's not why I come, it's because I'm accepted,' to me that says it all"

P7 " you suddenly realise that you're a member of a group of writers and you meet up with other groups of writers and immediately you begin an exchange, a networking"

This realisation was a very powerful experience, whether the individual was an adult learner or not:

P10 "it wasn't the sort of tokenistic thing as if there was a white middle class committee saying let's hear your story, your story and your story. Those people came and were part of the organising committee, that was a big difference. [...] I went to my first federation AGM and I was just blown away with that, not just people with different backgrounds but people with learning difficulties, and all sorts of people that a) I might not have met and b) were taking on positions of power in a way in an organization, and that was a really, really powerful important thing and challenged all of us [...] to work in different ways"

Diversity and complexity

Both the 2001 and the current study revealed a strong appreciation of difference, many respondents in the previous study remarking that the FWWCP had enabled them to encounter many people they would not have otherwise met. Such diversity brings complexities and over 30 years the FWWCP and TheFED learned to resolve these through a tradition of robust debate. This was important in building diverse identities on the basis of class, gender or ethnicity

P3 "they were fierce debates, it wasn't comfortable like sitting round in a room, people were sometimes getting extremely uncomfortable [...] about class, about identity, about the academics who are here, what are they doing if they are? You could be kind of inspected as it were from a certain perspective about what you're doing here, what's your purpose? [...] uncomfortable at times but also creative"

A consequence of debate is that groups working with working class, gendered and other minority experiences can derive strengths from the many divisions and difficulties they contain

P2 “[gives group name] were doing working class history [...] about the impact of Moseley’s blackshirts in the area and some of the views and expressions that came out were really quite controversial and there was a huge row about whether at least one publication should be edited in a certain way. There were plenty of things that came up especially when these people were elders in the community, they were listened to with respect but sometimes they came up with stuff that people were not comfortable with, which was great actually because you can’t pretend that the working class is one monolithic entity all sailing the same way”

The resultant negotiation of diversity has made it difficult to categorise or communicate the benefits of participation to other bodies, for example funders.

P1 described how one funder

"couldn't get a handle on The Federation because it did include all these different groupings of people. It had very earnest poets really working out their pieces, it had adult literacy students who were being creative and putting something down on paper maybe for the first time, it had history groups, don't forget the history strand, oral history, and all these sorts of things they honestly just couldn't put it in a bag, that's why they couldn't deal with it. And yes, I think that was the strength of The Federation and hopefully of the new

Federation, they will have so many different elements, that it's more than literature isn't it?"

Perhaps a consequence of this argument and negotiation has been the recognition of the value of persistence and taking bold chances in order to find the means to continue activities. After failing to find any sources of funding for his group one participant went to see his local MP in desperation:

P6 "literally within moments – she'd picked up the phone and called the external funding officer from the local council and said 'sort him out'. That was her words. And within 48 hours he was on the phone to me and just falling over backwards to find us funding streams". He also felt that funding shortages make groups competitive rather than co-operative, people tend to retain information rather than share it. "trying to connect up with organisations in this particular overall sector has never been the easiest thing. [...] talking to other people, especially professionals, [...] everyone clings very closely to their own little bit. Everyone's afraid of losing what little they already have"

But others were quick to disagree:

P7 " in this room today we've got an awful lot of representatives of an awful lot of groups [...lists six groups] so there's quite a lot of links here within all of this that involves also Survivors poetry and TheFED. And certainly when it comes to the minifest we're all there aren't we?"

Other participants described how they were networking and while as a result valuable information gets around by word of mouth, this is not always efficient.

Communication with funders and partners

Participants generally described limitations due to the lack of adequate funding, affecting not only important activities such as publication but more basic issues

P6 "funding is the main challenge because groups of our type don't usually contain too many wealthy people so it is a struggle to pay for the rooms, the tea and the coffee and that sort of stuff. [...] Without funding its harder to keep the sessions going and virtually impossible to produce any publications which have a mainstream type appearance "

Access to funds is further restricted where concepts have to fit changing arts or educational terminologies. As can be seen from the examples already given, a response to adversity results in unconventional and creative practices and processes. Often the design of forms or the wording cannot accommodate these, is intimidating or just too difficult to understand, the people operating the funding process are not always helpful, while the process of applying for funding is demanding for small volunteer led organisations who are just trying to keep themselves going, and unable to engage with complex processes. This is especially a barrier to Fed groups who involve their users/participants in the funding application process

