

Postcards from Here: Introducing Art Cards in the Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP) Encounter to Support Access to Metaphor and Readiness for Poetic Techniques

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Abstract

This article explores the art postcard/image as a creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) tool to support access to metaphor and readiness for employing poetic techniques in creative writing. It explores: the existing use of the image/object in CWTP; the tradition of using mental imagery in talking therapy; access to metaphor and stimulation of aesthetics in preparation for writing; some suggestions for CWTP practice; a small narrative reflexive self-study demonstrating this practice and some evaluative thoughts from practice participants.

Keywords: Creative writing, therapeutic, postcards, imagery, mental imagery, neurophysiology, access

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Permissions and Acknowledgements

Table 1: Adapted and reprinted from Munden, P. (2014). *Positioning poetry: A maverick framework for the curious and bold*. Middlesex University: Institute for Work Based Learning, p. 9.

Figure 1. Kanizsa's Triangle. Reprinted from "Margini quasi-percettivi in campi con stimolazione omogenea", G. Kanizsa, (1955), *Rivista di Psicologia*, 49(1), 7–30. Permission granted by the copyright holder.

Figure 2. Example of art cards displayed in a welcoming environment [photograph]. Author's photograph.

Figure 3. Ship Mind Map. Reprinted and adapted from "The Queen Victoria Visits Auckland, New Zealand" [pen and ink]. M. Dewhurst, (2015). In G. Campanario, *Urban Sketching: 100 postcards: 100 beautiful location sketches from around the world cards*. Indiana: Quarry Books. Reprinted and adapted with permission.

Figure 4. A scene on the ice near a town [Oil on panel]. (Avercamp, c1615). We are unable to reprint. Please access the image from *The National Gallery*, 1998, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hendrick-avercamp-a-scene-on-the-ice-near-a-town>.

Figure 5. Rabbit Knight Mind Map. Reprinted and adapted from Le Lapin Chevalier by M. Cardouat, 2008, playing card In Roubira, J-L. (2008). *Dixit*. Poitiers, France Libellud.

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Introduction

I have been working using creative writing therapeutically in groups for over twenty years. This work has ranged from communities responding creatively to place, to working in addiction recovery settings at a pivotal point in people's lives. I also work in academia, as Programme Leader for Metanoia Institute's Master of Science (MSc) in creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP).

This paper particularly explores my own motivations and interest in bringing postcards and other art images into the creative writing room.

The purpose of this article is to explore the history and potential of using art images in a creative writing setting and develops a rationale for how looking at art can support the aesthetics of creative writing from a neurophysiological perspective.

The aim of my work (e.g., in cancer care or bereavement settings) is to provide a tool for processing experience, as opposed to the sessions particularly being 'Creative Writing', although attention is given to noticing writing techniques. Some participants have not written creatively since leaving school and many people feel nervous about the prospect of writing exercises.

For the past couple of years, I have actively introduced art postcards/imagery into the CWTP space, both as a 'checking in/warm up' tool, and as a prompt for creative writing. Originally, my main motivation was as support for participants' stories; to hold up an image, even if one has no words, is participation and promotes inclusion.

I acknowledge that this topic of using images could expand to the size of a doctorate, so where do I draw the line between postcards, images in general, tangible objects, natural materials, metaphors and mental imagery? There is inevitable cross-over with all these areas of interest, some of which I'll explore. However, I will mainly focus on the practice of using art cards that can be purchased in handy sets as tools for CWTP practitioners and processes that can be replicated in practice.

In the light of my own experience of using images (Boast, 2013; King, 2016; Williamson, 2016, 2018), I have experienced this method as gifting metaphors that are surprising and non-habitual, and which give rise to insight for wellbeing, or offer the basis of a crafted piece. To demonstrate, I have included a narrative self-study and methods that can be taken forward by CWTP practitioners. I have also included some evaluative comments from participants to return this topic to practice with others.

The researcher/writer in me felt I could not dive into the action of practice without setting the scene. I was curious:

- What is the history of using objects and images in CWTP?
- What is therapy's relationship with mental imagery?
- How might images support the creative writing process?

What is the History of Using Objects and Images in CWTP?

The use of images and objects is well documented in CWTP literature. Some examples are recounted below with moments of commentary on practice.

In Bolton's (2011) 'Write yourself: Creative writing and personal development' suggestions are made for using clothing, containers and tools and buttons 'to represent someone or something in each of our lives' (pp. 30, 57-61).

A chapter of 'Writing works: A resource handbook for therapeutic writing workshops and activities' (Bolton, Field and Thompson, 2006) is devoted to using objects, as Gillie Bolton summarises in the introduction to 'Writing from Objects':

Fiona Hamilton brought plasticine, Glynis Charlton an empty box, and Angela Stoner stones. They might be brought by the writers, as Angela Stoner's group brought their personal 'talismans' to write about, Geraldine Green's feathers and stones, and Fiona Hamilton's brought 'objects that were important to them. (Bolton, 2006, p. 74)

In the accounts that follow this introduction, items are used variously to feel, mould, imagine, ventriloquise, empathise, juxtapose with here-and-now feelings, contain difficult emotions, and also for dressing-up, handling, reflection and as dialogue partners. Angela Stoner comments on how participants can 'project onto objects aspects of ourselves which we cannot ordinarily recognise, or find difficult to acknowledge' (Stoner, 2006, p. 77).

Gillie Bolton recounts two exercises where objects are chosen for participants by the facilitators, about which one of the facilitators, Robert Hamberger, comments:

Unknown to the workshop leader, an object may spark associations for a writer that are distressing, and the workshop leader must be ready to support the

writer with making a shape and a sense of that distress, if possible. (Bolton, Byron & Hamberger, 2006 p. 95)

For these same reasons, I have always preferred providing an element of possibility and choice with the proviso (named in the group guidelines) to move away from thoughts/writing that could become overwhelming. However, there is never a guarantee that participants won't become triggered by something which suddenly links an emotion with an object or image.

In counsellor Kate Thomson's 'Therapeutic Journal Writing' (2011, pp. 117-118) she tells of utilising photographs and particularly the prompts that may accompany an exercise with personal (or other) images:

Who's missing?

What does s/he want from you?

What wisdom/ advice can you offer him/her?

