Telling (My) Stories: Potential Uses of Autofiction to Enhance Wellbeing in a Community Arts Setting

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Abstract

This paper reports on *Telling (My) Stories*, a two-month community writing project that was held at Bournemouth University in 2023 with the aim of elucidating the life stories of 12 participants to enhance their feeling of wellbeing and their mental health. It evaluates the applicability of autofiction to community arts projects with a focus on writing and wellbeing. In doing so it takes the evolution of autofiction to a new a stage, treating it not merely as a fashionable fictional genre in the literary marketplace, but also as an active tool for potential utility in the kinds of community writing setting where the public gesture of publishing a finished, written work of fiction is not the goal and where achieving some kind of wellbeing benefit through writing is a valid end in its own right. It suggests that it is possible for autofiction to be employed in a community writing project in such a way that enables a modest benefit to their wellbeing to be achieved by the participants. It also makes some observations on the status of the university as an institution perceived by project participants to be both a safe space and a somewhat prestigious venue that they wanted to attend, provided that potential barriers to attending (most notably, social anxiety among those unaccustomed to doing so) can be sensitively overcome.

Keywords: autofiction; life writing; community arts; participatory arts; wellbeing; inclusivity; safe spaces.

Introduction

Over the last two decades a narrative turn has taken place in the social and human sciences, using storytelling in a wide diversity of fields to create new forms of understanding that would not be available using traditional research methods. During the 1990s researchers and practitioners in Therapeutic Writing, Health and Social Care, Education and Vocational Counselling all started to use storytelling as a research tool to supplement existing ways of working (which were mainly quantitative) with methods that were more qualitative. For example, writing therapists often use storytelling as a way of helping their patients to work through troubling experiences (Lengelle, 2021); Healthcare researchers encourage patients to keep diaries of their treatment as means of evaluating the quality of the service they receive (Matthews, 2018); Trainee teachers frequently use journaling as a way of reflecting on their developing education practice in order to improve it (Walker, 2018); Vocational guidance counsellors encourage their advisees to write life stories in the

form of career narratives to help them make difficult vocational decisions in their careers or professional lives (Ortiz-Vilarelle, 2021).

As this narrative turn has become increasingly adopted, a status quo has emerged which privileges autobiographical (i.e. factual) narratives over other forms of writing (Shands et al, 2015). This has the effect that more creative forms of storytelling have not been used to anything like the same extent, and the opportunity for using more creative genres of writing in these fields has been missed. By contrast, the recent emergence of autofiction creates an opportunity to apply alternative, creative forms of writing to research into people's empirical experiences and to extrapolate those experiences to improve our understanding of their lives.

The concept of autofiction has loosely been used to refer to a form of life writing that combines autobiographical and fictional elements. Coinage of the term *autofiction* has variously been attributed to British-American novelist and critic Paul West in 1972 (Bloom, 2019), French novelist Serge Doubrovsky in in 1977 (Grell, 2014), Jerzy Kosinski in America in 1986 (Nicol, 2018) and Edmund White in 1995 (Saunders, 2010), with this variety of derivation hinting at a potential multiplicity of both origin and meaning. In turn, this double-layered multiplicity implies the existence of a potentially wide variety of forms of autofiction and an equally possible broad application of the term. Indeed, this multiplicity might be why autofiction has become a form of creative writing that is very popular in the contemporary literary marketplace (Wasserman, 2022). For the most part, however, the term has been used to carry out acts of generic classification. Much less common has been applying the properties of autofiction in the teaching

of creative writing, in community arts settings or in community projects that contribute to the arts and wellbeing agenda.

This paper reports on one such project, *Telling (My) Stories*, a two-month community writing project that was held at Bournemouth University in February and March 2023 with the explicit aim of elucidating the life stories of 12 group members in order to enhance their feeling of wellbeing and their mental health. It evaluates the applicability of autofiction to community arts projects with a focus on writing and wellbeing.

In doing so it takes the evolution of autofiction to a new stage, treating it not merely as a fashionable fictional genre in the literary marketplace and the world of published books, but also as an active tool for potential utility in the kinds of community writing setting where the public gesture of publishing a finished, written work of fiction is not the goal and where achieving some kind of wellbeing benefit through writing is a valid end in its own right. In other words, it assesses how far the potential for autofiction to facilitate people in achieving relative therapeutic benefit through writing can be unlocked in such a setting. Its findings are necessarily provisional, given the comparatively small scale of the project.

