Elephant in the Zoom
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The Elephant in the Zoom

Facilitating Inclusivity in a Community Writing Group using Multimodal Methods

Jane Moss

ABSTRACT

This article describes an innovative approach to using digital devices and apps with a community group of non-professional writers over 60 years of age. Examples from the project, based in a rural Parish in Cornwall, illustrate the playful use of smartphones, Pinterest, PowerPoint, and live role play on Zoom. The effects of enforced digital collaboration during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic provide insight into the value of inclusive methods of facilitation. The digitalisation of creative writing studies is compared with non-digital community writing practice, distinguishing the motivations of community participants from adult learners. The author asks how digital methods can be integrated into community practice, taking into account those who lack resources or inclination to participate digitally. Theories of community engagement (Ledwith 2011), cooperation (Sennett 2012), and co-design (Manzini 2015), are cited in relation to the community context: also theories and practice of multimodal writing (Barnard 2019), and mobile story making (Farman 2014, Moores 2012, Schleser and Berry 2018), to inform the practice examples offered. The author concludes that the integration of digital methods is possible within community writing practice, when values of accessibility and inclusion are applied, and participants are encouraged to engage in playful innovation.

Introduction

This article describes ways to introduce digital appliances into the facilitation of community writing groups whose participants have only basic experience of digital appliances, for example apps, smartphones and tablets, or none at all. The article draws examples from a participatory community writing project to co-author a community novel: that is, a novel written by a group of people who engage with the wider community in which they are situated; in this instance a rural Parish on the south coast of Cornwall.

As the facilitator of the writing project I chose participatory action research (PAR) to enquire into the novel as a vehicle for participation, and to gain insight into a potential model for such a project, the role of the facilitator, and the efficacy of introducing digital methods into practice. My aim in selecting PAR methodology was to collaborate with the participants and to explore three aspects: first the anticipated barriers to participation for some members of the group. I wished to work with them, especially those potentially excluded by digital methods. Second, I wanted to consider my role as facilitator, and the potential for remediation through the introduction of digital methods. Third, I was interested in the multimodal potentialities of the novel itself, and how to render it through traditional and digital media within the limitations of my expertise and the group's skills.

Practice: a review of literature and context

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic became the unexpected context for the later stages of this community novel writing project, the major part of which took place from late 2018 to late 2019. This article has used the opportunity, therefore, to describe examples of multimodal practice, with digital elements, from before and during the March 2020 lockdown in the UK; the lockdown having provided unexpected insights into the affordances of online participation when it was suddenly impossible for the writing group to assemble in its usual community venues (a village hall, a café, and a community garden, among others). The resulting remediation of practice threw light on the potential for blended methods, and ways to encourage participants who had been hitherto reluctant or unable to engage online. My conclusions are based in part on these new insights. I offer pragmatic solutions to the inequalities of access and inclusion that become evident when digital methods are

introduced to multimodal practice in community writing groups whose working culture is still largely non-digital.

As a facilitator of community writing groups in diverse contexts for over twelve years, I have experienced the spectrum of practice from adult education in community colleges, writing groups and workshops in community venues where the focus is on learning and practicing creative writing, and writing groups in social care settings where the purpose is more allied to wellbeing. Across this spectrum I see a marked difference in the conditions of creative writing studies practiced in formal learning contexts, and those in which community practitioners normally facilitate creative writing. To examine this further, creative writing studies and the related pedagogy engage people in learning, so terms of *teacher, tutor, student, and classroom*, are appropriate to the context. Writing in the community, by comparison, is less closely defined and the motivation of participants is not necessarily, or exclusively, to do with learning. A gathering of writing enthusiasts - a writing group - in a physical space may be hosted by a facilitator or be self-hosted. Some groups are time-limited as part of a project or a structured programme of creative writing around a topic or theme; others are open-ended, meeting weekly or monthly as an ongoing creative activity. Locations can include, for example, libraries, community centres, village halls, cafes, pubs or participants' own homes. Some community writing groups' purpose is to critique with a view to publication; others exist simply to enable people to write in the company of others as a creative and social activity. Such groups are the creative writing equivalent of community choirs, art, dance or drama clubs, with their social as well as creative elements. "Specifically", says Ruggles Gere 1987: 3), "writing groups highlight the social dimension of writing. They provide tangible evidence that writing involves human interaction as well as solitary inscription".

What should not be assumed is that writing in the community is for the sole purpose of learning and associated routes into publication. By contrast, creative writing studies typically takes place in a classroom setting in which learning is the prime aim. In the twenty first century, that setting is increasingly online. I shall refer later in this article to the impact of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown on the community writing project described. First, to contextualise the recent radical changes that have taken place as a

result of the pandemic, I shall consider the spaces in which community writing takes place: spaces that are an amalgam of the physical and the emotional.

Community is itself a contested, complex term. Williams (1981: 66) calls it: "on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand, the materialization of various forms of common organization". He notes that it "seems never to be used unfavourably" (ibid). A sense of positive belonging is implied, with shared customs and culture. Delanty (2010: 1) traces the idea of community as a type of social contract to Aristotle: "associated with friendship", and "contractual ties in which the social character of people reaches its highest level". He cites communitarian Selznick's view: "What is particularly important…is not only participation, but also loyalty, solidarity and commitment" (Selznick in Delanty 2010: 56). Silk (1999: 5-17) considers "the relations between community, space and place", noting "There is an instrumental dimension to community" People live together in communities of place and share activities within communities of interest. In the digital age these can be global and communicative; the networked, connected community, which can be real or virtual.