Thompson (2011) describes how photographs of places, such as homes, can bring back vivid memories, quoting participant, Louise:

I can feel the black cat-shaped bootscraper by the door, I expect Gran to open
the black front door in her flower pinny, I can hear her say 'come on duck,' and
I can smell the beeswax and roasting meat and know what's behind the door.
(pp.119-120)

Photographs are deeply personal and evocative and I would want to know a group well before asking them to bring in their personal photographs. Unlike Kate I'm not a therapist, so I'm conscious of keeping the process therapeutic, as opposed to entering the territory of the therapy. In her book 'Storytelling and the Art of Imagination', Nancy Mellon (1992) explores how fictional objects hold power and protection like the boots in 'Puss in Boots', crowns, gowns, mantles, golden objects, bowls, weapons, touchstones, talismans, seeds and nuts. Items can contain properties such as magic, capacity for transformation, revelation, mending, nurture, gifting and being lost and found. These archetypal objects are also found in artworks, such as eggs in Still Life to represent offspring, or artists who draw on myth and fairytale. Cards, such as those supplied with the board game 'Dixit' (Roubira, 2008) concentrate on archetypal objects, or

a twist on well-known stories where objects have significance. I will discuss the use of these cards later.

On the theme of cards, as an outcome of her doctorate, writing for wellbeing practitioner, Reinekke Lengelle, developed a set of career cards to ‘help you develop a warm inner compass... on the way towards felt self-insight and inspired action’ (Lengelle and Sellen, 2015, pamphlet). On one side of the cards are the images, on the other writing prompts, encouraging reflection. Lengelle and Meijers’s (2009) model cycles between first and second stories of reflection within a boundary experience (i.e. when the individual's usual coping mechanisms are challenged or are insufficient), with some of the reflective phases interspersed with dialogues (with self and other): sensing, observing, sifting, focusing, understanding.

The many dialogues in CWTP between the visual and the written word led me to wonder how the therapy world treated images in talking therapies.

What is Therapy’s Relationship with Mental Images?

As many CWTP practitioners are aware, using mental imagery builds on a range of traditions in therapy (Freud 1899/1955; Jung, 1996/2003), shamanism and dreamwork.

I was interested to discover the work of psychotherapist, Valerie Thomas, who has written extensively on the topic of using mental imagery in therapy (Thomas, 2016). In the same way that CWTP transcends everyday rationality, Thomas makes a distinction between the ‘rational perspective’ (e.g., literal, empirical, linear etc) and the ‘imaginal perspective (e.g., symbolic, non-linear, emotional, intuitive)’ (p.4), terms inspired by James Hillman (1975).

Thomas makes the case for the efficacy of mental imagery as a healing modality. In her research, embodied responses to the imaginal perspective are acknowledged and backed up by recent cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT practices, for example to process negative affect (Holmes and Matthews, 2010) with mental imagery supporting access to non-conscious processes.

Other work that supports how concepts are experienced in the body has been carried out by Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) work on Conceptual Metaphor, which describes how concepts are ‘physically embodied’ and ‘sensory’ (p.252), linking linguistic metaphors and mental imagery, and found across cultures.

Thomas (2016) has categorised different functions of using mental imagery: *diagnostic* concerning the presenting issue, *monitoring* demonstrating change over time and *processing* with the release of repressed material. She observes a potential for imagery to repair psychological conditions, support a therapeutic process and to create generic templates for therapeutic work, which Thomas goes on to explore.

In CWTP, we don't diagnose participants, but we might be interested in supporting people to monitor their own change over time through chosen imagery, or to process experiences that may not yet have found voice (or paper).

Why Introduce Tools to Support the Creative Writing Process?

I have a sense of why I felt motivated to bring props along to help participants make the transition between 'everyday life' and the workshop setting.

Several years ago I was struck by a quote from Ken Robinson, the educational advocate, who during a talk for The University of Florida in 2008, stated the statistics provided in Table 1 on how divergent thinking diminishes as we progress through education. He called it 'the decline of genius' (cited in Munden, 2014, p. 76).

Table 1

The decline of genius: how divergent thinking diminishes as we progress through education

Age (years)	Capability
3-5	98%
8-10	32%
13-15	10%
25+	2%

Note: Adapted from Munden, 2014.

These statistics point at creativity being like a muscle and of the old adage 'if you don't use it, you lose it.' It also reminds me of the Gestalt idea of a correlation between challenge and support (Parlett, 1991). If I'm asking people who have 2% capability for divergent thinking to think creatively and employ metaphor and imagery to support their wellbeing, then this is a

challenge and I need to increase the support to help participants to meet this challenge and to increase skills for their independent use.

Another article which supports the use of ‘concrete words’ is by another Robinson, Mark Robinson (2000) at University of Durham explores concrete words (such as banana, apple) which are proposed as more ‘referentially stimulating’ than higher order words, such as fruit, food, or abstract concepts such as nurture, sustenance. Robinson refers to Wilma Bucci’s (1997) referential cycle and how the reformulation and insight moments come from the study of images, rewriting and reflection (Robinson, 2000).

From my own experience, as a writer, I can be aware of a feeling, such as being trapped, or feeling ashamed, but adding images and ideas to these sensations can bring something new. For example when writing my book ‘Visiting the Minotaur’ (Williamson, 2018), as I explored more deeply the character of the Minotaur in the labyrinth, and also reflecting on some of Picasso’s Minotaur inspired art, Minoan art and other bull imagery, I wrote the lines:

no need for a door
to this maze
shame has been my gatekeeper

(Williamson, 2018, p.14)

What struck me about this image was that it was my sense of shame that made me feel trapped, I was not physically incarcerated; I was free to cross the threshold of my imaginary prison.

It feels, therefore, a responsibility to support participants’ access to images and metaphor particularly with its notable efficacy, coming from a range of theoretical contexts. I was excited that exploring this topic, led me to Ramachandran and Hirstein’s (1999) paper which has helped me identify more specifically how looking at art can stimulate aesthetics in preparation for creative writing from a neurophysiological perspective.

How Looking at Art Images Stimulates Aesthetics in Preparation for Creative Writing from a Neurophysiological Perspective

In their paper ‘The Science of Art’, V.S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein (1999) identify ‘eight laws’ of aesthetic experience. In brief they suggest that artists’ works employ heuristics that ‘optimally titillate the visual areas of the brain’ (p.17), using the following

definitions: peak shift, grouping, contrast, isolation, perceptual problem solving, symmetry, abhorrence of coincidence/generic view point, repetition, rhythm and orderliness, balance, metaphor.

Optimal titillation refers to the ability of art to stimulate the visual areas of the brain more strongly than natural stimuli and points to evolutionary developments in the human ability to make links between, for example, form, contrast, symmetry, balance, repetition, and identifying ‘clusters’ that directly connect to the limbic system. This is where the therapeutic aspect is evoked; the limbic system (including the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, hypothalamus) controls emotional behaviour, motivation, long-term memory, sexual arousal, and smell. Stimulating this part of the brain has been associated with a decrease in depressive states and is undergoing further research (Noda et al, 2015).