Nevertheless, it concludes by suggesting that it is possible for autofiction to be employed in a community writing project in such a way that enables a modest benefit to their wellbeing to be achieved by the participants. In passing it also makes some observations on the status of the university as an institution perceived to be both a safe space and a somewhat prestigious venue by group members who had little or no prior experience of taking part in activities on campus, provided that potential barriers

to attending (most notably, social anxiety among those unaccustomed to doing so) can be sensitively overcome.

Theoretical Background

As stated above, one of the branches of the human sciences in which the so-called narrative turn of the 21st century has taken place is career counselling, where career counsellors have used narrative and storytelling to elucidate life stories among the people they counsel in order to help them see themselves in new ways, achieve new forms of self-knowledge and make better vocational decisions as a result.

Although career narratives are not to be conflated with autofiction, there are a number of intersections between them of direct relevance to the aims of this project, i.e. assessing how far autofiction can be used to unlock therapeutic potential, especially in a community arts setting. One of the leading exponents of using narrative methods in career counselling, the South African researcher Kobus Maree, has gone as far as to argue that career narratives can be used to help people overcome the pain of negative experiences, make sense of turbulent periods of rapid change in their lives and achieve a degree of self-healing through the making of new vocational choices following which the pain of a prior experience is converted into a meaningful social contribution so that taking on a new vocational role in one's personal or professional life affords opportunities to help others and in doing so, to heal one's own wounds. According to Maree, the key elements of career narratives are therefore as follows:

firstly, every life story is defined by the pain suffered by its authors. Secondly, for survival, it is essential to turn this pain into a social contribution, a gift to others who have suffered a similar fate. Thirdly, healing

is brought about by narrating or telling the story to empathetic career counsellors as well as other valued audiences in the client's life such as parents, partners and friends. Lastly, repeated reflection under the attentive eyes of skilled career counsellors has the power to heal psychic wounding and scarring (Maree, 3).

This account of how a painful experience can be first conceptualized in narrative and then overcome through the adoption of a new social role which enables the individual to make a wider contribution to the society around them so that helping others becomes cathected as a means to heal oneself is perhaps idealistic and may not be equally operative in every case.

Indeed, Larry Cochran (1997) has developed a more nuanced understanding of how differentials of race, culture, nationality, class and social status all play formative parts in how people experience the world and so construct their life stories.

Nevertheless, Maree's assumption of a foundational experience of pain which is somewhat alleviated through a practice of re-narration points to possible ways in which autofiction might be mobilized to attain therapeutic benefit because many works of autofiction have been written in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, or what Arnaud Genon (2013) calls a "faille fondatrice" (58), or founding faultline that rips a tear in the chronology of the person's life story so that the period before the specific traumatic experience becomes fundamentally severed from the period after it.

In other words, combining the narration of trauma that is a common component of autofiction with the attainment of self-healing that is the goal of Maree's career narratives points to a new way in which

autofiction might be deployed to achieve this effect through writing practices that are not necessarily limited to a person's career or vocational narratives. Mary McMahon and Mark Watson (2011) have drawn attention to the fact that the "literature in career psychology is generally recognized as being more theoretical than practical" (2) and this also has previously been true of autofiction, where most scholarly research has focused on literary stylistics and generic classification in the critical analysis of published works.

But when our conceptualization of autofiction is opened up to include not only published works but also self-narratives written for the more private and provisional goal of therapeutic benefit on the part of the writer this would potentially represent a transition from the theoretical to the practical and the applied.

Structure

In designing the *Telling (My) Stories* project, academic researchers from Bournemouth University worked with two community arts practitioners from a local partner organization. They met several times while the project was at the planning and preparation stage and this was important in enabling academic research about autofiction to be brought into contact with professional community arts practice in the design and implementation of the creative activities. The project was not buying in an off-the-shelf creative writing programme from the practitioners' back catalogue because the activities were newly created and bespoke to the project. However, neither was it a case of researchers communicating solely with other researchers about their academic work because the purpose of the project was to enable applications of that research in a non-academic setting and

in this the collaboration with community partners was essential. In other words, both the work of the researchers and that of the practitioners was transformed by the encounter.

It was clear from the start that collaboration with the partner organization was essential in identifying and recruiting potential participants. As a prominent and active community-based organization with long-standing connections to the community, the partner organization had not only an extensive network and contact list but also the confidence of their service users.

