

Disabled Writers Mentoring Scheme

Introduction

This publication reflects on the pilot scheme undertaken in 1999 to offer learning and professional development to nine disabled writers writing for performance.

It charts the scheme from inception to conclusion, detailing in its journey what was learnt from the experience.

The aim of this publication is to make that learning available. It is for those with a commitment to new work and to the disparate, but seldom heard voices from disabled writers.

This report draws on the reflections of the mentors and mentees involved in the scheme. As confidence is crucial to much shared artistic endeavour, while making the learning available, I have sought to maintain confidentiality by not attributing specific quotes to individuals.

In addition to all the mentors, mentees, steering panel and funders involved with the scheme I would like to extend thanks to Soho Theatre Company, the Royal National Theatre Studio, The Live Theatre, Newcastle, The Birmingham Rep and Bromley Education Department.

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London, March 2000

Contents

1. The components

- 1.1 The organisations
- 1.2 The mentees
- 1.3 The mentors
- 1.4 The steering panel
- 1.5 The funders

2. Mentoring

- 2.1 Background to mentoring
- 2.2 Why a mentoring scheme for disabled writers?

3. The aims of the scheme

4. The selection process

- 4.1 Recruitment
- 4.2 Applications
- 4.3 Interviews

5. The matching process

- 5.1 Role of the mentor
- 5.2 Selection and approach

6. The Launch

7. The Scheme

- 7.1 The structure of the scheme
- 7.2 Initial stages
- 7.3 The midway mentee review
- 7.4 The midway steering panel and mentor review
- 7.5 Reflection on the mentoring process (mentees)
 - On mentoring for disabled writers
 - On writing "disabled content"
 - On the challenges of turning ideas into drama
 - On writing time
 - On acculturation to theatre practice
 - On deadlines
 - On what has been learnt about writing practice
 - On the value of the scheme
- 7.6 Reflection on the mentoring process (mentors)

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 Final Steering Panel meeting
- 8.2 Final mentee meeting, including recommendations for the future
 - Writing about disability
 - The Burden of representation
 - Learning
 - Social Inclusion

1. The components

1.1 The organisations

The Disabled Writers Mentoring Scheme was a partnership between **writernet** (formerly New Playwrights Trust) and Graeae Theatre Company in association with New Writing North.

writernet exists to create a stronger marketplace for writers for all forms of live and recorded performance. It does this through provision of information, guidance and advice on all aspects of the industry and undertaking strategic pilot training and development projects as part of a commitment to continuing professional development. Future plans centre on extending a range of on-line information services both for and on writers working in theatre, television, film, radio, live art and live literature.
www.writernet.org.uk

Graeae is the UK's premier theatre company of actors with physical or sensory disabilities. Touring both nationally and internationally, with powerful theatrical productions which address both historical and contemporary issues and the experiences of the disabled community.

Graeae also runs a forum theatre programme, residencies, workshops and an extensive training programme in theatre skills for people with physical or sensory disabilities. Previous productions include Hounds by Maria Oshodi, Soft Vengeance by April de Angelis, Two, by Jim Cartwright and The Fall of the House of Usher by Steven Berkoff. Graeae's work challenges negative views of disability through active participation in the theatre.

New Writing North is the agency for new writing in the North of England

1.2 The mentees

Jamie Beddard, Ann Fisher, Jo Fraser Odin, Jackie Gay, Paula Greenwell, Reina Haig, Norma Pearson, Robert Williams-Findlay, and Peter Wolf.

1.3 The Mentors

Ann Coburn, Lucinda Coxon, Patrick Marber, Elizabeth Melville, Kaite O'Reilly, Philip Osment, Alan Plater, Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Woods

1.4 The Steering Panel

Jenny Sealey, Artistic Director, Graeae theatre company; Paul Sirett, playwright and Literary Manager at Soho Theatre Company; Danny Braverman, Associate Director at Theatre Royal Stratford East; Chris Sykes, playwright and Deputy Chair of the Writers Guild and Claire Malcolm, Director of New Writing North

1.5 The funders

The scheme was funded by The Baring Foundation, The City Parochial Foundation, The Bridge House Estates Charitable Trust, West Midlands Arts, The Arts Council of England, Northern Arts, The Northern Rock Foundation, The Writers' Guild of Great Britain, Golden Square Pictures Ltd and The Arts & Business Pairing Scheme.

With the exception of the Baring Foundation who funded **writernet's** previous mentoring scheme for women writers, and the Arts Council of England, all of these were first time funders. It is to their credit that they shared our belief in the importance of this project.

2. Mentoring

2.1 Background to mentoring

In Greek mythology Mentor was an old Ithacan, the friend to whom Ulysses entrusted the care of his son Telemachus, when he left on his Odyssey. Mentor was charged not only with looking after the kingdom but also with helping prepare Telemachus as future ruler. Less often recalled is that it was the goddess Athena who frequently spoke through Mentor when Telemachus was in need of guidance.