Criticism of the paper has mainly come from the art field, John Hyman (2006) takes exception to Ramachandran and Hirstein’s ‘dazzling boldness’ (p.45) and particularly the idea that ‘all art is caricature’ (p.45). Hyman believes that Ramachandran misses the point that the ability of art to convey feelings relies on the artist’s choice of tools, materials and techniques. It is true that some elements, such as image texture, artist’s materials and technique are lost in viewing art on a postcard, as opposed to in person. However, this hasn’t seemed to have been a barrier to accessing the aesthetic benefits of viewing art in the workshops I facilitate.

Below I have extracted a range of parallels between these ‘optimally titillated’ areas and techniques in writing creatively, particularly exemplified through poetic writing:

Peak Shift

Peak Shift refers to arts’ ability to take the ‘suchness’ of things (form, colour, depth, motion) and exaggerate them for easy recognition, the way that the bright blue-ness of the sky may be emphasised in Matisse’s cut-outs. This is exaggeration or hyperbole in poetry (often employed comically), such as James Tate’s (1991) line: *she scorched you with her radiance*.

Grouping

Grouping refers to our ability to create unitary objects by discovering correlations, such as our ability to see faces in Picasso’s noisier cubist works. In poetry we notice through-metaphor, making sense of the whole. An example might be Shakespeare’s use of the theatre as a

metaphor for life in ‘As You Like It’: ‘All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players’ (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, p. 227). We delight in binding these metaphorical aspects together, reinforcing our sense of orientation and recognition of the world around us. Clusters are used in therapeutic journaling as a technique, where ideas gravitate together, for example in a mind map or list, allowing the ‘capture of a lot of information quickly and visually’ (Thompson, 2011, p.95).

Contrast and Isolation

Contrast and isolation play their part in grouping, where even diffuse edges are noticed, such as in Monet’s (1903-4) ‘The Houses of Parliament’ (Effect of Fog) in which the interest in the edges of colour boundaries reward with the familiar shape of the government buildings. Isolation is the capacity to be with a particular element and to store it, whilst building a sense of the whole, such as noticing independently the stars, the moon, the village and trees in Van Gogh’s (1889) ‘The Starry Night’, then we are rewarded when the whole scene clicks into place. Poetry exemplifies this well with its delineated verses and particularly perhaps the sonnet form, where the first two sets of four lines present the content of each stanza (room in Italian) in distinct sets; the third has a thematic turn and the final couplet a summation. ‘Remember’ by Christina Rossetti (1849/2001) is a good example. The first two stanzas begin with ‘Remember me’, the third has the turn: ‘Yet if you should forget me for a while’ The final couplet brings the proceeding lines together:

Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

(Rossetti, 1849/2001, p.31)

Perceptual Problem Solving and Metaphor

Sarah Lucas’s (1992) image ‘Two fried eggs and a kebab’ plays to the ideas of **Perceptual Problem Solving** and **Metaphor**. The eye prefers the challenge of interpretation of the fried eggs as breasts and the kebab as a vagina to an image of complete nudity, where the reduced ‘object’ (quite literally meant in Lucas’ political artwork) found following effort, is more pleasing than one that is instantly obvious. In poetry this is the work of interpretation, or

deconstruction. A poetic example is ‘Diving into the wreck’ by Adrienne Rich (1973), where the diving expedition reveals what is not included in the stories told about women and particularly black women, who may also be lesbians, mothers and poets. The reader is invited to accompany Rich on her dive literally below the surface story of the wreck to see its reality. The allegory of the layered dive appeals to what Okanski and Gibbs (2019) describe as the ‘allegorical impulse’, where non-habitual literary readers and readers who were encouraged to read the poem literally as a scuba dive identified symbolically with the poem.

Symmetry, Repetition and Balance

Symmetry is both the topic and the experience of Leonardo da Vinci’s (1490) ‘*Vitruvian Man*’. It represents ‘ideal’ human body proportions in a diagrammatical way, whilst also depicting the man with asymmetrical legs and feet. As humans we are drawn to symmetry as a sign of both balance and a quality of prey and predators that have symmetrical features. In poetry, symmetry is represented in, for example, a mirror poem, or by bookending like in Blake’s (1794) ‘The Tyger’, in concrete form, or more subtly in rhyme scheme or rhythm. Similarly repetition and balance are at play in these examples, as in an artwork such as Andy Warhol’s (1962) ‘Marilyn Diptych’, or M.C. Escher’s (1939) tessellating lizards in ‘Lizards no.124’.

Abhorrence of Coincidence/Generic Point of View

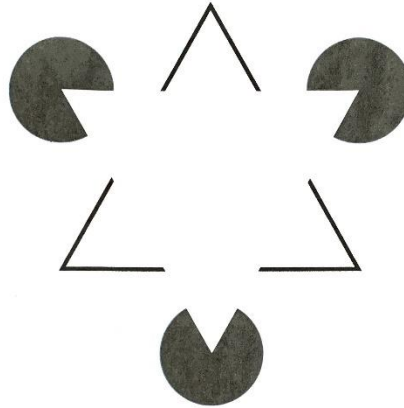
Abhorrence of coincidence/generic view point is an interesting provocation in both art and poetry. Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999) describe this as:

your visual system abhors interpretations which rely on a unique vantage point
and favours a generic one, or more generally, it abhors suspicious coincidences.
(p.30)

Our brain uses prior knowledge to predict where some information is missing (Stone, 2013). In Figure 1, we can identify a triangle facing down that intersects the ‘circles’ or ‘pac man’ figures and what looks like an occluded triangle but could be some chevrons.

Figure 1

Kanizsa's Triangle



Our experience of shapes and how overlays work influences our perception. There are a range of ways to perceive this image, as there are many ways to perceive a poem, such as the variety of readings of Robert Frost's (1923) 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. Another example might be the words that could be argued as 'missing', following the last line of Mary Oliver's 'The Journey':

determined to save
the only life you could save.

(Oliver, 1986, p.38)

The inferred words are: 'which was your own.'

Abhorrence of coincidence would be an aversion to an obvious 'trick' by the writer, such as exploiting the multiple rhymes with '- ation' (e.g. station, generation, rumination, substantiation); it may briefly amuse but soon becomes predictable. The generic viewpoint would be a poem with only one point of entry, or that insists upon a particular reading. As language is so multiplicitous and experience so various, even the simplest or shortest of poems can give rise to discussion and CWTTP facilitators are encouraged to allow these varied viewpoints.

Rhythm

Rhythm in art suggests movement or action, such as Katsushika Hokusai's (c.1830-1832) 'Under the Wave off Kanagawa', whose tendrils of water pounce like a tiger. Poems are

inherently rhythmic, whether they are formed as free-verse or in a sonnet.