By contrast, universities are not always as thoroughly rooted in the communities of the geographical locations in which they are based and in fact many of the eventual participants had never been to the university campus before. Having an organic connection to the communities was an absolutely crucial element of the project, since recruiting participants required a high level of mutual sensitivity and trust. These would have been lacking were it not for the collaboration with the partner.

The main recruitment tool used was a bright and attractive flyer sent to the partner group's mailing list. This struck an informal and accessible tone, emphasizing that no previous experience was required to take part and that 'Being creative in supported group settings is a great way to grow in confidence, make new friends, and spend time discovering more about your own thoughts and feelings.' More specifically, it identified that the course was suitable for people using mental health services or those who would like to try new ways to support their mental wellbeing. Finally, along with the practical details of where, when and who to contact it promised that 'Alongside developing new creative

skills and learning more about art, we hope you'll be inspired you to develop a short creative piece inspired by your own life.' It proved to be a highly effective recruitment tool and the course was over-subscribed – which might indicate a strong need for arts and wellbeing activities that was not being met by other, more traditional service providers.

Having recruited 12 participants for the project the professional partners remained in regular email contact with them before, during and after each session. At the start of each one they also met all the participants in the relatively neutral and familiar space of the university's central cafeteria area before leading them to the precise venue on campus. This provided a liminal space, and a period of transition between off- and on-campus, which was a consideration that seemed especially important given that the majority of participants had never been onto the university campus before (and many of them were very quick to point this out during the informal conversations that took place at that first meeting point).

Of the 12 participants, six were men and six were women. There was a mixture of ages from mid-thirties to early seventies. Three of the female participants came from other countries (Brazil, Columbia and Poland). The participants had been encouraged from the outset to take seriously their responsibilities to themselves and to other members of the group. These included the idea that where possible they should aim to participate in all sessions, or as many as practically possible. One participant dropped out after the first session, having been referred to the professional partners through a practice of social prescribing and apparently having been under the mistaken impression that the course was taking place at Arts

University Bournemouth, an institution geographically proximate to but separate from Bournemouth University, so that his expectation to take part in activities including wood crafting and other kinds of sculpture were clearly not met. This indicates the importance of clear course description and accurate signposting towards the exact nature of the activities to be covered.

On the other hand, all the other participants attended regularly, with a few individuals missing isolated one-off sessions. This high level of buy-in was anecdotally attributed by the professional partners to the participants' perception of the university as a prestige venue that they do not ordinarily have access to. This attribution was confirmed by post-event participant evaluation (see Figure 1) and interestingly alleviated an initial concern surrounding whether the university might be perceived as an intimidating, daunting or even alien environment for people not accustomed to visiting it.

Do you have any comments about where the course was held?

It was useful to have a venue which offered car parking, a bus hub, a bar, warm, clean and bright rooms to work in. The campus also felt safe which is vital as so many places feel threatening these days.

I had never been on campus before so welcomed the opportunity. Say what you like about the architecture (I liked it), the entire site was highly impressive.

For me it was not so important it was at a university although I think it is brilliant the university is facilitating courses like this. The quality of all the facilities was excellent and although we did not take advantage I am sure any AV / presentation requirements could be easily accommodated. The space and the furniture worked well for the different exercises. I have attended an art course there and the same applied. The environment is very much fit for purpose.

It is not only very close to my house, but also I felt more open minded when the venue has educational angle, is well equipped and safe. I liked the location, it was generally quiet and was also easy to access by public transport. I helped me see that the university offers things for the public as well.

I found the course being at the university was a middle market from Bournemouth and Poole and the buses to wimborne were more frequent, it was great to be a part of the university, but I could also say it may be daunting for people who want a smaller venue with less people

Also with the lecturer […] attending spoke volumes , it was great for him to immerse himself into the course.

It was great to finally be at BU (I don't live far away from it) and have that feeling of being part of a learning environment again

This was naturally important to me (although I am also interested in the idea of university-supported activities off campus).

It was a welcoming space that I personally was familiar with which put me at ease when I was feeling particularly anxious
The venue was secure, modern, brightly lit, accessible, safe.
Figure 1: Feedback on venue

Other responsibilities that were clearly flagged to the participants at the start of the programme and at the start of each individual session were the fact that the programme should be seen as a safe space in which the ideas, opinions, emotions and work of all participants should be fully respected and treated in the highest confidence.

