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Creative Writing and Reading for Groups: Creating with Words, Responding Without Them. A Community Intervention.

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Abstract

This thesis explores creative writing and reading groups for therapeutic purposes from historical, research, and neuroscience perspectives. The purpose was to differentiate creative writing and reading from other writing techniques and to incorporate its resources in a community Expressive Arts Therapy intervention. The benefits of reading, writing, and groups for well-being are described. A creative writing experience as a center of an Expressive Arts Therapy intervention was planned and executed, and its description and results are included. The author advocates for the therapeutic possibilities of language when used as a creative tool.

Keywords: creative writing, expressive arts therapy, active reading, groups, creative writing, and reading intervention.

Author Identity Statement: The author identifies as a Latin American Jewish cisgender white middle-aged woman, mother, writer, coach, and prominent teaching background in creative writing and storytelling.

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Introduction

Visual arts use color, texture, paint, paper, clay, pencils and markers, collages, and sculptures to name a few possibilities. Music includes instruments, voice, and recording. Drama experiment with improv, character development, dialogue, and monologue. Movement therapy has dance, mindful movement, and body scans. Each experience offers a different relationship with the materials, the body, the world, and others, therapeutic alliance included. Language appears in expressive arts therapy often in the form of journaling or spoken reflection about experiences through other arts modalities. Language is used mostly as a reasoning bridge between client and process, or client and artwork. Those words (especially those a client uses once and again to try to understand and reflect) have history, weight, and often a fixed meaning and/or emotion (conscious or unconscious) that can determine perception, lead to rigid but known narratives that get stick in the brain, body, and spirit. By using the same words in the same structures…how can we see or even feel different? Can a new language help us to re-think, to create new understandings? Using creative language, fantasy, building a plot in different voices, other settings, or timelines are not explored in their full potential in Expressive Arts Therapy, considered mostly as a tool for the wordless, for unveiling pains that clients cannot or are not ready to name yet, to *open the ways of knowing* through the body and imagination. But creative writing is another kind of language, the same as colors are not the same as a painting or a stone is not a sculpture. It can open other knowledge than logic: "While creative writing still deals with truth, it is truth in a philosophical, rather than literal, sense. It is not so much an examination of human events, as an examination of what it means to be human through those

events.” (Deveney& Lawson, 2022, p. 239). Trying to make sense of someone’s self in the world can be a repetitive discourse resistant to change once convinced of a certain meaning or if a story is strongly built as a defense mechanism. We are the stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are and are shaped as well by the stories we receive from others. So, if the same others tell the same stories, often with the same words, human beings might end up believing that is who they are.

Writing and reading are often perceived as less embodied than other forms of art, but as studies in neuroscience show, when reading and writing, both proved as very complex brain activities, our biology works in similar ways as if we were experiencing those words, defying the assumption that people’s understanding of the world is represented by symbols in the mind. Embodied and grounded cognition approached knowledge as sensorimotor and emotional experiences of the world, given by stimulations, actions, and bodily states, and explain: “Language understanding is also suggested to be fundamentally rooted in people's sensorimotor and emotional experiences. For example, it would not be surprising if one finds a sentence like "*A man is standing in the sky*" hard to understand. The underlying reason is that the action of "*standing*" at the particular location "*sky*" violates people's bodily experience of gravity, and therefore, one immediately knows that the sentence would not be true since people will undoubtedly fall instead of maintaining the state of standing in the sky.” (Miechun, Liu, Tingtin, Wang, Xiaol, 2023 p. 16656). But what clues to make sense of “a man standing in the sky” can open in a reader heart? What new sense of no sense is hidden in the contradictions and freedom of creative language? Is a story different if is told from the end? Does it change if it takes place in an open or closed space? If it has more than one narrator or different voices? Thinking of embodied cognition, I tend to infer that each change in writing and every reading offers different

