

The Write Stuff Project evaluation

Produced for the Asham Literary Endowment Trust
by **sam**

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Comments and feedback for the Write Stuff

"Thank you very much for organising and supporting The Write Stuff Project. My daughter was thoroughly engaged, stimulated and positively challenged at each stage of the project. Having her story published has been a real thrill; she would love to have more opportunities to develop her creative writing with the quality of support and encouragement she experienced with Nicky Singer. I hope that The Write Stuff will not be a "one-off" for my daughter at Heathfield Community College. The curriculum as it stands needs more creative enrichment and opportunities for the students to experiment and realise their talents with the active support of the literary community. I was struck by the number of students from The Priory School selected for publication in comparison to the very small number selected from Heathfield School. I wonder whether this is reflective of levels of literacy or levels of active support from the respective schools and whether this difference can be constructively addressed with East Sussex Education Department. I hope to hear that there will be more exciting projects in the near future!"

"...I just wanted to say thanks for a great [anthology launch]. George really enjoyed meeting Mal Peet and we very much appreciated the lovely sandwiches, etc! We will treasure the book which will have given all the young writers such a fantastic boost."

"...I have enjoyed taking part. Thank you so much for your advice it was extremely helpful."

Introduction

The Write Stuff, launched in September 2006, was a literary project that enabled young people in East Sussex aged 11 to 16 to receive one-to-one mentoring from established teenage fiction writers and aimed to promote creative writing within the Curriculum. The project was the culmination of two years' planning and research, commissioned by the Asham Literary Endowment Trust (Asham Trust) and undertaken by Sussex Arts Marketing (**sam**), as part of the Asham Trust's three year development plan. The project officially completed in March 2007 benefiting from the participation of over 800 young people from 13 schools and libraries. As part of the project, 93 young people went on to be mentored by a professional writer, 47 of whom were published in an anthology of work. In all, over 300 pieces of creative writing were produced, most of which can be viewed on the project website, www.write-stuff.org

Background and research

In 2004, as part of its three-year development programme, the Asham Trust commissioned **sam**, a cultural business development agency based in Brighton, to undertake research into young people's reading and writing in the 21st century. The study drew from current national and regional research and concluded there was a need for a creative literature-based project for young people aged 11-16 which was presented in a relevant, engaging and accessible way.

sam then led a series of focus groups with the target teenage audience in schools and libraries in order to test a range of project approaches. The results were published in January 2005.

Young people were clear about what would interest and excite them:

- the opportunity to meet real writers relevant to their age group
- the chance to publish their own work
- the opportunity to access writers, information about writing and other young writers online in an interactive and stimulating way

A steering group was convened, formed mostly of representatives of each of the institutions that had provided young people for the focus groups. In consultation with the steering group, **sam** worked with the Asham Trust to develop a project outline and budget. The Asham Trust approached a number of possible funders that would be required to realise the total cost of the project alongside their substantial contribution.

In 2006, funding for the projected budget was secured from the following sources:

- **The Asham Literary Endowment Trust**
- **The Paul Hamlyn Foundation**
- **East Sussex County Council**
- **The Foyle Foundation**
- **Arts Council England, South East**

Project outline

The Stimulus

Teenagers are notoriously selective about what interests them. The open curiosity of the primary school age group has developed into the need to be impressed and inspired by something different – the power of the peer group is formidable. Getting teenagers to read and write in the face of competition from television, video games, texting and chatrooms, in addition to other diversions, is increasingly challenging. Literacy is a key learning issue on the agenda of all schools and many are finding that the interest of young people is not being realised by the National Curriculum and its requirements. Particularly in secondary schools, teachers are under increased pressure to deliver the syllabus and work towards exams and there is less and less space for creative learning. The *Youth Matters* green paper (July 2005) stressed the importance of engaging young people in positive activities and empowering them to shape the services they receive.

This was the basis for the Write Stuff.

