

Turning Another Page

Being your own producer

Harry Giles

Experienced producer Harry Giles explores the role of the poet-as-self-producer and looks at two key aspects of what they do: soliciting bookings for readings and performances, and managing your own publicity.

About the author

Harry Giles is a poet, performance-maker and producer. He grew up in Orkney and is now based in Edinburgh, where he co-ordinates the spoken word events series Inky Fingers, co-directs the quarterly live art platform ANATOMY, and is part of the team running the Forest Café community arts space. His poetry has been published recently in Magma, Gutter and Clinic, amongst other journals, and his debut pamphlet *Visa Wedding* was published by Stewed Rhubarb in November 2012. He won the 2012 national IdeasTap Poetry Competition. He is the former BBC Scotland slam champion (2009), and has won further slams from Glasgow to Warwick to London. He has featured at major events such as the StAnza Poetry Festival and Edinburgh's Hogmanay, and at popular spoken word nights such as Chill Pill and Utter. Harry also makes participatory theatre performance, working as a solo performer and as a facilitator, creating one-to-ones, installations, street interventions and longer interactive shows in theatre spaces. He's recently made or shown work at the Soho Theatre, the Glue Factory, the Yard, Ovalhouse, CrisisArt, Hatch, Arches LIVE, Sprint and Buzzcut, alongside community centres, empty shops and street stalls.
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1) What is a producer and why should I be one?

In the arts, producers are the people who oversee all the organising, management and logistical work of making art happen. That means very different things in different art forms, but it usually involves finding the financial backing, bringing the right creative and managerial team together, and being the bottom-line for everything organisational.

In poetry, though we might be used to dealing with editors, publishers and promoters, we rarely meet someone called a producer. But I think that using the ideas of producing – especially of self-producing – can be a powerful way of poets taking control of what they want to do with their art. Rather than waiting around for somebody else to discover us and label us a success, self-producing means finding your own way of succeeding.

Especially in theatre and performance, the UK arts world is seeing more and more emerging artists working as their own producer. There are many reasons – reduced funding for larger organisations and an increasing political focus on entrepreneurship being chief among them – but the result is a sector filled with emerging artists organising their own events, writing their own funding applications, running their own marketing campaigns, and finding their own creative and managerial collaborators. We're seeing this cultural change in literature too, with young writers learning to promote themselves and hunt out support for their own work. Where previously artists might expect to just have to promote their work to find an interested producer (or, for poets, submit it to an interested editor / event organiser), now more and more artists are acting as combination artist, marketing department and funding officer.

There are obvious disadvantages to this. It requires artists to develop skills (like staff management or application-writing) that don't necessarily fit well with being an artist. It puts a lot of pressure on the individual to succeed by themselves. It can lead to over-stretched and over-stressed artists. But at the same time it does, as I've said, allow artists to control their own fate a little more – and if you can develop those extra skills, you can also find work using them for other artists and organisations. Moreover, it can help us manage a career within a more hostile funding environment, however frustrating we might find that situation. Lastly, and more optimistically, enthusiastic and energetic artists can support each other, and can help grow a stronger arts community together – being able to produce (organise, fund and support) yourself can make you a better advocate for others.

This resource will cover two of the main areas of what a poet-as-self-producer might do: soliciting bookings for readings and performances, and managing your own publicity. You might also like to check out another Turning Another Page, Setting up your own live event by Michael Pedersen, which is available to download at <http://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/training-and-events/turning-another-page.html> I'll end with some thoughts on working collectively, and being able to do all this without burning yourself out.

2) Getting bookings

a) Introduction

For some poets, performances are the heart of their poetry. I certainly began there – my first poetry was written explicitly for live performance, and I got most of my early training as a poet at open mics and poetry slams – but I do now write poetry for page publishing too, and some of my events might seem more like “readings” than “performances”. If you're a performance poet, getting booked for events will be one of your primary aims as a poet, but if you write primarily for the page, there are still good reasons for getting booked for events: reading or performing can be a great way of increasing the visibility of your work and attracting interest from publishers; people may be more likely to read (and buy!) your published work if they've enjoyed hearing it; you can also gain a new understanding of how your poetry works from hearing it aloud and with audiences; and event bookings can be a source of income – if you get good at them, it can be more reliable than royalty cheques!

b) Practising your skills and building reputation

Unless you're already a well-known poet, however, you'll need to practise your skills and build your reputation as a reader/performer before you can expect to get good bookings. Fortunately, the poetry community, and the spoken word scene in particular, is very good at providing opportunities to practise and build your reputation.

