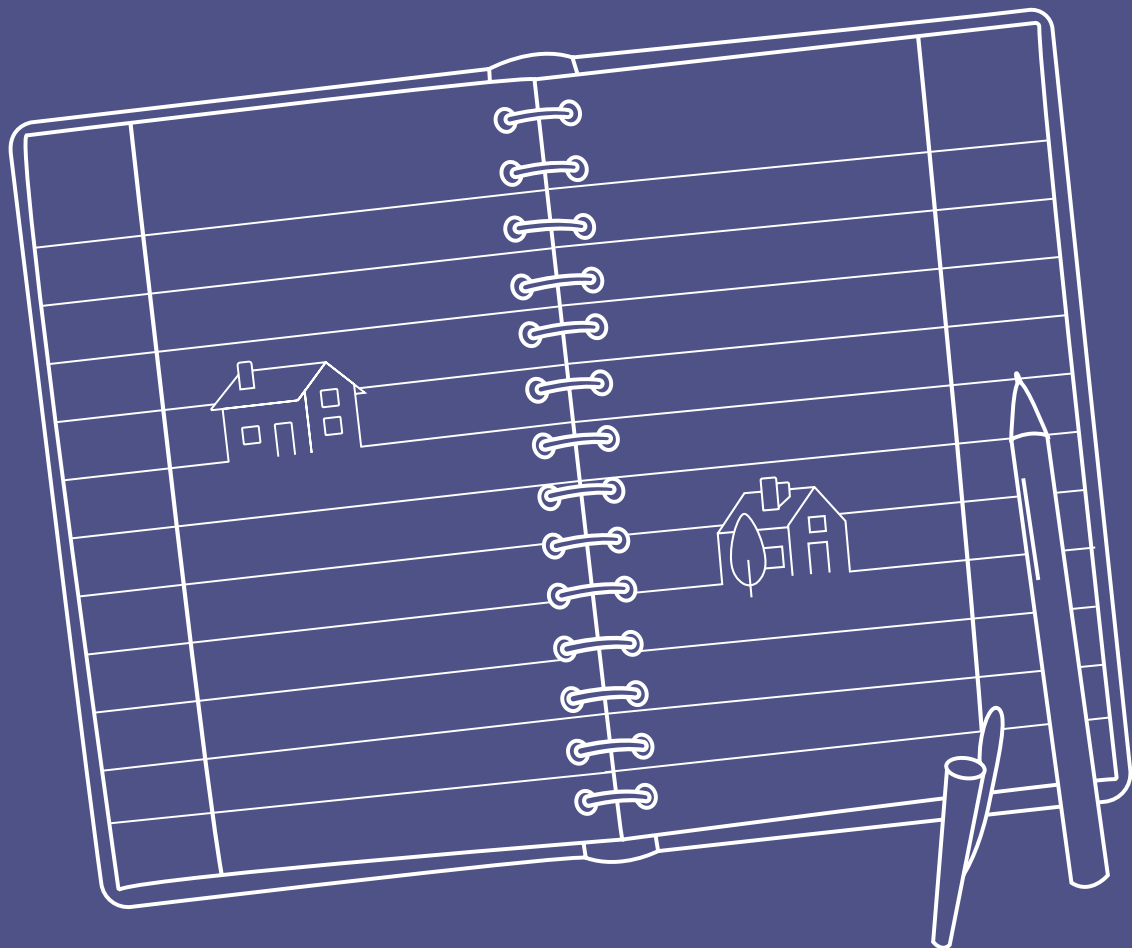




Beyond Covid-19

The Writer's Cycle as a Model for Resilience, Transformation and Inclusion

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with Lucy Sweetman and Joanna Nissel

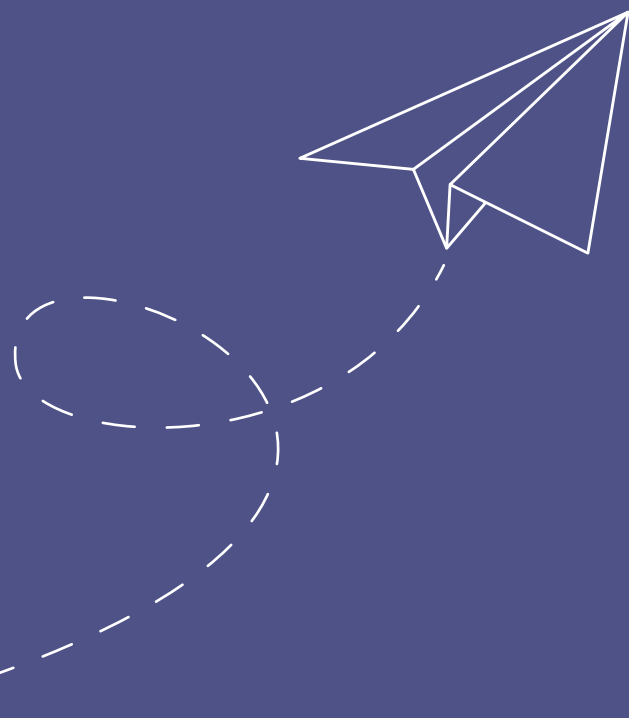


Introduction

Covid-19, the lockdown and its aftermath have the potential to severely disrupt a writer's ability to discover, connect, craft and transform. How can writers continue to create the space -- both emotional and literal -- to explore, write and grow in the midst of the ongoing personal and societal disruption? How can writers use their craft to both help others and to process and address the issues which Covid-19 has thrown into the light?

This discussion document attempts to anticipate the different ways in which Covid-19 might have affected individual writers and the writing, teaching and publishing ecology overall. It provides some suggestions to mitigate the negative impacts of the ongoing crisis for writers in all phases of their writing journey, as well as for writer-facilitators.

Above all, this discussion paper seeks to explore ways to continue to support 'Writing for All' during this difficult period and beyond. Now more than ever, a varied and thriving writing ecology made up of as many voices as possible will help people to use writing for their personal wellbeing, or to create work which actively engages with the times we find ourselves in. At the end of each section of the discussion there are resources to help writers respond to the crisis. An executive summary of this document is available for those who are short on time.



Research Methodology & Context

This discussion paper is exploratory. It references and draws from past and ongoing qualitative research, some of which has recently been published under the title 'The Writer's Cycle.'

The Writer's Cycle was developed by the creative writing incubator Paper Nations as part of an action research project. Paper Nations is based in the TRACE research centre at Bath Spa University. Led by Professor Bambo Soyinka, The Writer's Cycle is one of four research projects produced by Paper Nations.