Three popular contemporary writers of teenage fiction, **Anne Cassidy**, **Mal Peet** and **Nicky Singer**, were commissioned to run free creative writing workshops in nine schools and four public libraries across East Sussex, including Brighton & Hove, which aimed to inspire young people and develop their own writing skills. Many of the schools were either in rurally isolated areas where young people have little access to any kind of arts activity, or in economically deprived areas of the South East where some young people are likely to have limited access to books in the home environment (Brighton and Hove, Hastings, Peacehaven and Eastbourne all have wards ranking high on the multiple deprivation indices).

The participating schools and libraries were:

Beacon Community College (Crowborough)

Bishop Bell School (Eastbourne)

Hailsham Community College

Heathfield Community College

Peacehaven Community School

Portslade Community College

Priory School (Lewes)

Thomas Peacocke Community College (Rye)

William Parker School (Hastings)

Brighton Jubilee Library

Eastbourne Library

Lewes Library

Peacehaven Library

The project was publicly launched on 28 September 2006 at the Jubilee Library in Brighton (a project partner library).

Phase One: Workshops

Each writer worked with three schools and one library (Mal Peet worked with two libraries) running creative writing workshops with young people aged 11-16. Anne, Mal and Nicky visited their allocated schools for a day and libraries for half a day. A typical school visit consisted of three workshops with a class size group (around 90 young people during the day). A typical library visit involved between five and twenty young people who had signed-up to the workshop beforehand. At all workshops, flyers were distributed with details of the Write Stuff website which was key to taking part in the subsequent stages of the project.

Each writer was allowed to develop their own workshop content, but advised that it might be advantageous to set three 'exercises', the first of which would be set at the workshops with the remaining two being set during the online mentoring phase (see below).

In all, 860 young people attended the workshops in this initial stage of the project and benefited from direct contact with the writers.

Participating schools and libraries were also encouraged to run further book-related events on the visit day to make it a 'special event' for the whole school and to promote both reading and writing. Suggestions were a 'Book Day' or a 'Book Fair'. Peacehaven Community School organised an author signing event with Mal Peet in their library, which was received well by students who were enthusiastic about the chance to meet a known author. The Priory School also organised a signing event with Nicky Singer and have since established a relationship with Nicky involving her in Year 11 Award Evenings as a speaker.

Phase Two: Writers in residence (online mentorship)

A dedicated website (www.write-stuff.org) was built during the summer of 2006, designed with young people in mind, and took into account the consultation with young people over possible designs.

Once the school and library workshops were underway, the young people were encouraged to log in to the site and submit their work based on the writing they had created in the workshop. A key stimulus to participation at this initial stage was the promise of online publication of work for all those who submitted via the Write Stuff website (the focus groups advised that 'routes to publication' was a key element that young people felt important in encouraging creative writing). Once online, each young person was able to leave a message for their respective writer and collect messages left in return. In this way, the project writers were able to receive work and respond with their thoughts, suggestions and encouragement and help the young people develop their skills. At certain 'cut-off' dates, new exercises were set by the writers and made available online. New exercises were responded to by each writer's group of young people and new submissions of work sent via the website in the same way.

Towards the end of the mentoring period, all young people still active within the project were asked to refine a piece of writing developed as part of the project and submit as their 'final piece'. This piece was then considered for publication in an anthology of work.

The writers held an online in residency for three months (October to December, 2006). All writing that was submitted via the website was published on the website and remained available in the 'library' area of the site.

Phase Three: The legacy

Once the deadline had past for final submissions, each project writer spent some time reviewing the creative writing that they had helped the young people develop over the three month period. By submitting a final piece of work, each young person nominated themselves for publication in the project anthology. In all, 47 young people were selected by the writers and eventually published in the anthology.

The project anthology was designed to be the 'legacy' of the project and a tool by which to promote the achievements of the young people that took part. Every young person published in the anthology received a complimentary copy. Each participating school received 30 copies and each library, 10 copies.

The Write Stuff: An Anthology of Young People's Writing was officially launched at a celebratory event held at the University of Brighton on 22 March, 2007. All the young people included in the anthology were invited to attend, along with their family and friends, to receive their copy. Further copies of the anthology were sold at the event, with the proceeds going to the Asham Trust for future literary projects.

