

Hilton Koppe

Beyond the medical record – creative writing workshop for doctors



The Journey

From Australia to Switzerland,
From village to city,
From abstract idea to workshop,
From anxious to relieved,
From problem to solution,
From blank page to poetry,
From silence to music,
From trapped to free,
From uncertainty to delight,
From stranger to friend,
Magic happened!

From Australia to Switzerland, from village to city

It was a long journey from my home in Lennox Head, a small sea-side village on the east coast of Australia, to Wonca Europe in Basel. But it certainly was a journey worth making. I left home just after our big GP education conference in Australia, which was attended by 450 delegates – and we thought that was a big conference. Imagine my surprise when I arrived in Basel to find out that there were to be 4,700 delegates from 73 countries. It made me feel quite small!

From abstract idea to workshop

For the last few years, I have been running creative writing workshops for doctors, which were designed to use the process of writing to assist with burn out prevention. These workshops have been very successful in Australia and I was hoping it would be the same in Europe. My biggest concern was whether the processes used in the workshop would be of value to participants who do not have English as their first language.

When I run the workshops in Australia, I generally try to limit the number of participants from 15 to 20, as this allows a good balance between opportunities for people to share their work while at the same time having a wide variety of input and opinions from other participants.

From anxious to relieved

I was quite daunted then to arrive at my workshop in Basel to find about 100 participants, most of whom did not have English as their first language! How was I going to manage?

Luckily, it quickly became clear that the issues faced by family doctors in Australia are very similar to those faced by our colleagues in Europe, and I was able to use all the exercises we use at our workshops here without any problems. This was, in part, due to the shared nature of our experiences as family doctors, but also due to the linguistic brilliance of the participants. It is unimaginable that a conference could be held in Australia in any language other than English, but it was not a significant barrier to the doctors at my workshop to work in their second, or sometimes third language, and still be able to produce wonderful pieces of poetry.

The workshop started with my sharing of the story of how I came to be involved in running creative writing workshops for doctors. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into details about that here, but I have written about this previously [1].

From problem to solution

Participants were then asked to think of a patient that they found challenging in some way, particularly at an interpersonal level. Not surprisingly, none of the participants had difficulty thinking of someone! I did offer to give anyone who could not think of such a patient one of my patients, but there was no need for that.

After a fun introductory exercise to help participants start thinking about words which they could use to describe this patient, and how they made them feel, I offered some instruction about the features of a simple form of poem called a list poem. These poems have three main features:

1. Every line starts with the same word or the same sound.
2. Except for the last line, which starts with a different word, or a different sound. And the last line is the punch line which delivers the main message of the poem.
3. The title is important as an introduction to the theme of the poem, as the poems are often quite short, and a good introduction allows the reader to immediately know the tone of the poem.

From blank page to poetry

After hearing two examples of list poems written by doctors with the same amount of instruction in how to write poems as they had just received, the participants were invited to spend a few minutes writing a poem about their challenging patient.

It was wonderful for me to hear the silence in the room as all the participants engaged with this exercise. The room was absolutely silent as they focused all their attention on writing. It was at this moment that I knew that the workshop was going very well.

From silence to music

And it was even more wonderful for me to hear some of the poems. It is a generous and brave act to stand up and read a piece of poetry in front of a group of colleagues, and I was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm shown by this group. So many people wanted to read their work.

The quality of the writing was exceptional, particularly as it was often not in their first language. The magic of poetry meant that even a poem read in German had meaning to those of us who spoke no German. The meaning was able to be expressed through the music and the rhythm of the words.

From trapped to free

After the poetry, there was a small amount of time left for a reflective writing exercise. This form of writing can be used to reflect on a difficult situation with the aim of being able to think about it in a different and perhaps more helpful way.

I asked participants to think about a time from early in their career

Playing a game

Playing with symptoms,
 Playing with doctors,
 Playing with treatment,
 Playing with my time,
 Playing with emotions,
 One of us doesn't know the rules.

Waltraud Fink, Straning, Austria

when they felt they had been treated poorly by a senior colleague. Again, no one had problems thinking of such a situation. I then asked them to imagine that they were going home at the end of the day in which this situation occurred to write in their journal or diary about that event. The task for this writing exercise was to write about the event, as if it had happened today.

PABLO*

You pain my neck when I see you in the appointment book
 You pain my head because of your suicidal non compliance
 You pain my ear – your accent grates
 You pain my pocket because you don't pay my bills
 You pain my heart when I think of your sad life story and how
 your family suffers.

BUT

Whatever happens:

stroke
 infarct
 even suicide

I am a rat and you are the trap
 – clipped painfully to my tail
 together
 forever?!?

*name changed

Manfred Teichler, Switzerland

In the form of reflective writing we used in the workshop, participants were asked to *"just keep the pen moving. Don't worry about spelling or grammar or neatness. Just keep the pen moving. If you can't think of what to write, just write that you can't think what to write. The important thing is to just keep the pen moving. This writing is just for yourself. No one else is going to read it, so don't worry if it is any good. Leave your inner critic aside for a few moments, and just keep the pen moving."*

Again, the instruction was followed by absolute silence as they focused on the task. And they were able to maintain the focus on this task for the 10 minutes which were available. Unfortunately, the workshop was too short to allow the next steps in this exercise, which are to do the same style of writing about the same incident, firstly from the perspective of the other person involved in the incident, and then to do it from the perspective of a neutral third person observer.

From uncertainty to delight, from stranger to friend,

It was a privilege to be able to bring this workshop to Europe. I was absolutely delighted by the response from the participants, both at the workshop, and in emails since then. I was particularly pleased that ideas which germinated in a small village in coastal Australia were able to blossom in Basel, and hopefully now flourish around the world.

Magic happened!**References**

- 1 Koppe H, A road to humanity, Australian Family Physician, Vol 37, No 7, July 2008. <http://www.racgp.org.au/afp/200807/200807koppe.pdf>.

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