Equally, although the ethos of the professional partner organization is to deliver community arts activities with a focus on wellbeing, the participants also clearly understood that the programme was neither a form of therapy nor a substitute for counselling. As such, they should only bring to the sessions emotions or experiences that they felt

completely comfortable sharing with the whole group. In fact, the group went through the process of forming, norming, and performing remarkably quickly given that only two of its members had ever previously met.

This might be partly attributable to the perception of the university as a prestige venue in which participants wanted to work collegially for the collective good, and partly attributable to the fact that as a community arts group, the professional partners' contact list (from which the participants were recruited) comprises a very specific sample of the public, i.e. people who can be characterized as both interested in the therapeutic potential of arts activities and somewhat empathetic with regard to the well-being needs of others.

Although the location for the project was the university campus, this was not a lecture or seminar series in the conventional sense.

It was clear from the beginning that it was not teaching autofiction to the participants in the way that university tutors would teach (for example) modernism or postmodernism to a class of honours students. An outline understanding of autofiction, its properties and affordances had been embedded in the initial planning discussions between the university researchers and the partner practitioners because clearly, developing a specialist programme on the application of autofiction to enhance wellbeing requires a base level understanding of what autofiction is on the part of the practitioners. On the other hand, since autofiction was being used as a technique by the practitioners, whether or not the participants were familiar with the concept of autofiction was of much less significance and in fact during the five sessions of the programme only

one of them referred to the concept at all.

Figure 2 summarizes the content of all five sessions on the project.

2/2/23 Introduction to art and autobiography
9/2/23 Writing your stories – writing and autobiography
16/2/23 'Self Portrait' – visual art and autobiography
23/2/23 Performing the Self – performance art and autobiography
2/3/23 Sharing week; time to practice your short piece, then share your ideas and get feedback.

Figure 2: Schedule of activities

All of the sessions were two hours long with a break in the middle for refreshments. This break proved very valuable both in enabling the concentration of the participants to be renewed and in allowing for informal socialization and group cohesion.

All sessions were carefully planned and although they each started with a physical warm-up they did not follow a formulaic pattern. However, they were designed in such a way as to create the impression of enabling diverse ideas and forms of creativity gradually to coalesce and come together – giving the impression, that is, of becoming more formally structured over time.

The overall idea was to provide a form of scaffolding, starting with very short written activities and slowly expanding them as the course progressed. A relatively lengthy period was necessary for this to occur because participants had little experience of conceptualizing their lives in narrative and could not be expected to arrive fully adept at doing so from the very beginning.

Through narrating their stories in a variety of different formats participants developed their self-narratives, incorporating their past experiences,

character traits, interests and ambitions, key achievements and positive limitations.

As the narratives became deeper and richer they also became more valuable as sources of potential self-knowledge on the part of the participants, giving them opportunities to see themselves in new ways and hence to author the future chapters of their life stories.

Some of the participants stuck to the strictly factual as if they were writing journals or diaries whereas others became more creative and imaginative in imagining themselves in alternative situations and stories that departed from empirically experienced events.

For the first session participants were asked to bring along something that had personal significance to them such as an item of clothing, a childhood toy, an object from a special time in their life, something they had been given and so on. After initial discussions about how they understood the words "self" and "narrative" the session involved working from these objects as creative starting points in a variety of ways: drawing the object; creating and enacting a series of hand and facial gestures that expressed its significance; and free writing based on the memory of the first time each person encountered their object.

The second session introduced the concept of autobiographical art, looking at pieces of writing by two artists (Sylvia Plath and Bobby Baker) and then discussing responses to them. This was followed by a discussion of the different stages involved in the creative process (including Research, Free Writing/ Play, and Editing), with participants encouraged to identify a particular moment from their lives that they wanted to explore through writing.

This could be interpreted very broadly and might include a particular challenge they have faced, an achievement of which they are proud, a specific relationship with another person, an issue that is currently troubling them or similar. Time was set aside to engage in examples of each stage plus time at the end for sharing of work and peer feedback. The Free Writing through creative play was especially important in allowing participants to get ideas onto the page without fear of getting it wrong. This was complemented by the Edit stage, where participants were encouraged to develop a critical voice to reshape what they had written, and make creative decisions about what they wanted to present.