Mentoring is the pairing of an experienced professional with a less experienced counterpart. Throughout 1993 and into 1994, New Playwrights Trust (NPT) set up an ongoing series of meetings with key individuals and representatives of organisations concerned with writing by women. This panel developed the idea of a mentoring scheme for women writers. In 1994 NPT was successful in raising funds for the scheme from the Baring Foundation and private donations. The scheme ran from August 1995 to August 1996 with five pairings of mentors and mentees reflecting a diverse range and level of experience. A report was published and circulated to stimulate interest in mentoring. This scheme proved a successful first step. Mentoring writers as a developmental methodology is now being taken up widely.

For a fuller analysis of mentoring within the context of British contemporary theatre writing see [The Mentoring Scheme For Women Writers](#), New Playwrights Trust, London 1997 and [Education to the Arts: reflective Strategies and functions of mentoring](#), Josip Rainer, London 1998 - both available from writernet

2.2 Why a mentoring scheme for disabled writers?

There will be a premium on high levels of adaptability, knowledge, information and communication skills in the growth sectors of the next ten to fifteen years (creative industries, IT, training and education of all kinds)... Raising access to high quality education and training and to wider networks of support will be a key element of campaign for equal rights and opportunities for disabled people in future.

An inclusive future? Disability, social change and opportunities for greater inclusion by 2010, DEMOS, Ian Christie with Gavin Mensah-Coker . London 1999, p33

In response to the lack of work for the stage being produced by disabled writers, in 1994/95, NPT, working with disabled researcher Sally Ree and disabled writer Yvonne Lynch, and with support from

the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and BBC Equal Opportunities, undertook research for the London Arts Board (LAB) to map existing provision and identify priorities. Out of this research there emerged a need for the provision of basic information to assist disabled writers in navigating their way through the system. This has resulted in the publication by the LAB of Theatre Writing: A Guide for Disabled Writers. LAB, March 2000 - also available from writernet

It also became apparent that there was both a need to change the attitudes that encouraged the development of disabled writers' work and a need to explore alternative ways to proactively support their careers. This was demonstrated very practically when **writernet** was subsequently approached by Graeae, to try to address the lack of good quality scripts emerging from disabled writers, so that they could place a greater emphasis on the commissioning, development and production of new work.

Mentoring is now increasingly recognised as a modern career development tool.

"Many successful people have had help from others who have shaped their insight, experience and advice. But informal mentoring tends to favour those in existing networks and the creative industries have no firm career structure for artists, writers, designers and performers, so networks are difficult to access." Jane Seaman, *Mentoring in Action*, Artsbusiness, 14 September 1998

The fact that disabled writers write poetry and fiction much more readily than theatre pointed to a series of access issues. In consultation over many years with a range of disabled theatre practitioners, mentoring was identified as the most appropriate strategy for exploring and overcoming some of these. One of the recommendations from NPT's Women Writers Mentoring Scheme was that where possible, mentoring should take place with access to a producing company. This led to **writernet**'s partnership with Graeae. In discussing the proposed venture with Claire Malcolm, Director of New Writing North - the UK's only regional development agency working to support writers across media - she was very keen that we incorporate a specifically Northern aspect into our plans, leading to the association with New Writing North

3. The aims of the scheme

The primary aim of this scheme was to provide disabled dramatists with the opportunity to draw upon the experience and wisdom of more established counterparts - to develop them as writers and

increase their chances of production. The emphases ranged from developing confidence and purpose in the professional work of the mentee to generating produceable scripts.

This was within the context that Graeae had a new Artistic Director committed to new writing. The company had recently secured £250,000 from an Arts for Everyone Award, and had established a long term commitment to the nurturing, development and production of new work with an enhanced opportunity to produce and commission.

Via specific connections with Soho Theatre Company and Theatre Royal Stratford East it was also expected that disabled writers would subsequently form relationships with these and other new writing companies, so as not to be "ghettoised".

Mentoring has been found to prove most useful to those who are facing a transitional point in their work. Owing to the absence of a pool of established disabled playwrights it was inevitable that mentoring would need to operate as an umbrella term for a wide range of learning and development. Three categories of mentee were identified for consideration: existing theatre writers, writers switching from another medium, or performers wanting to write. Because disabled theatre writers have been so hampered through lack of focused initiatives, the scheme inevitably operated as a pilot project.

The final aim is thus the advocacy of disabled writers to the theatre and media communities and substantiation of the need for further opportunities to develop and produce them.

4. The selection process

There is concern reported in the research literature that the type of training which many disabled people tend to receive is geared to preconceived and stereotypical notions about the kinds of training they need. In effect, rather than adhering to the social model of disability and providing training for disabled people according to the (changing) nature of the labour market, the training offered has tended to have pre-determined 'realistic limits' - which may well grossly underestimate what someone is capable of and wishes to achieve....Recent official reports on the future of education and skills development have emphasised the need for much greater customisation of provision - fitting learning establishments to the needs of the disabled learner rather than vice versa.

