

Words through the Wire: Creative Writing on the Inside

Leni Shilton

Alice Springs Correctional Centre
PO Box 56
Alice Springs
0871 NT
ph:08 89518960 fax:08 89518964
leni.shilton@nt.gov.au

Words through the Wire: Creative Writing on the inside.

Abstract:

Offering literacy through creative writing classes to a group of students at ASCC has resulted in a change in the way they view their world. They are writing in a range of genres which include poetry, short stories, autobiography and more recently – play writing. The majority of the students are indigenous and have English as the second or third language. The writing is in their own 'voice' with some students choosing to depart from the conventions of English, working instead with Aboriginal English, street talk as well as their first languages.

The paper will include samples of student writing with audio of students reading from their own work. The creative writing course has given the students confidence in their writing and the skills to edit their own work and that of others. It has increased their employment prospects once they leave prison and has rehabilitative benefits by enabling the students to express themselves in a non-confronting way.

Words through the Wire: Creative Writing on the inside.

Introduction

Creative Writing provides prisoners a vehicle for self-exploration that enables another approach to self-development. Using the creative form can encourage expression of previously suppressed thoughts and feelings. Poetry in particular can bring to the surface much emotion and tension. Being enrolled in creative writing has given the students permission (or an excuse) to write. Let me read a short poem by a student who has just started writing down his thoughts; it was written in August this year. Mark has given me permission to read this to you.

Back Home

As I sit by the river bank
and hear the rippling sounds
I let my mind go with the flow
of the natural stream of water.
As the background of birds sing
a small wind blows from southside
it is good to be a part of nature
to be free.

I am willing to change my life
but I must change what I think
inside my heart and mind.

awaken myself and forecast
what is going to happen.
God help us with ideas
maybe, rather wait faithfully
for them to enter my heart and mind
I am willing to wait.

©2005 Mark Inkamala

There has been much reflective writing as well as writing which recounts events leading to imprisonment. Often it seems the students are writing or speaking of these events for the first time, as if the time in prison has brought them to a personal still point with creative writing offering a process with which to regroup and reflect on what has gone on in the past, and to begin to look to the future.

The class is run like a writer's group where students are encouraged to read their work and get feedback from each other. Running a group such as this in

prison presents challenges such as confidentiality and cultural issues between the students but as the group has got to know each other over the year they seem comfortable with each other and are happy to share their work. By reading their work, they are learning from each other and are learning to hear the different 'voices' in the group. They are not pressured to read if they have written something personal that they would rather not share. The group meets regularly two full mornings a week; this time creates a space in the prisoners' day where they can feel for a time, they are not imprisoned.

Creative Writing Inside

The Certificate III in Creative Writing at ASCC started in February 2005 with twelve students from all over the NT, East Timor, WA and TSI, both indigenous and non - indigenous.

The course consists of five core modules and four electives. The core modules focus on the establishment of a writing practice, and the four electives focus on different genres within writing- these are poetry, fiction, non fiction, essay, journalistic writing, and play writing.

The class has looked at the work of indigenous writers from Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Africa, on political poetry from East Timor and prison writings from South Africa. The course looks at western classical writings and contemporary writings from Australia, PNG and Japan. This diverse writing informs the students' own writing. It helps inspire them whilst expanding their thinking. We learn from a wide variety of writers by looking at the structure of the language they use, their content, the rhythm and sound of the writing; also, the way the work is formatted or set out on the page. This is especially important when looking at poetry. Students are encouraged to learn to see the words and the spaces on the page as well as hearing the sound of writing.

The course also focuses on the process of developing writing. In the first part of the year, much of the class time was spent generating writing, discussing different genres and working on exercises to get their words out (see Brophy 2003, Miller 2001, Goldberg 1986, Grenville 1990 and many others).

Students look at the use of language as a tool for communication. We have studied basic English grammar and structure. When students have a good understanding of the conventions of English, they can then decide to depart from these conventions. This process can be as simple as reducing punctuation and capitalisation or it can be writing experimentally, in their first language or with first language words and street language.

The Voice Inside

In September 2005 the students recorded their work for radio and this was broadcast during the Alice Desert Festival at the Totem Theatre during a day of literacy events. *The Voice Inside* was very successful, with the students' work being played to a full house. As the students were unable to attend, the

audience was invited to respond to the work by writing their comments in a book the students could read; many did and the feedback was very positive. People commented on the honesty and power in the writing, others commented on the strength in the students' voices. The audience was clearly moved by the students' work. The interest in the community following the broadcast is testament to the quality of the work.

Earlier in the year I asked Steve Hodder, a young Aboriginal actor from Alice Springs, to work with the students on the finer points of writing for performance. Steve showed the students a number of plays he has acted in, including one called 'Birds in a Cage,' where Steve acts the part of a prisoner in prison for the first time. The students had a few tips for him on that one!

For the students, the process of producing work for *The Voice Inside* was much more than just recording the poems, plays and spoken word. Some members of the group produced a poster, the program and a CD cover. Students asked each other and staff members to be the voices in their plays; they helped each other out with the backing vocals on songs and with language translations. Others learnt how to scan images used in the visual presentation.