Oldenburg identifies a "third place" (Oldenburg 1997) of cafes, shopping malls, pubs and community spaces; neither home nor work but somewhere in which social exchanges take place. Bourdieu's concept of "'habitus', or embodied culture" is "a set of dispositions that lead people to act and react in certain ways" (in Clark and Ivanic (ed.) 1997: 46). The writing group, like a community sports club, choir, or silver band has routines and behaviours.

A writing group of the type assembled to write the community novel in this project exemplifies the mixed community of place, interest and third place: a defined Parish area, a community of people who come together to collaborate in co-authorship, and the spaces in which they meet and engage, for example a village hall, café or pub, and virtual spaces such as a private Pinterest board and Zoom. This space has its own cultural norms and ambience in which to be creative. It is facilitated with awareness of individual and group dynamics, and with mutually agreed ground rules. The "Twelve Basic Principles" described by Schneider (2003: 186) and the "foundations" of "trust, respect, pacing and boundaries" recommended by Bolton (in Bolton et

al 2006:17) are typical of the measures that enable trust to develop among a group. The community writing group is not a space intended principally for learning, although learning may occur, and it is not traditionally digital. Participants attend to share their enthusiasm, to be social, expressive, and creative. Professional development and outcomes such as publication are not the prime aims.

The early decades of the twenty first century saw creative writing studies and the classroom shift slowly but inexorably onto digital platforms. As Harper initially observed (in Dean Clark et al 2015: 7): "The world changed, many people noticed, but not many reacted… much of the teaching of creative writing continues to address a predigital world rather than the environment in which we now live, learn, and teach". Some were quicker to embrace the emerging practices of online learning as they applied to creative writing. In her review of Koehler (2017), Bradley (2018) notes:

> Koehler positions the book as a look at how the "digital turn" is effectively transforming writing inside and outside of the university, and how this turn has already begun and will continue to change writing, research methods, curriculum, and more in English departments.

Digital fiction methods and pedagogy have become an established topic of academic enquiry (Skains 2019: 1-10), but the movement to online learning and use of digital devices in the classroom has had its drawbacks. Mueller and Oppenheim (2014) found, for example, that notetaking by hand, compared to typed notes, promoted better information retention among students, an insight supported by Vincent's study (2016). The gains of online learning, including the ability to participate remotely, are countered by the exclusion of those who either lack the resources to engage online, or who simply prefer not to.

The move online is beginning to be replicated in some community practice, and has of course been accelerated by the conditions of the Covid-19 lockdown. Before the pandemic, some facilitators were already allowing electronic devices to be used, but the pen remains the favoured technology for many. Harper has noted: "…in the community setting, away from classroom and form teaching, the environment itself has yet to catch up" (in Dean Clark et al 2015: 7). The customs and practice of that environment are different to learning environments. Even five years later this is still the case in the

lived experience of practice. Most commonly in community settings, mobile phones are put away or switched to silent. Laptops are discouraged or forbidden by many facilitators. The emphasis is on draft writing by hand. Tools of perfection such as the on-screen spellcheck are antithetical to the facilitator's invitation to write messily and freely in rough draft form. Community writing groups are motivated by the attractions of the group as a social space for self-expression, not by the rigours of academic or professional endeavour.

That said, whether facilitated or not, community writing group customs and practice are intrinsically multimodal in their methods. For example, they make use of diverse materials designed to stimulate writing around themes: published texts, images, sound and objects. They often make use of immersive details and sensory stimuli from the venue or context in which they meet. Barnard has argued that "In creative writing, we need new tools" (2019: 5) and that digital tools that "enable users to access text, audio and moving images…" can become part of an enhanced toolkit if, to cite Leahy et al, "new media technologies [can] be embedded with play as a guiding principle" (2019: 13). Barnard writes about the individual author. The challenge for community practice is to enable digital participation among multiple people with varying degrees of digital literacy, aptitude and motivation.

The guidance provided by Barnard (2019) on multimodal writing, Moores (2012) on digital writing tools, and Farman (ed. 2014) on the use of smartphones for mobile story making suggests methods that can be transferable to practice with participants whose experience of mobile devices is limited or non-existent. The assumption of Moores (2012) and Farman (ibid), especially, is that the adoption of such digital methods is an easy transition to make. In the light of community-based practice and experience I agree with Barnard's honest observation: "There is some resistance in the field of Creative Writing to engaging wholeheartedly in the digital turn. There are writers, of course, who delight in new media technologies. However, others do not" (Barnard 2019: 7).

Certain individual authors have embraced the affordances of multimodal and digital fiction: for examples the potential for location-based mobile story telling illustrated by Oppengaard and Grigar (in Farman (ed.) 2104: 17-33), uses for smartphone

devices (Kilby and Berry in Schleser and Berry (eds.) 2018: 51-63) and works of ambient literature such as *Breathe* (Pullinger 2018). Rather than wholly swapping traditional methods for the digital I find it helpful to consider hybrid and blended forms of fiction that interact between print and online platforms: novels such as, for example, *The Death of Bunny Munro* (Cave 2009), and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (Egan 2011). These offer intriguing and playful examples in which traditional and digital methods work together to evolve inter-textual forms that engage readers simultaneously in print and online. If such blended forms are to be facilitated among a community group of volunteer writers, the invitation must be accepted to embrace a cross-fertilisation of digital methods new to practice and traditional methods familiar to participants. The examples that follow show that such methods, used playfully, can help overcome the hesitation some feel about adopting new methods for writing.