Sessions Three and Four adopted similar approaches, looking at examples of visual artists whose work draws on their own life stories; and performance artists whose work is not quite theatre, not quite visual art, but somewhere between the two. A discussion of both Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono elicited the observation that some artists use themselves, and their bodies, as part of their work itself. By contrast looking at 'Family Hold Back', a darkly comic performance satirizing the manners and etiquette of an English dinner table by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris prompted the opinion that this was closer to theatre, where artists tell stories and perform more recognizable roles. All of this discussion was underpinned by a consideration of what the participants could see happening in each work, how it made them feel, and what the artists might be trying to communicate to the audience. This in turn could then be applied to the participants' own self representations in the final session, by exploring the opposing poles of autobiographical fact and creative, imaginary alternative selves.

Discussion

For the final session, participants were invited to share some of their work in the form of a 3-minute presentation. The format of this was open-ended and depending on what each person had produced could be a reading, performance, or visual piece. Although it was emphasized that nobody was obliged to share their work if they did not wish to, everybody chose to. Presentations were recorded and made available uniquely to each participant as a permanent take-away from the course and also as a finished artefact of which they could feel proud.

By the final presentation, a number of small but discernible developments had taken place among the participants.

For example, in the discussion of the words "self" and "narrative" in the first session, a male participant in his forties immediately started talking about dementia and the impact this has on our sense of who we are and how we relate to others. This then carried through his work in all five sessions, which he used to explore the challenging experience of living with (and caring for) a relative who was also a dementia patient. Another male participant was a carer for his ageing wife and although his willingness to share aspects of this experience was more muted (possibly indicating that five weeks was insufficient to gain his trust), this facet of his life nevertheless informed his narratives at certain moments.

Figure 3 collates the post-event participant feedback collected about the impact the programme had on their mental health and wellbeing.

In addition, the evaluation asked participants: How far would you agree with the statement, "Taking part in the

course was good for my mental wellbeing?" to which all respondents answered 5 out of 5 on a Likert scale, indicating "Strongly agree."

However, although a useful general indicator of how highly participants valued the course and a potential means of quantifying the benefit to their wellbeing that it brought about, there is a danger that this kind of approach can be superficial and in fact the quantitative data generated by the participants during the evaluation phase was much richer and more meaningful.

Can you tell us more about how you feel the course had an impact on your mental health and/or wellbeing?

For my first 70 years I had been the model citizen. Middle of the road, middle income, middle class. Having suffered from clinical depression a few years ago, I had decided to try to experience anything on offer. This short course was well outside my comfort zone so I joined with not a little trepidation. I needn't have worried. I loved it and hope to be part of the SALT performance [another project run by the same partners] in July. My confidence, self esteem and even ego received a huge boost from this course.
I have very strong perfectionist tendencies which often prevent me engaging in art or finding ways to avoid it. The different course approaches (artistic, literary and performance) to telling my story offered me the opportunity to explore without getting bogged in detail and hence avoiding.
It made me feel accepted, understood and not judged. Felt a sense of belonging.
I think mainly connecting with others and trying something new. Even if the challenge of it was perhaps a little daunting or overwhelming at times. But it was good to have to challenge to help develop myself. Simply being in an event in person was hugely helpful and opened my eyes to how isolated I had become. I think it has also helped with my confidence, being able to do the final story and this will help in terms of other difficulties in my life.
500% these courses help with confidence, self worth, being able to interact and integrate safely, non judgemental, people can be open and honest in a safe space , the course can

challenge your boundaries and comfort zone again in a safe space , the deliverers always say tasks check in etc are all optional , this unpressurized approach makes it more inclusive for all, my mental health improves immensely, and also having something to look forward each week, I cannot stress how this helps with mental health but so many other areas in my life!!!
It provided a safe space to share our stories and creative ways to enable that sharing
I found it interesting to be able to pick out recurring themes or common elements from among the different activities we did each week - especially when the connections between these things was not necessarily obvious to begin with.
I have been struggling for some time with my mental health and isolation has been a big issue so this gave me somewhere to go and be around similar people to myself and explore some of my own personal history in a safe way
The course has had a great impact on my wellbeing. First, I made friends with a group of diverse and interesting people with whom I would have never met her I not joined the course. The course was a safe space where I felt comfortable being open about myself and my feelings. There were tears and laughs from others in the group. I felt we got to know each other quite well in such a short time. Performing my final piece in front of the group was an effective way to help me deal with some of the things that negatively affect my mental health. I'm so grateful that I had this opportunity.
Figure 3: Feedback on mental health and wellbeing

For example one of them, a woman in her late thirties who had previously worked for a bank, said she valued the sessions highly because since becoming a mother over a decade earlier her opportunities to assert her own sense of identity had become limited. Another woman in her early thirties who evinced a degree of shyness and even low self-confidence during the sessions specifically requested that she be the first to present her work in the final session as this would ensure that she had no opportunity to duck out of it.