4.1 Recruitment

The scheme was widely advertised in theatre and disability arts publications. Careful attention was given to accessing potential candidates. Mentees were selected for the scheme according to a process agreed by the Steering Panel. Not all needed to have been writing for theatre (some may be poetry or fiction writers), although all had to demonstrate a desire to do so. Matching mentors were sought subsequently.

"The recruitment process was assisted by the scheme being advertised in DAIL magazine. This publication is usually produced on tape around the same time as the print version allowing visually impaired people the same time scale for the application process". (mentee journal)

Fifty writers applied to the scheme, with a short-list of twelve interviewed before the final selection of seven was agreed. A separate but allied process was pursued for the additional two writers on the scheme from the north of England who were identified by New Writing North.

Successful candidates were then invited, in consultation with the Steering Panel, to recommend appropriate writers to be mentors:

"The benefits of the scheme began when I saw it advertised in the Writers Guild newsletter. I was at a low point in my illness, feeling isolated and out of touch. Indeed the challenge of applying for the scheme nearly defeated me. But once I'd applied I found myself galvanised, as the process kickstarted me into facing my artistic and social predicament". (mentee journal)

4.2 Applications

The scheme was open to writers at any level: beginners, those whose who had some experience and those who would consider themselves experienced - and to anyone who defined themselves as disabled. As a guide the SHAPE definition of disability was used.

People with physical, mental or sensory disabilities, with hidden disabilities, such as psoriasis, epilepsy, heart, chest conditions; people with disabilities linked to ageing; people suffering from mental illness.

Applicants were invited to submit between 1-3 ideas of less than 250 words, or a scene less than 10 pages double spaced or lasting less than 10 minutes of stage time, and a CV + letter outlining what they hoped to achieve from the scheme. Sample ideas and information about the partner organisations were enclosed with details of the scheme for those interested in applying.

Applications were welcomed in any format including the option to e-mail

4.3 Interviews

Applicants were asked:

1. How would you aim to progress the ideas or sample scene that you submitted?
2. How do you think mentoring might work successfully for you?
3. What are your access needs and how might they be ideally met?
4. What kind of skills and experience would you look for in a mentor? Do you have anyone in mind?
5. Where would you like your writing to be in 3 years time ?
6. Do you have anything you would like to ask us?

The Steering Panel used the interviews:

- to clarify the nature of the scheme, its parameters, what was expected of both mentors and mentees and the roles of **writernet** & Graeae.
- to identify access needs and consider appropriate strategies to meet them.
- to identify ways in which those needs might be met by a mentoring relationship; and how the relationship might be best focused to enable this to happen.
- to identify possible suitable mentors either from those who had already put themselves forward, from the suggestions of those wishing to be mentored, and from the panel's own knowledge.
- finally, to make selections

Originally the scheme had been designed for 6 writers, but with successful fundraising it became possible to increase this to 9.

"Once I'd been short-listed for the scheme I was worried I'd be left out because I was too ill to attend the interview. I braced myself for the customary ritual of having to apologise for my uselessness and miss yet another creative opportunity. In fact, for once, the opposite was true. (The Project Director) arranged for the interview to be held by phone, and I realised that this was going to be an initiative run for the benefit of its mentees. The interview furthered my belief. Instead of having to cover for my condition, and minimise its impact (as I must whenever else I'm working, or directors/producers tend to panic over deadlines and rewrites) I found the interviewing panel were sensitive to my problems, as well as interested in my creative ideas. Whether or not I was selected for the scheme, this feedback was of considerable benefit". (mentee journal)

5. The matching process

5.1 Role of the mentor

Depending on the requirements of the mentee, mentors were encouraged to operate:

- as a **networker/facilitator** - providing information and opening doors to further opportunity.
- as a **sounding board** - for ideas and approaches that the mentee may need more encouragement to pursue.
- as a **role model** - giving confidence to the mentee.
- as a **constructive critic** - providing feedback.
- and as a **dramaturg**, offering detailed skills development.

These roles of course involved certain skills and the balance and focus of each relationship needed to be carefully negotiated in each case.

5.2 Selection and approach

There are obvious difficulties in trying to lay down a firm structure for any mentor/mentee relationships which should primarily be built on trust and a willingness on the part of the mentor to pass on the benefits of their experience. Nevertheless it was important to establish clear parameters and to ensure that these and the pairings themselves were defined by the individual mentee's needs and the mentors' own individual experience.

With advice from the steering panel, on the basis of the needs that had been identified at interview, shortlists of potential mentors were drawn up for each selected mentee and discussed with them. A potential mentor would only be approached once it had been checked with the mentee that this selection was (still) appropriate.

