

Retelling Stories Project

1. Overview and background to the project

Retelling Stories is a joint pilot project launched in early 2019 between Newcastle City Council and Newcastle University to research, devise and deliver 5 bespoke training sessions with practitioners working with people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This training programme set out to explore how creative writing techniques can help frontline advice and support workers to use active listening skills and narrative structures to better capture, understand, and re-tell the stories of the residents they engage with.

These residents are consistently asked to tell their stories for a wide range of different purposes (to provide support, to refer them to other services, to find suitable accommodation, to determine whether they are owed a duty etc.). They are asked about extremely personal medical, financial and emotional information which needs to be drawn out empathetically. Practitioners must also re-tell resident's stories to a wide range of different audiences (accommodation providers, support services, social care etc.) and for a wide range of different purposes (advocating for access to accommodation, referring to essential support, applying for benefit entitlements etc.). Although creative techniques may seem abstract, there is significant potential in providing techniques to better capture, understand and re-tell resident's stories. By learning these techniques, it is hoped that practitioners will be able to better draw out the information required in the best way possible and then use that information to better advocate for residents.

The project was funded through Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer programme and contributes to the theme of 'improving our understanding' and specifically 'strengthening our insights from frontline practitioners'¹. The project builds on the development of 'Our Inclusion Plan' as part of an aim to develop an even more empathetic process of assessing and planning for residents' needs. For context, 'Our Inclusion Plan' was designed and implemented as a new assessment and planning framework for supporting residents who Newcastle City Council's statutory housing advice, assessment and temporary accommodation services are working with to have the foundations for a stable life. This is at the same time as ensuring that it is compliant with the legislative requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 to assess and jointly plan around the housing and support needs of residents at risk of homelessness.

¹ An overview report of the work that constituted Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer describes each of these themes and is available separately

The programme was jointly devised by Gez Casey, Senior Teacher in the School of English Literature Language and Linguistics at Newcastle University and Dr Chris Parker, Senior Active Inclusion Officer, Active Inclusion Service, Newcastle City Council. The sessions were delivered by Gez Casey. The pilot project was evaluated by Joel Halligan, a PhD student under the supervision of Dr Suzanne Moffatt, Senior Lecturer in Sociology of Health, Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University. The evaluation involved three focus groups with ten of the 12 practitioners who took part in the 'Retelling Stories' sessions.

This report intends to provide a brief overview of the project, an outline of the individual sessions and summary of the findings from the first phase of the evaluation with participating frontline practitioners.

2. The Programme

The sessions covered a number of relevant techniques and theories in creative writing:

- An awareness of story structures
- Techniques for active listening and questioning
- The recording of relevant narrative detail
- An awareness of what other agencies are looking for
- The shaping of that material for those contexts

With reference to the Newcastle City Council's 'Our Inclusion Plan' document, the sessions explored:

- Creative approaches to navigating difficult conversations
- Creative ways of assessing resident's priorities, goals and ambitions
- Creative interpretation and evaluation of obstacles
- Creative analysis of future options, within achievable parameters
- Creative imagining of the needs and expectations of prospective audiences for the narrative material

The sessions made use of:

- Anonymised composite case studies for use in exercises
- Some written and oral exercises to explore narrative techniques
- Some roleplay to illustrate examples of story gathering and retelling

- Some professional actors and a dramatist to perform an extract from “Wet House”, a play set in a homeless hostel, written by Paddy Campbell and to answer relevant questions about the issues raised

Over the five weeks of the sessions, practitioners gathered additional techniques and perspectives for use in the gathering and retelling of the stories of residents. In a supportive, non-judgemental and creative environment, the sessions aimed to offer focussed exercises to illustrate a variety of creative techniques. Without adding to existing workloads, this pilot aimed to offer additional practical and usable approaches to future conversations and story gathering.

3. Preparation

Before designing the sessions, it was important to spend some time in the services that the participating frontline practitioners worked in. This allowed better understanding of which creative techniques would be most relevant to practitioners.

Therefore, on various days during October- November 2018, Gez Casey shadowed Newcastle City Council frontline workers at the Housing Advice Centre, Cherry Tree View Temporary Accommodation and with the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer Multidisciplinary Team to observe present practice. Observations made and conversations conducted during this period helped to feed into the pilot project programme.

During November 2018-January 2019, a number of planning sessions took place between Gez Casey and Chris Parker (Senior Active Inclusion Officer at Newcastle City Council) together with colleagues from the Active Inclusion Service and from Newcastle Institute of Social Renewal. Among the colleagues consulted were Neil Munslow, Service Manager and Claire Horton, Service Improvement Lead, Active Inclusion Newcastle and Suzanne Moffatt, Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University. These discussions helped to devise, discuss and refine course content, and to consider methods of independently evaluating the project with the front line practitioners involved.