P5 " all the funds out there are saying 'oh yes we must reach all these people, communities that never get involved and they're never going to because the

language that they use is too high falutin' that it doesn't [...] involve the smaller group, it can't go out to a group of mother and toddlers and help them to fill out an application form [...] that's where these funders go wrong, they should have people out there, people who can give them that advice, not just over the telephone, but who can say 'look, here's an example..' or go out and talk to them about it"

One development strategy of working with other groups to develop projects can break down because of a failure to communicate and recognise needs. Survivor participants described work with mental health services where changes in staff meant that their work was abruptly discontinued. P6 saw this as a failure

"on the part of the administration at the hospital. The turn-out was enormous and they really enjoyed themselves but it happened as a result of a phone call I received from the locum head of occupational therapy, she was really keen to get us in there.[...] we went and we entertained the mental health unit and the geriatric unit but the staff and the management, once the locum left, they just shut the place down. The next time we went it was all in darkness it was all locked up. They were not interested at all."

Ethos and identity

As some of the other data has already strongly suggested, reaching out to other groups is integral to the ethos of worker writing and community publishing. The recognition of the value of this inclusive connection to literacy and to people who may have

writing difficulties who are not accommodated by recent changes in education provision was strongly felt where policy changes threatened this engagement:

P10 " they didn't want people to come back year after year after year, or to gradually progress or have a community of 'well this is us writing our stories', what they wanted was, exactly, 10 week courses, enough to get people back into work. And there were some very patronising remarks like 'they don't need to come to this, they could just go to needlework, or they could just go to some craft activity, it's just a club, they don't need literacy'"

In return, one participant described how some people continued to attend groups in order to be able to come to the FWWCP annual meetings.

Sometimes, however, members of educational groups were not seen as autonomous, able to make their own decision to join the FWWCP independently of their tutors:

P3 "At other times people in TheFED were very wary of that educational label, and wouldn't let some of those groups in because they weren't appropriate, they were too educational"

The transition which the organisation had to make from the FWWCP to TheFED can appear to be mostly an adaptation to fewer resources. Generally there appears to be strong and important elements of consistency which paradoxically arose from the recognition of diversities combining in affinities:

P3 "If you look at history since the 70's there's been quite a few changes; if you come to any Fed event I always think it's got a similar kind of feel, kind of ethos, and the kinds of people that come and the kinds of activity going on, there's a awful lot of continuity, sameness going on which is very valuable, but I guess the biggest change in a way for me was there was almost a unique moment around the early 70's when so many different strands came together. You could identify other areas that aren't based around writing groups that might have an affinity, obviously local libraries tend to take over the autobiography, oral history type work."

However the change from FWWCP to TheFED produced some concerns about the loss of class identity:

P7 "I don't know if we all like the name as it is now, a network of writing and community publishers.

P8: that's why you dropped the 'worker'

P9: We have got community publishers in this area, or are they in our community?

P6: I don't know about community publishers around here to be honest, there are small – I was going to say publishers but they're printers aren't they

P9: They're small printers

P6: They're small printers but I don't know if there are any community publishers

P7: So when we publisher our stuff we are publishers then aren't we?

P8: [...] the booklets we have had produced are published by [gives group name] [...] So yes I guess that qualifies us as community publishers, if it doesn't well then I don't know what does."

Other important factors were travel and physical access to buildings, whether meeting times include people at work or people who might not go out in the evenings and of the group size

P9 "small groups are important [...] you could have lots of small groups, but once your group has gone beyond the 15-20 mark you lose that input and that intimacy in a way."

People also needed time in their lives to write, but some were inventive. One writer worked in a factory:

P1 "she'd be working on the machine and get an idea for a poem, write it down

P10: hide it under the –

P1: The boss would come she'd have to hide it and carry on sewing."

These barriers can be overcome with some pragmatic flexibility:

P5 "we had a couple that wanted to come along, but the only night they could come along was on a Thursday, but the daughter decided that that night she needed the children babysitting for a couple of months for her part time job, so

the children were going to be a barrier, so we invited the grandchildren in. They were five and nine years old, 'so long as you look after them that was fine,' and that went so well that even the five and the nine year old ended up tutoring other participants on the computer course [...] giving tips to all these older people [...]. Nobody said 'you're a little smart-arse telling me what to do' - more than peer tuition, it was amazing to watch. [...] And if somebody came on the course one week in another three weeks they'd be tutoring another new person, and the confidence it gave them, because they knew how to do something they could show them, it was a big snowball effect."