By using images to stimulate aspects of neurophysiology, some of the overlapping terms between art and literature naturally form part of conversation; a door is opened to the metaphorical, allegorical and symbolic world and the possibility of understanding one another on a deeper level.

The Art Box, Urban Sketching and Dixit Cards: Pros and Cons

Two sets of postcards that I have found very useful are ‘The Art Box’ (Phaidon Editors, 2012) and ‘Urban Sketching’ (Campanario, 2015). Both these sets of postcards contain a hundred different images. Dixit cards accompany a board game and are archetypal images that borrow from fairytale, myth and storytelling (Roubira, 2008).

‘The Art Box’ contains a mixture of images mainly from the 19th and 20th Century, with a few from the 1400s. Some will be recognisable to many participants, such as famous works by Leonard da Vinci, Picasso, Degas, Miro, and many more. Figurative, landscape, sculptural and abstract images are included and there is a moment of recognition between person and image as having met before, meaning that as soon as participants enter the room, they are finding familiarity with what they already know, but also curiosity about what else can be discovered.

A sense of elitism could be attributed to ‘The Art Box’ cards, the knowledge that may come with an art history education, or the sense of entitlement, or finance, to enter an art gallery. This has never been reported by participants, whilst at the same time, I’m aware that some of the images are largely, although not exclusively, Eurocentric, white, male-dominated and comprise part of the Western art history canon.

For the above reasons I have spent time looking for images that were more global, local to the artists, and not necessarily from classically trained artists, to use alongside ‘The Art Box’. I was delighted to find ‘Urban Sketching’, described as ‘exquisite location drawings from around the world, which were created by a roster of international artists with a gift for discovering inspiration within the cities where they live and travel’ (Campanario, 2015). These images are sometimes recognisable as specific city locations, such as San Francisco, Sydney, Stockholm, Hong Kong, whilst others are of ‘happenings’: a sports event in the Dominican Republic, a beach scene from Israel, a man sleeping in a cafe in Turkey, a barber’s shop in UAE, and a bakery in a

Mauritanian market. Some of the sketches are annotated, encouraging a cross-over between art and words and a sense of scrap-booking. The provisional and instant nature of sketches supports the philosophy of CWTP where fragments are viable, pieces are not necessarily complete or polished, and there is room for change within and beyond the first draft. Some of the images include the situation from which the artist viewed their main subject, for example a car dashboard, or table and some are clearly created across the centre-fold of a notebook or sketchbook.

The ‘Urban Sketching’ images are evocative of place. This can be both transporting for the imagination, but also have the possibility of taking participants vividly to a memory of specific locations, over which they have no control, so there is a potential trigger. As one of Kate Thompson’s participants commented on one of her workshops, ‘I came across it quite unexpectedly and suddenly I was there’ (Thompson, 2011, p.119). However, my experience is that people who have found places they have visited before can find themselves reunited and bathed in a memory brought back to life. After a traumatic experience such as a cancer diagnosis or bereavement, reconnecting to the time prior to the trauma can have a unifying affect, a visit to a different world that Hilary Mantel describes as:

Your former life still seems to exist somewhere, but you can’t get back to it; there is a glimpse in dreams of those peacock lawns and fountains, but you’re fenced out, and each morning you wake up to the loss over again. (Mantel, 2014, p. 63)

There can be respite in memories and revisiting specific places in our minds and if participants find themselves suddenly emotionally connected to a loved one, or a nostalgic time of their lives through place, there can be the opportunity to explore this with others in the supportive setting of the group.

The Dixit cards have an archetypal quality, feeding into Nancy Mellon’s idea that objects hold power; there are different extension sets named: Origins, Memories, Quest, Revelations, Harmonies, Daydreams, Odyssey, Journey.

These cards evoke and acknowledge both personal and common experience, traditional and mythical tales. Examples include: a compass laid out on a cloth map; a table after a feast; a doll’s house; images captured in droplets of rain/tears; an older person made of autumnal leaves;

a child barricaded in with play bricks; a small child with a sword facing a large dragon; scales weighing money and a feather; someone finding a rose in a frozen landscape.

The cards are not straightforward and there are layers of meaning to be uncovered, alongside multiple interpretations. For this reason I am careful about introducing these cards to a group I don't know well, because although they can be taken on face value, it is difficult to avoid experiencing resonance from their references that may arise from close inspection or discussion.

Guidelines for Using Art Cards for Practitioners

Preparing the Room

I usually lay out the cards in advance somewhere in the room. For warm-ups, I place them on the main table, and for an exercise, onto a side table.

Cards are usually displayed non-reverentially, so although neatly laid out, each card is not given its own space; there is overlap with other cards and a sense that they can be touched without spoiling any kind of display. See figure 2 for an example.

Where space is limited, I might make small piles of the cards, enough for each individual to have a choice. I encourage participants to swap piles if they don't find anything suitable.

Figure 2

Example of art cards displayed in a welcoming environment [photograph]



Warming-up

When people enter the room, they often comment on the cards. I introduce how we are going to use them to help us think about the day's topic, e.g., hopes and fears for the first session, or a specific theme. The card selection gives participants something to do while they are waiting for a group to gather and usually act as a conversation starter.

I make it clear that participants may just be drawn to a small aspect of the image: it could be a colour, or an atmosphere that the image emanates. I explain that participants do not have to know anything about the images, or the artist; the important part is that it has a quality which can support their response to the topic.

As the group settles, and if the group is large, I might begin with participants talking with a neighbour, so that people are not daunted by speaking to an audience. If it is a small group, I invite someone to start and we will move around in a circle giving each person a chance to say something about their card and relationship with the topic. This also gives an opportunity for the speaker to avoid being the focus of attention at what can be a tense time of 'breaking the ice', allowing other participants to look at the card, as opposed to the speaker.

By the time we have finished this round, there is a sense of connection to one another, to the images and some of the aesthetic attributes and vocabulary have entered the room, setting the scene for the creative writing to follow.

Mind Mapping Exercise

There are overlaps with this exercise and Stepping Stones (Progoff, 1992) and Clustering (Thompson, 2011) where a number of ideas centre around a topic. In Stepping Stones, for example, the writer might be encouraged to think of seven books they have read, or five homes they have inhabited.

I encourage participants to choose a card they are drawn towards, fostering a sense of positivity towards their choice.

With an A4 or A3 piece of paper, participants are invited to place the card in the centre and lightly draw around it, (See figures 3-5 for examples).

Using freely drawn lines leading out from the image, I ask participants to: 'Write what you see. Do this quickly and in repeated cycles, so that each sweep produces more ideas.'