The grassroots of spoken word are open mics. An open mic is an event where anyone can sign up for a slot to perform. Generally these will be quite short – at the Inky Fingers Open Mic, monthly in Edinburgh, everyone gets 5 minutes only, for example – and there might be a dozen or more performers in one night. Open mics are usually very friendly, supportive spaces – they're designed for poets to experiment and practise, and audiences are often there to hear new and unusual work as well as to support their friends. A good open mic is a safe space to try out your work, and it can be much more fun than just practising in your bedroom. You can learn a lot by the direct feedback an audience gives you with its smiles, laughs and applause – but bring along trusted friends and critics to offer feedback too.

Another open forum is the poetry slam. These are live poetry competitions, traditionally open to anyone to sign up (though you might also find so-called “exhibition slams” of invited poets) and judged by the audience (though, particularly in Scotland, you might also find invited judging panels). Though slams tend to favour highly dramatic and energetic performances, I've also seen quiet, thoughtful poems win out. The heated nature of slams is a great challenge to up your game as a performer, and doing well in a slam is both a satisfying boost and a good route to building a reputation. Event organisers will often scout slams for talent and winning can sometimes lead to new bookings.

If you don't feel ready for either of these, then look out for workshops that can boost your performance skills. Poetry organisations are increasingly holding classes in reading and performance – Inky Fingers runs regular performance classes with community writers' groups, and also holds a bi-monthly SPEAKeasy session which offers peer feedback. Or, even better, set up your own group with friends! Key to learning to perform is hearing what other people think.

Just as in publishing there's a well-trodden route – first getting poems in magazines, then in better magazines, then getting a pamphlet or two published, then a first collection, and onwards from there – there are also standard ways of progressing in getting bookings at live events. You might get noticed at an open mic or slam, then get an offer of a short set at a regular night – both Blind Poetics and Rally & Broad in Edinburgh have an “Introducing” slot – which might lead to longer sets elsewhere, and eventually to invitations at major events like poetry festivals. At any stage, you can also push things forward by writing directly to event organisers and soliciting bookings – with more on this below – but as with publishing, the more and better credits you have, the easier it can be to get organisers to pay attention to you.

The spoken word scene is also growing a dynamic relationship with publishing. Having published work can lead to interest from spoken word organisers and, increasingly, doing well in spoken word can lead to interest from publishers – Luke Wright, for example, is one of the UK's most successful contemporary spoken word artists and in 2013 had his first collection published by experimental press Pinned in the Margins. So you might hone your skills at an open mic in preparation for organising a book launch, and if your book then does well a reading series might take an interest, and then that could lead to major bookings. It's all a question of pursuing the things that excite and interest you, and practising until you do them well. There's no point continually entering poetry slams in order to chase a possible success if you just don't enjoy doing them – not loving it means you're less likely to do well, after all! There are many routes to success, and experiment and

practice will find the one that's right for you.

c) Finding Events

The UK currently has a thriving spoken word scene, with a huge range and diversity of events. In London, you can find a live poetry event every night (sometimes more than one); Edinburgh has at least two every week; and other cities and towns have their own crops. Many of these events site themselves within the performance poetry community, but others are organised by poets working more regularly for the page, and more still will welcome multiple styles and approaches. What's important for you is finding the kind of events you enjoy performing at.

A common piece of advice given to poets submitting work for publication is to read the journals they're submitting to first, to understand the community and styles of writers published there. Exactly the same holds true for live poetry – different events belong to different communities (demographic and aesthetic) and are interested in different ranges of styles. Not every event will be for you – but many will be, and many will push your boundaries in interesting ways. I recommend visiting all the events you can your local area, especially those with a regular slot (monthly is the most common) to get a sense of where you fit in.