The management of ASCC has supported the project and encouraged the students in their writing. They have given permission for radio interviews to be conducted in the prison and for *The Voice Inside* to be played on two local radio stations.

The Voice Inside gave the students a new focus as they wrote with the knowledge that their words would be presented publicly. The students responded well to the idea of writing in a different genre and worked on exercises which explored character development, plot and dialogue. The production of *The Voice Inside* was the culmination of the module 'Writing for Performance.' I will be playing the results of these efforts for you at the end of this paper.

Recidivism and Education

This is what is happening in creative writing but what is the point of studying it? What educational outcomes are there from this type of education?

The recent review into NT Correctional Services, *A Path to Good Corrections* (2004 p.84), recommends that targets for achieving literacy, numeracy and English comprehension be established. The aim of providing Creative Writing fulfils this recommendation by offering a high level course to students who have good skills in written and spoken English and wish to extend and develop them. These students tend to be long-term prisoners who have been attending education for some time or who have entered the prison system already competent in English.

The students wanting to attend literacy classes at ASCC do an initial literacy test to ascertain their skills in written and spoken English. We tailor the teaching

to fit the needs of the students, by grading the classes into different literacy ability level.

In previous years I have had little to offer students with higher literacy skills those students who have completed at least year ten at high school. Most have done very little study since finishing school but in prison have shown a great interest in studying something more than basic literacy and numeracy.

Creative writing provides a great basis for working on English comprehension, sentence structure - grammar and spelling, all those wonderful parts of English many of us didn't spend much time on at school. By reading and writing regularly these skills will improve and the students have found this already; the more they write the easier it becomes.

What of that age old question, recidivism?

How can Creative Writing help address this problem?

Obviously the course needs to be so much hard work that students won't want to re-offend just to get back into it. More seriously though, the course will help stop recidivism by facilitating the sort of self-reflection expressed in Mark's poem at the beginning of this paper. In his poem, Mark talks about his home and wanting to go back, but he also talks about making a change. He says, 'I am willing to change my life.' English is not Mark's first language so his choice of the words; 'Awaken myself and forecast what is going to happen,' is particularly powerful. He has a very literal meaning in this line. Mark told me he likes this poem because he was able express clearly what he feels.

Creative Writing for the Outside

Through their work on, *The Voice Inside*, the students did indeed find they have a powerful voice. They discovered the strength in words to move and influence the audience. They have seen that people are interested in hearing their work, people are intrigued to know what is going on in their minds. The hard work now is learning how to deal with this new-found knowledge. Do they use this writing to manipulate their audience? How do they learn about an audience when they are locked up and their audience is outside? The students' response to all the attention has been unbalanced, with some students removing themselves from class and others, by demonstrating difficult behaviour in class. Finding a balance in prison is not easy; part of the learning in creative writing is coming to terms with what you will do with this writing you have created. This part of the journey is just beginning for the students.

The value of creative writing is demonstrated in a change in the confidence of each of the students' writing. To document this, I keep a folio of the students' work including early writing drafts and final copies these shows a development in the writing and a refining of the content. It is safe to say, that the only

creative writing done previous to the course was in letters to girlfriends or when filling out Centrelink forms.

Some students want to work in writing when they leave prison and see it as a real job prospect. Others, I suspect, are writing because they can: there is an opportunity and space to write and they are using it. It is possible that they will not write creatively when they leave prison, but just having studied the course means they have new skills in self-expression and a different perspective of the world. They have seen how poetry and the spoken word can be used as a powerful force in their own writing and in the reading they have done. The students have seen how their writing can touch people, how words can make people laugh or move them to tears.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the development of the creative writing program at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre and the production of *The Voice Inside*, an audio recording of the students' work performed during the recent Alice Desert Festival. I have reflected on how creative writing can have an influence on recidivism. And lastly, I have commented on the effects on the student who have put their work out into the wider community and the potential of creative writing in life after prison.

The use of language as a tool for expression is an exciting journey which I am honoured to be a part of.

I will now play you some stories from 'The Voice Inside.' The students and I hope you enjoy them.

References:

A Path to Good Corrections – A Review of the Northern Territory Correctional Services Adult Custodial Operations, CAYA, Management Consulting International Inc., March 2004, Ontario, Canada.

Back Home, Unpublished poem © 2005 Mark Inkamala, Alice Springs.

Brophy, K. 2003, *Explorations in Creative Writing*, Melbourne University Press. Melbourne.

Certificate III in Creative Writing, 14780NT NT Cultural, Resource & Tourism Training Advisory Council.

Goldberg, N. 1986, *Writing down the Bones*, Shambhala, Boston & London.

Grenville, K. 1990, *The Writers Workbook*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

Miller, P. 2001, *Writing your Life*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

The Voice Inside © 2005 Alfie Campbell, Nelio Serra, Clarrie Haywood, Tony Wade, Brad Putland and Simon Smith: Creative Writing Students Alice Springs Correctional Centre.