Tools such as isolating windows or magnifiers can be introduced to encourage close engagement with the image.

I suggest adding an emotional quality or memory to each of the ideas, skipping over any that feel too provocative for that day, or words that don't suggest any further connections.

I then suggest the participants choose one idea that feels meaningful, but not overwhelming, and free-write for five minutes on the topic to see where it takes them. William Storr (2019) affirms that the brain is more drawn to meaning than objects that stand out.

A choice can be made by the facilitator, or the participants, as to what to share: the card, the mind map, the free writing, or the process.

I propose to participants that they can continue to shape the free-writing at home, and/or move around their mind map responding in writing to each of their separate notes. I advise that they do not write for more than 10-15 minutes at a time.

Gift Giving

Participants are invited to keep their cards. Having a memento from the workshop can increase the longevity of its benefit when the participant re-finds the image at a later date and remembers, hopefully fondly, the group and their writing. In some groups I provide a 'scrap-book', so the journey of the series can be recorded. This allows individuals to have a place at home in which to reconnect with their workshop experience.

Thoughts on Access

Some of the societal barriers to access, such as education and cultural perspectives, are discussed above. Although visual prompts are not accessible to visually impaired people, 'Living paintings' provide tactile and audio books that give access to a wide range of classic and contemporary art images in their 'Touch to see' range (The Living Paintings Trust, 2020).

Using images offers support to people who experience aphantasia, the inability to conjure images in the mind's eye, but who can relate to given images.

A Short Narrative Self-Study: 3 Cards; 3 Mind Maps; 3 Poems; 3 Commentaries

Methodology

A narrative self-study has five characteristics, according to LaBoskey (2004). They are self-initiated, interactive, aim for improvement, qualitative and exemplar based. This study is self-initiated; it interacts via its reflexive elements. In my examples, a reflexive lens on my narration fills the gaps implied within the poetic text and situates experience in a wider cultural environment. The ‘aim for improvement’ is personal development through insight. It is qualitative (not quantitative) and provides examples from a range of writing experiences.

A critical realist perspective recognises a correlation between the complexities of storying people’s lives and the reality of the world and experiences. Narrating a life requires ‘emplotment’, a process by which we organise experience with causal factors (Mattingly, 1998). My study organises my personal experiences in relation to using imagery, creative synthesis and my own insights; there is a beginning (mind mapping), middle (poem) and end (reflections), which form a story arc for each example.

Narrative knowing expands our experience of being human, by attending to individual narrations, set against a backdrop of grand narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988). By writing, particularly in a short form such as poetry, meaning and causality is condensed into a small space (Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima, 2009).

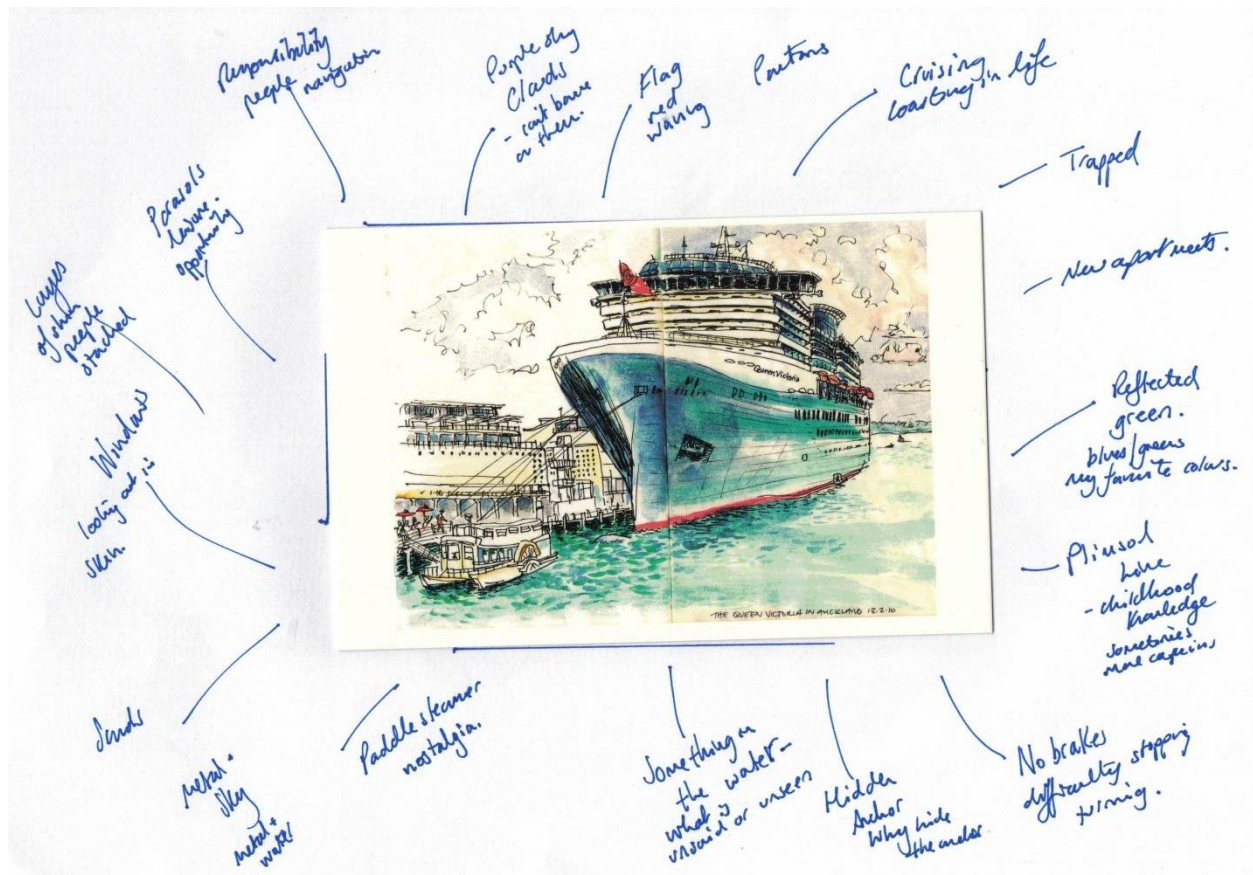
To triangulate this narrative self-study I have included evaluative feedback from workshop participants.