Each region has its own prominent newspaper and magazine listings services for arts and other events, too numerous to list here. Several regular journals, including Poetry London and Iota, also have event listings published. But the easiest mechanism is through the several websites and blogs dedicated to live literature, spoken word and performance poetry, where you can find what's happening in your area.

RESOURCE: LIVE POETRY LISTINGS SITES

Write Out Loud (<http://www.writeoutloud.net>): UK-wide site, with a focus on spoken word and performance poetry. Includes workshops as well as live events. Excellent searchable calendar, and searchable by location.

Poets on Fire (<http://poetsonfire.blogspot.co.uk/>): UK-wide site, with a focus on spoken word and performance poetry. Very widely used, but hard to search – best for regular updates.

Scottish Poetry Library (<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/connect/events>): Scotland-wide site covering all forms of poetry, including workshops and meet-ups as well as live events.

Edinburgh City of Literature: (<http://www.cityofliterature.com/whats-on.aspx?sec=5&pid=20>): Edinburgh-based site covering all literature, including workshops and meet-ups as well as live events.

Poetry Society (<http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/events/>): London-based site, very widely used, with a good calendar function.

Poetry London (<http://www.poetrylondon.co.uk/listing/events>): Covers the whole of the UK, particularly strongly for the publishing sector.

Poetry Kapow (<http://www.poetrykapow.co.uk/calendar/>): Covers the south of England, very actively updated.

d) Contacting Event Organisers

So you've got the practice in, you feel confident in your skills, maybe you've had a couple of small bookings, and now you want to put yourself out there. How do you do it?

The most important thing to understand is that most event organisers will want to hear from you. I run a monthly night, and I'm always looking for new talent – I can't know every performer available, and I'm more likely to find unusual and diverse performers by welcoming solicitations. Once you get over the anxious hump of “Well I just don't want to bother them!” it all becomes a lot easier. Really, the very worst that can happen is that you don't hear back.

The first thing to do is to prepare a simple press pack that summarises your work and your credentials (see “self-publicity” below). Then you need to prepare a list of contacts who might be interested in booking you. Decide what areas you'd like to travel to and what size of event you want – do you want local audiences? to get to know new cities? any event or just the big ones? – and then find as many events as you can that will fit. Some will have websites, others Facebook groups, others just an email address, but very few will have no online presence at all. Where you can't find an organiser's email through these routes, try looking up the venue the event is held in. More powerful than all of these routes is asking your friends who go to poetry events, especially those who tour, who best to get in contact with – and a personal introduction can go a long way to getting an organiser to pay attention to you.

Now draft your email. You just need to do a few simple things:

- Say who you are, where you heard about the event / organiser from (this shows you've done your research), and why you're looking for bookings.
- Introduce your main credentials as a writer and performer, with a particular emphasis on readings and performances.
- Outline the financial conditions you're looking for (see “making the money work” below).
- Outline the date range you're looking for.

If you haven't heard back in a few weeks, I think it's fair enough to send a follow-up email – this can help jump you up a queue, and I personally never mind receiving them. But more beyond that is likely to feel like pestering, and you may do better to wait until later in your career, as sometimes organisers do feel too inundated to reply to everyone.

Here's a simple example of a “book me” email I've used which can serve as a model:

RESOURCE: A “BOOK ME” EMAIL

Hallo [Name of Organiser],

[Mutual friend] suggested I get in touch with you about poetry in Newcastle; I'm a performance poet based in Edinburgh, and am organising a tour of UK spoken word nights this summer. I've gigged pretty extensively in Scotland and London, so am trying to get to the places I haven't been to before. I'm really excited about getting to know the scenes around the country – I care a lot about building links between nights and developing strong platforms for spoken word, and touring's a big part of that, as well as being good for my own work. I run a popular night in Edinburgh called Inky Fingers (<http://inkyfingersedinburgh.wordpress.com/>), and we're working both to bring in a diversity of artists for our nights and better support Scottish poets in organising tours.

