

Writing as a means of healing and growth

For the past nine years, I have been leading writing groups in and around Dublin. I trained for this activity in Austin, Texas, USA, in April 2007. The particular teaching I follow is that of Pat Schneider, founder of Amherst Writers and Artists (AWA). Pat's book, *Writing Alone and With Others*, tells the story of how Pat was invited to lead groups in Chicopee, a low-income housing area not far from her home in Amherst. The girls who wrote with Pat in Chicopee were dealing with many problems: poverty, unemployment, drugs, prostitution, violence and lack of education. Continuing, week after week with these women, writing with them, listening to their writings and giving them positive feedback, Pat noticed a change in the girls: as they found their voices, they grew in confidence and self-esteem. Some of them returned to education and went on to do diplomas which enabled them to get worthwhile employment. I met some of these Chicopee women in Pat's house in Amherst in 2007 and was so impressed by their confidence and determination. One of Pat's sayings is "Through writing change happens". Over the years since I did my training in Texas, I have never been without a group of writers. My two permanent groups are composed mostly of women in their 70s. Week after week, we write. Many of these ladies are happy just to come, write with their friends, have a cup of tea and a chat and go home. A few are writing their life stories for the benefit of their children. A few have had work published and have won competitions. Working together has fostered a great community spirit among the writers.

Pat Schneider's book, gives the method she has developed and, having used it for nine years now, I can truly say it works. The format for the writing session is: Prompt, Write, Feedback. The "prompt" can take many forms and it is up to the leader to find interesting prompts. Pat's book has lists of prompts for the leader to use. Sometimes a prompt suggests itself e.g. a tree coming into bloom in the garden, the first snowfall of winter, a national feast day.

Confidentiality is absolutely essential. This gives writers freedom to write freely.

Another rule with Pat is "Everything is treated as fiction, whether or not it is factually true." It takes a bit of time to get this idea across, but it does safeguard the writers. They can write quite personal pieces, but the listeners are asked to treat it as a piece of fiction. This prevents them from asking personal questions and offering therapy. The leader can remind the group that if they find writing about a particular topic has distressed them, they may want to get some help or advice elsewhere, not in the group. Everything can be written about; Pat has imposed no taboos. Keeping it fiction creates a space for both the writer and the listeners. During my time, I have heard pieces about death, murder, rape, homosexuality, as well as pieces about parties, birthdays, weddings, holidays and other joyous things. Concentrating on the writing rather than the writer will get you through the most challenging sessions. The wisdom of the fiction rule has been proven again and again.

Poetry is always welcomed and some writers always write poems rather than prose. Experience as a participant in a group is a great help for the potential leader and I had the privilege of being a member of a group in Dublin with a very competent woman called Alison.

Writing with vulnerable people, referred to in USA as “special populations” is extremely rewarding. Just as Pat took her writing workshops to Chicopee, I sought out vulnerable groups in Dublin. I worked in the Women’s Prison in Dublin, in a Drop-in Centre for drug addicts, with immigrant groups and with women who had been trafficked. The trafficked women were in the Ruhama centre in Dublin. Language was a challenge here, as the women had come from different countries and some were quite poor in English. I asked Pat’s advice about this and she gave me a good answer: Allow the women to write in their own languages. Then let them read in their own languages. Expressing their ideas and then hearing their own voices was an empowering experience for women who had been silenced. There was always some girl in the group who could translate or paraphrase for the group. By smiling or clapping, or maybe by shaking their heads, or making sympathetic noises, they were able to let the writer know that they had understood what she had written.

There is great scope for imaginative prompts for groups of women from different countries: fruit from different countries and continents such as mangoes, guavas, plantains, grapes to mention just a few. The Nigerian shops in Dublin have a great variety of foods; ALDI and LIDL also stock very interesting things. You can have a party with the fruit afterwards. Another good prompt is jewellery. Euro shops, DEALZ and Tiger have a great variety. Ask the girls to choose a piece of jewellery from your collection, put it on and then write a story about where they will be going while wearing the jewellery – a party, a film, a meal in a restaurant etc. Since the jewellery is cheap, you can allow the girls to keep the pieces they have chosen. This will remind them of an enjoyable experience in the group. Just mentioning colours is also a way to get the group speaking. I asked the group to call out all the colours they could think of. We wrote these down and then I asked them to choose a colour that had been important to them at some particular time in their lives: school uniform, a toy, an animal, a bedroom wall, anything that comes to mind when they think of the colour. I found this exercise very powerful. You could also have a large collection of pictures, cut from magazines and newspapers. These can be very evocative. You may come across pictures which show victims of trafficking or sexual violence. Include them among others. They may trigger memories. Always be sensitive but do not be afraid of emotion. You can ask the girls to imagine they are the person in the picture and tell their story. You could also ask them to write a dialogue between the characters in the pictures.

There may be tears in the group. These may be healing tears, so let them flow. You could gently remind the girls that counsellors are available if they want to talk about distressing subjects. This was my situation in Ruhama and the Drugs centre. Writing brought the feelings to the surface. Before that, these feelings may have been stifled, pushed down.

Even though you are leading the group, you will write in response to the prompt and read your piece, just like the other writers. You may be surprised at the feedback you are given!

I would encourage you to look at the website of Amherst Writers and Artists www.amherstwriters.com and also to order the book. You may even travel to US to do the training! I was reluctant to ask my congregation for permission to go to Texas, but I am very glad I did. Some of the groups I work with are in a position to pay for their sessions and Dublin City Council also paid me for work with immigrants, so

my training and travel are long ago paid for. However, the real benefit is for the most vulnerable girls, women and men and girls in society.

Please do email me about writing and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have, with the help of my fellow workshop leaders here in Ireland.

Look for books by **Gilly Bolton** who works in London in the field of writing for healing.

Look for books by James Pennebaker who works at the University of Texas in Austin, and especially Dr Pennebaker's Rules for healing writing, a one-page document you can download.

Eilís in Dublin

August 2016