Method

Over a period of three weeks, I picked three cards (one from ‘Urban Sketching’; one from ‘The Art Box’ and one from Dixit). I created a mind map for each and using these notes as a basis, created a poem. For the purposes of this study, I wrote a commentary, including reflexivity, drawing on 1) access to metaphor 2) stimulating aesthetics in preparation for writing and 3) personal insights

Figure 3

Postcard Mind Map: Ship



Poem: Academic

Ships know about sinking,
running aground —
ballast, masts
tilting away from the horizon,
anchors tucked up
in their chests on chains
coiled tight,
link on link.
The logic of stopping is lost
to the confusion of water,
a green sky reflected

and nothing to grip those steely sides;
the shadow of something askew,
bothering the back of the mind
whilst floating impossibly
above the Plimpsoll line.
The relentless screw-prop
of calendars, papers, intakes,
the weight of responsibility.
She turned towards the light
the sky tipping, hinged
on a flurry of cloud.

Commentary

Access to metaphor. Having spent the last two years reflecting on working in academia, I have written a lot on this topic and wasn't surprised to see it 'resurface'. However, I wouldn't have found the details in this 'ship' metaphor without the postcard. It occurred to me that ships don't have brakes like a car or a train and this was the hook for me into the topic of 'running aground'. It brought to mind recent news stories about academics taking their own lives due to overwhelm at work (BBC News, 2019; Times Higher Education, 2018). In an academic role which encourages self-care for students, it is important for me to 'practice what I preach'; congruence is lost if I find myself 'out of my depth', or nearing it and don't respond with self-care.

The poem exercised a sense of an unstoppable machine, which can be the experience of working in academia, with the annual rotation of tasks and intakes, and a sense of there being no way to stop this cycle. This vigorous and often energising rotation of duties is very much reflected in the lines:

The logic of stopping is lost
to the confusion of water

The physical tension of ‘holding’ or ‘holding back’ was depicted by the:

anchors tucked up
in their chests on chains

This was perhaps the most important line to me personally, that the capability of stopping is there, but sometimes people are unable to employ their resources and autonomy under pressure, even though it is there at their disposal.

Another important couplet for me was:

whilst floating impossibly
above the Plimsoll line.

which reflects how often academics are willing, or expected, to fulfil impossible tasks that do not fit into the hours paid, and sometimes not even into waking hours. The image of the impossibility of floating is that ships seem top-heavy and workload outweighs support.

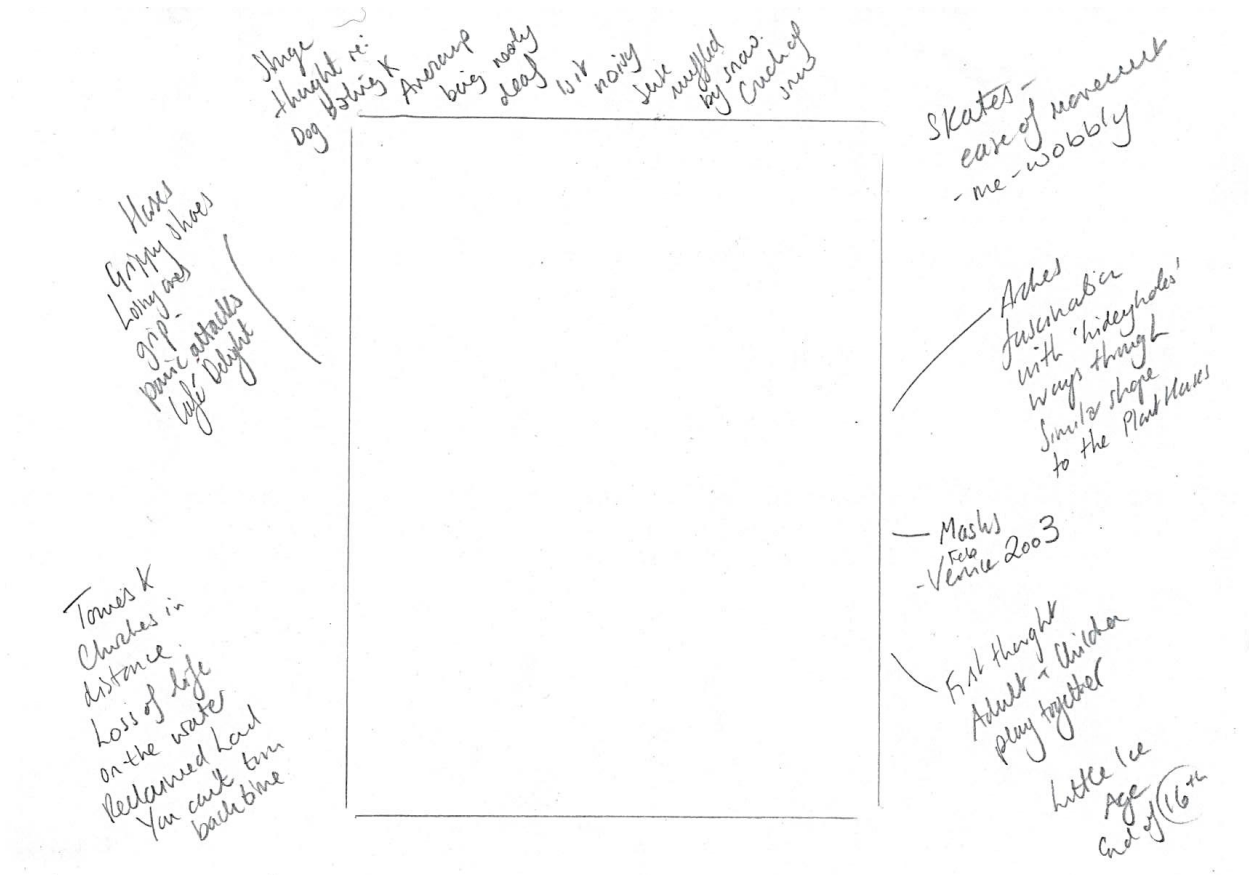
Stimulating aesthetics in preparation for writing. The ‘peak shift’ in the image is the exaggeration of the red Plimsoll line, which probably drew my attention to the ‘top heavy’ vessel. The mind mapping enabled ‘grouping’ and ‘isolation’, as my ideas clustered around the whole (the ship) and the parts (e.g., chains, anchor, cloud) of the image. These parts provided a word hoard and vocabulary to aid expression. The symmetry, repetition and rhythm came through the image to give the poem its poised pairs of lines, even in the ‘falling’ of the academic, there is this sense that the rhythm isn’t interrupted, it was indeed unstoppable.

Personal insights. On a positive note, I could take lessons from this imagery and ‘cautionary tale’: to start stopping in good time, to use my available resources, and to acknowledge that I’d chosen a very strong and capable vessel to represent the role of academic. However, it does not matter how strong and capable you are, it becomes meaningless if you end up:

sinking,
running aground —

Figure 4

Postcard Mind Map: A Scene on the Ice Near a Town



Note: We are unable to reprint. Please access the image from *The National Gallery*, 1998, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hendrick-avercamp-a-scene-on-the-ice-near-a-town>.