In 2018, in collaboration with the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), Paper Nations ran a Call for Evidence to teachers, writers, poets, authors and workshop leaders, asking people to tell us their views and experiences of creative writing education. This was done to help us understand more about what people value, what they need and what they think is missing from the current system of Creative Writing education. The responses enabled Paper Nations, NAWE and our other partners to develop and share a set of resources that help educators build, enhance and sustain creative writing in schools and communities.

The Writer's Cycle highlights transformative implications of the writing life-cycle. The underlying model (as verified in an independent report from the Centre for Youth Education, previously known as LKMco) has been shown to enhance feelings of connection, and to increase confidence and frequency in writing, especially for people who initially struggle to write. An independent evaluator noted that Paper Nations' resources have helped to address the problem of uneven access to high-quality creative writing education in schools and community settings.

Spurred on by these findings, Paper Nations has continued with further research into cultural factors informing creative writing practice. More recently, we have begun to explore potential uses of The Writer's Cycle as a model for Resilience, Transformation and Inclusion.

Discovery

The Discovery theme emphasises the importance of time, space, solitude and experimentation as writers discover themselves and their writing through exploration. On one level, it may seem as if the lockdown resulting from the pandemic provided writers with the perfect opportunity to spend time writing in isolation, free from the usual pressures of everyday life.

In reality, however, this may not have been the case. The Discovery theme highlights the value of developing regular writing routines and habits -- the pandemic disrupted and continues to disrupt normal routines, including writing ones. This may be especially true for writers who have extra responsibilities due to the pandemic. For example, some writers may have found themselves caring for a relative who is vulnerable to the virus, or they may have had additional childcare duties due to school closures.

Writers may also have been unable to access the usual resources which aid them in the Discovery phase of their cycle. They may not have been able to visit libraries which provide reading and research materials, or go to places which they usually find inspirational. Whilst some writers need quiet and privacy to be able to write, others prefer busy public places as writing venues -- during the strictest phase of the lockdown, this was clearly rendered impossible.

The Discovery phase of The Writer's Cycle might also, in normal circumstances, involve some writers seeking out spaces which nourish them and provide them with the freedom to explore and play -- for example, writing retreats. Covid-19 and the resultant lockdown rendered such arrangements difficult.

On top of this, writers may be affected financially due to Covid-19. Normal sources of income -- be they writing-related or otherwise -- may be profoundly reduced. Writers with already low incomes may find themselves in an even more precarious position than normal.

Writers with health conditions or disabilities may become further isolated and vulnerable due to the pandemic. The move to online events and classes could have had mixed implications for writers with disabilities. For some, the increased availability of online resources could be beneficial -- issues around wheelchair accessibility are removed as are challenges around transport. However, online platforms can be difficult to navigate for some writers with visual or hearing impairments or differences. The picture overall is that this pandemic and its resultant lockdown will have most severely affected those already on the margins.

For the very youngest of writers, school can provide an environment in which to explore, experiment and discover writing for the very first time. Recent school closures have taken this vital space away from many children. Notably, these effects will be felt most severely by children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. A report from the Sutton Trust found that children from independent schools were twice as likely as state school pupils to participate in online lessons every day during the lockdown. A third of children whose household income was over £100,000 per year had over £100 spent on their learning during the first week of lockdown, in comparison to just 8% of children from working class homes.

Supporting and enabling writers to access a range of reading materials from a variety of sources widens individual writers' pools of influence. For writers who remain clinically vulnerable, it could be helpful to continue to direct them to online sources which can expand their reading. This could take the form of online libraries and databases, as well as bookstores which deliver -- more and more independent bookstores are beginning to offer this service.

In addition to all the practical considerations which might affect a writer's ability to flourish in the Discovery phase of their cycle, Covid-19 also presents many emotional challenges. At the most basic level, anxiety surrounding the pandemic may make it harder for writers to focus, explore and enjoy their craft in the ways they might in more normal times.

Furthermore, at a time of such crisis, writers may have begun to question their nascent or developed writing and personal identities. Some may doubt the value of writing and art to provide answers and solutions to the problems we face. As mental health suffers, writers' confidence in their ability may wane. It may be harder for writers to give themselves permission to take pleasure in their writing when the situation in the wider world is so concerning.

The core concepts of the Discovery theme, therefore -- namely, that writers need to have freedom, space and creative nourishment in order to discover themselves as writers -- have been severely threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic. As we emerge from the strictest phases of lockdown, it is important to note that the barriers to Discovery have not been lifted. With no vaccine and no cure, Covid-19 still represents a very real threat. The social divides it has highlighted in our society have left many grappling with emotional and existential questions. Although pubs are opening and football is returning, many cultural venues such as theatres remain closed.

For writers, as for others, the anxieties and uncertainties of the present and the future mean that finding the space to be creative can still be challenging. This is especially true for writers who have, or who are caring for someone with, underlying health conditions. For such individuals, a reopening world represents a source of danger and fear.

Continued thought also needs to be given to those writers suffering long-term economic effects from the lockdown. If writers are to have the practical and emotional time and space to write and discover, supportive measures implemented during lockdown need to be maintained or even redoubled as we move forward.

It is not possible to solve or remove many of the factors which are currently continuing to damage writers' ability to engage with the Discovery stage of their cycle. However, there may be some ways in which the effects could be mitigated and writers' ability to explore and discover enabled.

It may help to focus on the value of writing as a tool for processing emotions and feelings. Rather than writing for purpose, journaling could be used as a way to deal with the ups and downs that inevitably arise. For those who do want to continue to write but are stranded indoors for clinical or other reasons, it will be vital to continue to create and share online resources which can allow them to continue researching and exploring. For example, open access repositories such as virtual libraries and databases will be an invaluable resource for writers still in lockdown.

For writers who are financially affected by the crisis, signposting them towards potential sources of income or financial support may also be vital. By removing practical concerns, writers' freedom to play, explore and discover can hopefully be re-established.

Equally important is ensuring that writers are supported emotionally during the pandemic. As the spirit of the Discovery phase of the Cycle is to allow writers to explore writing without pressure, it could be helpful to promote the message that writers do not have to use any perceived 'extra' free time to be more than usually productive. As lockdown eases, it is key that the shared trauma of the pandemic is recognised and that writers are not under the expectation (self-imposed or otherwise) that they should create masterpieces at such a time.