In review, the project was a great success in many respects and benefited a large number of young people across East Sussex. Over the course of the project, over 800 young people from 13 schools and libraries had direct contact with a professional teenage fiction writer. Of these, 93 young people went on to be mentored online, 47 of whom were published in the project anthology. In all, over 300 pieces of original creative writing were produced, most of which can be viewed on the project website, www.write-stuff.org

Evaluation

On 22 January 2007, a review meeting was convened to evaluate the progress and outcomes of the Write Stuff project. Written feedback was requested from all partners prior to the meeting and their comments and suggestions included in the discussion. The meeting aimed to produce a set of recommendations for future versions of the project based on partners' experiences throughout the project.

- In general, feedback from schools, libraries, young people and their parents indicated that the project was felt to be a worthwhile venture and praised for its aspirations. Almost all schools and libraries felt that participating in the project had had a positive impact upon its students/visitors.
- It was felt that, in some cases, certain schools and libraries competed for the same young people which undermined the libraries' attempts to recruit workshop attendees. In future, this should be monitored to avoid such competition.
- Most of the participating schools and libraries felt that more interaction with the writers at an early stage in the project would encourage higher levels of participation and retention of young people.
- Some schools felt that there was too much administration required on their behalf.
- It was noted that the Head of English and Librarians at schools were crucial to the success of the project. Schools, ideally, needed to commit to some degree of preparation work prior to contact with the writer and that this could only really be implemented with coordination from the Head of English (ie. preferably within the Curriculum). Where available, the Librarian should be able to manage to day-to-day running of the project for the school, encouraging participation, organising workshops, dealing with problems, etc.
- Due to a number of issues faced in administering the project and progressing each young person between the exercises set by the writers, there was a noticeable drop in the 'pace' of the project soon after the first exercise was due. It was suggested that participation dropped when the pace of the project slowed and was generally felt that each stage should progress faster to maintain energy and momentum and help engage young people in the project.
- Communication mechanisms (especially web-based) were generally felt to be inadequate for many reasons and needed reviewing.

- All writers felt that the web-based interface made locating young writers and any updates to their work overly laborious – the focus needed to be shifted from organisational structure to supporting the mentoring process.
- The website didn't operate as the 'hub' it was intended to be – young writers rarely checked the website for messages and preferred to rely on messages to be relayed to them via email. This was unreliable due to spam filters and undermined the communication system. It was suggested that the website should act purely as a public 'front-end' to the project and updated more regularly with news, information, submitted work, etc.
- It was felt that school staff needed to be clear from the outset regarding expectations of commitment and volume of work involved in participating in the project. As such, the project managers need to make their role clear when recruiting them as key partners at the start of the project.
- It was noted that those with a better ability in creative writing and English tended to be more committed to the project and produce work of better quality. It was suggested that a self-selection method of participation was employed in future to increase the quality of the work being produced via the project. However, this undermines the original project ethos of providing opportunities to those less able or unlikely to encounter such opportunities. As such, it was decided that the project's ideology needs to be well considered prior to any future versions as this has a potential impact on sources of funding, outcomes, legacy, etc.
- Project writers suggested that using 'exercises' as a stimuli for creative work needs to be reconsidered – for many, setting a prescriptive exercise undermines the creative process and 'blue-sky thinking'. Although a more structural approach works for some, it was felt that it then became difficult to suddenly attempt to switch 'topics' with a new exercise as opposed to continuing to develop an original piece of creative writing.
- The predicted allocation of project writers' time at the start of the project was inadequate. It was reported that the following time was spent, on average, per piece of work (not including time spent locating work on the website, etc.):
 - ¼hr to read through work
 - ¼hr to select work
 - ¾hr to critique work
 - ½hr of communication with young writer
 - (Total = 1¾ hrs per piece)
- It was suggested that **sam** became more involved in the marketing and promotion of any future versions of the project to raise participation levels.