Occupational spin-off

The consequence of so much diversity and participatory organisation was shown in the 2001 study, which demonstrated that involvement in writing and publishing activities provided many additional opportunities beyond the immediate occupation of writing or producing publications. People have clearly developed a range of other skills and appreciated their acquisition. These may include familiarisation with different aspects of computer literacy connected with the operation of word processing, email, website, publishing and database programmes. Community negotiation skills from accessing funding and other resources to resolving disputes have been essential in preparing a space for the production of local narratives, enabling them to be performed and published, and in the discussion of how these may be interpreted. Workshop and educational practices have had to be developed that accommodate different levels of literacy, different awarenesses and knowledge of literature and culture.

Groups have had to develop innovative strategies to disseminate and market their material to their communities. There is evidence (Morley and Worpole 1982, Pollard 2001, Morley, Worpole and Pollard 2009, Parks and Pollard, 2009, Woodin 2009) that these activities have had to operate to different principles to conventional practices in publishing. Key issues might, for example, be the preference for direct sales rather than selling through intermediaries who charge an unaffordable amount of the cover price for their services both for the publisher and for the target readership. The organic and spontaneous development of groups and the intensely local pattern of publication distribution and predominant audience interest has meant that local lessons have not always been transmitted – for example aspects of design which result in unsuccessful covers making books difficult to sell, developing projects that take a long time for a small group to complete, threatening group cohesion and the possibility of realising objectives, or overprinting so that groups are burdened with unsold books (Parks and Pollard 2009). However, the fact that so many groups have survived, that so many publications have been produced overall and that certain groups have produced many publications amongst themselves, often linked to performances and other events to aid successful distribution is a testament to the capacity of TheFED's members.

Some of the benefits are not easily categorised. Both the 2001 study and the current interviews referred to the importance of gatherings like the mini-fest and Festival of Writing, particularly the readings. The readings have always been the highlight of the year for some members, an occasion where people from all the groups listen to an evening of performances, often arranged so that the performers are in the centre of a semi circle. These occasions are created as a celebration of everything that TheFED

is, and will include writing produced earlier in the day, pieces that are performed by certain individuals every time they come to such an event (and which are appreciated none the less), others written especially for the mini-fest, groups showcasing their work, and often pieces which represent a first attempt at writing by adult learners. The result is highly varied, ranging between polished and spontaneous. All the performers are given applause, everything is appreciated, especially the effort taken by less confident performers. Some people are unable to read their work themselves and have someone to read it for them while they take the stage and receive the appreciation. At the 2009 mini-fest one performer held aloft a tape recorder with her performance playing on it as a way of overcoming her uncertainties.

This flexibility with regard to enabling people to take part has also been a continuing tradition of the workshop content of events. One of the recent interviews discussed an example where a poetry workshop was lead by two people who had significant writing difficulties, but no problem with composition. Participants had been given an exercise in which they had to write a poem using words with only three letters in them, because these were the only words one of the facilitators could spell. For the participants this was very challenging, and out of nine only one person managed to produce a wholly three letter word poem.

Events like the mini-fest consequently produce complicated outcomes, some of which relate to sustainability through opportunities to discover their strength:

P6 “[Festivals of writing] got a lot of people there that would normally not have attended a large gathering, especially one of that type with readings and workshops where they were exposing their vulnerability to a lot of people that

they didn't know. It gave them the chance to take that on and survive it and want to come back for more which everybody did. It strengthened everybody that went there and I think that's the main benefit that our group derived from TheFED. That and the fact of having contact with an organisation of that type through the magazine and being able to write for TheFED and just – and really just confidence building – opening people out who through no fault of their own had become very enclosed.”

There is also a complex relationship to personal growth which not only affects individuals but has an influence on those around them:

P6 “any group of this type has ultimately a ripple effect which touches friends and family and thereby the wider community [...] the most valuable thing that any group like this does is that it enables people to offer their vulnerability rather than protect it. [...] that's one of the most courageous and valuable things that anyone can do and that gives people an inner confidence which obviously expresses their self externally even if only to a small extent. And that obviously has an ongoing effect [...] it's a positive change, and that makes them feel good and they express that in their life elsewhere and so the community enlarges because of it and it may not be actively noticeable by the community at large but it all has a positive effect across the community.”

Often in the past it has not understood has been that organisations like TheFED have a history of their own rather than one which can be imposed externally, and this experience may actually be more significant and something for others to learn from.