Many positive steps have been taken during this period to nurture writers and help them continue to have the space they need to explore, discover and write. Across the country, community writing groups have been providing valuable creative and emotional support for writers in response to the pandemic. NAWE member Jo Earlam created new digital resources for children during lockdown on her Archie Space Dog and Tuamor the Turtle websites. The National Centre for Writing established several free online writing courses for young people. Meanwhile, poet Cathy Grindrod is running a series of free online 'Writing for Wellbeing' workshops online from July to December, focusing on creating a 'calm space' for writers to 'connect with themselves and their creativity.'

These are just a few examples to demonstrate the strength of the writing community's response to Covid-19. Networks such as NAWE regularly provide information about these groups in their newsletters and online bulletins.

Further mapping and research is needed to explore ways in which writers could help to mitigate the effects of school closures on the most vulnerable young learner-writers. Collaborations between authors and schools could help teachers to adapt approaches to empower young writers by giving them the space and support they need to write, discover, explore and grow.

Finally, ways could be explored in which to support writers with the more existential questions which this crisis presents. It is vitally important that, as we begin to look beyond Covid-19, writing events and publications continue to be created, shared and promoted which help address the issues society faces. Writing has an integral role to play in connecting people, exploring difficult topics, and raising awareness or even funds during difficult times. More now than ever, the value of writing must not be forgotten -- not least because this will help writers to continue to find fulfilment in the process of expressing their ideas, identities and experiences through words, language and narrative forms.

Key Takeaways:

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown caused disruptions to writing routines due to practical, emotional and financial implications. Writers already isolated or vulnerable before the pandemic were most severely affected, with the move to online events and workshops having mixed benefits and drawbacks for writers with disabilities. The ability of the very youngest of writers to explore, experiment and discover their writing identities has been hindered by school closures.

During lockdown, many positive initiatives were launched by writers and writing organisations across the country, providing vital emotional and creative support. As we begin to emerge from the strictest of lockdowns, it is important that such measures are continued. Particular attention should be paid to those still restricted by the pandemic such as those with clinical vulnerabilities or caring duties.

Further research could reveal ways in which The Writer's Cycle can be used to support writers, in particular young writers and vulnerable adults, in the aftermath of the pandemic. A recognition of writing's power to help us process, respond and heal is important for writers in the Discovery phase of the Cycle.

Resources:

'Arts Council England Covid-19 Support'.

'No pressure, online journaling workshop' from Writers' HQ.

Creative writing exercises from Writers' HQ.

More writing exercises and encouragement from Writers' HQ.

Leeds-based yoga and creative writing workshop for women.

An online novel-writing course for the over-70s, designed to assist during periods of isolation.

A series of free, light-hearted writing prompts and exercises.

A list of 20 free online libraries.

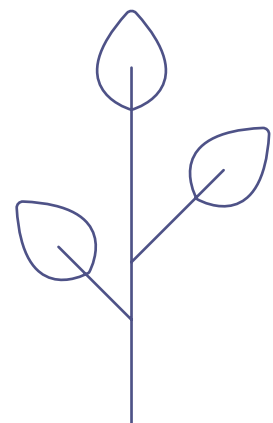
A notebook app for freewriting and jotting down notes.

'12 Rules of Creativity' by Michael Atavar: a book of twelve 'practical steps' to 'help stimulate your creativity'.

'A Creative Guide to Exploring Your Life' by Graham Gordon Ramsay and Holly Barlow Sweet: a book about exploring your identity through creativity.

'A Fox Crossed My Path: Creative Therapeutic Writing on a Depressive Illness' by Monica Suswin: a book about using creative writing therapeutically for mental health.

'1001 Brilliant Writing Ideas' by Ron Shaw: a book of 1001 writing ideas for teachers to use with children



Connection

The Connection phase of the Cycle recognises the need that many writers have for a community of like-minded writers or of people who share their interests. The theme also balances this with a recognition of the fact that some writers are happiest when solitary and connect to the world directly through their writing.

Even for those writers who prefer to work alone, the type of isolation imposed by Covid-19 has been very different in tone to one undertaken by choice. People who say that they choose to write in solitude describe their experience as one that is marked by peace, a sense of security, focus and heightened connection to the natural rhythms of life. However being forced to write in isolation is very different, and is more likely characterised by anxiety, stress and loneliness.

For writers who feel the need for community and regular connection in order to write, the pandemic and the lockdown in its various iterations present an even more evident challenge. Writing groups, creative writing university programmes, formal and informal workshops have gone through periods of cancellation, or have at the very least been moved online. As many settings move towards blended learning, virtual learning is likely to continue to play a more prominent role than previously.

Supporting writers to stay in touch with potential support networks, be they personal or professional, is essential. Yet the standard ways in which writers might seek to connect socially and artistically have been hampered by the crisis. In-person festivals, readings, workshops, writing groups and networking events may have been cancelled or postponed. Likewise, field trips, site visits and outings to research and gather ideas for writing are likely to have been delayed or rendered impossible.

Some vulnerable young writers who are just beginning to explore writing and their identity through this may have found that the usual places and people who facilitate their writing have been less available to them. In certain cases, vulnerable people may also not have access to the internet, meaning that even alternative modes of connection and communication have been denied to them.

At the most fundamental level, the innate human need to connect with other human beings has been compromised by this virus. For writers, as for others, the ramifications of this isolation could include a reduced capacity for creativity.

As with the issues faced by writers trying to discover their art and themselves during this crisis, the problems which the pandemic presents to writers trying to connect with others are difficult to remove entirely. That said, once again there are perhaps ways to soften the blow of social isolation.

Of course, the internet is a vital resource for those able to access it. Online workshops, classes and support groups for writers can continue to be promoted and created. Both formal and informal networks of writers can be maintained in this way to some degree. For writers who wish to stay in touch with the writing community, but feel unable to write at present, online reading groups or social media read-alongs may be of value. Such events have the potential to include many who would not otherwise be able to easily access diverse literary events -- for example, those living in rural areas.

During lockdown there has certainly been a flourishing of online literary events designed to bring people together though physically apart. The Stay-at-Home! Festival, organised by author C J Cooke and Paper Nations, was attended by over 20,000 people. Other events, such as The Big Book Weekend, organised by Kit de Waal and Molly Flatt, and OWN IT!, a week-long online arts festival, were similarly popular. Such events highlight the ability of writing to unite people at times of crisis.

There is a long established culture of writing groups and development agencies across the country -- Writing West Midlands, Literature Works, Write Club, and Novel Nights, to name just a few. These agencies and groups responded with generosity to the crisis, many providing free workshops, advice and blogs to meet rising demand for writing support.