A wee bit about me: I've been performing and organising spoken word for the last 6 years. I've got

a good few slams under my belt (including the BBC Slam Scotland in 2009), and have featured at nights like Express Excess in London and Last Monday at Rio in Glasgow. I aim for diversity in my style – I like building sets that travel all across the poetic spectrum, from diamond rants to tight little stanzas. I grew up on a tiny Scottish island, and my poetry's rooted there, though I try to make it travel. You can find a press pack that's got more details and my full performance credits in it at [web address].

As I'm organising a tour under my own steam, I'm trying to make sure I can get fees or expenses from enough nights to make sure I at least break even – but I'm fairly flexible as to how this is done at each night. If you've got a set fee, that's great; if I can take donations on the night instead, also good; if I can run a workshop with your support to get cash in, that works too! Just let me know.

I'm looking to get dates in May-July this year. If you'd like to book me, pop a couple of suggested dates my way, and let's see if we can make it happen!

Thanks,

Harry Giles

e) Making the Money Work

Most live literature events are run on a shoestring budget, and while as professional poets we have a right to expect a fee, reality often falls short. It's good to be frank about this from the beginning! A standard professional fee for a reading or performance (20 – 40 minutes) is £150, and for a 2-3 hour workshop it's £200-250. However, you will encounter fees like this far less often than you would like. Speaking personally, the fee I'm most likely to encounter for a gig as a performance poet is £30. When invited to read at events more aligned with the publishing sector, I'm more likely to get the full fee, but I'm also more likely to be asked to do it for free. In performance poetry in particular, there's a sense that when you “progress” in the scene it's easier to ask for bigger fees, which amounts to a sort of working apprenticeship, but even then £30 gigs are common. On top of (or sometimes instead of) fees, you can ask for travel expenses and accommodation costs if you're travelling – these are both often available even when fees aren't.

These are the realities we have to work with, though I'd also argue that it's the work of organisers – through securing bigger budgets – and artists – through asking for bigger fees and expecting better standards – to improve it. When you're working out what to ask for, you need to decide on an accommodation between the ideal professional fee and the reality of poetry's economics and your standing as a writer and performer. You should also set certain principles for yourself on your absolute minimum: for myself, I will perform for no fee if it's for a good cause but not otherwise, and I won't perform anywhere if I'll be out of pocket due to travel costs. I also won't perform unpaid if other performers – and especially organisers – are getting paid, because I think it's the responsibility of an organiser to make paying artists their first funding priority.

A useful approach can be to start by asking an organiser what fees are available – this asks them to set the standard, and prevents you from under-valuing yourself from the get-go. If you do this, though, you should be prepared to negotiate, which can be emotionally taxing. Throughout any negotiation, most promoters won't take any offence as long as you're honest and reasonable.

Finally, two words of caution. First, I would counsel against performing unless you have an explicit agreement on the financial conditions. If you don't have an agreement, don't assume you will get any money, even if the organiser has said there'll “probably” be some. Second, there are, sadly,

unscrupulous organisers out there – who renege on agreements, or who pay themselves without paying artists. This is a very rare problem, but it does happen, sadly; to avoid it, do your research, especially by asking friends, and if you're ever treated poorly then make sure that other poets know about it as far as you can.

f) What to do when no-one will book you

You've been practising for a while, you're confident in your skills, you've had a couple of small bookings, you're following all the advice in resources like this, and yet still the bookings won't come. What can you do?

My first tip will always be to find people to work collectively with. Do you have other friends who are writers? Maybe you could organise an event together, to help promote each other's work – if it's a good event and you charge on the door, you could even bring some money in. Do you know of local poetry organisations looking for volunteers? Helping out with other poets' and collectives' events can be a good way of making connections that can lead to bookings. You don't have to be alone as poet: mutual aid is a great way of strengthening each other, on which more later.

My second tip is a bit tougher: you can always practise more. I get 2-3 paid bookings a month, and I still regularly perform at open mics, especially to hone new material. You can practise writing alone (though writers' groups are great), but you'll never stop needing to practise your work in front of audiences. The moment you get complacent about your reading and performance skills, that's when you can expect the bookings to dry up! But the poetry world is active and enthusiastic enough that there'll still always be a stage for you.

