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## USING STUDENTS IN 'REAL TIME PROJECTS'

How can we teach our students the essential skills needed to find employment in the competitive arena of creative arts? In this article Lucy English, Reader in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University shows how she has involved her students in 'real world' projects and how these projects have been part of the assessment process. The students in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University enjoy one of the UK's most forward thinking Creative Writing departments. Third year students are encouraged to develop and create individual projects which take them outside of the classroom and into the 'real world'. These projects are often collaborative, innovative and far reaching in terms of the students' creative development and employability. During 2013-4 Lucy English involved three third year Creative Writing students in the writing and production of a new piece of spoken word theatre, *Count Me In*.

### **What is *Count Me In*?**

Following our touring spoken word show *Flash* in 2010-11, The South West Collective; Sara-Jane Arbury, Glenn Carmichael and Lucy English created a new spoken word show, *Count Me In*, on the theme of 'Numbers'. It is a participatory, performance poetry production set in a Bingo Hall, which contains multi-media elements such as film, audio installations and promenade choreography. Community-based workshops are an integral part of *Count Me In* where members of a community have the opportunity to create and perform a section of the show.

*Count Me In* combines storytelling, lyrical poetry, film and sound to explore the role of numbers in modern lives. The show is light-hearted and playful, but it also explores the inner lives of its characters and reveals their hidden anxieties and fears through the numbers called in the Bingo game. The show encourages members of the audience to evaluate their own attitudes towards the essential numbers in their lives and to celebrate the complexity of this relationship.

*Count Me In* was created and written by the three artists, Sara-Jane, Glenn and Lucy. However, *Count Me In* also invited the public to be actively involved in its construction and production. In each venue, we ran creative writing workshops where participants explored the central theme of 'Numbers' and used this material to devise a segment of an evening performance of the show. They were encouraged to perform their work themselves. The production therefore constantly changed and evolved at every venue with new material being written and staged. *Count Me In* was collaborative in nature, with local people having the opportunity to take part in spoken word theatre, as well as the experience of writing for performance. All material written the workshops was displayed on our website as well as other poems written by audience members. *Count Me In* was awarded a Strategic Touring Funding Grant by the Arts Council.

*Count Me In* was confirmed in fourteen venues in the South West and South of the UK from 2013-4. The final performances were in February/ March 2015: A community group and two residential homes for the elderly in Bath and North East Somerset , and Burdall's Yard, Bath.

The collaborative ethos of the project was augmented by our relationship with Bath Spa University who provided three third year students as project workers. Two creative writing students assisted in the creation of the show and the delivery of the workshops, and a publishing student managed the online presence and publicity. Their experiences were written up as their third year dissertations, which were mentored and marked by Bath Spa staff. We recognize that the transfer of specialist knowledge is essential to developing young people's involvement in the arts, and spoken word in particular. *Count Me In* developed their employability skills in the arts sector, and the creation and sustaining of future arts events by and for young people.

*Count Me In* was aimed at communities with little or no arts engagement and little experience of spoken word. By March 2015 we will have played at eighteen venues and run 25 workshops. The details of all tour dates are on our website. <http://swcollective.co.uk/>

### **How we did it.**

We invited students to apply for the position of project workers in May 2013. We clearly stated what their involvement would be and how they could use their experiences in their final year projects. After interviews three students were selected. Two creative writing students and one publishing student. Morgan wanted to develop his performance skills and confidence in running workshops. Greg wanted to learn more about delivering creative writing workshops in the community and Hannah wanted a social media project for her final year portfolio. Greg was going to use his experience as an independent project, Morgan would use the content for his other third year modules and Hannah would use her material in her final publishing portfolio.

We started writing the show in the summer of 2013. By September we had a rough draft. We invited all the students to our early rehearsals and asked for their feedback and comments. Our two creative writing students, Morgan and Greg, wrote poems for the show and after discussion we decided that they would perform this as a two voice poem based on the number 16. The topic was teenage bullying.