Alex Parry's online workshop on the 12th of June, 'Writing the Rules for Zoom?', offered the opportunity for a

no-cost skills exchange session to share how socially engaged art practitioners and educators have used, adapted and reshaped Zoom (and other video comms platforms) for workshops and other group activities.

Initiatives that respond with compassion and speed to urgent needs as they arise will continue to be of vital importance in ensuring that writers and writing communities remain connected during Covid-19 and beyond.

In some cases, it may continue to fall to writer-facilitators to maintain contact with the more vulnerable writers whose writing they facilitate. If the writer lacks access to the internet, this could be through phone calls or even letter writing. However, it should be noted that this may not always be possible and may in some cases be an extra strain on the emotional and creative resources of the writer-facilitator.

Perhaps most important of all at this time is to recognise the ways in which we have remained connected although apart. Whilst this pandemic is experienced differently by everyone and affects some far more severely than others, it is nevertheless true that it leaves no one completely untouched. Writing has a key role to play in connecting communities during this crisis and in its aftermath. Events such as The Big Book Weekend demonstrate the ways in which writing can be used to maintain, or even intensify, a sense of community and togetherness during times of crisis.

As lockdown begins to ease, issues of isolation and marginalisation are only brought into sharper relief. Although many are beginning to socialise and work in face-to-face contexts once more, for those who are more vulnerable to the virus or who are caring for someone who is, these freedoms are still out of reach.

For those with a more entrenched, longer-term experience of isolation, the lockdown may have represented a brief period of solidarity in which their experiences were more widely understood. The end of lockdown risks a withdrawal of this empathy.

Some writers with disabilities or other conditions may have found that the increased abundance of online literary events during lockdown offered an opportunity for inclusion which they had not previously experienced.

A reduction in such events could lead to a deepening sense of isolation with knock-on impacts on writers' ability to find the connection they need to form ideas, write, and share that writing. Accessibility in the arts will now need to include consideration of the medically vulnerable.

When considering how Connection has been affected by Covid-19, it is also important to note the society-wide divisions which this pandemic has made more visible. Poverty, ageism, inequality and systemic injustice have come to the fore. Around a quarter of Covid-19 deaths have taken place in care homes, with many calling for an Inquiry.

Meanwhile, people of Black African heritage in England and Wales have been shown to be 3.5 times more likely to die of Covid-19 than white people. A study ordered by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies found that this

increased risk of death from the coronavirus for Black, Brown and Asian patients is not due to medical reasons but to their likelihood of initially being infected and may be linked to occupation, housing and other non-medical risks.

In this moment of great historical upheaval, marked not only by the pandemic but also by anti-racism protests across the globe, the Connection theme may be affected in several ways. For some writers, feelings of injustice, hurt and disconnect may make it harder to foster a sense of community and togetherness conducive to a fulfilling writing life. For others, the need to practically engage with current issues may make finding time to write more difficult.

However, it is also true that writing and writers can help us to process and respond to the challenges we face, both individually and communally. For some writers, increased awareness and public discussion of inequality may help build a greater sense of togetherness and possibility, allowing them to find wider audiences for writing which addresses such issues. Writing can be championed as a means of carefully responding to the complexities of this period. By seeking to promote greater diversity in writing created and shared, a wider range of perspectives, approaches and solutions will emerge.

Key Takeaways:

Covid-19 and the resultant lockdown hampered the innate need of writers and human beings to connect with each other face-to-face. Furthermore, the virus has heightened and exposed systemic divisions and injustices which may have affected some writers' sense of connection and belonging. At the same time, a growing awareness of these issues may help some writers to experience a sense of togetherness and solidarity, and to find an audience for work which addresses the challenges in front of us.

During lockdown, there was a flourishing of online events and resources designed to bring writers together although physically apart. For some marginalised writers, such events may have offered opportunities for inclusion which they had not previously experienced.

As we begin to look beyond Covid-19, it is vital that inclusion becomes the touchstone of cultural events and resources. In particular, consideration should be given to those who are more vulnerable to the virus. It is also important to continue to explore the power of writing to champion inclusivity and bring people together. In this way Covid-19 may also provide an impetus to remove barriers to inclusion in writing services, encouraging us to double our efforts to reach out to people who have previously been marginalised.

Resources:

Mind, for emotional support.

Tonic, a Bristol-based spoken word poetry scene. Now operating largely online.

Out on the Page: social and artistic support for writers identifying as LGBTQ+.

Online literary festival at My Virtual Literary Festival -- regular events and readings.

An online writing community, Scribophile.

Online community forums for writers from Writers' HQ.

Community Writing Group, based in Weymouth.

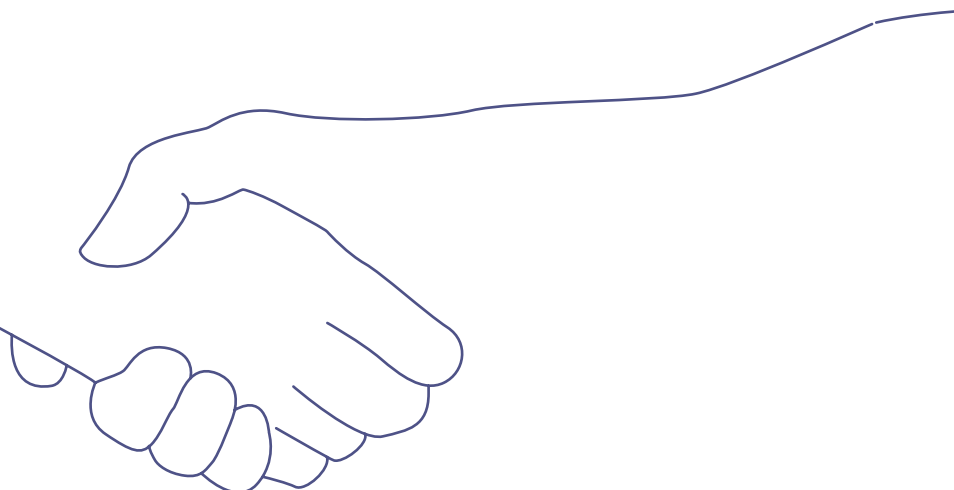
Writing workshop in Sheffield.

An online writers' group, WritersCafe.org.

A free to join, online novel-writing community running every November.

52 Dates for Writers by Claire Wingfield: a book designed to help writers explore the world around them.

Corsham StoryTown Festival, uniting a community through storytelling.



Craft

The Craft phase of The Writer's Cycle sees writers taking time to hone their voice, find their style and take inspiration from the work of other writers. It may involve seeking out the support of an editor. For others, the development of an inner editor is key.