3) Self-Publicity

a) Introduction

At the heart of being a successful poet is being a good poet – practising your writing and practising your performing. Being present as a good poet in poetry communities is the best route to success – whatever you define success to be (more on that later). But just as being assertive in soliciting bookings can be a good way to pick things up, being good at publicising your own work is a really useful way of getting it out there. Self-publicity is not for everyone, and some people find it pretty tough, but at the very least it's good to be able to tell your friends when you're reading and encourage them to come along. In this section I give some advice on some of the different ways you have of promoting your work, and at the end I've some advice on how to do it all without looking (or feeling!) like a phoney.

b) Press Packs

Your first key publicity tool is a simple press pack about your work as a poet. This is like your poets' CV, and it can be as simple as a page or two of credits (but if you have a friend with good computer design skills you might want to call in a favour to help make it pretty). Your press pack should include

- All relevant contact details
- One or two photos of you – high quality author photos or images of you in action
- A short (one paragraph) bio about you and what motivates your poetry
- A list of your performance credits
- A list of your publishing credits
- If you run workshops, details of the workshops you provide
- Testimonials about your writing, performing and workshop facilitating

The last point – testimonials – is possibly the most important. Whenever you've performed or run a workshop, you should ask the organiser if they would be able to provide a sentence or two about you and your work. For writing, ask publishers or editors who know your work if they'd be willing to offer some copy. And once you start getting reviewed, make sure you can extract good quotes from them for your press pack.

The whole thing should not add up to more than a few pages, and less is usually more: include the best photos, the best blurbs, the best credits, rather than aiming for completion. One useful strategy is to use a website to keep a list of your complete credits and blurbs and then to distil them into a document you can post or email to people.

For an example, you can find mine at <http://harrygiles.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/harrygiles-poetrypack.pdf> – but that doesn't mean I've done everything right! Also, your press pack should be crafted to express your identity and work as a poet, not fit a standard model, so be as creative as you can.

c) Websites

Having a personal professional website is probably the best way of providing easy, accessible information about your work as a poet. On a website, you can provide a bio, include a full portfolio and credits, have a host of pictures, advertise events and blog about your work and interests. It also doesn't have to be difficult – there are now a host of services that make building websites easier, so you no longer have to be able to write computer code and know how to handle internet domains. The resource below introduces some of the main options.

There are two main approaches to poets' websites. The first uses the website as a sort of enhanced press pack with more links and information – a simple showcase of your work as a poet. The second often incorporates this, but builds on it by including social elements: regular blogs, integrated social media (such as embedded Twitter or Youtube feeds), and an active presence. If your website is just a portfolio, people are only likely to visit when they want to find out more about you; if your website is active and interesting of itself, because you're providing interesting content, then people are more likely to visit for the content and stay to find out more about you – it's more effective self-publicity that way. The problem is that you're only likely to do that well if you enjoy it!

RESOURCE: WEBSITE PLATFORMS AND EXAMPLES

WordPress (www.wordpress.com) is my favourite free platform. It's flexible and powerful, meaning you can build a wide range of different styles of website, and it has good community support for problems and bug fixes. It's especially good if you're intending to blog. The main disadvantage is that you do have to feel comfortable using a more complex website and working without beginner tutorials – it's best for people already comfortable with the web, though it doesn't require complex coding.

Free platforms like **Wix** (<http://www.wix.com>) and **MrSite** (<http://uk.mrsite.com/>) are designed with beginners in mind: their business is built on providing simple tutorials and wizards for making attractive websites. You can achieve prettier results with these more easily than with Wordpress, but there's also less flexibility. They're good if you want a site with a few simple pages and aren't intending to update it very regularly or use it interactively.

Squarespace (<http://www.squarespace.com>) is a paid platform (with free trial) that balances to best of both WordPress and the simpler builders in that it allows for good results quickly and had

more in depth flexibility. They also have excellent customer services, rather than relying on a community of users. The main disadvantage is that it's not free!

Tumblr (www.tumblr.com) is half a website-builder and half a social media platform. The sites are generally very simple, with little aesthetic variation, and the main function is being able to share content with other Tumblr users easily. However, if you can write programming code or can get a friend to help, you can build quite complex websites in Tumblr that integrate the social sharing functions.