Hesitation can be felt by the facilitator as well but is best overcome by taking an approach grounded in values of accessibility and inclusion. If these are adhered to, innovation becomes possible. To illustrate: when the Covid-19 lockdown occurred on 23 March 2020, the notion of physical assembly ended overnight. With writing group participants clamouring to continue, somehow, community practitioners including me quickly took our work online through the video platforms of Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams. We found ourselves suddenly in a laboratory for our own professional futures, determined to find ways to continue our facilitation, whilst aware as well of what I came to think of as the elephant in the Zoom. This refers to a problem: that some people were not able to follow us online. They were quite simply absent, unable or unwilling to participate in this way. Coaching in how to join us in the Zoom room was dependent on them having the right digital devices but also having someone to help them become familiar with Zoom. For people shielding, self-isolating, or living alone, there was no easy way to help them.

At the same time, some unexpected benefits of meeting and writing together online quickly became apparent. In the writing group I shall describe below, the work rate quickened, with drafting and critiquing of chapters for a community novel markedly speeded up. I attributed this to the extra time most now had on their hands, and the participants affirmed that. I noted, however, a tendency for some group members

to become more intent on the writing task when working on screen, and less apt to veer off the topic of discussion, as they often did when around a table together. The Zoom room, with its dolls house-like windows and muted sound, became a place of concentration with its own intimacy and sense of community.

In the wider community of writer-facilitators and community practitioners, some new affordances quickly became apparent during lockdown. People who could not attend physically were now able to join in. Practitioners reported a suddenly global reach for their work, a move from the local to the international. A webinar hosted by community artists Francois Matarasso and Arlene Goldbard was typical of the online discussions that proliferated during the lockdown period as practitioners shared examples of rapidly evolving new methods and the affordances and inequalities that were surfacing, with assembly only possible in a digital space. Reflecting on the role of community artists in the post-pandemic future, Matarasso concluded: "The work I can do is to create a dynamic in which other people gather and start to do things…That's a really valuable role, just by saying 'Let's do something here,' and not knowing where that will spin off." (Matarasso 2020 [online]). This period of sudden change and the enforced shift online enabled participation to continue but excluded some. I shall illustrate how this manifested itself, and how it was resolved, in examples below.

Age is a consideration in the adoption of digital appliances for some participants, but it is not the only barrier to online participation. Access to resources plays its part. Looking first at age, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports: "Virtually all adults aged 16 to 44 years in the UK were recent internet users (99%) in 2019, compared with 47% of adults aged 75 years and over. The percentage of adults who have never used the internet is falling: 7.5% in 2019, a fall from 8.4% in 2018" (ONS 2019:1). Furthermore:

> Since the survey began in 2011, adults aged 75 years and over have consistently been the lowest users of the internet. In 2011, of all adults aged 75 years and over, 20% were recent internet users, rising to 47% in 2019. However, recent internet use in the 65 to 74 years age group increased from 52% in 2011 to 83% in 2019, closing the gap on younger age groups (ONS 2019: 3).

The increase in users in the 65-74 age group is

pertinent to the type of project I describe below, whose participants fall into the 60 to 74 years of age bracket, yet it is notable that 17% are still not online. In terms of those in retirement, who comprise a high proportion of these participants: "Recent internet use by retired adults increased by 27 percentage points since 2011, to 67% in 2019, reflecting the increase in internet use in the older age groups (ONS 2019: 4). Yet I note from this that 33% of retired adults could not be called recent internet users. This may well change in the light of the pandemic, during which many people have had little choice but to go online in order to see family and friends. When available, ONS data for 2020 will provide insight into the shift.

Research is needed to enquire further into the composition of community writing groups, and their participants' access and attitudes to online usage. Reflecting on experience in practice, I contend that those whose adult and professional lives were spent largely before the innovations of Web 2.0, and those whose work did not require them to work online, lack motivation to replace familiar methods of pen, paper and word processing with new digital devices in the context of a creative activity. This is the person discernible from ONS data who is in their 70s, does not own a tablet or smart phone, or if they do, are unfamiliar with their applications beyond the everyday activities of phoning, texting and possibly emailing family and friends. Those who are in the category of early-retired professionals associate office-related technology with work, not a creative activity they now wish to pursue. Others may not have experienced the automated workplace. Such participants represent a significant proportion of those who have contributed to the novel writing project I describe below. The pen is the preferred technology.

Looking across the field of practice, I note a tendency for people over the age of 50 to attend community writing groups, where the invitation to attend is non-age specific. Younger participants are the exception. This older age group has time available for creative activities once children have left home. Work commitments are easing and some are in early retirement. Whatever the reason for the tendency for community writing groups of the type I discuss here to be in the 50-70 age range, a comment by facilitator Belona Greenwood of Norfolk Women Writers echoes my own experience: "we had a number of older women who were extremely valuable to our project who didn't even own a laptop… to cope with

learning blogging and digital stuff was a step too far" (interview 2018).

Confidence is a consideration. The participant who is unused to digital appliances is likely to require instruction and coaching in order to use, for example, Pinterest or Instagram as part of a writing workshop. Confidence can of course be nurtured, but this introduces a further potential reason for the lack of digital take up in community practice. Every facilitator has their own toolkit of exercises, themes and craft skills. It is already a crowded field with, arguably, little pressing need to introduce technology with which not all participants will be familiar. The question of how and when to introduce digital devices, and the resources required to use them effectively, is dependent in part on the nature of the community of place. The modern classroom offers adequate equipment but the same cannot be assumed in a village hall, a community café, the quiet corner of a pub, or an outdoor space; the habitual haunts of the community writing group. Confidence applies, too, to the facilitator's own skills, which may be limited. The self-employed practitioner typically lacks access to IT support, training and equipment beyond what they own for personal use. These subtle but real barriers represent an inequality to which the field of creative writing studies and related pedagogy is somewhat blind. Very few people are excluded by the use of pens, other than on grounds of literacy. More are potentially excluded by insistence on the use of online platforms and apps, and even smartphones, for which they lack digital literacy, or the desire to engage.