4. The sessions

This section provides a brief overview of each of the five sessions that constituted the ‘Retelling Stories’ project. For each session we describe the purpose, a description of the activities undertaken, formative feedback from practitioners during the sessions and relevant feedback captured during the evaluation. Key findings on the pilot as a whole can be found in section 6.

4.1 - Session One

This session introduced some questions about narrative structure and technique. Using some practical listening and retelling exercises, participants considered:

- What makes a story?
- How do you dig down deeper into the detail of a story?

The practical exercises involved, in pairs, swapping stories about each other and then retelling the stories of your partner to the group. Retelling a memorable detail from someone else's story.

Purpose and formative feedback

The exercises were designed to remind practitioners of the process of volunteering information to a (relative) stranger. Although it was made clear that practitioners were in control of their own information and could reveal as much (or as little) as they wanted. Some participants found the revelation of personal information disconcerting, though they appreciated that residents regularly have to share information that they have less control over.

Relevant feedback from evaluation

"I'm quite a private person. I'm very aware of that but I think that helped me understand again or remind me again how difficult it might be for other people who are having to share that information with me."

"But having to be coaxed, to a certain extent, made you realise the awkward nature sometimes of passing on information."

"For me, that first session, I think, would be really useful for the staff that works underneath us, for our assistants. Their job is very different to ours. But I think maybe just appreciating...how important their small interactions are."

4.2 - Session Two

Session two focused on two key discussion points:

- Creative writing elements for story narrative.
- Deconstructing a favourite story.

Practical Exercises included, in pairs, tell your partner your favourite story. Retell your partner's story to the rest of the group. Use the following model of story structure:

A Protagonist in a story has an **OBJECTIVE**;
 Things that prevent this happening are **OBSTACLES**;
 These maybe overcome by **STRENGTHS/ASSETS**.
 The unravelling of the story shows if they **SUCCEED** or **NOT**.

Purpose and formative feedback

These exercises are designed to get participants to structure a story they know, using this model. They then considered how this may relate to working with residents, and to consider how this relates to the new Inclusion Plan (e.g. Our Plan, page 28). Part of the discussion about this grid centred on the different types of OBSTACLES faced by the protagonist identified by individual practitioners. Often the more complex obstacles are INTERNAL, concerning some character trait or behaviour pattern of the protagonist. Of the other kinds of obstacle, the EXTERNAL pressure from peer groups and extended family members were also noted as significant. These elements were explored further in the case studies and play performance in later sessions.

Relevant feedback from evaluation

“I think in that second session where we all had to talk about a film that would relate to and relate the story, that was so interesting because some people knew that story chapter by chapter sort of thing, whereas to others it was the emotion of the story rather than the finer detail. I think people just interpret things in different ways...”

“Yes, I really honestly didn’t know what it was going to be. Then I think it was after the second session, I thought this is how our support plan [is] and so I could see what it was, the retelling stories. I could see what it was about from the first session where you told a story and then once you told it again you got more information but it was good, I did enjoy it.”

4.3 - Session Three

Session three focused on four different techniques, using one of two composite case studies, “Paul”:

- Building the story from a variety of sources over a period of time
- Constructing a past narrative
- Projecting a future narrative
- Considering audiences for particular stories

The practical exercise involved practitioners thinking about “Paul’s” story in groups. Information about “Paul” was provided in three stages outlining a supported accommodation eviction scenario.

Practitioners were asked to consider a number of questions as they received more information at each stage:

- How do you construct his narrative?
- What are the key points in that narrative?
- What are the key questions to ask him?

Purpose and formative feedback

It is clear from the feedback provided that the view taken about Paul develops as more information becomes available (i.e. as his story becomes more complex and detailed). It also became clear that a protagonist's objective may be flexible and that any detailed framework around the grid from Session 2 is a snapshot in time, subject to alteration at short notice. Also, a resident's obstacles can often be easily identified (and clearly visible in any narrative around their housing history) whereas their strengths and assets may often be less tangible and harder to describe and quantify.

Relevant feedback from evaluation

"I found the case studies more useful...it gives you the opportunity to actually think about the fact that these people do have history, and they are bringing a lot of baggage with them, and maybe they present to you as being somebody who is really strong and able to do this, that and the other. But if you just dig down a little bit deeper, in actual fact it's a façade, and really, they have got other things that they really want to be dealing with."

"Maybe just putting yourself back in the person's shoes a little bit and think. 'If I was in that situation, what would I want to happen?'"

4.4 - Session Four

Session four involved professional actors and a dramatist to perform an extract from "Wet House", a play set in a homeless hostel, written by Paddy Campbell and to answer relevant questions about the issues raised.