Craft has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in many of the same ways as the Discovery and Connection phases of the Cycle. Each theme, after all, overlaps and feeds into the others. With diminished capacity for experimentation and discovery, writers may have found it harder to work on their craft. With impaired ability to connect, writers will have been less able to seek external editors from either existing or new sources. They may have found it harder to widen their influences and absorb new techniques and skills into their craft. As restrictions are eased, barriers remain in place for the most clinically vulnerable or those with caring responsibilities.

In truth, the ongoing crisis could be affecting writers' ability to develop and polish their craft in myriad ways, with great variations between individuals. For some, the anxiety and disruption of the pandemic could make it difficult to focus on anything but fulfilling their own and their loved ones' most basic needs.

Even the lockdown easing presents its own anxieties, especially for those with underlying health conditions which could make them more vulnerable to the virus. Outdoor spaces may become more crowded and therefore less available to vulnerable groups. The delicate concentration and voracious absorption of influences required to define and develop a craft as a writer may be too exhausting and emotionally consuming at such a time.

For others, however, the urgent issues and changes thrown into the light by the pandemic may actually bring about a heightened state of awareness, a sensitivity to new influences and a renewed sense of purpose as a writer. The importance of articulating and addressing the situation we face may act as a catalyst for some, causing them to further define and refine their craft. Some writers may find that current injustices or, indeed, acts of bravery provoke emotional reactions in them which spur them on to different topics or modes of writing.

Writers who rely on others to help them edit and evaluate their work may well need to adapt the ways in which they go about receiving this feedback. Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that demand during the pandemic has been high for resources which support writers to develop their craft.

Out on the Page, a group for LGBTQ+ writers, has seen the number of writers engaging with their services triple to 300 since the lockdown began. Similarly, Paper Nations' reach on social media has tripled in comparison to the same period in 2019, and we have awarded Time to Write Commissions to over 50 writers to help them progress with their work. National Writing Day on the 24th of June, which called for people to write a 24-word story and post it online, reached #1 in Twitter trends for the UK.

The Poetry Business have moved their 'Writing Days' workshops online, delivering writing exercises and feedback to poets. Arvon, too, have been providing virtual masterclasses, including one in non-fiction, run by Jay Griffiths. Ledbury Poetry Festival and Hay festival were both online too. Some organisations have also been offering longer-term craft support, such as a year-long distance-learning course in Dramatic Writing from The Creative Writing Programme, in association with New Writing South.

Those attending online festivals often seemed keen to use the experience to help them in their own writing. For example, craft workshops at the BBC Upload festival sold out immediately. Likewise, at the Stay-at-Home Literature Festival, workshops with a hands on element were oversubscribed with 55% of people participating saying that they would now write more as a result.

In some ways, online events have presented opportunities for craft support to writers who would not usually have access to it. One participant at The Big Book Weekend claimed that

The digital nature of the festival meant that, as a perpetually shy person, I felt able to ask a question and received an enlightening answer, which will help me as I move forward with my current work in progress.

To help mitigate some of the negative effects of the pandemic and its aftermath on a writer's ability to craft, it is important that the positive moves made during the lockdown are not forgotten. Innovative ways of delivering craft support to writers from all backgrounds should still be sought and implemented. It is vital to ensure that the measures elsewhere outlined to support the Discovery and Connection phases of the Cycle are undertaken. If writers feel able to discover, explore and remain connected, their ability to hone their craft is bolstered.

For younger writers still in school or further education, creative writing could be used as a tool to help mitigate the effects of recent school closures. Helping young writers to hone their craft may help them to continue to learn, grow and process current upheavals and uncertainties.

In the first wave of responses to Covid-19 there was a sector wide effort to provide free services and support. More recently, organisations providing craft support and manuscript editing services have started to reintroduce changes and are experimenting with subscription models. For example, The Literary Consultancy recently launched Being a Writer, providing support for writers to sustain and protect their creativity. This service is available on a low-cost subscription with a 30-day free trial.

Subscription services enable individual writers to access low-cost craft support, and they also economically sustain the writing and publishing ecology during this challenging time. However, of course, writers on low incomes who have been financially affected by the pandemic and resultant lockdown may have fewer funds available to them with which to purchase these services. Many writing-facilitators are aware of these challenges, and they have supplemented their paid-for-services with scholarship schemes and programmes to support writers experiencing financial hardship.

The relationship between a thriving individual writer and a thriving writing scene more generally is surely a virtuous circle. If there is a wealth of new writing available -- both in response to the crisis and around other topics -- writers will hopefully be able to take sustenance and inspiration from the work of others. This in turn will form the basis from which writers can be fulfilled by refining their own craft and producing work of quality and complexity.

From an economic perspective, the writing ecology is in a fragile place. Many writing facilitators and organisations have civic missions to support marginalised writers. But writing-facilitators also need to survive economically. As a community, it's important to gain a fuller understanding of the pressure points across the writing ecology so that we are all supported to develop our crafts, our services and our livelihoods.

Key Takeaways:

The Craft theme of The Writer's Cycle has been affected by Covid-19 in many of the same ways as the Discovery and Connection themes. For some writers, the anxieties of the pandemic have made it difficult to focus on honing their craft. For others, the urgencies of the current moment have acted as a catalyst, spurring them on to find ever more articulate ways of addressing issues.

During lockdown, demand was high for resources which help writers to develop their craft. For some writers, the online nature of such events may have actually made it easier to seek such support.

As lockdown begins to ease, it is important that the innovations of the last few months are not abandoned. Writers from all backgrounds deserve access to craft support. It is also important that writers continue to share writing with each other, thereby enabling a continuous exchange of ideas and influences. At the same time, further research is needed into how some of the craft support initiatives introduced in response to Covid-19 can be sustained economically.

Resources:

Independent bookstores with online shops and delivery.

Hive is an online book delivery service. A portion of the profits from each sale goes towards supporting independent bookstores.

The Literary Consultancy 'Free Reads' scheme, offering free manuscript feedback to low-income writers.

A blog by Amanda Reynolds designed to help you write your novel.

A series of written prompts and blogs from Toby Litt designed to help short story writers with their craft.

Free online short story course from Laura Mae Isaacman.

Free ten day book-writing course from Jennie Nash.

