

Disabled Writers Mentoring Scheme II 2007

(Graeae, writernet and Apples and Snakes)

Initial conversations were held in London and Edinburgh with Ellie Howell, Jenny Sealey, Alex Bulmer and Judith Kilvington at Graeae; also Geraldine Collinge and Heidi Stephenson for Apples & Snakes and Philippa Johnston @ literaturetraining to link the work more widely. Apples and Snakes had been restructuring and then Heidi was very unwell. This scheme was ultimately delivered in 2007, with six, monthly meetings.

Jonathan Meth, Sarah Dickenson, Alex Bulmer (Graeae) and Sarah Ellis(Apples and Snakes) came together as a steering group. Graeae and Apples and Snakes made nominations to the programme as it was decided not to make it open access, but to target resources on artists known to both companies and to whose trajectories this scheme would add value.

5 mentoring partnerships were delivered as planned for individual writer /performers – with a mentee led approach. Partner organisations scoped and made initial recommendations of mentees at the partner meeting. Meantime potential mentors were sounded out - for example Tim Crouch / Roney Fraser Munroe/ Mat Fraser – as back-up.

Where possible, we worked with mentees to identify their preferred mentors. This was successful in 4 cases. In a fifth case this was not possible and the steering group brainstormed a number of suggestions to yield a shortlist, from which we were able to successfully select.

Liz Carr and Gordon Anderson
Joseph Coelho and Shan Khan
Pete Edwards and Robert Pacitti
Ju Gosling and Deborah Williams
Claire Williamson and Anna Murphy

literaturetraining were initially asked to focus on the cross-cutting learning between the three organisations and the constituencies they represent: live literature / performance poetry , disability arts , playwriting.

By prioritising a mentee-led approach the schedules began to elasticate somewhat, making co-ordinated group based activity more difficult. As a result it was decided to use literaturetraining to conduct professional development planning sessions for each of the

5 mentees as both part of their exit strategy from the mentoring programme and also to capitalise on literature training's newly published guide.

Then the learning would be aggregated in a more manageable, individual-centred way

Mentee feedback

"For me, mentoring has meant having access to someone who can help me think bigger, better, beyond my own limitations. I have loved that about the scheme. What I have learnt from Gordon is that mentoring doesn't have to be formal or structured but can be dynamic and move with your needs at the time. It means I have guidance from someone with a vast experience and vast resources of knowledge and yet what I've valued so much about the mentoring is that it's enabled me to see my issues are shared with others and that whether you're starting out or have been going for many years, that many of the same issues affect you. Mostly though and perhaps most importantly is that working with Gordon has helped me clear the wood from the trees with my thinking. Each session, he has helped me clarify the next step and what I need to do to progress. I certainly wouldn't have the clarity and focus that I currently have for my project without the scheme.

As for what hasn't worked – I don't think anything hasn't worked to be honest – not just to be 'nice' but because I have no complaints. This maybe because I had few expectations and limited understanding of mentoring in many ways.. But whatever, the scheme has far exceeded what I expected to get from it in the beginning. I particularly appreciate that we've been left alone to sort this all ourselves – to co-ordinate it between us and to make the sessions work for both of us. So the distance and the freedom have been much appreciated!"

Liz Carr, mentee

"I was phoned and asked if I wanted to apply for the mentoring scheme the day before the deadline, so I didn't give the process a lot of thought beforehand. I suppose I applied without needing to think about it because the idea of having someone pass on the benefit of their experience and knowledge to me was so attractive. I'm very largely self-taught - as most writers are - and the bulk of my university work took place via independent study, so as a result I really appreciate any kind of teaching that is intensive and professionally appropriate. I also provide a lot of support and training advice to other disabled artists on both a paid and a pro-

bono basis, so it's good to redress the balance when possible and to have some career development support myself.

Thanks to the scheme, I've been able to link up with a writer/performer who I already knew, but who I had not had a chance to spend any concentrated time with outside of other people's projects that we were both working on. The reason I chose her was that both of us situate our work within the field of disability arts, and we're both interested in creating work that looks at gender and other 'minority' issues too. However, she's been very successful in creating and touring one-woman shows, while I've only got one show under my belt and am very much a beginner in this field. We're both very busy and need to earn a living, so I wouldn't have wanted to ask her for mentoring or other support on an unpaid basis.

The mentoring process has given us an opportunity to spend some intensive time together, with an agenda that is dictated by my needs. Again, this makes a welcome change from being the person providing the support. I'm able to discuss my creative process, which gives me additional focus on it, and receive constructive feedback as well as suggestions as to what to do next, along with a lot of useful information about how the process has worked for her. The mentoring process has also enabled me to focus on developing a new show when otherwise I might well have decided that I had too many other pieces of work demanding attention”.

Ju Gosling, mentee

“We agreed to work solely on the piece ‘The Homecoming’, so that I can feel I have finished something. The feelings around the piece seem to be something I am processing and am finding poetry a struggle, until I have finished this story. In August, I was ready to give up on the story 1) in favour of writing general poems 2) feeling like the story was ‘old stuff’ about my divorce and my brother’s suicide, but Annamaria has been excited by the piece and persuaded me to persevere.

Annamaria and I are getting on well. I am finding Annamaria very encouraging and when I hear from her, I feel that someone is also keeping an eye on the story I am writing and, very importantly, telling me what it is about, describing it and comparing it to other stories. This helps me understand what I am doing and make it ‘more like itself’.