Recommendations

- To be wary of undertaking this sort of project in a location where there are a relatively few schools. The reason for this is that the schools diminish the pool of participants for the libraries as they are directly competing.
- In the early contact phases between the project writers and the young people, the project would have benefited from greater contact time to help establish a rapport and a better sense of 'ownership'.
- The level of routine administration involved should be significantly reduced, where possible, for participating schools and libraries and this is a priority point of investigation for future versions of the project. With reduced administration, there would be an opportunity to undertake better and more effective communication between the project writers, schools and project managers.
- To use the reduced administrative time to add to the website content, using it as a project marketing tool, rather than a communication route between mentor and young writer.
- Schools should be requested to have a Head of English/Librarian/English Tutor 'team' and a central, dedicated point of contact within the school. School partners would be properly briefed as to the work and commitment involved in the project. The schools' link should, ideally, be an English specialist.
- It is now clear that the success of any future version of the project is dependent on a simpler method of communication being established between project writer and young people. The experiment of producing an all-encompassing website was not as successful as was first hoped. The suggestions for simplifying this process were:
 - To collect scripts from schools and libraries and have these posted directly to the project writers for initial selection.
 - To use existing email technology for mentoring purposes, creating project email accounts for correspondence. Communicating only after the initial selection phase.
 - Reinforcing the importance of communicating with project writers with encouragement from school representatives and possibly further follow-up visits to schools by project writers.
- The development of a set of strategies to ensure greater take up amongst the selected young writers should be investigated further.
- The current project website (www.write-stuff.org) should be migrated to the Asham website as a micro-site to avoid continuing web hosting costs and ensure a web presence in the future. This will help future stakeholders/funders to better understand how the project worked before and see the ways in which it could develop.

Appendix

Project writer biographies

Anne Cassidy was born in London in 1952 and was a teacher in London schools for 19 years before she turned to writing full time. Anne has been writing books for teenagers for many years and concentrates on crime stories and thrillers.

Anne's most recent books for Scholastic have been thrillers for the Teen-Rated range including Love Letters, Missing Judy and Tough Love and she also penned the East End Murders series. Looking for JJ won the Booktrust Teenage Prize 2004, and the Sheffield Children's Book Award 2005, and has been shortlisted for the Angus Book Award 2005 (to be announced May 2006), the prestigious Whitbread Children's Book Award 2004 and also the Carnegie Medal 2004. Anne has also been shortlisted for numerous regional awards, including the Staffordshire YTF Book Award 2005, and the Redbridge Teenage Book Award 2005.

Mal Peet grew up in a small town in Norfolk. He went to a slightly barmy all-boys Grammar School where the masters wore vampire capes.

After that he went to university to study English and American Literature and to learn how to have a good time. He then devoted several years to avoiding a career. About twenty years ago he married Elspeth Graham, and together they started to write and illustrate books for Primary School children. To date, they've produced a hundred or so. In 2003, Walker Books published his first novel, Keeper. To Mal's enormous surprise, it won the Branford Boase Award and a Nestle Children's Book Prize, and has since been translated into several languages including Japanese and Hungarian. (Which means that he now has editions of his own book that he doesn't know how to read.) His second book, Tamar, recently won the Carnegie Medal. This put him into a state of shock from which he has not yet recovered.

Nicky Singer has worked in publishing, the arts and television. She has been writing since the age of 12 and has had four adult novels published and two books of non-fiction.

Her first novel for children - Feather Boy - won two Blue Peter awards, including its Book of the Year. The book is set in Brighton, where she lives, and was inspired after she discovered a derelict house in the area. All the locations in the book actually exist. Feather Boy is now published in 24 countries and the TV adaptation won a BAFTA for best drama. Its current incarnation is as a musical.

Nicky's second book for young people - Doll - is about motherless children, lies and self-harm. It was shortlisted for the Booktrust Teenage Prize. She has also published The Innocent's Story, in response to 9/11 and her next book - Gemx - is due out in October 2006 and is about genetically modified people.

Nicky Singer is married to a barrister and has two teenage sons and a daughter aged nine.

Images of the Write Stuff project launch and anthology launch