There are other platforms that are comparable to each of these: a good list of options with comparisons is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Website_builder

RESOURCE: POETS' WEBSITE EXAMPLES

Ryan Van Winkle (<http://ryanvanwinkle.com>) has an attractive but straightforward site that has a portfolio and plenty of artist information, clearly presented, with a regular blog front and centre to keep people engaged.

Melissa Broder (<http://www.melissabroder.com/>) and **Steve Roggenbuck** (<http://www.steveroggenbuck.com/>) are good examples of poets who have built their use of the internet across websites and social media into the heart of their poetry and their engagement with audiences – particularly common in the US. Their sites are complex and sprawling and also are well-crafted adverts for their work.

Nia Davies (<http://niadavies.wordpress.com/>) and **Amy Key** (<http://insteadofstars.tumblr.com/>) are both using blog-based platforms to build websites that showcase their work, make it easy to contact them, and make it easy to share their work and commentary socially.

d) Social Media

Social media allows us to share and advertise our work with friends, but it also allows us to build new connections and reach new audiences. Different platforms are better at different things – some people use them all, and some only use what's most effective for what they want.

There are two good and often-mentioned rules to bear in mind when trying to do social media well. The first is that it has to be social: that means that you need to interact with other people as well as posting your own content. Liking or commenting on someone's Facebook post, retweeting or discussing with people in Twitter, and sharing Tumblr posts, are all ways of strengthening connections between people and building social relationships – which means people are more likely to share your own posts more widely. In other words, no-one enjoys someone who only talks about themselves! The second rule is that it has to be media: that means you need to be providing content that's interesting. If all you do on Facebook is advertise that you're published in this journal or reading at that event, people are much less likely to be interested in you and your work than if you're providing interesting commentary on the poetry world, or discussing politics, or even – though sometimes this puts me off! – talking about your cat.

My third rule, though, is a rule I'm going to keep reiterating: there's no point in doing it if you don't enjoy it. If you're just going through the motions of tweeting every day or two, or liking random Facebook posts without really engaging, people will feel your disengagement. There is no

obligation to do social media at all! It can help boost your work, but if you don't like it for whatever reason, then just focus on the writing and performing.

Lastly, a couple of words about the two biggest platforms. Facebook is mostly good at modelling your existing social relationships – it's a good way to keep in touch with friends from other parts of your life. It's particularly strong at advertising events – it has functions like groups, pages and events that make it easy to keep your friends updated. You can strengthen your connections with existing social circles and catch up with people you've recently met. Twitter can do this too, but it's also particularly good at growing new relationships. Because Twitter is mostly about commentary (it used to be called a “micro-blogging” platform), allows for very easy and light sharing, and doesn't have to require approval before someone follows you, you'll often find yourself coming into contact with people you haven't met elsewhere. I've met people on Twitter then formed friendships in person – I've even got work contracts through Twitter connections! But that, as always, is only likely to happen if you're active, interested, and interesting on the platform.

e) Face-to-Face

Astonishingly, people still meet in person even in these internet-heavy days. Some organisations specifically run networking events, but you're also likely to meet organisers and editors (and other poets) who might be interested in your work at performances, readings, launches, conferences and so on. Although it pains me to say it, these are also marketing opportunities! The best way of marketing yourself – as always – is to be interested in and supportive of other people's work, to be active and engaged. But there's no harm in helping people remember you.

Business cards are still a really useful way of passing on your contact details. I once missed out on a great performance opportunity because I had to scribble my contact details on a beer mat – ever since then I've made sure to have a business card with me always. There are plenty of internet print providers you can search for able to help out here.

More effective still is having tiny samplers of your work. I've seen people make beautiful mini-pamphlets simply by cutting up and folding A4 sheets of paper, or putting poems on badges and stickers, or coming up with other creative ways of sharing their work. This is far more a way of doing art and poetry than a marketing opportunity: although people will remember you for it, you have to do it because you're excited by it first.