In her story she adopted the persona of an explorer (named after herself) and

used cut-up maps to demonstrate her journey through the metaphorical adventure of her life in a loose, symbolic and open-ended way. In other words, although she apparently had chosen not to share many specific details of her personal life with the group through story, she nevertheless utilized the process of storytelling to adopt a fictional persona somewhat modelled on herself to construct a high level of articulacy and personal meaning.

This demonstrates the difference between autofiction and autobiography when applied to a practical community arts setting.

By contrast, one of the participants was a retired, professional male somewhat confident in his demeanour (he was former captain of a golf club) who used the final presentation of his story as part of coming out. After the final session he revealed that he had only recently done so to his wife and grown-up children and was still in the process of doing so in his life more generally.

He had not specifically intimated in any of the writing activities or discussion in the prior sessions that this was the end point towards which his self-narrative was tending, but he did reveal in hindsight that he had nevertheless been working towards that point in his mind all along. His decision to do so in the final session thus is further testament not only to the supportive environment of the university but also to the high level of trust he felt had been generated among members of the group.

Notably, this participant was the only member of the group who used the term autofiction to refer to his narrative, and he did so hesitantly and uncertainly, mainly because he had chosen to write in the third person as this provided a higher level of freedom from self-

censorship than writing in the first person would have done, whereas during discussions we had mentioned that autofiction is more normally a first-person narrative. On the other hand, it has been established by Martens (2018) among others that it is possible to write autofiction in the third person. More importantly, since the whole project was not a class in the conventional sense, and since it provided opportunities for self-exploration among the participants rather than teaching them as such, it would not have been appropriate to try and correct this perception.

What mattered more was the capacity for personal development (Hunt, 2018) that it facilitated. Having contributed to his process of coming out and recalibrating his sense of self and his relationships around him, this narrative could therefore be seen as an instance of what Edmund White (1995) has termed "gay autofiction."

Prior to the final presentation, most of the writing produced by this participant had been dedicated to his memories of his mother and grandmother. For one of the sessions, members of the group had been given the task of bringing in three objects of particular emotional significance to them because objects elicit memories and memories elicit emotions. Indeed, as Maree has pointed out, when life-narratives are co-constructed jointly between a facilitator and a subject the factual truth of the recollections "will not always be 100% accurate – nor should they be" because factual accuracy is less important than the emotional meaning and value ascribed to it by them (12).

This further illustrates the distinction between autobiography and autofiction in a community arts setting, whereby in order to utilize autobiographical narrative facts have first to be verified as

the basis for the narrative whereas autofiction takes emotional experience as its own kind of truth.

Having chosen to bring his mother's golliwog to the group in response to this task, the participant in question somewhat nervously contacted us in advance to discuss the wisdom of doing so. After a brief conversation between the researchers and facilitators it was decided that having invited members of the group to bring in artefacts from their homes, it was not helpful to censor or restrict the range of items they could choose. However, it was also suggested that the group might pause for an open conversation about what a golliwog stood for and how it had been associated with those feelings historically.

To the individual in question, it was simply a child's toy, well over seventy years old and richly laden with personal memories and emotional experience. But he was also reflective enough to realize that it was not simply any children's toy, and that its historical association with imperialism and racism might endow it with very provocative and unsettling feelings for others. Catherine Cusset (2012) has said that a search for truth and a need to be honest with ourselves even if it might be painful or unflattering is a hallmark of autofiction and one that certainly came to the fore in this case.

In the event, no discussion arose of the golliwog within the group during the session based on bringing in objects. However, the golliwog did feature briefly within this person's final presentation (which, as mentioned above, took the form of a coming out narrative). After he had finished reading his story to the group, although the other members asked no searching questions at all about the coming out narrative, one member asked the

question: "Did I hear the word golliwog in there? It's a while since I've heard that word." Notably, this question was asked by the only black male participant within the group and he did not say anything any more critical or probing than this, choosing instead to simply leave the question hanging.