That said, the opportunity to introduce digital methods to the already multimodal mix in community practice can be daunting but is also potentially thrilling. How can we as practitioners embrace new methods while adhering to a values-based approach that prizes accessibility and inclusiveness? In addition to those values I advocate the principle of innovation: the "playful co-produced approach" described by McMillan and McNicholl (2019) and the "adaptability" named by Barnard (2019:11) as an essential element of multimodal practice for writers. I shall illustrate this next, with examples drawn from the community novel project.

Examples of practice from a community novel
This project set out to involve volunteers, not professional writers, in co-creating a community novel; one that was recognisably a novel in length and structure, but written and presented using multimodal methods, including digital methods. It would be serialised in print and online as a flipbook through a local monthly Parish magazine, and as a WordPress site promoted though local social media groups, especially Facebook. It would be planned and written by a core writing group and would engage with the wider community through local interest groups whose input would help shape the story. It can be viewed online as work in progress at www.joinedupwriters.wordpress.com, and in flipbook form at www.mylorandflushing.org.uk, the website of a local community publication and information hub. Local fundraising will take place for self-publishing in print, and there are plans for a podcast involving members of a local play reading group.

In autumn 2018 seventeen participants responded to my open call to help co-write a community novel. Those who came forward were aged between approximately 60 and 74 years of age. This helped determine methods used in the early stages of the project, which were largely traditional: a group sharing of notions of what a novel could be, what we would need to think about, and ideas about genre. In the first meeting, the results were handwritten and strung up on cardboard bunting so that everyone's contribution carried equal weight.

A consensus emerged, that this would be a work of contemporary fiction, avoiding genres such as crime or fantasy, which were not to the group's taste. The preference was to devise a contemporary story set in a place with which local people would identify, a fictionalised version of their own villages and rural surroundings within the Parish. The intention was not to produce a piece of writing that could be termed overtly 'instrumental' in the sense defined by Matarasso (1997: 2), but a participatory novel that would be: "the creation of art by professional artists and non-professional artists" (Matarasso 2019: 47). Everyone, including me in the role of writer-facilitator, would take part in the multimodal process leading to the novel. I did not intend myself to write, but to enable the group, some of whom had not written creatively before, to write.

A routine was set with weekly meetings in which the volunteers shared ideas for the novel. In an early session I introduced the Pinterest app, which was already known to some in the group. This gave me confidence that those already familiar would be able to help others, including some who did not have
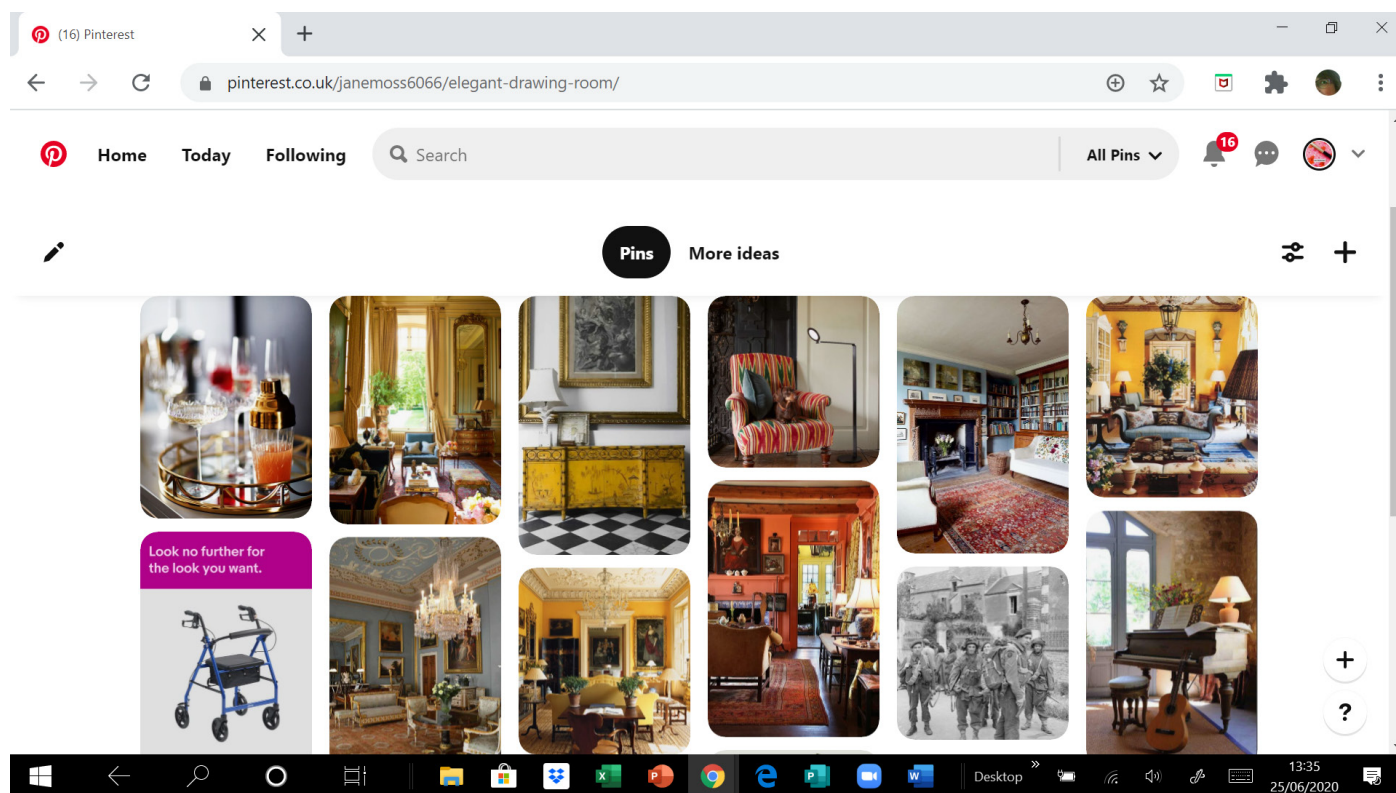
Figure 1