Poem: A Scene on the Ice Near a Town (Hendrick Avercamp*, c1615)

I saw the dog running,
her excitement sliding on ice,
sporting a smile, a shadow
and the thought of a bark
echoing like a skidding pebble.

How silent the scene,
where merriment and music

should be, the volume of
my brush switched off.

I paint as I experience:
the unjingling decorated
sleigh-horse;

silent flurry of fallen skirts,
ignored by skaters
and their soundless blades;

masked revellers -
mime artists sharing
symbolic gestures;

the church tower
rising tall without
the weight of bells;

the cold russet clouds
opening like a hole in the lake,
draining out all sound.

*Avercamp was a non-verbal (and probably deaf) artist, known as ‘the mute of
Kampen’ (de stom van Campen)

(Williamson, 2020)

Commentary

Access to metaphor. I looked very closely at this image and used a magnifier to see some of its more obscure details. There was something about this very ‘noisy’ scene juxtaposed with my silent meditation on the image. I was particularly drawn to the horse and wondered whether it had ‘grippy shoes’. This took me to the phrase ‘losing one’s grip’ and things ‘slipping’. I was surprised to turn the postcard over and discover that Avercamp was deaf,

perhaps amplifying his visual perceptiveness. I too have found hearing more of a challenge of late and recently had my ears tested, fearing my own ability to hear was slipping. It wasn't.

Given historical information about Avercamp's hearing, it was possible for me to 'ventriloquise', which is both an ekphrastic and writing for wellbeing technique (Bolton et al., 2006). The depiction of this silent world, also highlighted something for me personally, which is the experience of not being heard, which remains an issue for women (Kushner, 2019; Solnit, 2019), where my own sounds are not reflected back, described in Avercamp's 'stifled' paintbrush.

I began to notice silent potential in the image, such as mime artists and the church without bells in the distance. I would never have arrived at these ideas without the image, which becomes a vehicle for my own experience of the world. It provoked consideration of what I choose to 'hold back' and what I put out that is not heard:

The russet cold clouds
opening like a hole in the lake,
sucking out all sound.

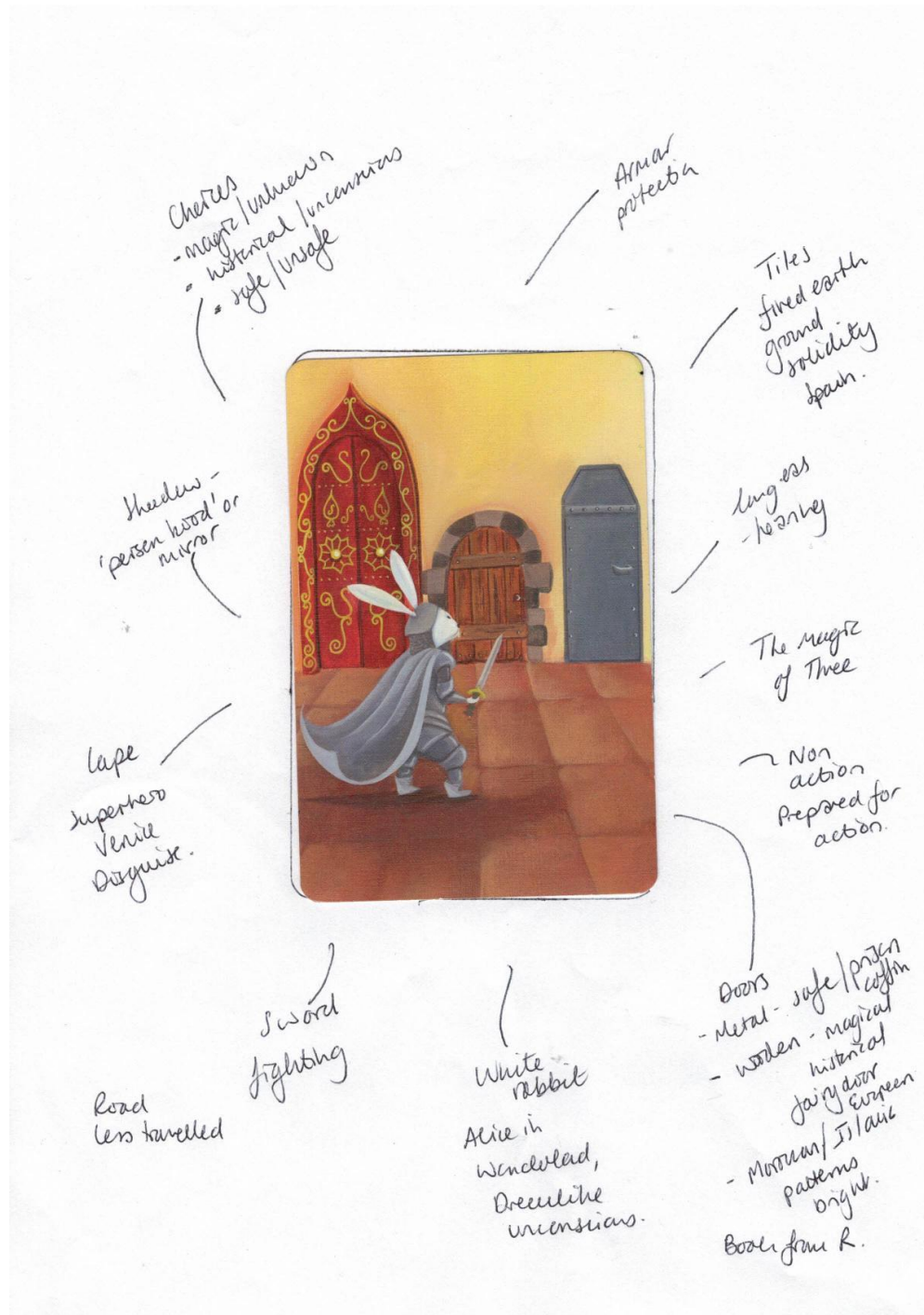
Stimulating aesthetics in preparation for writing. It was the clouds, perhaps painted to 'balance' the image that struck me. They became a counterpoint to the whole busy scene, as if, like the lake, they could drain the whole picture of its life. There are many 'viewpoints' within the image, encouraging my close reading of it and leading me to try the painter's viewpoint to support my own words and ideas. The 'layers' of creativity are built up, the images, the voice of the artist and my voice as writer.