knowledge, experience, and emotion. Emotion seems to be the key: “Emotion is not only that behavior evoked by an external stimulus (an attack) or internal (a memory) or a process that provides basic support for communication between peers (emotional language), but it is also that fire that warms and gives meaning and coherence to reason, thought and mental processes and - therefore - to creative thinking itself.” (Mora as cited in Vázquez-Medel, Mora, & Acedo García, 2020, p. 6) Setting emotions and creative writing as the gravity center of a therapeutic process might replace re-traumatizing and story repetition, for new processing and understanding paths. The reason is explained by how the brain works. Emotion, through the amygdala, reaches the different areas of the cerebral cortex, including Wernicke's and Broca's territories which process language and reading: “From this, it follows that without the emotional component, it would not be possible to not only write any book but also not read it because what leads us to the latter, to reading, is that emotional spark, first unconscious that lights up to give rise to attention. essential in this reading process.” (Vázquez-Medel et al., 2020, p.6). Keeping in mind that creative writing and reading workshops are typically centered on the quality and effectiveness of the texts, the challenge was to transform a creative writing workshop into an Expressive Arts Therapy one. So feedback was created in another art form, and transitions (sometimes as parts of resource explanations) were made through movement, play, and music. In that way, the hope was to create/complement writing and reading with *attunement* (Kossak 2015) and intensify the embodiment of both experiences, but centering the attention on feelings and processing, instead of logic and technique. Maybe knowing in advance that a response will take place after each text participants may engage deeper in active listening and find something new about themselves in others' words. Maybe a feeling of company can emerge in others’ artwork. Maybe by listening to my story in another voice, I can read myself in new ways. Because this was a short one-time

four-hour intervention, we worked mostly with creative language, changing the voice and the setting and incorporating other modalities, with the conviction that creative arts healing power reaches multiple dimensions. As McNiff highlighted, the "Holistic approach that recognizes the whole person – body, mind, spirit and soul – and the healing power of the arts, not assingle modalities but as a whole, foreshadows his famous dictum. Whenever illness is associated with loss of soul, the arts emerge spontaneously as remedies, soul medicine." (as cited in Estrella, 2019, p. 3). Therapeutic and well-being for this project are based on Bunden's (2022) core components of personal recovery: connectedness, hope, optimism, identity, meaning in life, and empowerment, as they seemed necessary for improving mental health.

This Thesis project was also an attempt to explore deeper into my whole life intuition about creativity, reading, and writing as mental health allies and put my former knowledge in literature in service of other's well-being.

Literature Review

In mental health counseling and expressive arts therapy, most research shows the benefits of reading, expressive writing, and narrative therapy (using them sometimes indistinctively). There is very little research about creative writing for therapeutic purposes. It came to my attention that terms such as "bibliotherapy", 'writing therapy" or "expressive writing" were used with no clear definitions, without specifying their meaning or practice details. The only systematic research review I could find about creative writing groups for mental health, concludes that: "Despite findings indicating some promising outcomes of creative writing on personal recovery from mental health disorders, this systematic review highlights the need for further research. Overall, the lack of a clear definition, in addition to differing measures of personal recovery, as well as the heterogeneity of interventions, and methodological

shortcomings of the included studies may have influenced the detection of effects across the included studies." (Bundesen et al., 2020, p. 12). The research engines used were Google, Scholar, Lesley University Library, and Research Gate among others, terms included creative writing, reading, and writing for well-being, bibliotherapy, writing therapy, counseling and writing. The terms were searched together and separately, and the time frame used was between 2019 to 2023 to choose the most updated materials. Assuming those limitations, I will try to describe the main ideas of what is known about creative writing for therapeutic purposes from three perspectives: historical, research-based, and neuroscience.

1. **History**

From a historical perspective, Ruini, Chiara & Mortara, C. (2021) summarized how creative writing interventions have been used mostly in therapeutic group settings at different moments in time, and through different psychological approaches, concluding that what "The aforementioned writing therapies all have in common is a theoretical underpinning: the act of writing as a means to modify one's life story and reframe elements which survivors want to change." (Ruini et al., 2021, p. 25) Even though writing practices have been included in traditional therapy for a long time, the authors set Pennebaker as the founder of the expressive writing method (setting writing as the center of his practice) around 1986. Pennebaker stated that writing not only gives voice to blocked feelings, but it helps clients link causal events with themselves, improving their introspective capacity by writing a meaningful story. By changing the story while writing, other reflections and possibilities could emerge for real life. Later Mc Adams (in the nineties and until now) worked with guided autobiography (two-hour weekly sessions) and identity, highlighting the benefits of being the author of one's life such as personal agency, meaningful events and positive traits recognition, the relation between life events and