We ran a scratch performance at Burdall's Yard in Oct 2013 and all the students were involved in the delivery of the workshops and/or the performance. The audience was largely other students. After the show we held an open discussion with the audience on what had worked and what hadn't. In light of this we altered the sequence of events and made the ending stronger. We also decided to appoint a director to improve the choreography.

The development of social media networking was essential element of *Count Me In*. Assisted by the third year publishing student we set up a website, Tumblr blog, Facebook page and Twitter accounts to chart the progress of the project. These social media sites were to be vital hubs in which to exchange information, add photographs and other film content, establish links and contacts and form a network of spoken word activists in rural, outlying and 'hard to reach' areas and communities.

## **The challenges.**

Our first challenge was the time scale of the project. After Burdall's Yard our next performance was in March 2014. Although we invited all the students to our rehearsals and meetings it was a long time for them to still feel engaged. Our discussions about what venues we should contact and how we should do this were not topics they could easily engage with. It was a difficult show to pitch and many small venues did not have the resources to put on this production. For the students their main time of engagement would be from March to May but by the time we had secured performances and workshops we found that they could not commit to these dates. Morgan and Hannah came with us to St. Ives. Greg performed at Bristol, Cheltenham and South Gloucestershire libraries, where he assisted in one workshop, and Morgan also came to Cheltenham and Plymouth. Hannah attended the Bristol production and the South Gloucestershire libraries.

Our second challenge was the nature of the show itself. *Count Me In* was not playing at glamorous venues. Many of our workshop audiences were those with mental health issues, the elderly and those who experience exclusion. This was an eye opener for our students and we perhaps do not always realise how privileged our students are. Although both Greg and Morgan had identified a desire to assist in community creative writing the reality was more difficult than they had imagined. They were used to lively student creative writing workshops and a good level of literacy. We were aware of the gap between their expectations and reality so before each workshop we briefed them as to what to expect and after each one we listened to their comments and experiences. This was more difficult for Greg than Morgan and by May Greg had only helped run one workshop.

The third challenge was that our target users were not proficient in social media neither were many of our venues. This meant that Hannah's role as our social media manager was limited. She also did not know which other organisations or individuals to link with. We gave her as much assistance as possible but the full use of our social media was not really utilized. However, Hannah did layout several of the poems submitted by our audience members and she filmed audience responses to the show after St. Ives. These films were displayed on our website.

Our fourth challenge was the pressure of other student deadlines. By May all our students were straining under their final deadlines and it was difficult for them to attend either the performances or the workshops.

## **Summary.**

We decided to treat our students as full members of the team rather than unpaid volunteers and involved them in discussions and decision making even though this was difficult for them. We enjoyed their input and company. They all behaved professionally and upped their game when it was required of them.

All our students had an insight into the real working life of a creative project and how such projects can be messy, chaotic and constantly evolving. Our tour dates changed constantly as venues deliberated whether or not to run the show. Three performances were cancelled due to low numbers. The students learned that even with a substantial Arts Council Grant booking and delivering a creative project is hard work.

Greg has decided not to pursue further community teaching and has concentrated more on working for radio. He has become aware he needs to be open about asking for help or explanations when he doesn't understand. Morgan has gained considerable confidence from being part of the tour and has felt pride in his achievements. He is investigating a further career in education. Hannah has secured herself a job working for a major charity. Although her engagement with *Count Me In* was the least due to her other deadlines she has used her experiences to great advantage. Her final project was of a high standard and she achieved an overall distinction.

### **What we have learned.**

I will certainly consider using students again in creative projects. All students have learned from their experiences, even if their experiences were not positive. I will make sure in future that the fluid life of a creative project is more clearly explained or at least give more room for the students to comment on this. I will also be aware that their intention to comment and the pressure of final deadlines will need to be negotiated earlier.

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