



## How did I get here?

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### Steve Dearden: Breaking eggs

*Steve is the Director of the Writing Squad, a programme for writers in Yorkshire aged 16-20, has set up international collaborations between writers in the UK and Canada, and while collecting jobs with literature in the title has been Co-ordinator of the National Association for Literature Development (NALD), Literature Officer at Yorkshire Arts, and Director of the Ilkley Literature Festival. He is an advisor to the Scottish Arts Council and has worked as a consultant for a wide range of literature and arts organisations. Steve's short stories have been published by magazines in the UK, Australia and Finland. He was the ARCHitexts Writer in Residence at the Bluewater Shopping Centre and one of six writers from Finland and Yorkshire collaborating on Interland published by Smith Doorstop in September 2006.*

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### I like the balance

Whenever I wanted to do something my Dad knew would end in disaster, he would try and persuade me not to do it, but he never forbade me. Eventually he would say, 'O.K. but as sure as eggs are eggs, X will happen.' I would do it. X would happen. I'd learnt something.

Although he finds it hard to explain to his friends what I do, I think he is fairly pleased with how I've turned out. There are three strands to my work:

- I act as a consultant – using what I have learnt as a festival director, funder, policy maker and producer to help arts and literature organisations clarify why, for whom and how they do things.
- I set up and run my own projects. For instance: The Writing Squad [www.writingsquad.com](http://www.writingsquad.com), a two year programme for writers aged 16-20, now working with its third group of exciting

emerging writers, and Light Transports [www.light-transport.net](http://www.light-transport.net), funded by the Urban Cultural Programme, commissioning and sourcing short stories from Yorkshire and abroad to be distributed free at Yorkshire's mainline stations

- I also write short stories.

I like the balance. Most people presume I do the first two strands to create time for writing. But if you gave me a million pounds to go and write, by the end of the week I would be on the phone to someone saying, "Do you think it would be a good idea if we ..." and another project would be born. The consultancy keeps me in touch, I come away from most jobs deeply enriched, having learnt a lot from the people I worked with.

The balance has always been there, writing, putting on and managing things, being someone people turn to and ask 'how do you think we could? ...'

Why do I do it? I am not sure I can put it better

than my friend Ralf Andtbacka introducing my prose in Interland [www.intland.net](http://www.intland.net):

'literature seems to be an integral feature of Steve's way of being in the world ... there is always focus on the process itself, on producing a good text, rather than on the potential benefits of being a writer, all the useless hype. For him, I believe, literature above all signifies empowerment, intellectually and existentially, and this is the key motivational force behind his work both as a writer and a literary activist.'

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## Jumping in at the deep end

My first project was at school. I set up a poetry magazine with work by pupils but also some teachers prepared to make themselves vulnerable. It ran for three, maybe four issues. At university, instead of my degree, I directed plays, set up theatre companies, ran tours, helped make short films, some new scripts, some working with writers. We operated within the safety of the university but always tried to work beyond the university audience: doing rep in the summer vacation, tours of stately homes in the south, going to the Edinburgh Fringe and on a British Council tour of Italy.

All this seems about a million years ago now, but the values I work by today were forged then. We took risks, partly because we knew no better, partly because we were generous with each other, partly because we were passionate, resilient and confident. We were also self-reliant, no one set any of this up for us, there were no arts departments, there was no technical or skill based support, just loads of moral encouragement, plenty of time and a little funding.

I did the same on the dole for a bit. Then back to Durham for my first job as Arts Officer at the University, a steep learning curve in grant-making, being an operator, forging links, helping people realise ideas. One of the main objectives was to promote town-gown links through the arts – the job hadn't been done before and no one

knew how I was supposed to do it. But again, bags of moral support. And funding.

Then more dole, more plays, films, writing, until my Dad said 'If you don't get a proper job soon, no one will employ you.' Ilkley Literature Festival decided to appoint their first full time professional director and took a punt on me. Another deep end, there weren't as many festivals around then, only Cheltenham and Lancaster, and Hay just starting, we were a rare breed but met up under the auspices of the long defunct National Poetry Secretariat. From the other directors and promoters I learnt a little of what a festival director did, listening, using their contacts. The rest I learnt by putting on three things that looked like what I thought an interesting literature festival might look like. I got lots of moral support from a strong board who pretended to believe in me until they did.

I promised myself I'd only do three festivals and became Yorkshire Arts' temporary Literature Officer as a way out, but found I liked it, and stayed nine years, each year different to the last. I discovered the double edged sword of literature's low status, one being the lack of funds, the other being left alone to get on with pretty much what I wanted to. The job felt like looking at a table of wires all atangle. Some I could see needed to be joined together, others kept apart, some were long dead, some I had no idea about so picked them up and tried ...