personality changes, and improved self-esteem and optimism. *Logotherapy*, created by Victor Frankl after surviving concentration camps during World War II, was based exclusively on working with words and is considered a bridge between clinical and positive psychology, mixing a rigorous cognitive examination with the belief that everyone has a sense of meaning to be discovered through writing. "The main difference between logotherapy and guided autobiography relies on the philosophical framework used in existential approach… ingredients of logotherapy, thus, concern the increase in life meaning" (Ruini et al., 2021, p. 27) in individual's life experiences. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy uses writing mostly to take notes, build structures, and reminders as proof of thoughts, feelings, and actions Acceptance and content therapy worked with writing affirmations to, as the name implies, accept what is difficult instead of trying to change it, especially if those events or realities are out of the client's reach or control. Acceptance is considered a necessary step to content and realistic empowerment, and from there, to keep walking towards new possibilities for well-being. Positive psychology, a strength-based approach to mental health, uses prompts to exercise writing such as a positive presentation, or written gratitude, forgiveness, and wisdom letters. The only reference to creative writing techniques is about the difference between the first and third person in severe traumatic experiences explaining that is common to "Initially narrate it in the third person and only later, once the elaboration and integration processes have set into motion, are they able to narrate their experience in the first person. This phenomenon occurs because third-person narration allows the writer to feel safer and more detached from the experience, while first-person perspective reminds them that they were the protagonist of the trauma." (Ruini et al., 2021, p. 25).

Narrative therapy was not included by Ruini et al. (2021) in their review but I consider it is a fundamental part of writing therapeutic approaches. Is defined by Hays, Neukrug &

Danica *(*2022), as a postmodern social constructivist theory in which people's beliefs and values are transmitted by dominant narratives and defined identity as a changing construction influenced by people's interactions in specific contexts. Understanding that social and cultural dominant narratives oppress individuals or groups, narrative therapy encourages changing *thin* for *thick* descriptions of life stories: "Such descriptions, which generally evolve out of our problem-saturated stories, leave little room for alternative explanations, lend themselves toward narrow explanations of events, and tend to "dominate" the way we come to understand who we are. Thick descriptions, on the other hand, are complex descriptions of our lives and the stories that describe our lives, and an understanding that our lives are multistoried." (Hays et al., 2022, p. 317) Finding details and secondary stories enriches the possibilities for clients to discover new ways, paths, and ideas, enhancing "thin descriptions of stories often lead clients to thin conclusions about their lives, as they tend to view the world in simple, often dualistic, ways." (Morgan as cited in Hays et al., 2022, p. 317) Opposite to *thin*, is a kind of storytelling applying all the attitudes and actions, details, personalization, and secondary stories, so the client can be aware of the layers in their problem-saturated story they tend to generalize (because of fear, embarrassment, social pressure, or defense mechanisms). By consciously choosing their truths, a liberation process from oppressive powers that sometimes can be very clear and loud (like in the case of politically or socially oppressed groups, or minorities) or a constant whisper of family, religious, or moral social mandates, can begin to happen: "Creative writing is, above all, a human action located in a specific place, at a specific time, and carried out from a complex state of consciousness. An action that causes displacements both in the mental state of the creator and, virtually, of those who connect, in receptive discursive interaction, with the significant potential of the resulting text, as long as they have the competence that the text itself requires." (Vázquez-

Medel, et al., 2020 p. 3). The required competence refers not only to the ability to read and write, but also to a literary sensibility, and creative ability that anyone (who doesn't suffer from a severe language disability) can learn the same as speech and creativity.

Another key concept of narrative therapy is to externalize a problem or a mental health diagnosis, from the individual as something other than the client, to face it in a less threatening way, and to empower possibilities to heal. That externalization can take the form of a character, a monster in action to observe it, make peace with it or even fight it. The intention is to disagree with older psychodynamic approaches reducing individuals to a diagnosis, instead, the exercise is to understand that is part of the client's but not what they are.