Each potential mentor was made aware of the basic principles behind the scheme. They were sent further details of what was required from them and asked to make assessments of their strengths and abilities which they might be able to bring to a relationship, as well as aspects they feel might need more support from **writernet**/Graeae as co-ordinators of the project. Prior to any consideration of any proposed mentees, prospective mentors were asked to consider the following questions:-

- How do you think mentoring might be able to help a writer?
- What overall skills and experience do you think you could bring to being a mentor?
- What sort of specific help do you think you would be most able to give to a mentee?
- What sort of help do you think it would not be appropriate for you to be asked to provide (please note that you will not be asked to provide general counselling)?
- What are the ideas, approaches or styles that you would be most interested in developing in a mentee?
- Would you find disability awareness training useful?
- In what ways do you think mentoring another writer could develop you?

Mentors also needed to be open to the concept of *the mentee* driving the relationship according to agreed aims. After this the specifics of each relationship would be clarified in an agreement.

While informal mentoring is widespread practice, the formal nature of the scheme did not appeal to all those writers approached and as a result some invitations were declined. Although flexibility was central to the scheme's aims, compromising the formality of the relationship from the start might have jeopardised the partnership (and might not) but would certainly have made it much more difficult to track and evaluate. Even with agreement to formal requirements it was anticipated that in practice formal adherence would be patchy...

The matching process was crucial to the success of the scheme and continued in some cases for 3 months until suitable mentors were found.

"In my opinion ours has been a great partnership and a very positive indictment of the matching up process." (mentee journal)

"Being accepted on to the scheme was a huge challenge. I was a real novice and knew many, although not all of my shortcomings. It was important to me, as it must have been with all the other mentees to find the right mentor. I wanted someone who would have a clear understanding of my socio-political starting point". (mentee journal)

6. The Launch

The scheme was launched with around 50 invited guests on January 14th 1999 at the Royal National Theatre in the Olivier Stalls Foyer. The Directors of **writernet** and Graeae spoke about why the scheme had come about and mentor Kaite O'Reilly and mentee Jo Fraser Odin about why it mattered. The scheme was covered by BBC Radio 4's You and Yours, The Times Educational Supplement, Disability Now and DAIL.

7. The Scheme

7.1 The structure of the scheme

In each case, the relationship between mentor and mentee lasted over the course of a year interspersed by six 2 hour meetings. The relationship and focus for each meeting was agreed by them in a "mentoring agreement" outlined at the first proper encounter. Draft agreements had been sent to each mentee prior to this as an example. Each agreement set aims for the scheme and was both a means of reviewing each relationship at the half way stage and assessing overall effectiveness at the end of the scheme.

7.2 Initial stages

"As soon as I'd been selected for the scheme, (the Project Director) visited me to discuss goals, targets, possible mentors. This process started me thinking about a strategy for the coming year, and reawakened my hope that positive interaction was possible with the theatre world, even for one as isolated as myself. It also helped break a 'me' and 'them' attitude - rooted in the idea that somewhere 'out there' was some kind of theatrical utopia from which I was barred by my confinement. I started to realise (and remember) what a chaotic and insecure profession the theatre really is". (mentee journal)

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"To be given the unique opportunity of working with an established playwright was great, and led to delight for the following reasons:

- a guiding hand - being able to tap into someone with a wealth of experience
- glean information - techniques, process, subject matter, critical faculties etc.
- provide discipline - working towards an ends - with the privileges inferred by the scheme - implied structure and responsibility
- an audience - somebody respected reading my work.
- an assessment of my ability - could I write or not?

My fear was being found out as a charlatan with minimal ability who should, in no uncertain terms, stick to their day job

We agreed on starting from scratch, and (to) worry about process rather than product. To this end I was to write a series of short scenes, concentrating on authenticity of dialogue. This was surprisingly difficult... my own use of language tends to be fairly economical and individual due to my speech impediment: less words equal less effort; while some words are harder than others. By starting writing the scenes and with my mentor's urgings, the need to find real voices soon became very apparent. This was a very useful beginning and enabled me to think in terms of building blocks, as opposed to strategies; one step at a time". (mentee journal)

The importance of establishing clear ground rules at the beginning of the partnership cannot be underestimated. Inviting reflections on what might have been improved, one mentee identified this as the critical moment.

"I don't feel the mentoring scheme was as successful as it could have been because the expectations / obligations seemed unclear. I absolutely adore (my mentor) but, probably because of his own experiences, he was unwilling to lay down guidelines. I think it would have been wise to clarify these from the outset". (mentee journal)

In practice the parameters of the scheme were established to provide a framework within which to progress. It was up to each mentor/mentee to negotiate how this would work.