laptops or smart phones. In these early stages, use of an app felt like a taboo being broken: my training as a writer in the community had drilled into me the custom and practice of discouraging smartphones and other electronic devices from the writing group. Suddenly the writing table held equipment, wires and adapters as well as paper and pens. There was more to carry to the session and more time needed to set up and test the venue's projector with which I was unfamiliar. My facilitator notes from that time comment, ruefully, on "The time it takes to set up… the need for closer instruction" (Moss 2018-2020). The community hall where we met lacked wifi but I established a connection through an open access account from a neighbouring house through a thick granite wall.

Adopting a positive attitude of "let's play with this and see how it works", I showed the group how Pinterest boards might be used to develop a world from which a story could arise. Some participants were concerned about social media: "I don't want to get hacked," said one. Another asked "What's an app?". Fears were allayed when I explained that the group would use a private board, not visible to the wider social media community. Those able to use the app themselves joined in as I projected the board from my laptop. After some false starts the process became fluent. Pins were placed, some adding their own, others calling out suggestions which those online then searched for and pinned for them. This

made for a lively, noisy session, not the normal hushed concentration of a writing group. There were positive reactions including laughter as the board grew.

Some took to the app with ease, including one participant who logged in from her winter break in Spain. Others struggled, finding it less intuitive than, for example, Facebook, or because they were completely new to using social media. An attempt later in the same week to host a remote session was unsuccessful and led to a strew of emails and texts from would-be participants who either couldn't access the board, or, once in, did not know what to do other than look at what was already there. This was despite having taken part in the physical group session. I concluded that there was value in using the app in a physical meeting that enabled coaching to take place. Confidence and unfamiliarity with the technology were the barriers, but in this way the app could still be a useful tool.

We were able to look at the boards in subsequent group meetings, some working on their tablets or phones while I displayed the boards to the whole group through the projector. Presence in the same physical space made it easy to achieve consensus about locations for a story, a dilapidated country house and estate. Ideas about character and theme began to emerge (Figure 1).

From this small beginning, a theme of *home* emerged. The group developed a story about a country estate and its once great house in decline, the community around it under strain from climate change and economic forces. A cast of characters, developed using a template on the Evernote app, included members of several families, variously trying to save or exploit the estate. A working culture developed. Pen and paper were joined by tablets and smart phones in weekly writing sessions that were designed to ensure no one would be at a disadvantage if they lacked the means to take part digitally. My notes record a comment by a participant and my response: "Joanna said: 'As long as you haven't been doing things I don't know about online…'. I reassured her that she had not missed anything" (Moss 2018-2020).

Determination to find solutions to such exclusions, perceived or otherwise, became intrinsic to the project.

From the start, I based facilitation of the co-authorship necessary to create the novel using principles of co-design (Manzini 2015) and collaboration using the dialogic approach identified by Sennett (2012: 18-20). Although in the early stages as the writers "formed, stormed, normed and performed" (Tuckman and Jensen 1977: 419-427), discussion tended towards the dialectical (Sennett 2012: 18-20), as ideas for theme and story were thrashed out and negotiated between sometimes opposing voices. Consensus was most easily achieved through methods of improvisation (Libera 2004) which engendered a sense of shared endeavour and fun. I was keen to encourage agency and build confidence among the participants as they thrashed out the story. This was not my novel, but theirs, so I consciously limited my influence on the story to guidance in narrative structure and writing craft, gently intervening to head off disaster if I saw an idea taking route that would be problematic later in the process.

As an example of the improvisational and multimodal approach, a group of the community writers gathered in a local café in summer 2019 to plan a chapter in which gossip was spreading through the fictional village, following a dramatic event. We began with a verbal improvisation, using a "yes, and" or "don't say no" technique (Libera 2004: 10). This had already proved a useful way to generate ideas. Someone starts with a statement and others take turns, hearing what has been said before them and continuing with *yes, and…*. It prevents the blocking effect of someone saying no to another's idea; a tendency among some in the group. The group had adopted a ground rule to circumvent disagreements that would block progress: simply to allow ideas to sit "on the table". We used a picture of an actual table on which ideas would be written or placed on post-it notes. I maintained a record of such ideas in Trello, to which those able to use the app had access. This was an example of Webb and Brien's "bowerbird bricolage" approach to gathering material (in Biggs and Karlsson (eds.): 186-203), providing both a repository and the type of "digital scrapbook" referred to by Keep (in Schleser and Berry (eds.) 2018: 43).