This might be because he did not want to challenge the author of the story too overtly in a narrative that was ostensibly about coming out, within the specific context of a group in which the inner dynamics were highly mutually supportive, but did not want the tacit racialized history of the golliwog to be left entirely uninterrogated either. In other words, it was in itself a very sensitive form of challenge, raising the objection in an indirect and allusive rather than confrontational way and through the words "It's been a while" consigning the history of racism to the past so that the individual telling the story did not feel arraigned.

The only subsequent discussion that took place was directed towards the three overseas women in the group who all stated that they had never heard the word before, thus rendering it necessary to explain without necessarily endorsing while also not alienating the original member who had brought the object in.

Of these three women, two chose to use their final presentations to reflect on the experience of migration, doing so through non-verbal performance pieces that were both powerful and emotional (see Figure 4: Participant Feedback on activities). The first, a Brazilian woman in her fifties, staged a performance in which she was getting ready for a night out, perhaps a date with a lover, by putting on clothes and make-up and then systematically working through all the same steps in reverse order as she took the clothes and make-up off, thus

leaving her symbolically (though not literally) bare and hence exposed and vulnerable.

The only constant - an item that she was wearing at the start of the performance and that remained on for the whole time - was a crucifix and this was perceptively identified by members of the group in the discussion that followed as a potential constant in a lifetime of (unvoiced) turbulence and change. In other words, the non-verbal nature of the performance had the effect of elevating the simple act of dressing and then undressing onto a metaphorical level where it could speak to and for all the unspoken experiences - of love? Of loss? Of leaving people behind? Of being left? - that had made up that person's life.

What stood out for you? What did you enjoy? What would you like more of?

The support from the two leaders bred support from the wider group. Everyone was encouraged without application of pressure to participate. They also serve who stand and wait. I enjoyed it all and was distressed that I had to miss the middle session through illness.

Most of it was miles out of my comfort zone so the positive feedback did wonders for my confidence level and will encourage me to tackle other creative tasks.
What was important for me was:

The statement "Remember creativity is about playing, so let it be fun and focus on exploring". That has helped with my perfectionism and also beginning to change my attitude to art.

The different forms of expression I am convinced could help people in all sorts of ways, especially wellbeing. I saw this in action.

I can now see the value of the safe environment (before I thought it was a bit woke) to allow people to explore and articulate what are often difficult thoughts, facts or emotions.

The supportive and caring environment allowed people to challenge themselves to do what they would otherwise avoid (its all about me!) and benefit and grow from it.

We had all signed up for this but I could really see the value of a course like this in helping people with wellbeing/mental health.

I really like the variation of different activities during each session, as it kept my brain occupied and stimulated. I also really liked the duo of facilitators and their individual styles, which nicely complimented each other and brought something different to the table. The games helped to break the ice and made us feel a part of a community, which them made it easier to share personal stories. There was a lot of positivity and lack of pressure, making the course very relaxing - it also encouraged people to come every week as it was very enjoyable. Hot chocolate was a cherry on a cake 🍫

Even though I missed the writing week, I enjoyed the free writing homework and would love to have explored this further.

My memory can be poor, I liked more so the working in groups also the telling a story by each adding a part

We were VERY DIFFERENT PEOPLE from all walks of life, and listening to their stories was as powerful as telling mine

I really liked the final session where everyone shared their work. Some of these were very moving and there was a noticeable change in the levels of confidence and articulacy among many of the participants.

I missed the visual art session as I was unwell in hospital at the time and this was a shame. The course was very quick and I appreciate that it was free and understand the reasons but I would of preferred a longer course to enable more time to each area

The people in the group were supporting and genuine and committed, [the professional facilitators] were amazing, the atmosphere was just right and so contributed to an amazingly successful outcome of 10 fantastic and unique stories that we heard from all the participants.

The recording of our pieces needs better sound and was a rough sketch of something that might go on to be more polished. Perhaps we might make a professional collection of our stories to go online or be shown publicly. With direction, set, music maybe...
Figure 4: Feedback on activities

This non-verbal performance piece found a surprizing level of congruence in the presentation made by a Columbian woman in her twenties who took an almost identical approach through the silent putting on and taking off of a wedding dress. Here too the performance was emotionally charged and powerful and again the implication seemed to be that wordlessness was a more expressive vehicle for the revelation of a life story in miniature than the use of language.