"Thus far I would characterise the mentor/mentee relationship as being somewhat erratic, undisciplined and great fun. I think it is working well for both of us to operate on this somewhat casual basis, but I will spend the next six months putting more pressure on him....I am cautiously optimistic that if I can focus his energies he may well produce interesting work in the not too distant future". (mentor journal)

7.3 The midway mentee review

While 6 meetings were originally budgeted for between each mentee and mentor, many of whom attended the launch at the RNT, there was initially no provision for the mentees to meet together to share their experiences prior to the end of project gathering. Reflection-in-action had been identified through research as a very positive

mentoring model. (Education to the Arts: reflective Strategies and functions of mentoring, Josip Rainer, London 1998)

A day facilitated by Jenny Sealey at Graeae and the Project Director was successfully fundraised for to concentrate on creating an environment in which the mentees felt free to voice strengths and weaknesses of their learning to date. By scheduling the day at the mid-way point in the process, the mentees had an opportunity to practically implement positive developments yielded from the day.

Key points which emerged from the meeting were

- a sense of isolation: from producing theatres; from other writers; through individual disabilities. One suggestion was that what was needed as much as a mentor was a "buddy"
- finances: equipment (including technical support); time; money; childcare; going to see new plays
- advice: on how to navigate the industry; on finances/ business; on disability organisations that might be able to provide support; on how to access development and training opportunities
- networking: other mentee contact details; a broader network of other disabled writers; a broader network of non-disabled writers
- mentee /mentor matching: this was working very well - the work put in had paid dividends.
- ownership / participation: a desire to move away from guinea pig status towards mentees feeling part of a scheme beyond their own individual mentor relationships; the added value of the overall scheme beyond just each individual; more meetings to develop and gel as a group
- review: a desire to review the original goals of the scheme, revisiting practical targets with mentors; distinguishing between achievable goals within the scheme and wider aims as a writer over time; maintaining a record of the learning as the scheme progressed
- an exit strategy for the scheme: using the ending of the scheme as a springboard for mentees' work as writers.

"At first I was sceptical about the need for a mid way meeting. After the event I was glad I attended. It was interesting and reassuring to meet the other mentees. I felt pleased with the progress that I and my mentor were making and I was glad to offer encouragement and suggestions of things we had done or

talked about to other mentees. I recognised some people's feelings of isolation but I did not share them." (mentee journal)

One of the specific requests which emerged from the midway review was for a sense of the mentors' working methods, rituals and routines. One mentor agreed to share her practices with everyone:

"How to keep the words flowing on the page, that's the biggest challenge - especially in the early, difficult stages of a project. The trick is to create a disciplined routine. I have set times for writing - usually school hours, more if I have a particularly pressing deadline. I try very hard NOT to leave my desk too often. I know I will find something else to do if I stray into other parts of the house.

Talking of displacement activities - research is a classic. Research is dangerous because - unlike scrubbing floors - it can be justified, "Yes, yes, I'm working on a play. I'm at the research stage..." I have learnt to start with the minimum amount of research - only as much as I absolutely need to begin writing. Then I put away my notes and do not look at them again until I have finished the writing of the first draft. Facts can always be checked later.

Stories are important to me - so I always plot before I start to write and I always make sure I have a good story arc. Entrances and exits are good pivots on which to turn plot, change direction, set up twists and tensions etc

I read my work aloud

This is basic stuff, I know, but one of my indispensable writing guidelines is: dialogue does not always equal clarity. People are not always explaining themselves when they talk. What is motivating a character to talk at any given moment? Are they nervous or frightened? Are they using talk as a weapon or to hurt someone? Are they creating a smokescreen or telling outright lies? Do they know what the truth is or are they fooling themselves?

Finally, I have learned not to be frightened of writing rubbish. Rubbish can always be sifted, recycled and improved. It is important to end a day with something - anything to carry over to the next morning. Sitting waiting for perfect prose usually means a blank page at the end of the day". (mentor journal)

Another request was for more interaction between mentees:

"Met co-mentee at the MAC in Birmingham. Very similar experiences to me - ambitious ideas, some of which work in theatre, some of which don't. Good relationship with mentor. The scheme a good trigger to get work done, deadlines, structure etc." (mentee journal)

A commitment was made to facilitate a final mentee meeting, once the formal relationships were complete and material had been submitted, to reflect back on the scheme as a whole and make recommendations for the future.

7.4 Steering Panel Mid-way meeting

The Steering Panel also met to evaluate confidential mentor feedback, which had been gathered by the Project Director. This yielded the following overall points for mentors/mentees:

- Time management.

How mentees spent time between meetings was vital to the success of each partnership. Establishing an environment and a routine in which to write was crucial to avoid over-dependence on the meetings to generate progress on drafting. Writers find completely different ways to manage this - whatever works for the individual.

- Exit Strategy

An absolute deadline for completion of the mentor / mentee relationships (including delivery of material being developed) was set. Having recognised the value of reviewing their own expectations of the scheme, mentees should be clearer about what can be realistically achieved within the parameters of the scheme. This needed to be firmed up with mentors and where necessary revisions made as to what a likely successful outcome might constitute. Mentors were not at all obliged to continue their relationship with their mentees following their final meeting, though they may want to. If they do, how this is managed and what constitute parameters will need to be agreed between mentor and mentee.