The session started with introductions between practitioners, actors and playwright Paddy Campbell before a discussion around the storytelling and narrative techniques used in Paddy's *Wet House*. Paddy also provided an explanation of the context in which the play was written.

The practical exercise involved a performance of an extract from the play (Act 2, scene 7)². After the performance, staff were asked how this scene could be recorded in different ways. For each they were then asked to consider how this fitted with Kerry's own narrative of the story.

The practitioners then took part in a hot seating exercise with actor/writer. In this exercise, practitioners were able to ask the character specific questions. This led into a discussion with the whole group focused around two key questions:

- What are the key points in these characters' stories in a work of fiction?
- How are these different from treating these characters as residents

² This scene involves Kerry asking Helen to make her some food. Mike intervenes (page 81-84 of *Wet House*).

Purpose and formative feedback

The distancing of key issues through fictionalisation, allowed for a free discussion about the behaviour of both resident and staff members in the scene. The questions of professional boundaries were discussed. As staff understand more about the stories of the residents they work with, how do they ensure that their judgement remains objective and supportive? Applying some of the structure of session 3's questions for the resident, the actors playing Kerry and Helen "hot seated" the answers to the group's questions and concerns.

Relevant feedback from evaluation

"I think the Wet House bit we saw was really useful. It is very similar to what I've seen in practice...I think for our wider team to appreciate, to be presented with that situation, and be asked, "What would you record in that situation?"

"People don't just only kick off for nothing. There are events that have led up to it. It might be the case that they didn't have all of the information, but when you put it together, actually the response, you can understand it a little bit more."

4.5 - Session Five

The final session focused on the second of the composite case studies, looking at "Linda's" story. Linda's story focused on a complicated but common story of a resident who was at risk of eviction due to issues with her benefit receipt. As in session three, practitioners were provided with more information about Linda's story as the case went on. There were four main techniques that were applied in this session:

- Building the story from a variety of sources
- Constructing a past narrative
- Projecting a future narrative
- Considering audiences for stories

The practical exercise for session five focused on constructing and re-telling story of Linda. Practitioners were asked to gather, understand and re-structure that information for a particular audience. Practitioners were able to choose the most relevant audience that they wished to tell Linda's story to.

As they did so, practitioners were asked to consider four questions:

- How do you get Linda to engage with agencies that might help her?
- How do you construct her narrative?
- What are the key questions to ask her?
- How would you retell her story to other audiences?

Purpose and formative feedback

The appreciation of Linda's story developed as new information became available from a variety of sources. The information provided was structured in a way that represented the wide range of information sources that practitioners may use to understand a resident's situation. This included a referral record on Gateway; YHN Northgate case records; notes from an interview with Housing Support Officer at Cherry Tree View; historical record on Welfare Rights AIMS database; the resident's Universal Credit journal.

The four groups of practitioners in the session identified the following audiences:

Group A: The Freedom Programme for victims of domestic violence

Group B: YHN

Group C: Linda's GP

Group D: Money Matters Debt Advisors

The range of different options established by groups of practitioners emphasised how Linda's story could be adapted for a range of audiences, all of which could provide important support but all of which require different information.

Relevant feedback from evaluation

Practitioners later reflected on the importance of re-telling Linda's story back to her to demonstrate active listening and ensure she was aware of the support that could and should be offered:

"It is clear to me now that you have been struggling to cope on your own with a number of issues. I am here to help you move forward in a planned way, focusing on your priorities. There is other help available and other agencies can offer support as well".

Others reflected on the value of drawing together various sources of information to develop a wider picture of residents needs:

"If you've only got snippets of information then your understanding is limited and you piece together the story without all those details. It's only when you get the wider picture that you can get a better understanding of the story."

5. Summative discussion at the end of the project

At the end of the final session, a summative discussion between participating practitioners and the session leader identified a number of key points that had emerged from the sessions:

- A story is a snapshot: something that applies at one moment in time
- There are different kinds of OBJECTIVES (short term, long term)
- There are different types of OBSTACLE (Internal, Inter-personal and External)

- Try to identify STRENGTHS and ASSETS (often not as clear as OBSTACLES)
- Tracing a story back to THE INCITING INCIDENT and considering the context of that incident.
- Considering the difference between HABITUAL and EXCEPTIONAL behaviours.

This summative discussion also identified a number of key questions that had been explored during the sessions and could guide the ways in which practitioners captured, understood and re-told resident's stories:

- How do you win people's trust to get them to voluntarily share their stories?
- How can we ask what matters to residents and what they really want?
- How do you make the chronology of a person's story not just a negative narrative of disappointments, missed opportunities and failures?
- How to best illustrate the shaping of the story and potential audiences?