There is no induction to being a literature officer, I had supportive if disinterested bosses, a little money to invest and a sector rich in human capital, attitude and ideas. I learnt through watching peers, one or two other officers and the radical local authority arts officer, Phil Wood. I picked up the strategic and networking skills that enabled me to become the Co-ordinator at NALD where I got to work with experienced old hands and the bright new stars bringing new energies, new contexts, new dimensions. Since 2005 I have been doing the freelance balancing act.

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## Inspiration, not instruction

Looking back, there are not really turning points, just a succession of inspirational and dedicated people from parents and teachers, through student friends, to my international friends and (mostly) Yorkshire colleagues who, despite years of chronic underfunding and lack of recognition, have created a distinct, exciting ecology. More than that, like the students at Durham, they have an approach, a politic, a way of doing things which is sometimes more important than the intended result. They are people who have purpose, but also create conditions which allow the unexpected.

There have not been many hurdles, other than the people who have fairly frequently said no, or 'as sure as eggs are eggs', though that has often acted as fuel, an added spur. Perhaps the greatest hurdle I've had to overcome is myself. Literature can be a lonely profession, and though I enjoy spending large amounts of time alone, I have had to learn the difference between creative indolence (cooking as I call it) and time wasting self-indulgence, to recognise when a position is relaxed and when it is laziness.

I struggle to think of things I have learnt on a short training course. All the useful methodologies I employ, most of the tips I pass on, were passed on to me by a friend or colleague saying 'when I am doing that, I do this.' Things I struggled to understand – reading figures for instance – I finally understood working alongside someone who was fluent, who could read the subtext, who knew how money worked. I have learnt, not by being told but by being involved, inspiration not instruction. You can create learning tools round breath, it is harder to create breath from tools.

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## On the soapbox

So some soapbox, or is it egg box, conclusions:

- People are essential to learning and growth. People are our great untapped resource. We are rubbish in the literature sector at collecting and passing on knowledge, and properly rewarding people prepared to pass on skills through long term mentoring friendships. Seek out, nurture and reward your friends.
- 80% of the British workforce of 2020 is already at work now. We should be arguing for investment in our work rather than peripheral organisations and schemes, and the need to build training round the development and delivery of our work.
- In the development sector we need to be honest with ourselves. Is it a literature or British thing, that some seem to want people to do well but not that well? If you cannot look into your heart and see that you want the people you work with to do as well as they can on their own terms, if there is any sign of envy, stop helping them and look after your own needs.
- We should be giving people responsibility at as early a stage in their careers as we can. Even when we are as sure as eggs are eggs that Y will happen, we should be giving people the opportunity to prove us wrong and enjoy watching them overtake us.

And finally, don't take no for an answer, then blame the decision makers lack of literature knowledge. Marshall the knowledge, the arguments, the friends, go back and question decisions and make the case, so that the answer becomes, 'Oh, of course I see, OK then.' As sure as eggs are eggs. it isn't easy but sometimes ...

Two quotes to leave you with ...

'Some people pick up their tools. Others become the making itself.' (Brecht)

'My Father has two sayings he likes to repeat:

1. *Every* job is a sales job.
2. *Everything* you really want to do turns out to be hard work.'

(Rob Long, *Conversations with my Agent* p.118)

June 2006

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## Useful links

Steve Dearden

[www.stevedearden.com](http://www.stevedearden.com)

ARCHitexts

Project placing writer in residencies at venues of architectural interest.

<http://www.art-architecture.co.uk/architexts/>

Foundland

An exploration of how the web can complement live literature.

[www.foundland.net](http://www.foundland.net)

Interland

A collaboration between writers from Yorkshire, England and Ostrobothnia, Finland.

[www.intland.net](http://www.intland.net)

Light Transports

A reader development project which involved commissioning and sourcing short stories from Yorkshire and abroad for free distribution at Yorkshire's mainline stations.

[www.light-transports.net](http://www.light-transports.net)

The Writing Squad

A programme for emerging young writers in Yorkshire and the Humber aged 16-20.

[www.writingsquad.com](http://www.writingsquad.com)

Arts Consultants.org.uk

Online register of arts consultants, trainers and suppliers.

[www.arts-consultants.org.uk](http://www.arts-consultants.org.uk)

AI (Arts Industry)

Leading news and jobs magazine for the culture industry.

[www.artsindustry.co.uk](http://www.artsindustry.co.uk)

ArtsProfessional

The UK's leading arts management magazine.

[www.artsprofessional.co.uk](http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk)

Literary Festivals

The British Council's online, searchable directory of UK literary festivals.

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-literature-literary-festivals.htm>

The National Association for Literature Development

The only national body for all those involved in developing writers, readers and literature audiences.

[www.nald.org](http://www.nald.org)

nalgao

The national association of local government arts officers.

[www.nalgao.org](http://www.nalgao.org)

Story

Information, tips and advice for writers including details of magazines that will accept short stories, competitions and workshops.

[www.theshortstory.org.uk](http://www.theshortstory.org.uk)