- Following the submission of material

writernet and Graeae agreed to arrange for any material produced by all the mentees to be read independently and given a full report. Where appropriate some writers would subsequently be invited to have their material read aloud working with actors. This and any further development would be assessed according to where each

writer was with their work and the needs arising. This would be ascertained following consultation between the Steering Panel and mentors, and would require separate fundraising. A celebration of the scheme, to be held at Soho's new building in late March, would be held to publicly mark the Scheme's conclusion. Linked to publication of this report the aim would be to engage industry and press attention.

- Report on the scheme

Mentors and mentees were again reminded of the need to keep a record, in either diary or report form, of the process(es) during the scheme to feed into this report and also help the Steering Panel to evaluate the scheme. In compiling this material both mentors and mentees would be asked to mark what from their material was confidential to the internal evaluation process and what they were happy for a wider public to see. The deadline for this submission was also set.

7.5 Reflection on the mentoring process (mentees)

The mentees took differing approaches to tracking their experience of the programme. Some kept diaries as they went along, others wrote up their reflections only once they had completed their work on scripting. Much material was submitted by both mentees and mentors which outlined very specific activity - often related to the dramaturgical particulars of the script development concerned. These are not reproduced here. What follows is a selection of observations which read together both raise questions and offer a number of pointers for those interested in the broader aspects of mentoring, writing and disability:

On mentoring for disabled writers:

"Engaging in a one to one process can be an ideal way of working for a disabled person. There is potential for a significant degree of flexibility which can be tailored to an individual's needs. This is not always possible in the classes etc offered to the general public. There are usually barriers placed in front of the disabled person which are unrelated to the activity to be engaged in. This programme seemed to be designed with all these concerns in mind....

...The scheme provided me with an opportunity to obtain information through asking questions rather than have to try to access written material which can be difficult and time

consuming as I am blind. I did not see it as a root to a specific piece of work". (mentee journal)

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On writing "disabled content":

"In terms of the content of my writing my mentor was far keener than I that I should cover topics surrounding my disability, than I was. He, quite reasonably, argued that my experiences gave unique and different insights and that I should concentrate on giving a voice to these. This was an area where I was ahead of the field and these "different insights" provided the essence to fulfil my dramatic pretensions. For my part I see disability as one facet of my life - and a small one at that - and would hate to be pigeon-holed as an issue-based writer. I flag this debate because it is complex, interesting and although unresolved provided food for thought. In the end my piece does have a protagonist with a disability, but I hope the issues this raises can be dealt with in an unconventional and challenging fashion. Finally I would have to reluctantly agree that an aspiring writer does well to start with material s/he knows best". (mentee journal)

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"I wanted to move away from the confines of disability work and this opportunity to ask questions about the non-disabled world in a safe environment was very valuable. It enabled me to re-evaluate my thinking and allowed me to see how important it is to become less bogged down in disability practicalities". (mentee journal)

On the challenges of turning ideas into drama:

"My initial meetings with my mentor were on (the) one hand frustrating and on the other amazingly insightful. She could see immediately where I needed to be clear and convey my story succinctly...

...What I had conceived as a simple idea became complicated; a mountain of explanation to climb. My frustration left me numb. I couldn't write. In fact after my computer broke down I stopped writing altogether. My mentor, however, was persistent. She continually told me: Go back to the basics. Plot your story, look at the themes, the structure, character and dialogue. Think of your play like this: your story is the skeleton, your plot is the flesh. The script is the skin that holds it all

together; the story is the destination, the journey; the people are the scenery that make the journey interesting". When I did eventually plot my play it became clear that I had swung widely off course. The play I was now writing had no resemblance to the play I had set out to write". (mentee journal)

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On writing time:

"The main problem has been extreme busyness on my part, when I took on the project I was fishing around for things to do, since then I have had a novel accepted for publication and had to do two major rewrites on it, plus production and editing on a collection of short stories". (mentee journal)

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On acculturation to theatre practice:

"Went to see Perpetua at The Door (Birmingham Rep). I found the staging interesting, changing world with few props, sliding doors. Also the use of rants, creating characters who can do this and the clever use of language and comedy in a very serious subject... Went on a tour of the Rep to see stage, lights, costume, prop & set making, paint shop...Went to see All That Trouble We Had. Interesting staging again, bridge over the top of the stage, symbolising the unity of the world. Good humour in the play, the device of all the characters having specific fears, transformative thing of surviving a fall....