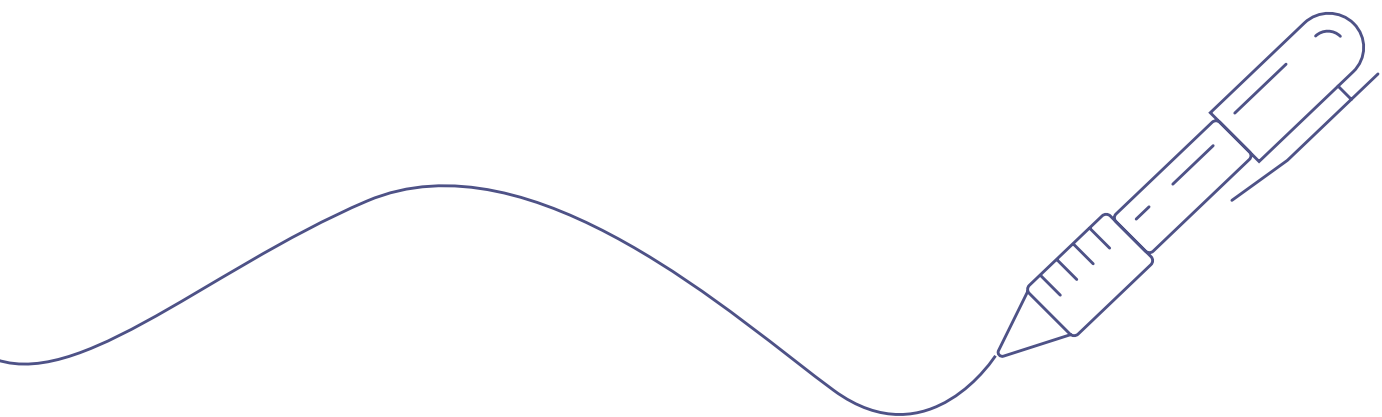
Online poetry mentoring with Anna Saunders.

An online editing and critique service for poetry and fiction, from Chris Fielden.

The Creative Writing Programme from New Writing South.

'A Creative Writing Handbook: Developing Dramatic Technique, Individual Style and Voice', edited by Derek Neale: a book about creative writing techniques and development.

'45 Master Characters' by Victoria Schmidt: a book about character development



Transformation

The Transformation phase of The Writer's Cycle refers to three potential transformations. Firstly, the personal, artistic or professional development of the writer. Secondly, the transformation of their words, for example through publication, performance, or mediation. Thirdly, cultural or societal transformations as expressed through the body of the writing, the context within which the writing is produced, and/or through discussion ensuing from the content, emotions, and ideas emanating from the text. The current pandemic intensifies the writer's relationship to all three forms of transformation.

The pandemic has threatened writers' ability to transform their work in a number of practical ways. Firstly, if writers produce work designed for performance such as spoken-word poetry, current restrictions continue to render performance to in-venue audiences challenging. As lockdown eases, there is a need for an urgent reimagining of the layout and operation of theatres and cultural spaces to allow for safe resumption of performances and events.

Alternatives to in-venue performances could continue to be sought -- for example, online and live-streamed events. There is some concern, however, that many of the online events which took place during lockdown were only made possible through emergency sources of funding and by authors' willingness to contribute time and expertise free of charge during a crisis.

Such a model is clearly unsustainable. If innovation and inclusion are to be the touchstones of writing communities as we move beyond Covid-19, there is a need for widespread transformation and investment in the creation and sharing of accessible, adaptable resources and events.

For those writers seeking traditional publication, the effects of the pandemic are also likely to be marked. On the one hand, there is some suggestion that people have been inclined to read more during the pandemic. The Guardian reports that one in three Britons are reading more since the start of the lockdown on the 23rd of March, with a particular rise amongst young people aged between 18 and 24.

This noted, however, publishing and bookselling are unlikely to escape unscathed by a generally weakened economy. Readers, theatre-goers and all those engaging with writing as audiences are set to have less money to spend as well as fewer opportunities to spend it whilst still constrained by social distancing. As lockdown eases, swathes of the public will remain clinically vulnerable to the virus, and many people may continue to feel wary of mixing with others. This could mean an ongoing reduction in audience numbers well into the future. Alternatively, there may be many individuals eager to resume public activities after months confined at home.

The negative economic effects of the pandemic are likely to be felt most by smaller, independent presses and venues. As a result, emerging writers in particular may find it even harder than usual to get their work accepted for publication.

In addition, it may be that one result of publishers having diminished resources will be a retreat to safer publication choices. Publishers may opt for more mainstream works which seem more likely to find large audiences. This might result in more unusual or experimental work being overlooked. It may also mean that writers from more marginalised backgrounds or those with different perspectives to offer through their writing find that even fewer avenues to publication are open to them.

Furthermore, it may be that the usual bodies which writers might turn to for support during times of difficulty -- be that financial support or creative -- will have fewer resources available with which to help writers in need. Arts charities might be particularly hard hit, with donors potentially struggling to commit to their regular levels of giving, and with standard fundraising methods rendered more difficult by social distancing. According to one survey by Civil Society News, nine in ten charities will struggle to meet their objectives due to Covid-19.

When assessing the effect of the pandemic on writers' ability to transform their work for an audience, it is also worth considering a potential shift in audience appetites and interests during this crisis and its aftermath. This means that works which have already been completed and are approaching publication may be received differently than they might have been previously. It is unclear, though, which direction this shift might take.

How will a world in mourning engage with writing and the arts? Will audiences seek work which comforts them, reasserts the status quo and reaffirms the old 'normal'? Or will there instead be a desire for writing which is challenging, experimental and engages directly with the issues we face? In truth, perhaps we will see both as well as a plethora of other reactions.

Such questions lead into a discussion of the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of writing to bring about cultural and societal transformations. For many writers, it is not sufficient to create well-written work which offers them a sense of personal achievement or transformation. Instead, writers might be driven by a hope of producing work which moves its audience to action or a changed perspective; they might hope to create art which transforms culture. It may be the case that any personal transformation for the writer is inextricably tied to their work's impact and reception, to the changes it inspires in others.

On the one hand, the ongoing pandemic and its aftermath may present challenges to writing's ability to be culturally transformative. Firstly, if it is harder for audiences to access writing in certain formats -- as has been suggested elsewhere in this document -- then it is clearly harder for that writing to inspire change in that audience.

Secondly, it is possible that some readers and audiences could become less receptive to transformations. In times of panic and distress, being asked to face further challenges and question more of the status quo may be too overwhelming; audiences may seek comfort above all else and may avoid work which seeks to change their minds.