Although autofiction has primarily been understood as a form of writing, de Bloois (2007) has recently started to explore the possibility for it to exist in other media, especially visual art and there has also been early-stage research into autofiction in performance (e.g. Delhey 2019, Stubenrauch 2019). However, as Patrice Pavis points out, a true autofictional practice of theatrical performance or autoperformance is "rarer" and remains under-conceptualized (2016, 24).

Although it would be tempting to make a theoretical leap from the performances of these two women to a wider theory of autofiction in performance, or indeed of autofiction and the narration of lives lived in migration, it would be difficult to do so without making an absurdly essentializing move.

Indeed, the fact that the third overseas female member of the group (a Polish woman in her forties) did not explore aspects of migrant experience at all in her presentation flags up the importance of not over-generalizing. Her narrative instead was dedicated to caring for a friend diagnosed with - and

subsequently surviving - cancer. The images of fragility, precariousness and immizeration perhaps stereotypically associated with dominant consumer images of migrants' lives were eschewed in favour of a narrative emphasizing both care and hope.

That is not to say, however, that the Polish participant wanted to overlook aspects of migrant experience altogether. During one of the sessions she had told a comical but also cutting story about the unfashionable uniform she was made to wear when she first came to the UK to work in a hotel; and in another she talked about the irony of the fact that she had travelled to the UK by coach so that the first time she ever took a plane it was to leave Britain for a holiday in Barcelona. Each of these anecdotes, though based on aspects of migrant experience such as dress and travel, rapidly superseded them and instead fed into a wider self-narrative of her as a determined, beauty-loving and somewhat rebellious person.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on a dedicated community writing project with the specific aim of evaluating how far the techniques of autofiction can be applied to provide a benefit to the wellbeing of participants. In other words, its aim was to report on the activities of the project in order to identify what insight could be gained from it, rather than to carry out a programme of original field research as such.

This means that a more formal programme of research would be needed among a bigger sample group over a longer period of time in order to enable a series of longitudinal measures of the impact autofiction can have when applied in such a way. Nevertheless, given these limitations, in the light of the

qualitative and quantitative evaluation data generated by participants in *Telling (My) Stories* it is possible to conclude that autofiction can be used by facilitators of community writing projects to enable a modest wellbeing benefit on the part of the project participants. This seems to be owing to the genre instability and open-ended definition of autofiction.

That is, whereas autobiography is perceived by participants to require a strict adherence to known facts at all times and therefore places limitations and constraints on how they see themselves, autofiction can be looser, freer and more speculative and therefore has the capacity to enable individuals to see themselves in a new way and hence gain new forms of self-understanding and self-knowledge.

Moreover, although the techniques and affordances of autofiction are used by practitioners to elicit this understanding from participants it does not matter whether the participants themselves are aware that this is what they are doing or not, or even whether they use the term autofiction at all.

For them, the wellbeing gain is what matters rather than the theoretical name for the writing techniques that enable it. In addition, it appears to be the case that the university, as a prestigious institution, a safe space, and a well-connected venue to which physical access was relatively easy was an appropriate organization to run such a project provided perceptual and emotional barriers to participation could be overcome.

It should be noted, however, that participants also expressed a strong level of interest in taking part in university-led activities off campus. In either case, the important element is the

collaboration, putting researchers into contact with practitioners in order to enable new kinds of practice and improve people's lives.

BIOGRAPHY

Hywel Dix is Professor of English at Bournemouth University, UK. He has published extensively on the relationship between literature, culture and political change in contemporary Britain, most notably in Postmodern Fiction and the Break-Up of Britain (2010), After Raymond Williams: Cultural Materialism and the Break-Up of Britain (Second Edition, 2013), Multicultural Narratives: Traces and Perspectives, co-edited with Mustafa Kirca (2018) and Compatriots or Competitors? Welsh, Scottish, English and Northern Irish Writing and Brexit in Comparative Contexts. His wider research focuses include modern and contemporary literature, critical cultural theory, authorial careers and autofiction. His monograph about literary careers entitled The Late-Career Novelist was published in 2017 and an edited collection of essays on Autofiction in English was published by Palgrave in 2018. He has recently completed a study entitled Autofiction and Cultural Memory with Routledge. He is very interested in how academic research can be put into partnership with community arts practitioners, especially in creative writing, to enhance personal development in a variety of ways among diverse participants and stakeholders, and has run or contributed to a number of projects to achieve this.

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