To understand the overall effectiveness of the sessions, an evaluation was undertaken by researchers from the Institute of Health and Society at Newcastle University.

6. Key findings from the evaluation

Three evaluative focus groups were undertaken by a researcher from the Institute of Health and Society at Newcastle University. 10 of the 12 practitioners that took part in the workshops participated in a focus group. Practitioners from the three different services were split according to allow for comparison between the perspectives of practitioners undertaking different roles. The headline findings from the evaluation are summarised below with relevant quotes from practitioners.

Most practitioners found 'Retelling Stories' useful. They noted that it provided a:

- i) a refresher to current practice;
- ii) a validation of some existing structures and methods of practice;
- iii) an opportunity to have time out for reflection, and
- iv) valuable continuing professional development

"I think personally, it's probably just reassured us on my practice really... it's kind of like continuous development really by knowing, and maybe implementing, or focusing on other elements a bit more. It definitely was a positive."

"It was just like a reminder, a prompt, what you need to include when you're telling these stories of the individuals to other agencies. It acts as like a refresher which is good. I think

you always need that reminder of what you need to include when you're detailing someone's history, particularly if it's to benefit them."

Practitioners generally felt that the material used in the sessions could be tailored to a more specific cohort of practitioners. The feedback indicates that, because of the wide ranging nature of the work roles represented in the pilot project group, some elements of the course content were more relevant to some people than others. Key factors that influenced practitioners' capacity to utilise the techniques learned during the sessions were:

- i) the nature of the relationship between resident and practitioner;
- ii) the time and opportunity available for the staff member to fully explore the story being defined and described;
- iii) the context of the interview setting (e.g. next to a crowded waiting room) and
- iv) the increased pressure on practitioners that the intensity of engagement involves

"I think it made me think when we are asking clients, obviously it is very personal, and they choose what they tell us."

"I was just going to say, even having that time out at work, because it's rare that we have that, but to even just reflect on what we are doing to recognise when actually practice is good. I think that was important."

"There may be 300 people outside, but you are kind of like, 'I'm with them now.' You can't be like, 'Hurry up, there are loads of people waiting'."

The majority of practitioners felt that the project would provide a good grounding for frontline workers and for staff working in related agencies (e.g. hostel staff and Work Coaches at Jobcentre Plus). Practitioners also highlighted that attending could be a worthwhile team-building exercise for frontline staff.

"I think it is certainly useful and I think it should be used for, yes, front-line staff, particularly those that are new to an organisation. But I think as well, yes, I suppose other agencies as well who we work with..."

"It was just like a reminder, a prompt, what you need to include when you're telling these stories of the individuals to other agencies. It acts as like a refresher which is good. I think you always need that reminder of what you need to include when you're detailing someone's history, particularly if it's to benefit them."

“I think it can be hard for people, especially if they have done the job for a long time. “Why do I need to go on this training?” But I think everybody should be encouraged to have that. It’s continuous development, isn’t it? Like you say, it might not massively change your practice but even if it just makes them think a bit more about the person, it would be worthwhile”.

“It did remind me that I could approach client interviews from asset based perspective and although I have re-experienced people’s stories a number of times during the day, I could be sensitive and aware that I’m dealing with people coming out of the sessions and then go immediately into client interviews, I was probably a little bit gentler with people than what I’d otherwise be. However, I did find that- to maintain that is quite draining.”

7. Recommendations

Practitioners were asked for recommendations on improving the content and structure of the sessions. What became clear in the focus groups with participants was that the idea of constructing a narrative for a resident involves a number of different considerations and enabling factors:

- Having enough TIME to pull together the elements of the story that may be stored in a variety of different sources;
- Already working at full capacity, people have to find the SPACE to build trust between practitioner and resident in often pressurised conditions to draw out crucial elements
- Within the CONTEXT that the material being volunteered is often of a delicate and painful nature for the resident and requires sensitivity and empathy from the practitioner

The pilot has complemented workforce development around ‘Our Inclusion Plan’. As with the Inclusion Plan, the sessions have encouraged practitioners to look beyond a resident’s presenting needs and the value of piecing together a fuller narrative that allows for deeper exploration of underlying issues that can contribute to the risk of homelessness.

It was clear that a future iteration of the ‘Retelling Stories’ project may be better if it was specifically tailored towards the needs of particular practitioners. Practitioners also highlighted that consideration should be given to providing additional writing skills, notetaking techniques and course content reminders for participants to use in their future practice. Although the techniques covered in the Retelling Stories session was seen as valuable, it was also clear that the additional demands on

practitioners need to be considered. These additional demands limit the capacity of practitioners to adopt and implement this more holistic approach to collecting and retelling complex stories.

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