In addition, writers whose work seeks to bring about transformations in areas not overtly, instantly linkable to the pandemic may find that audiences are unwilling or unable to engage. With thoughts focused on the immediate danger of Covid-19, it may prove still more difficult to create work which transforms attitudes or behaviours around more diverse subjects.

This noted, it is also true that the current crisis represents a moment of great change. 'Normal' life has been disrupted, and communities are considering what a 'new normal' might look like. In some ways, perhaps the present moment is ripe for cultural transformation and conversations around how we can 'build back better'.

As discussed elsewhere, the pandemic has thrown into starker relief the divides and inequalities in our society. Black, Brown and Asian people have been shown to be at particular risk from the virus. Running alongside the pandemic, issues around racism and police brutality have been brought to greater visibility by the Black Lives Matter movement -- these protests contribute to an historical moment already marked by great upheaval and collective questioning.

Older people have been plunged into deep isolation, with death rates in care homes frighteningly high. Blue-collar workers have been asked to put themselves in danger whilst many middle-class professionals were able to work from home. The country has been split between those who have gardens and those who live in cramped accommodation. Perhaps, quite to the contrary of this document's earlier surmises, the aftermath of this pandemic will see audiences opening up to writing which seeks to provide new solutions or answers to the problems society faces. Perhaps, the pandemic and current events have revealed a need for cultural transformations which writing can help to initiate and build upon.

As elsewhere, potential remedies to the challenges posed by Covid-19 for writers hoping to transform their work and create cultural transformation are most likely incomplete solutions. That said, the negative effects of the pandemic on Transformation can perhaps be reduced even if not entirely removed.

Continuing to enable and promote alternatives to in-person performances could be useful, especially for the clinically vulnerable. This might take the form of online and virtual performances. It is also important to support charities, small independent presses and venues which enable writers of different backgrounds and at different stages of their career or writing journey to present their work to an audience. Now more than ever, the Paper Nations ethos of 'Writing for All' is essential to creating and maintaining a healthy and varied writing ecology.

It is also important to continue to monitor and research readers' responses and appetites in the light of the pandemic. Writing, reading and engaging with performances and other forms of writing could be encouraged as a means of individually and communally expressing and processing emotional, political and social reactions to the crisis.

It is hoped that the steps outlined to support writers and the writing ecology elsewhere in this document will form part of a response which protects writers sufficiently that they can address the crisis in ways which allow for the whole gamut of potential reactions to be explored. The Writer's Cycle could become a vital framework through which to conduct research into potential writer-centred responses to the challenges of the pandemic.

Covid-19 will most likely also have other impacts on the personal transformation of writers themselves. With their ability to inhabit the Discovery, Connection and Craft phases of The Writer's Cycle impinged by the pandemic, it seems almost inevitable that their capacity to transform themselves through writing will also be affected.

Some writers might, in normal circumstances, seek the support of a coach or mentor during their Transformation phase. This might be someone who helps the writer to arrange their lifestyle in a way which best supports their writing. During lockdown, opportunities for face-to-face contact -- be it initial or continued -- were severely restricted. This may have had an impact on some writers' ability to transform their lifestyle into one which allows them to progress with their writing journey.

One measure which could help writers to carry on transforming and growing during this period might be to find ways to support their continued professional development online. For example, writers who are able might find it useful to connect remotely with people or resources which can support them in gaining the skills necessary to respond to the requirements of the current situation. Some writer-facilitators might benefit from help to adapt classes or workshops for online platforms; others might find guidance helpful around using social media as a platform to promote their work.

Both the practical and emotional ramifications of the current crisis may make it harder for individuals to develop and nurture a strong sense of their writing identity. It is harder to explore, write and share that writing with others. It is perhaps harder, too, for a writer to define their role in a world which is rapidly changing, unpredictable and frightening.

Workplaces and educational environments will need to think more carefully about how they support the development of writers within their care. Continuing to value writers and writing as means of responding to the questions we currently face may encourage employers and educators to maintain investment in writers.

The Writer's Cycle model itself may prove instrumental in supporting writers and the writing ecology to make necessary transformations in the wake of Covid-19. On a more individual basis, The Writer's Cycle provides actionable suggestions for supporting writers at all times, including times of crisis, thereby facilitating their ability to make personal and creative transformations in their writing and lifestyle.

More widely, it can be used as a framework for envisaging and designing adaptation, and could help implement changes in education, writing communities and the delivery and promotion of the creative arts. This could build resilience across creative industries and allow writers to respond innovatively and robustly to rapidly changing circumstances.

This research could contribute to the deepening conversations about diversity in writing and publishing which current events have amplified. Important research and initiatives are already underway from other organisations and individuals. 'Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing' is the first in-depth academic study in the UK on diversity in trade fiction and the publishing industry. Focusing on literary fiction, crime and thriller, and young adult fiction, the report examines prejudices within the publishing industry. It concludes that 'publishers still see writers of colour as a 'commercial risk'' and that 'assumptions about audiences being white and middle-class still prevail.'

Similarly, The Ledbury Poetry Critics Report has examined diversity in poetry and poetry criticism. Studying a range of British and Irish newspapers and poetry journals, it reveals that between 2017 and 2019, only 9.6% of poetry criticism in these publications was written by BAME critics. The Common People report argued that the under-representation of working class writers in publishing is a challenge that impacts not only the international publishing houses, but the creative sector as a whole.

Encouragingly, attempts are being made to begin to address these issues. The National Centre for Writing has produced a reading list of 'Brilliant Books by Black Writers'. Meanwhile, Penguin Books has compiled a list of ways to support black publishers and bookshops.

The government's recent announcement of a £33.5 million fund for school improvement suggests that there is appetite for educational change. Initiatives such as The Writers' Block 'Teachers as Writers' workshop demonstrate a growing awareness of the importance of writing in teaching and learning. Further research could reveal how The Writer's Cycle can be a part of this movement, emphasising writing's central role in learning, and outlining pathways for reflection and change-making.

The development of widely available resources with the values of The Writer's Cycle at their heart could also be of use to individuals seeking support for more informal learning. A quarter of UK jobs could be lost due to the pandemic, and many individuals or organisations might seek to use writing as a tool to imagine better futures and adapt to changing circumstances.

If measures are taken to ensure that writers at all stages of their writing journey are able to discover their art and themselves, connect with others and hone their craft, the effect of the pandemic on writing and writers' transformation need not be totally crushing. If writers and the writing ecology can be supported emotionally, artistically and financially during this period and beyond -- and if the power of writing to connect us and help us respond to our current situation continues to be celebrated -- then the pandemic could in fact be a part of a writing transformation rather than spell its end.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a tragedy that no one asked for, few expected, and that all hope will soon end, with the least possible toll on life, health and happiness. Its implications for writers and writing are varied and could be severe. Yet, throughout history, writing has been transformed at moments of significant collective trauma. Like the poets of the First World War, writers have often created innovative works from a context of disruption and challenge.