...(My mentor) thinks in terms of plays and theatre whereas I think in terms of fiction and books but I hope that I have learnt enough to recognise when an idea I might have would work best as a play and have the knowledge (and reborn confidence) to follow that up". (mentee journal)

On deadlines:

"I was coaxed (coerced!) into finally jumping in, and going for it. A combination of blind panic, gentle persuasion, impending deadlines and lack of excuses led to the final execution of a first draft. My mentor's feedback was positive, helpful and honest and I instigated many of his suggestions. This included many heartbreaking cuts, changes in emphasis and structure and general polishing". (mentee journal)

On what has been learnt about writing practice:

"I would say to any writer undertaking a project to remember a few simple rules:

1. Write every day
2. Try to find a regular class you can attend where you can discuss your work
3. Get used to criticism
4. If you get stuck on one piece, move on
5. Never give up " (mentee journal)

~

"Learn to embrace - and if possible enjoy - the process of rewriting a script, rather than resenting the intrusion of directors/actors/producers etc. Stage drama is not only a collaborative process, but also a collective one. The finished product is group work, presented to a collective audience. This approach will strengthen and broaden the writing, so avoid being over-possessive or over-attached to what you write.

Try to be shrewd. Instead of seeing your work as a poet or painter, think around what you're writing. Ground the world of the play in society as well as your own imagination. Take a few steps back to assess it: indeed learn to place yourself 'in the audience' while you judge what you've written. See it from an audience's perspective. Allow them to connect with it. Make it credible. Identify what kind of audience you wish to attract, and write with them foremost in mind.

Follow Aristotle's dictum: 'Wise in thought, plain in speech'. It's the job of a writer to fret and worry about structure on every level, and deliver on every level, but don't let this intellectual process spill over too much into the script's language and action. Thus the structure and meaning of a play, and the issues it deals with are presented to an audience in a direct emotional way, with as few rhetorical devices and verbal barriers as possible.

Avoid cliché: be original. Don't write for posterity, write for NOW. Let the distant future of any work look after itself.

I needed a basic rule of writing to keep me focused....I boiled it down to five words. Always write the dramatic action". (mentee journal)

On the value(s) of the scheme:

"I have no regrets about going onto the DWMS. Having had many dreams before which disappeared into the night and other projects that looked or sounded good, but failed to materialise into finished articles I cannot begin to express how I feel about completing (the first draft of my play). It is hard to think of another project that has given me so much personal satisfaction and pleasure". (mentee journal)

~

"Being part of the Scheme has helped me regain a lot of self-confidence and belief in my own abilities. I have no doubt about the value of having a mentor and feel committed to supporting others having access to the same opportunity I had". (mentee journal)

~

"As a would-be writer, the mentoring scheme has been extremely useful in terms of experience and opportunity. I sincerely hope I will be able to build upon, improve and continue the work which I have started in the past year... In conclusion I am very grateful for the opportunity I have been given and hope it can provide the springboard for a burgeoning writing career". (mentee journal)

~

"I now feel pleased and relieved that I have achieved some of what I set out to do, learnt a lot and established a good and long lasting friendship with my mentor". (mentee journal)

~

"Whatever happens next, the disabled writers mentoring Scheme has already provided me with a creative lifeline. By creatively empowering me it is delivering on its aims". (mentee journal)

7.6 Reflection on the mentoring process (mentors)

The material submitted by mentors during the scheme perhaps inevitably focused much more on implications for the ongoing management of individual relationships. In this context the Project Director operated as a sounding board to agree specific next steps or angles of approach. Some material has therefore remained for evaluation purposes rather than publication.

While mentees were positively pressurised towards delivering their reflections, as well as their scripts, less emphasis was placed on persuading mentors to contribute formal responses as their function (and remuneration) was primarily linked to delivering the appropriate mentoring:

"She is interested in both film and theatre - she obviously thinks visually and philosophically...I feel that she needs to be given encouragement and confidence - and that if she can persevere she could come up with a substantial, innovative and interesting play. She is interested in the art and doesn't want her work to be purely polemical.... I find her fascinating to talk to and I've come away from meetings feeling stimulated to really think about what makes a good story? What makes a character interesting? What situations are dramatically rich?"
(mentor journal)

~

"He has used our relationship as a support mechanism. I have been his sounding board and dramaturg: someone who has encouraged him to write beyond 'first attempt'. He warned me he has always resisted the notion of redrafting work (his experience as a poet having a different process) - but has welcomed my suggestions for restructuring and encouragement to 'do better'.

I have been encouraging him to DARE, to write the piece he really wants and not what he thinks he ought to write, or what he thinks is expected of him.

One of the primary roles I've played is that of time manager. I fix deadlines which he generally meets; insist he shows me new work each month: I chivvy him along when he needs to deliver some work-in-progress and set the (hopeful) schedule for the completion of the first draft. In my experience a playwright needs to pace herself. I am hoping once he learns the process - the setting of deadlines, etc, as much as techniques for writing the script - he will always be able to manage himself should he continue working in the medium in the future.

I have always been aware of the potential difficulties of a mentoring relationship - the balance of power - the mentee's (perhaps unconscious) desire to please the mentor; the mentor's predilection for specific styles or form. I have endeavoured to ensure the mentee's decisions have been his, but I am available for advice when he is uncertain. There can be no 'wrong or right' if we are hoping to nurture exciting future playwrights, who may further develop the medium.

