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Creative writing and social entrepreneurship

I recently examined a PhD by publications which was focused on a prison residency. The creative content of the thesis was writing from the writer in residence not the prisoners. It was inspiring and reminded me of a few things: most of all that writing is about more than getting published. Far more. In a recent presentation I pondered the nature of post-study life for the writer, after the Masters, MFA or PhD: what does the creative writing student go on to do in the world to make money? They may well undertake a residency or two. Employment and employability are hot topics in higher education, with a plethora of executive and government edicts issued it seems each and every week. Our students are highly employable, our subject well placed to address such agendas. But sometimes it does so in unexpected ways.

In that presentation I stumbled around the term social entrepreneurship. The first part of it came easy, our students tend to be social beings. But the 'entre' part – that seemed at first glance to come from an alien world-view. After a little reading around, I realised: writers are indeed creative, take the initiative and chances. They are more likely than most to invent their own opportunities. This terminology has risen to greater prominence in the past few years. Many of the possibilities and commissions that fit into a writer's work portfolio might fall under the heading of social entrepreneurship – including writing residencies in prisons, care homes, with refugees and asylum seekers, or with other sections of the community. These are roles, often set up in collaboration with existing bodies – funding bodies but also charities and the voluntary sector. It's well worth taking a look at the NAWE guide to residencies (see below) to see the range of possibilities.

The Creative Writing student typically (though not exclusively) has had a previous life outside of academia, they may well have work experience; they are geared for change, possibly of career (especially postgraduates), and are used to imagining different kinds of work. They are perfectly equipped to capitalise on their experience of life thus far. And they are more socially aware than students from many other academic subjects. These are generalisations, admittedly, but what do our students gain from studying writing other than considerable literary and editorial skills? Why, of course, creative writing study enables them to imagine the lives, emotional rhythms, hardships and consciousness of their characters. It's no real surprise if they emerge from their studies with a social conscience.

Jen Webb claims in 'Writing and the Global Economy' (*Writing in Education* 72 p. 25) that creative writing students are not bothered about earning less than fellow graduates from other disciplines; she suggests they would prefer to drive cabs, or work in hospitality and retail, because their ambition is to earn enough money to sustain their writing practice. The inconvenience of a writing career is that in most cases it does not pay the rent – far from it – even when the writer is successful. There is widespread need for portfolio careers. The following are some of the jobs that writing students take during and after their studies. I've

done quite a few of them. In many cases these jobs will dominate and supersede the writing, in terms of income generation and time.

- Teaching – creative writing
- Teaching – English, Literature/Language
- Teaching – English as second language
- Teaching some other discipline – psychology, yoga, mechanical engineering, maths, history, arts and humanities, music
- Illustration
- Copy writing
- Journalism
- Working in bookshop or other shops
- Working in library
- Copy typing
- Taxi driving
- Writing residencies
- Working in arts administration
- Van driving
- Landscape gardening
- Building and decorating
- Private tuition
- Charity work
- Door to door selling
- Nursing
- Media work
- Sales and tele-sales
- Editing
- Postman or woman
- Working in a café, bar or restaurant
- Bus driving
- Setting up own press

Back to the prison residency. This PhD thesis reminded me of when I'd just completed my MA. A friend of a friend arranged for me to facilitate writing activities in a prison. It was unofficial – I was supposed to be teaching business studies. There was no Arts Council grant, I was paid an hourly teacher's rate. After several months, three inmates produced an anthology of their work – *Prose from Cons*. In effect it was a residency, continuing for a further eighteen months and another collection of writing. For many of the writers this was the first time they had used a computer or typed anything, or completed any creative work.

I've come across writers who have engaged in residencies in a variety of social or community settings, and a number of writers with different kinds of portfolio career. Some teach, which comes with its own well-documented problems. I started teaching in a university at the same time as facilitating in the prison. The precarious nature of portfolio work is that you tend to say 'yes' to everything and bank on a certain percentage falling through. You write during the breaks in teaching – during the summer and lulls in marking. But what happens to the writing if nothing falls through and you get all the teaching and residencies you applied for? This is the inherent problem with portfolio working. That and the problems of not being reimbursed and respected appropriately as a permanent appointment. While I think of it, as we approach the hiring season for next year – all members please use and re-distribute the HE committee's guidance on part-time teaching employment practices. Spread the word to your HR departments and relevant staff:

<https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/contracts.html>

The well-publicized residencies undertaken by writers such as Tania Hershman and Sarah Butler (see the NAWE residency guide) fit with the evolving definitions of social entrepreneurship, in that there isn't a single profit-goal as there might be with the conventional entrepreneur. There is a set of broad social, cultural or environmental goals, associated with the voluntary sector – typically but not exclusively in areas such as deprivation, prisons, health care, education and community or international development. Profit making isn't an end in itself – although obviously there is a core requirement of income generation for the writer.

The plight of the portfolio writer tallies with the testimony of choreographer Crystal Pite, talking of creating the dance *Flight Patterns* with the Royal Ballet – the dance was based on the international refugee crisis, a project of social engagement. She said of her role as choreographer: 'I have to be a leader and I have to be a creator. Being a leader means I have to know what I'm doing, I need to walk into the studio and know; I need to be able to be clear, decisive and sure. And being a creator is really the opposite of that. I need to be in a state of not knowing and allow myself to meander and to play.'

This seems to me to describe the perpetual state of the creative writer in the world of employment. It reveals a similar skillset and aptitude, echoing the writer's creative process but also the dilemma they face when placed in facilitating roles such as teaching, residencies or arts projects. Writers are accustomed to lead, to know what they're doing, but also to be in a state of not-knowing. They are familiar with uncertainty, while being accustomed to directing and controlling words and narratives at macro and micro levels. They can play and initiate, they can organize too. This combination is in demand. It amounts to a considerable social and entrepreneurial strength. Yet it won't register clearly in any government employability statistics, in destination salary charts or any of the weekly edicts.

References

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NAWE guide to writing residencies

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