This particular improvisation aimed to capture gossip that might spread around the fictional village. My notes record the following:

- Yes and he killed her first
- Yes and she found them like that
- Yes and there was a pill bottle and two glasses
- Yes and there was a letter
- Yes and he took it away
- Yes and I saw the Police go up the hill
- Yes and there was a woman at the house
- Yes and I saw her earlier by the quay
- Yes and she's a cousin of Mrs Clemens [the estate owner]
- Yes and he didn't say nothing to his sons about it
- Yes and he left the dog tied in the barn

(Moss 2018-2020)

After the verbal exercise I invited the group to listen to the hub bub of conversation in the background of the café where we sat, and to note down random words and phrases. This harvested snatches from anonymous conversations and led to discussion about which of the fictional characters might use such terms, and who would spread the gossip or try to quell it.

I invited the participants then to check their mobile phones and choose the third from last text from a recent text conversation. I reminded them that they should only share what they were comfortable with, and nothing too personal. One member without a mobile phone worked with another who was happy to share her texts.

The exercise became a riot of hilarity. Participants

soon departed from the original instruction and began to share further examples of texts which, taken out of context, invited bizarre speculation:

- Ring me later I need know more xx (sic)
- Just hanging washing. Can leave soon
- Can't explain but please don't contact Jean
- Let's hope it was worth it
- How did he do it?
- In the fridge. Disguised as mushrooms
- There's a lot of denial going on
- We are locked out
- She stole my dinner. She's just an opportunist
- Ah, anything could be true then

Still in the café, the group moved on to draft writing, some with pens and some on tablets. Drafts were shared, a scene was mapped out, and a volunteer offered to write the first draft for review at the next weekly session. Snatches of texts and eavesdropped conversations found their way into the eventual scene, which was written in three drafts with further minor amendments. Improvisation and phone texts, chosen at random, provided the element of play that enabled multiple voices and opinions within the group to work together seamlessly. In terms of an authorial voice, the result presents an inversion of the Bakhtinian notion of the polyphonous authorial voice in the novel: "a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (Bakhtin 1934, trans. Holquist and Emerson 1981: 259-422). The community novel is articulated not as several voices expressed by one, but a unified voice rendered through a convergence of many. By this stage in the process I noticed that the use of digital appliances was resisted far less than in early stages. A typical agreement noted unanimously at the end of this particular session was that it had been fun.

Most of the group became used to referring to Trello for updates on chapters, Slack for sharing photographs from smartphones, and Mindmeister for mind-mapping connections between fictional characters and relations to the story's theme (Figure 2).

The group and I became comfortable with the notion that we could combine traditional and digital methods to work separately or together. The diversity of methods had the effect of reassuring participants that they were not missing out if they lacked digital means. They could take part in other ways and material generated on different devices, including pens, was woven together in the final edit.

Confident by now of its own agency, and with a full narrative plotted, the group continued to work on the novel during 2019 and early 2020 with light facilitation from me. By the start of 2020 the full
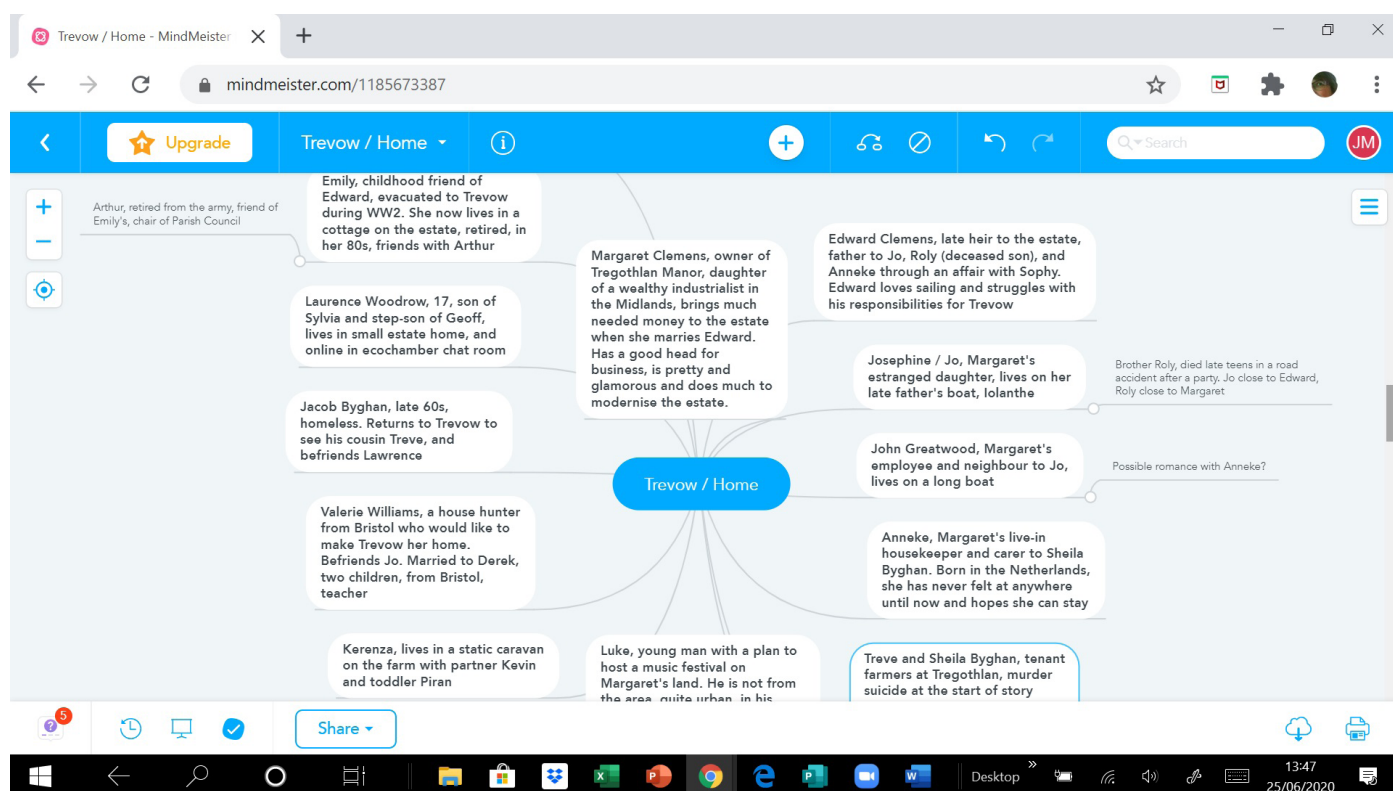