A writer's life, a Writer's Cycle, is a series of reactions to internal and external transformations. The coming years will bear witness to the transformations which the shock of Covid-19 will wring on the writing ecology and on individual writers.

Key Takeaways:

The pandemic has affected writers' ability to engage with all three forms of transformation referred to by the Transformation theme of The Writer's Cycle. Limited access to mentoring and support, combined with a period of great change and turbulence, may have affected writers' potential for personal transformation. The closure of cultural venues, and damage to the publishing ecology will have knock-on impacts on writers' capacity to transform their work for an audience. Since smaller, less mainstream presses are most likely to be severely affected, this may have ramifications in particular for writers who are already traditionally sidelined.

When it comes to the public's receptiveness to the cultural transformations which writing can offer, it is difficult to know which way the scales will tip. Audiences may seek comfort, or they may look to engage with the issues which Covid-19 has thrown into the light. Encouraging attempts have been made in recent months to begin to address lack of diversity and inclusion in writing and publishing communities. Further research could reveal how The Writer's Cycle can become a part of this movement by emphasising writing as a means for imagining and designing systemic transformations.

Resources:

'Moving Foreword' -- 16 week online course for Liverpool writers from Writing on the Wall. A creative and professional development programme.

Free business advice from Writing on the Wall and Enterprise Hub to writers in the Liverpool city region.

Emergency funding to help writers affected by Covid-19: The Authors' Emergency Fund.

LiteratureWorks signposts writers in the South West to resources, opportunities, competitions, support and more.

The Writer's Compass -- a tool which brings together all of NAWE's professional development resources for writers.

NAWE's page of up-to-date writing events and opportunities across the country.

The Poets' Directory contains information about magazines and submissions opportunities for poets.

Resources for writers from New Writing South.

One-to-one short professional development sessions from New Writing South.

Competitions and submissions opportunities.

Poetry submissions opportunities from Angela Carr.

Summary and Implications

Covid-19 has severely disrupted the daily rituals and habits of anyone who writes for pleasure, for learning or for a living. A disruption of our writing lives has widespread implications for any sector (cultural, educational and business) that depends on the exchange of good quality written texts.

Writing is an important medium in the lives of most people. Within education and the workplace, writing is a medium for expression, analysis and communication. Good writing requires space to think and explore. Given the potential severity of ongoing interruptions to our writing lives, further research is needed into how best to support writers to keep going during times of crisis. The Writer's Cycle could be central to this research, highlighting the key role of writing in learning and research, and facilitating greater participation in the research process by enabling widespread writing and reflection.

Many writers seek community and connection to others. This can be found online as well as through 'in person' interaction. Anyone with access to a mobile phone and internet connection can easily 'publish' their words. With minimal effort most writers can find an audience. Online spaces for sharing writing have huge emancipatory benefits, but there are also dangers.

How do readers distinguish fact from fiction? How do we support writers to craft words with care when there is a sense of urgency and a pressing need to communicate? How do online environments shape practices of writing, especially for those experiencing marginalisation, loneliness and vulnerability? These questions can all be explored in greater depth through further research.

In 2018, there were still 5.3 million adults in the UK who had never used the internet, or had not used it within the last three months. This matters not least because being digitally literate equates to an increase of between 3% and 10% in earnings, and also allows people to connect with family, friends and their communities 14% more frequently. Furthermore, with many writing and creative activities moved online during lockdown, the digital divide will only have increased. Those unable to access the internet have also been excluded from cultural events. As we begin to move beyond Covid-19, it will be important to find ways to bring the pleasures and possibilities of creative writing to the most isolated -- including those who cannot access the internet.

Further research into The Writer's Cycle would enable these challenges and opportunities to be explored in greater depth. It would facilitate the development of actionable, evidence-based solutions. Furthermore, it could enable us to better understand experiences of writing as an interpretive practice during times of crisis.

Writing-facilitators have a key role to play in mobilising and connecting the collective efforts of writing communities to respond to the crisis. Demand for online tuition has surged during the pandemic. Organisations such as NAWA can be pivotal in ensuring that access to online writing tuition is not limited to the most privileged of learners, but instead can bring the benefits of creative writing to as many adults and young people as possible.

Writing is a means for personal and cultural transformation, and can be as important as science in the fight against Covid-19. We turn to science when we want to identify the facts, the risks, and the underlying trends. Yet, writing and words enable us to process, interpret and share data in meaningful ways. As we take tentative steps towards imagining the aftermath of this crisis, writing also provides a means for personal and societal reflection, healing and transformation. Further research into experiences of writing as an interpretive practice during times of crisis is needed.

There are numerous questions that could be addressed through further research, which may include some of the following:

- How do we support people to craft their words with care, especially during a crisis when people are approaching their writing with a sense of urgency and an immediate need to communicate?
- Imaginative writing and reading can help us to address fears, and to envisage ways out of a crisis. Imaginative writing as an exploratory tool, and as escapism, is valuable. However, online, writing is often published at speed without editorial support, peer review or accurate labelling. Speculation, or even pure fantasy, is sometimes presented as fact. How do we support creative and imaginative writing, whilst helping writers and readers to separate fact from fiction?
- It is likely that workplaces and educational environments will continue to be displaced into homes and private living spaces. Given this, how do we help people to set up home and virtual environments that are conducive to writing? How do hybrid home/virtual environments shape practices of writing and reading, especially for those experiencing marginalisation, loneliness and vulnerability?
- Writing has an interpretative value. Research shows that people try to use writing to improve their lives. For instance, writing can be used to process complexity, to understand change, to initiate transformations, to record experiences and to review progress. Could further studies, perhaps in collaboration with researchers from other disciplines, give us greater insight into the value of writing across different sectors? For example, can writing boost our ability to recover from, or adapt to crisis? Within the context of Covid-19 and of similar life-changing events, are there opportunities here for enhancing cultural literacy, for improving well being, and for increasing efficacy?

In summary, writing is an important medium in the lives of most people. Within education and the workplace, it is a tool for expression, for thought and for communication. We write to reflect and to connect to others. In times of crisis, writing can be a lifeline. By facilitating a wider understanding of The Writer's Cycle, we can support more people to explore complexity, navigate fears and imagine futures.

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