Personal Insights. Bringing up two children, being an academic and a freelancer means that there is a lot of busy-ness in my life, and there is the tendency to be silent and stoic about very long days and work pressures. There is also the experience of struggling to have my voice heard in academia and beyond, the idea of 'lip service' paid to struggles on the front line, particularly an incongruence between what we teach and larger systems within which we work, both in higher education and outside where governments sweep aside facts, statistics and 'expertise' (currently notable around climate change). What I will take away from this exercise is the need to amplify what I do. Without amplification, one takes on more and more without recognising its value or beauty, as in the painting's plethora of activity. I recognise areas where I

have assimilated to this silent world, where, metaphorically speaking, I do not expect church bells to ring, or playful success to be noisy.

Figure 5

Postcard Mind Map: The Knight Rabbit



Poem: Down the Rabbit Hole

onto that tiled floor
you draw your sword,
but pause to notice
the shadow of your personhood.

Hesitate before the doors,
put on your armour,
your cape, prick up your ears –
ready for anything.

Ready for nothing –
bathe in the possibility
of a range of actions
not yet taken, of doors:

prison-like, steely
offering safety,
or a coffin
riveted closed

wooden, familiar
from fairy tales – the past
with its secrets, insights,
or old worn ways

ornate, sumptuous,
curiously luxuriant
in gold and scarlet
and possibly deceptive

and be with that
middle ground,

still as a hare sniffing
for signs of yourself.

Commentary

Access to metaphor. A choice of doors is archetypally about a crossroads in life; ‘falling down the rabbit hole’ from Alice in Wonderland (couldn, 1865) has become synonymous with finding oneself in an unexpected place and a choice to make. So, this card brought both an image and a story. It also provided objects of power (Mellon, 1992): a sword, armour, a cape.

I could relate to having a difficult choice to make (around next steps in career), having powerful tools (representing experience) and also stopping to consider the right decision. As a working mother, balancing parenthood, career and finances is a constant circus trick (Hackman, 2015).

The rabbit’s shadow gives it a reality that is often overlooked when rushing and emphasised for me that sense of hesitation. He doesn’t look ‘late’ in this image; there is time.

Stimulating aesthetics in preparation for writing. Rhythm is notable in this image with the three doors, which are literally replicated in the poem, with the ‘magic of three’ rule applied. There is a possibility of a generic viewpoint being evoked, that the rabbit has to choose one of the doors. However, there may be other doors out of scene, or a corridor to follow, and this is where the poem leads to a fourth possibility of not choosing a door. The grouping of the rabbit and doors, less so the objects, suggested Lewis Carroll’s story to me.

Personal Insights. Next steps in my career have been on my agenda for about two years now and has been the topic of a proper enquiry involving lots of writing, psychotherapy and supervision. Like in the image, I have gathered my resources and potential together and there are choices ahead. However, I have, for now, decided to watch and see what unfolds. I’m attracted to, and suspicious of, all the doors and have moved through a period of ‘freezing’ to a sense of pausing to observe, which feels empowering, reflected in the poem. What is new is recognising a sense of ‘personhood’, a more solid sense of self and a range of resources and choices.

Qualitative Responses from Workshop Participants

Bringing the responses of participants to this practice is important to me; I value their feedback and, as you will note below, the fresh perspectives they bring to this topic.

I asked a group of participants, from a hospital setting with whom I had worked for at least six weeks, about their experience of using postcard images to assist a verbal opening round prior to creative writing. Permission was sought from all participants to include their responses.

I have particularly drawn on their use of metaphor to describe the postcard uses. For one participant, the idea of the postcards as an ‘anchor’ arose as if there was something grounding and steadying; the anchor image was followed by the ‘spark’ing of ‘further ideas’. The two images contrast: the anchor is perhaps the ground from which the ‘spark’ of inspiration can fly off in all directions, rather like my mind map’s lines above.

Another participant used the image of a ‘hook’ on which their writing could hang ‘be it literally or metaphorically’. It is interesting to note that a hook and an anchor can have a similar shape, but a different function: one secures and the other, if you are lucky, generally catches. The hook relates to well-known imagery used by writers to describe the creative process: Ted Hughes (1967) with the metaphor of fishing, and Jeanette Winterson when interviewed by Miller (2005), with the metaphor of a bucket dipped into a well. The same participant described a concern pre-attendance of having ‘no idea how I would ever begin to write’ and the pressure to ‘make it up’. They described how: ‘the art cards opened the door into my own imagination’, which has a sense of possibilities, and reminds me of Miroslav Holub’s poem ‘The Door’ (Astley, 2002) and its invitation to: *Go and open the door*.

A third participant, described: ‘I have been writing poetry for many years and have tended to get inspiration from a variety of places, but have never thought of using image.’ They noted: ‘a sense of place and the way the artist has responded emotionally to that and what else does poetry do if not that?’ They also described their intention to visit an art exhibition by William Blake, a poet and an artist. I resonated with engaging with images leading to pilgrimages to see artist’s work face-to-face, or to research their images further.

A fourth participant described: ‘I really enjoy using images, they free my thoughts and enable me to tap into ideas that I was otherwise unaware of’.

There is some resonance here with other quotes. The word ‘tap’ reminds me of the unlocked potential of the ‘hook’ and Winterson’s bucket down the well. The same participant

used the word 'trigger' in relation to working with images in a group, 'trigger', like 'spark', is a fiery and explosive word, which on this occasion was applied to the group work and how collective creativity can make it 'easier to share your feeling and emotions'.

The group sharing was mentioned by another participant describing how the process was 'enhanced by listening to other participants talking about the images they had chosen and then listening to their writing stimulated by those images.' I recognise how this dialogical work was missing from my reflexive self-study, although I experienced a dialogic relationship with the images.

A fifth participant responded to the image work by recounting: 'a reminder of place, time, feeling or emotion might creep in, which enables you to untangle how you feel'; this prompts me to think of the 'figure-ground' perception in Gestalt (Cherry, 2020) and the 'Grouping' element described above. It also portrays how I experienced Figures 3-5. This participant also brings forward a thread metaphor, one of 'untangling'.

I was startled by the quotes from participants which arrived with me just as I was finishing the paper. It has provided me with a new vocabulary as a practitioner with which to describe the process of using the postcards to: anchor, hook, focus, spark, and untangle. Also, how one might connect with the artist as a fellow artist in the creative process, and how the group lends their lenses, to create a collaborative process.

Conclusion

Mirroring a path many of our Masters students take, I set out with curiosity about the practice I have developed, regularly bringing postcards into the CWTP encounter. What I have discovered is a rich history of practice using image amongst CWTP facilitators, a tradition in talking therapies, a rationale for this tool, and how this process works on a neurophysiological level. I have also enriched my personal practice, reflections and insights, and found new vocabulary and ways of thinking about this process through workshop participants' feedback. I hope that other practitioners can find inspiration in this article to take some of the practice suggestions forward with confidence. There is also potential for more in-depth research on this topic.

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