Figure 2

novel was well under-way and my involvement was reduced to occasional writing sessions, posting chapters onto WordPress, liaising with the Parish magazine to progress the monthly serialisation, and providing occasional advice on points of structure and style. On 23 March 2020, however, that changed. The pandemic made it impossible for the writers meet. The urgent question was how to continue the novel if they could not physically assemble. No one wished to give up.

A new word, Zoom, swiftly entered the language of participatory arts facilitators. After a week of trial and error, most of the core community novel group, by this time a tight seven, managed to gather online, first by Skype and then, more satisfactorily, by Zoom, which I hosted. By the third week there was determination to include the one member of the group who had been unable so far to take part; the space created by her absence described as our "elephant in the Zoom" (Moss 2018-2020). Using an unfamiliar iPhone sent to her by her son, and with telephone coaching from me and a family member, she managed eventually to join us online. Her first appearance was greeted by cheers and waving, although it quickly became apparent that she could not hear us. A further phone call from me, coaching her in how to raise her microphone volume, then mute and unmute, brought her fully back into the group. I include this anecdote to illustrate the sheer determination of someone not used to digital methods, to join in. For me as facilitator, this was an example of accessibility and inclusiveness being achieved despite the conditions in which we found ourselves.

The final example of practice, and the implications for form it suggests for an episode in the community novel, was made possible by this enforced online working. It took place on 26 May 2020, with six participants whose task was to create new material for the midpoint in the novel in which a slick young music promoter presents his controversial plan for *Greenfest*, an inappropriately large-scale event on rural land. In the story so far his plans have already divided the community and he is here to charm the sceptical. The scene takes place in a packed village hall on a cold January evening. We discussed who would be present, what their reactions would be, how they would express them, and a rough narrative outline for the scene. We used traditional methods of drafting with pens to sketch out details of the atmosphere in the hall, then assigned some roles: I would play the part of the young man, someone else would play the role of Chair and others would speak for or against the plans.

The scene was developed in a Zoom session which included live role play, recorded with the group's permission. To prepare, I had elicited the group's

Figure 3

Figure 4

ideas for a set of PowerPoint slides for the presenter to use. The presentation would be slick but the PowerPoint notes view would reveal his lack of preparedness (Figure 3).

A member of the group used Microsoft Publisher to make an A4 poster of the type that might be seen on public noticeboards, announcing the time and place of the fictional meeting. This was printed, laminated, pinned to a real village noticeboard and photographed on iPhone, before being hastily taken down in case anyone thought it real. The image was emailed to the group in advance of the session, with notes preparing them for the roles they would play. Another volunteer made a poster using fictional band names devised using https://www.bandnamemaker.com/ and ideas shared in the group.

In Zoom, I screen-shared the PowerPoint presentation and narrated the slides in the role of the young man. Midway through the presentation, heckling broke out, led by one of the participants in the role of the lead protestor, others joining in in support. This was spontaneous and unanticipated. It caused another of the group, in the guise of Chair, to call for order, and the meeting was paused. We stayed in role and after some minutes the presentation resumed. A question and answer session followed in which the group made further points for and against the fictional event. I responded in role, thinking on my feet.

At the end of the role play the group discussed how to use the material that had been generated. Two ideas attracted unanimous support: a set of formal notes written as if by a parish clerk, and a short news piece written and tweeted by a fictional local reporter. In the following week both were drafted and critiqued within the group. Discussion ensued about how to present this as a chapter in the novel in a hybrid form: the news article advancing the plot, with the clerk's notes and the poster provided as embellishing links in the online novel.

The multimodal approach spawned more creative activity, with no prompting by me. A set of protest posters was made by one of the group in the days following the exercise, with help from family

members in lockdown. They cut up an old sail (easily to hand in such a coastal location), painted slogans onto it, photographed them and posted the images into our visual repository on Slack. Another member of the group made a collage combining the posters with illustrations of protestors wearing animal masks, hand-drawn over figures cut from magazines and photographed on her iPhone (Figure 4).

We speculated on how to introduce sound to the scene and it was suggested that we could use an extract from the role play or source crowd noise from an open access news source, or one with creative commons copyright.

After this episode I reflected further on the extent to which the community novel writers had shifted from their early caution about digital methods, to active engagement with those methods. They were now reimagining the form of the novel in a spirit of playful innovation. Could this new online confidence be attributed to the Covid-19 lockdown? Certainly by now there was a strong sense of collective endeavour and trust within the group, made even stronger by the intensifying effects of lockdown. More had been won over to platforms such as Zoom as a means, sometimes the only means, of gathering with

friends and family. The motivation to participate online overcame nervousness. I observed a new momentum and an increased work rate. A series of ancillary multimodal projects sprang up, devised to occupy those who had time on their hands while in isolation or shielding. One participant found an app, smartdraw.com, to create a series of family trees for the novel's principal characters. Others took photographs during daily walks as a visual diary of the changing season. Forwarded to me, these contributed to short pieces of ambient story telling on the Wakelet app, providing insights into a character who was a close observer of the landscape.