Instead, however, such organisations meet demands to match external criteria through which benefits are determined not by the members, but by others with different objectives. Consequently, the question about why something works is not ever explored, and the spontaneity, innovation, and local practices are misrecognised because they are ordered to criteria that do not necessarily serve the organisations needs. This problem is frequently recognised in other areas of community development, but has not with community publishing:

P5: “you're talking about the history and the things that have happened in the past either with TheFED or with Pecket I suppose it's the same, if you've got a good plan that works, why change it. Yes you need to move on and add things, but if something - if you've got a good basic plan and it involves an awful lot of people and they enjoy it and they come to it and they benefit from it, then there's no reason - yeah you can have more activities, you can do other things, but because of lack of funding again, things get wound down, when you come to start again it's like reinventing the wheel.”

This reservoir of practices and narratives continues to be of interest elsewhere, both in terms of the discussion of narrative and occupation within my profession – albeit at the moment through a small range of people, also outside the UK where TheFED has been able to maintain contacts with Open City Press in Philadelphia and Syracuse University. This is extending to publications which aim to make this experience available to US audiences, particularly students of community literacy.

Futures

Perhaps because group members are keenly aware that their narratives are not recognised in the mainstream they see the importance of establishing archives so that others can benefit from learning about how they ran their groups

P5: " I think that's most important, that they're kept and not just in paper and in boxes in cupboards and stuffed up in attics, they need to be digitised and on made available on the internet so other people can say "oh we could do that in our area". [...] I think its important to keep the ethos and the activities going."

Very significantly, despite the disruption experienced by the loss of the FWWCP's financial position and several similar difficulties affecting other prominent member groups in the movement in recent years, despite a long weeding out of radical left organisations especially counter cultural survivors like the FWWCP, and attrition in adult education and literacy, participants had a positive outlook because of the networks that have enabled them to retain a group identity, both as individual and as extended groups

P6: "with the links that we've got to external groups and with the number of people that attend centres like the one that we're in here, the future does look quite good for the actual numbers of people and figures of people to get involved in creative writing and poetry writing in general so that its fairly good really."

P1 " there's always scope, [...] people are learning but it's not what we would call education, it's much more it's about life as it were.

P2: I think that what [---] said, that little phrase 'more than literature', if we want a new slogan, I think that would be a good one to go with. As for realism and realistic now 'demand the impossible, achieve the impossible'.

P11: I think nationally within the department of health there's a real interest now in terms of making a linkage which is there between creative writing and improved mental health. There's a very new organisation which is looking to provide community input into the development of a national policy in arts and mental health. It's something I feel that TheFED might want to get involved in."

Conclusions

The worker writing and community publishing movement represented by the FWWCP and TheFED has been the sponsor of practical participatory approaches to group work negotiated around writing, literacy and publication and diversity. Despite being a relatively small movement and despite the obvious fragility of both aspects of their organisation and the records and publications it has produced, the people involved in these groups have developed a strong sense of group identity. This is evident through the expression of their presence as part of their local cultures and also, to a varying extent, in terms of the continuous development of the larger movement in which they participate.

There is a strong sense of struggling to represent experiences which are outside the cultural mainstream which has served to pull together diversities, of working with small resources and developing capabilities as a result, which people talk of with affection and with a sense of having achieved something. The participants have many examples of how they have worked to enable each other, learning organically through discovery and the reinvention of the movement both currently and in the past, even through disagreement. Perhaps one of the range of benefits people get from participation is the sense of 'doing something together which is recognised through an audience'. For example the FWWCP's festival readings were of particular importance in participants in the 2001 study, and this aspect of reading and listening together remains the focus of the current mini-fest. Through mutual expression and activity they become confident in their perception of the movement's difference, the

knowledge and experience they have, its values and their ability to share these, even though - perhaps because - it remains difficult to obtain recognition for them.

This experience has been developed over nearly 40 years through debate and practice steeped in the cultural politics of class, gender, ethnicity, disability and mental distress survivors (which has sometimes questioned the role of professionals and educators) through self determination and active group and community participation. A small study can only outline the richness of experiences the movement contains, but its members appear to have a lot of tacit knowledge which can benefit group work practices, especially where they involve marginalised groups.

Reaching and meeting the needs of marginalised groups has recently become something of an issue of concern in policy. Official approaches to community needs operate from a top down approach, often creating resistance before they can engage with the target group's needs. This generates suspicion and hostility before anything can be negotiated. Insertion into groups can also promote hostility, but the kinds of processes which have been explored by worker writing groups and community publishers may offer an answer to securing a working relationship.



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