I have also found that she has given me permission to play and try things out, permission for which I struggle to give myself. I find

that I am usually striving to 'get it right' and my own critic chunters away at me. There is something freeing about 'having a go' that means that I have license to experiment, something I give to my students, but rarely to myself. I find that when I engage with this, I actually feel an embodied sense of freedom. There is no danger of my spiralling off into trials without product, my sense of drive sees to that.

One thing that Annamaria has given me to do is to make a story box, which contains objects that can become details in the piece. I am often hurtling along trying to tell the story and forget those detailed moments that help the reader/audience pause and take the feelings in.

Another thing that Annamaria suggested doing was to put images in the box. This reminded me that in my pre-verbal stage of this story, I did stick images in a lovely book. I went back to the images (which are about two years old) and found that they all still resonate with me and speak of exactly what I wanted to say. I am now using this book as my diary, where I can also put images and stick in emails that I exchange.

I am now keeping a 'Homecoming Diary', which is separate, but not exclusive to my 'morning pages'. I am finding that writing specifically in relation to the creative work means that I have to give it space in my heart and head.

'The Homecoming' is coming along and today, I am taking the first 50 pages to Colin Brown of Poetry Can, to see whether he is interested in publishing it or staging it for next year's Bristol Poetry Festival. I am going to point out that it is a work in progress, but think there is a sense of the whole piece in these first 47 poems. I think there will be approximately 70 or 80 in all".

Claire Williamson

"This Writernet/Graeae mentorship with Robert Pacitti has helped me to write a longer production of FAT and look at different ways of working. I have explored new ways of writing and creating material for a performance.

I had worked with Robert briefly on a two-day Graeae workshop in 2002, and have always wanted to do more work with him. This mentorship gave me the chance to build on our relationship. I knew Robert would be the best person to act as my mentor and was thrilled when he agreed.

The mentorship consisted of meeting up with Robert once or twice a month (working around our schedules). I enjoyed working with Robert immensely because he gave me such great feedback on my writing. I was able to look at my work very objectively and I was able to be very open with Robert because of our working relationship.

As part of each session, Robert gave me many great suggestions and exercises to go away and work on, and I was inspired to come up with my own ideas that took me in new directions.

Robert's approach to writing is to write material and then look at it and take away what you want from it. Also, I found Robert would make me look deeper into my writing and ask questions. They were sometimes questions I couldn't answer, but it always made me think. I used to have a great time on the bus going home after a session with him because I had a lot of thoughts about my writing going through my head.

There were times when Robert would ask me to go away and experiment with stuff. For example, he asked me to experiment with Coke, like writing about what it felt like to put my foot in, or my hand, because this is a part of my performance.

Robert is now assisting me with an Arts Council of England grant application to be able to rehearse FAT and take it on tour. Also, as part of the application, he is helping me find three venues to perform at.

Working with Michael, my creative enabler, was a great help. A very important aspect of the mentorship for me was having this support, because I would never be able to do all the work that was asked of me without it.

Michael and I would meet up twice a week for three hours each time, and we would work on what Robert had suggested as well as additional ideas and exercises for creating material.

The way the creative enabler supported me in this mentorship was by coming to meetings with Robert and helping with communication and taking notes. Also working on the exercises that Robert gave me to do, I would dictate and Michael would type what I said into the computer. Michael and I would discuss many different aspects of the project and are working together on the grant application to take the performance to production.

The role of creative enabler is something that I would like to continue to use in the future. I could not work without it because I need the continuity and also the skill of the right person, someone who understands my speech, and understands my working process.

In terms of timing, the spacing of my meetings with Robert was fine. The number of meetings, however, was too short. I would like more, so I'm able to complete the piece of work.

As a disabled writer/performer, my working process is slowed down and everything takes longer. For me, it's about communication; for example sometimes I have to repeat what I'm saying several times for someone to understand it, or my creative enabler has to read out what I've written to me. So even though my experience on this mentorship was very good, it would have been even better to have more time both with my mentor and with my creative enabler.

A positive outcome of this mentorship is the basic script for a one-man show that I hope to take on tour. I feel that performing and touring this piece will lead to lots of opportunities for future work, and help introduce me to people in the arts community, as it would be a great chance to invite artists and producers to see my work. This is something that is very important to me.

I very much appreciate the support of Writernet and Graeae in making this project possible for me. The outcome has been wonderful".

Pete Edwards

"This have been going really well. I have had two meetings with Shan so far. For the first Shan met me in Soho and asked me some challenging questions about where I want to go in my career and whether i am really serious about writing. It was a real wake up call and made me consciously consider my seriousness towards playwrighting - i discovered i'm going to do come hell or highwater and promptly sent him a completed script ready for our second meeting.

I was keen to get a script in for the Verity Bargate Deadline. Shan proved a great inspiration for this and gave me some wonderful feedback on my first draft. I Managed to get a script in by the deadline. We are currently arranging our third meeting where we will have another look at the script I entered for the Verity Bargate and I will also show Shan A new play I recently finished written for a much, much younger audience.

The Mentoring scheme has proven to be a great inspiration for me. The fact that there is someone there who will formally read my work and truthfully feedback is so is a great comfort as well as a fantastic kick up the arse.

It was great going to the Soho the other night. I think such theatre trips open up potential networking opportunities that the majority of lonely writers may find hard to come by".

Joseph Coelho

Jonathan Meth formed part of the mentoring roadshow which New Writing North are running with literature training and other literature-based organisations, as part of NALD's "Only Connect" in October 2007 at The Brewery in Kendal.