The writers were not alone in embracing digital methods during lockdown. The community novel had formed links to other local communities of interest, including an art group. As the weeks wore on, a series of watercolours arrived in my inbox, contributed by members of the group, one of whom had used the iPad painting app for the first time to provide us with a picture of a cottage which was to be the scene of a forthcoming episode (Figure 5). A participant whose son-in-law had skills in Photoshop was helped remotely to devise a series of vintage-style postcards pertinent to a subplot.

Figure 5

As weekly Zoom meetings became the new norm, one participant said: "This will do for now," the inference being that physical meeting would still be preferred. Some valid boundaries also pertained. A suggestion that we create a fictional Facebook group or a Tik Tok account to use in an element of plot, was firmly rejected by one group member who said she would only use social media for a very few close family and friends. Assurances that no one would see what was written inside the private group did not persuade her and the plan was dropped. This participant had drawn her boundary firmly and that was respected.

The use of Pinterest, the texts used to generate the gossip episode, and the PowerPoint role play demonstrated the value of integrating digital methods into an already multimodal practice, but not in a way that was exclusive or excluding of other methods. Play and fun were elements that encouraged engagement with unfamiliar technology, and the use of apps for purposes other than those for which they were designed proved part of the fun. In other parts of the study WhatsApp and texting became regular tools for generating dialogue, stimulated by NetProv methods of the type suggested by Wittig and Marino (in Dean Clark et al 2015: 153-164). The Google map-based app What3Words helped generate material for descriptive and evocative writing. These examples and others will be the subject of further practice and related articles.

Conclusions

At the start of this project I was interested in gaining insight into the efficacy of introducing digital methods to a customarily non-digital field of practice, and to understand the potential for remediation of practice through multimodal methods. In presenting these examples of practice I have shown that digital methods can be introduced to the facilitation of a community writing group whose members either lack or are unfamiliar with digital resources. This can be achieved by applying the values of accessibility and inclusion to practice, and the principle of innovation through a playful approach to the use of digital applications and appliances. The values-based approach provides a buffer against the use of methods that inadvertently or intrinsically exclude some participants. Theories of community engagement and co-design, in which the writer-facilitator is enabler rather than expert ensure an inclusive process that is based on principles of consensus and collaborative problem

solving. Manzini's definition proved valid:

> The role of the expert designer is therefore to participate with his or her special skills and abilities, and with his or her special culture and vision of the world, in the construction of action platforms and sense systems that give people, and the social groups taking part, a greater possibility of being what they want to be and doing what they want to do.
> (Manzini 2015: 98)

The project from which the examples offered here are drawn has taken a longitudinal approach to testing apps and digital platforms. The unexpected interruption of the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to further learning about the affordances of digital practice, and there is more yet to be extrapolated from the study in terms of multimodal working practices.

The project has shown the value of using commonplace apps: the sort with which participants may be familiar through communication with family and friends, and which are freely available on smart phones, tablets and laptops. A spirit of play will promote confidence and encourage those unused to using such devices. A certain amount of coaching and modelling by the facilitator is to be expected. Where individuals lack access to appropriate devices, or lack confidence to use them, hybrid or blended forms of facilitation will address the inequality.

Methods can include techniques of digital fiction, notably the bower bird bricolage approach to harvesting material to feather the research nest, or in this case the writing nest. The playful adaptation of applications to creative purposes for which they were not designed takes little effort but offers opportunities for innovation that enhance the writer-facilitator's toolkit.

I have argued at the start that there is a gap in knowledge in terms of how digital methods now accepted as commonplace in the teaching of creative writing studies can be introduced to community writing practice. I have explained the different aims and outputs of such community writing groups and their participants' motivations. Further research is needed to fully understand and develop digital methods that are appropriate in a community context outside adult learning, but this study when complete will offer insight. The traditional culture and

practices of community writing groups value the ease and accessibility of writing by hand, and the value of physical assembly; experience of practice during lockdown suggests that there is a desire to return to physical meetings, but that there are positive affordances in meeting online. These should not be lost but continue to be part of blended digital and traditional methods that are inclusive and accessible for anyone wishing to participate.

Innovation occurs when facilitator and participants work together to overcome the barrier posed to some by the use of digital apps. Methods that engender a sense of play and fun motivate us, facilitators and participators together, to embrace elasticity in the resulting fictional forms. The result is an expanded palette of methods, enhanced by new toys to play with but also new challenges. The live debate that ignited under Covid-19 lockdown between community arts practitioners, over the effects of exclusively online working on our practice, is likely to continue and when this article appears, answers may be forming through continued remediation of practice. The material presented here, written as it

is happening, is offered as a contribution. A hybrid multimodal community practice is evolving and is arguably more inclusive than the increasingly polarised binary between the digital and the non-digital that has hitherto characterised the difference between creative writing in formal learning and professional settings, and creative writing in the community.

If community writing practice is now to take place online as well as in what limited physical spaces we can offer in future, it must be designed and run in ways that are inclusive and innovative. Facilitators and participants must continue to use the bond of trust between them to break down technical barriers to inclusivity. This article has argued throughout that the absence of those who cannot or choose not to engage online must not become the elephant in the Zoom: a question mark hanging over the nature of participation as we slowly emerge into the post-pandemic world.

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