Regarding what I've received from being a mentor on this scheme...affirmation, stimulation, discussion, companionship... In many ways it has been illuminating, reminding me of my own principles, concerns, ambitions and beliefs. I also have a deep commitment to the furtherance and support of new writers and new writing. It's creating a community for ourselves - and if there's more good work being made, we all benefit".
(mentor journal)

8. Conclusion

8.1 Final Steering Panel meeting

The panel had read all the mentees' material submitted by the December deadline and met to make recommendations as to next steps. These included a combination of script reports, rehearsed readings and workshops as well as encouragement to complete drafts by the end of March, where this had been the goal and scripts were still incomplete. The Panel also offered brief reflections on particular individual needs and questions for the mentees regarding what *they* might now really want for their writing. Where appropriate these recommendations were checked with mentors before being fed back to the mentees

Individual feedback was given to all the mentees before they gathered to share final reflections on the scheme as a whole.

8.2 Final mentee meeting and recommendations

This meeting concentrated on focusing recommendations for the readers of this report.

Writing about disability

An apposite and vigorous discussion was held. The mentees identified a lack of creative vision about this issue in the sector at large. Points raised included:

- The only work producers were interested in commissioning was "work about disability", so that the disabled "become interesting".
- Disability is only one aspect of an individual's identity - owning your own story was important, but only as a start. There is an assumption by the wider sector that you have to have an overview of *all* disability.
- However, it was also felt that this approach was easily compounded. Sometimes those within the disability movement can also see individuals as disabled before they see you as a person - they want you to be a cause celebre.
- There was some trepidation about creating disabled characters - issues about how you present the person - it has to carry so much. One writer didn't want to be slandered for portraying disability in a negative way - "as a new writer there are safer subjects".

The Burden of representation

The formal challenge about portrayal of disability was characterised as the burden of representation. One writer quoted writer Jackie Kay's view: "I'm not going to take responsibility for creating positive characters" as liberating.

A creative solution to alleviating this burden of representation was offered:

"If we spread the issues around among the characters, then different values can be enshrined rather than just embodied within the protagonist. This then allows for complexity. Looking at the conflicts of our lives, rather than the biography, this can then resonate.

Representation could more usefully be viewed via dramatic conflict than simply characterisation...It doesn't have to happen *in your work*...

How people *identify with* my work (group, audience) - as distinct from - My *identity as* a writer (restricted, limitation of insight)" (mentee)

At the same time it was acknowledged that issue-based agit-prop has its place... There needs to be the full range of disabled writers' voices. Part of the challenge for disabled writers is about getting the skills to deal with people's responses

"It is the responsibility of companies like Graeae and **writernet** to encourage writers. What I write is up to me. It is the political and organisational structures who should be alleviating the burden of representation". (mentee)

Learning

There were strong requests for better opportunities for more focused training, practical working and "nicking skills"; learning more about theatre, dramaturgy and the trade. Also identified was the need for an apprenticeship on the job, with a successful outcome.

One writer knew nothing about the scheme before applying and assumed she would find something different. Ultimately she felt like she might have wasted her mentor's time. She felt she should have started somewhere else..."the difficulty is that there is so little else on offer, so every opportunity is grabbed".

The Disabled Writers Mentoring Scheme "has provided a wonderful opportunity and needs to be extended to those who want it". This could be helped by developing on-line provision, mapping potential routes for writers.

"The long term benefit of the scheme cannot yet be predicted".

Funders need to be encouraged to think creatively about meeting a wide range of needs and not just relying on individual initiatives such as this one.

The cost of taking advantage of learning opportunities...may be prohibitive for many... new thinking will be needed on how disadvantaged people in general and disabled people in particular, can be assisted to afford learning opportunities...

An inclusive future? Disability, social change and opportunities for greater inclusion by 2010, DEMOS, Ian Christie & Gavin Mensah-Coker. London 1999 p49

Social inclusion

There is a need for disabled writers to engage with other people to guard against isolation and develop within a shared learning context. Writing alone for the stage and being disabled equates to isolation multiplied. Peer group networking and encouragement is very important and it was felt of considerable benefit to meet other disabled writers, particularly to realise that difficulties faced were not unique. Making a relationship with **writernet**, was seen as key.

Deconstructing "open access" was also seen as vital. It can mean so many different things. Now that under the Disability Discrimination Act a paid for service must offer appropriate access to all disabled needs, it was hoped that companies would more genuinely engage with real needs and not just hide under blanket terminology.

How creative dramatic work is written about by the Press and the lenses through which readers - and potential audiences - are invited to engage with work by disabled writers also has implications for social inclusion, training and writing about disability.

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writernet and Graeae acknowledge their responsibility not only to offer a continued involvement with those writers on the scheme requiring it, but also to those disabled writers who await discovery. At the time of writing the partner organisations are pursuing 3 separate strands of work to follow through.

Now it is up to others to acknowledge their responsibility.