I'm really bad at my last tip, which is trying to remember all the connections you've made face to face. Having a good place to store business cards, or a page in your diary to record contact details, is a good way of keeping track. This is important so that you can remember who's involved in what project, which organisation has which people who can support you, and so on. That's as useful to other people as it is to yourself – conversations where I can remember “Oh, you're interested in that thing, well you've definitely got to talk to XYZ!” are some of the most useful I've had as a self-producer.

f) Doing it well means not being a phoney

I've reiterated several times that none of the self-publicity will work well unless you enjoy it for itself: whether it's chatting on Twitter, blogging, or networking in person, you have to enjoy the socialising or writing or it'll be empty. And despite our advertising-saturated world, I think people are pretty good at spotting someone who's only doing something for the publicity, or who's only interested in their own work.

I think the best way of publicising yourself is to be publicising other people's work – to be interested in what other artists are doing and using your own marketing routes to promote it. As always,

you're better off working collectively than working alone.

A lot of people who do self-publicity are beset by feelings of phoniness – there is something difficult in advertising yourself, and it's easy to worry about being seen as arrogant or over-reaching. But I think if you're doing what you enjoy and enjoying other people, you'll probably be OK. The key thing here is that everything should be done for its own sake, because it interests you, and not for abstract targets and goals. And given that self-publicising is a kind of performance, you can always ask your friends for feedback and advice.

4) Working Collectively

Throughout this article, I've mentioned that working collectively can be a powerful way of strengthening your abilities as a self-producer: it gives you support from friends and colleagues, helps you share and learn new skills, and can attract more interest than a solo artist can. I also just find it more fun!

There are many ways poets might work together. One of the simplest is a peer writing group: if you don't already have a group of friends you regularly share work with, I recommend finding a group of people who trust each other to give each other feedback. These regular groups sometimes lead to new projects, with individuals working together to produce the work. A step up from that is a collective like Scotland's **Writers' Bloc** (<http://www.writers-bloc.org.uk/>): although the writers in the group primarily work individually, they also organise occasional events together and help each other to produce small-scale publishing projects. London's **Chill Pill** (<http://www.chill-pill.co.uk/>) is another good example: it's a group of poets organising high profile events, but also using the publicity to promote each other's work to a wider audience. The most developed model is one like my own organisation, **Inky Fingers** (<http://inkyfingersedinburgh.wordpress.com/>)...

RESOURCE: INKY FINGERS CASE STUDY

Inky Fingers was founded in October 2010 by myself and a writer named Alice Tarbuck. We began by wanting to organise a free monthly open mic and writers' group – simple enough, we thought, especially with the support of Edinburgh's Forest Café, a free and open access arts space. From the beginning, our attitude was to be as open as possible, welcoming anyone to perform, but also welcoming other people to help get involved with the organising.

Bringing interested people on board meant that we fast started getting more ambitious about the kind of events we could run. In our first year, we ran a hugely popular poetry slam, and also a very well-attended 6-day minifestival in August – the energy of the group pushing us far beyond the original ambitions. By the time our second year began, the name Inky Fingers started to be recognised for itself – and it's now perhaps better-known than any of the writers and organisers working within it.

The result of this is that other organisations started coming to us to ask for help in running their events. In our second and third years, as spoken word specialists, we've organised events for the Scottish Book Trust, the Scottish Poetry Library and the StAnza Poetry Festival, just for starters. This made the organisation stronger, but also brought in occasional income for our team when event management fees were available: the Inky Fingers name brought in the work, a huge advantage of working collectively. Similarly, we are also now regularly contacted by organisations looking for writers to run workshops, which can be divided around the collective.

In the third year, we entered another new phase: getting major project funding in. Through our work with community writers' groups, we were able to put in strong funding applications to Creative Scotland and the Robertson Trust to create a Project Manager position within the organisation, with funding to run events and workshops. We were able to create the part-time work and long-term projects that are rarely available to individuals applying alone, and the long-term plan is to be able to increase our core and project budgets to grow employment in the spoken word sector.

None of this is what we planned when we began! Inky Fingers is now a collective of around 10 people, with varying levels of availability and commitment. Some of us are professional full-time writers and arts freelancers; some of us work in other jobs while pursuing a writing career; some of us are students; and so of us move between the roles. The group is always changing and growing, and I believe that's because it still sticks to the principle of being as free and open as possible.

Working collectively brings its own risks and challenges. Even in open groups, energetic and dynamic leader-types are often needed to kick things off and help keep them going. Groups can often suffer from diffuse responsibility – someone says “let's do this!”, and everyone else says “yes!”, but unless specific people are given or take on specific tasks then even something everyone wants to happen won't happen. That means that good organisers and meeting facilitators are crucial to strong collectives. If groups are open to new people, then nervous or unpractised organisers may need a lot of support and encouragement before they're able to take on responsibilities – often it can be a few weeks of increased work before they start to spread the load. Conversely, leaders and strong personalities can undermine a collective – if someone always takes on all the jobs, then other people will feel disempowered, and if the same people are always speaking, others will start to lose their ownership of the collective.

Dynamics of gender, race, class and so on are important to pay attention to here to maintain healthy and diverse collectives. Collectives are also made up largely of volunteers which means that energy can often run low. At their worst, collectives' over-reaching ambition and poor organisation can drain all the members of energy. But at their best, collectives can be sustaining, nourishing and empowering for everyone involved, bringing in more work and more notice to all of their members. As with everything else in this resource, if you enjoy working for other people and can do it for its own sake, the benefits will come in naturally.

5) Bigging yourself up without wearing yourself down

This article has been packed with ideas about ways to be your own producer and so to further your career. It might make you feel quite pressured! I'd hate you to finish reading this and think “Oh no, now I've got to immediately make my press pack, email everyone whose business card I have in my wallet, and get my techy friend to build me a website.” So I think the best way of ending this resource, which I hope has been full of encouragement as well as ideas and advice, is with some simple tips for making sure that being your own producer doesn't leave you isolated and drained.

Manage your time. If you start taking on all these tasks and become an active organiser, you're always going to have more things to do than you can keep in mind at any one time. Keeping a diary is essential if you want to keep track of meetings and avoid double-booking yourself – but it's also a great way to make sure you have free time. To avoid from over-committing, I scribble out days in my diary so that I literally can't write anything in it! Similarly, a good system of to do lists – on paper or on documents on your computer (I use the great Stickies programme (<http://www.zhornsoftware.co.uk/stickies/>) – keeps track of your commitments and lets you make

sensible decisions about what you can manage.

You don't need to do everything. When you really get going as a producer of yourself (and others), you'll find that there are more ideas and opportunities than you can possibly manage yourself. Eventually, you have to start saying no – not just to other people, but to yourself. This is never a bad thing – in fact, it's less about denying chances and more about giving priority and attention to the things that really matter to you. If you can, start to notice the warning signs of when you've taken on too much, find a way to cut back, and begin saying no.

Put the writing and performing first. Your skills as a poet – writing and performing – are the most important things in your career. It's really tempting to let maintaining your website, emailing contacts, checking twitter, designing posters and so on become a never-ending list of tasks that crowds out all the time for writing and performing. I think it's partly because we use tasks we know we can fulfil to avoid confronting the terrifying monster that is the blank page or empty stage. But it's what you're really in this for, after all.

Do it together. I've spoken at length about working collectively, because I think that “do it together” is even more empowering than “do it yourself”. But there are other ways of bringing other people in. Maybe you'd like to work with a visual artist friend or musician you know on a cross-media project: small collaborations can be as exciting or sustaining as collectives. Maybe you'd like to organise a shared work space with other poets, so you can encourage each other to keep it up. If nothing else, one of the most important ways of doing it together is meeting another poet friend for a cup of tea when you can share your fears – and your ideas!

Do what you love. As far as is economically possible, only take on the work you actually enjoy doing, and do it because you enjoy doing it. I've said it many times in this resource, but it's worth one more time: if you're alienated from the work, the work will alienate your audience – whether that's the promoter you're writing to, the friends you're Facebooking, or the audience you're reading to. Don't start a poetry collective because you want to get published – start a collective because you want to start a collective. Another aspect to this is that it's easy to become envious of other people for successes you don't even want. There are many paths through poetry and many ways to success, and you should only be looking for success in the things you love doing. If you're a performance poet, don't be envious of the peer who's just got their first print collection out. And if you do have elders in your own field, then avoid envy by asking them for advice instead! As long as you keep doing what you love, you'll be doing alright.

Good luck!

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