1. **Research.**

As I explained at the beginning of this section, from the research perspective about creative writing in groups, Bundesen, et al. (2022) had trouble finding enough research under the established criteria and could include only five pieces for their review. The requisites to be included were having creative writing as the main activity for the group, including individual writing, sharing phases, being conducted by a health professional with writing experience or a writing professional, having a mental health disorder diagnosis. Studies could be qualitative or quantitative. The results from those five investigations were related to the group benefit in writing workshops or who should lead them. Most interventions were structured in three phases: a topic presentation by the facilitator, personal writing, and sharing. Sometimes the writing was expressive, with a prompt, and sometimes with a basic literary tool (for example building a metaphor). The authors concluded that connectedness was the most frequently addressed outcome, groups facilitated the development of meaningful peer connections that contributed to feeling supported, less lonely, and having a sense of belonging; and "Additionally, the group enabled revelation, communication, and exploration of emotions otherwise. difficult to share." (Bundesen et al.,

2022, p. 10) Other authors (Franz et al., 2020) pointed out similar group benefits. “Writing groups were found to support empowerment as the process of writing and to share written material was described as a medium that could support being heard and finding a voice (Cooper, 2013; Jensen & Blair, 1997) and as an arena for facing and communicating difficult emotions that can establish a sense of control over such emotions.” (Franz et al., 2020 page 12). As Malyn, Thomas & Ramsey-Wade (2020) explained citing the interpersonal theory, protective factors for suicide and depression are social connection (the feeling of not being alone in the world) and the feeling that there is someone who is going through something similar that reduces hopelessness. Community-based bibliotherapy and therapeutic creative writing groups showed to support a space in which participants feel acknowledged, accepted, challenged, and inspired: “Being acknowledged as a person with abilities and as something other than someone with a mental disorder is central to personal recovery and highly related to a sense of identity. Two studies highlighted the importance of the facilitator being a professional writer as opposed to a mental health professional to establish a sense of producing art.” (Bundesen et al., 2022, p. 13). Other authors highlight the importance of having someone well-educated in literature and psychology (Deveney & Lawson, 2022, p.720).

Regarding bibliotherapy, the term has changed over the last 120 years and is used without a clear definition, sometimes as reading without other references to the therapist's role or discussion group. Langeber (2023) explained that bibliotherapy researchers described it as guided reading, low-cost psychotherapy, or self-help but clarifies that the updated concept definition is that “bibliotherapy is a therapeutic tool using collaborative reading and discussion to reduce anxiety and depression.” (Langeber, 2023, p. 39). And continues to explain why: “In 2012, Nobel prize-winning psychiatrist and neuroscientist Eric Kandel explained that when the

human brain interacts with the dramatic arc, the brain releases specific chemicals: oxytocin and vasopressin. These chemicals are associated with positive social cognition—feelings of empathy and pleasure. Kandel (2012) clarified that these chemicals bond humans because they "increase trust and a willingness to take risks." (Langeber, 2023, p. 38). Four of the 10 systematic reviews concluded that bibliotherapy increased empathy and trust, changed negative behaviors, improved problem-solving skills, and promoted emotional health.

2. Neuroscience

Literature Nobel Prize Mario Vargas Llosa (2006) asked himself why we read or write fiction if we know it is not "true". He answers that we read and write fiction because by disguising the truth, emerges the truth of who we are, what we want to be, what we dream, care about, fear, and hide. That is why in his opinion Balzac wrote that literature is a nation's private history. But also, there is the possibility, for good readers, of living other lives, escaping the space-time continuum in which only one life at a time can be lived. Somehow by reading is possible to experience the lives of the characters, be them, and go wherever they go finding meaning, beauty, and emotions to add life to a reader's life. His answers deeply resonated with me and still do today even though I read them 15 years ago. Neuroscience might explain why: "Reading is not a passive act of absorbing and assimilating, simply, what is written in a book, but rather it is an active (re-creative) process of what is described there… activating a broad cognitive arc that involves curiosity, attention, learning, memory, emotion, consciousness, feeling, knowledge, and thought, thereby building those bridges that are as necessary as they are real between humanities and science." (Vázquez-Medel et al., 2020, p. 10). Not only humanities and science but also maybe that re-creation builds bridges between consciousness and unconsciousness, thoughts and emotions, emotions and future actions "Our brain stem supports the most fundamental and unconscious bases

of vital processes, which become more complex when the limbic system (emotional brain), the one in which the emotional responses of pleasure (reward) and pain (punishment) reside interacts with the cerebral cortex of association to transform into consciousness or will for change and meaning." (Vazquez-Medel et al., 2020, p. 5). Authors continue explaining that is that emotional spark that lights up and raises attention, essential to the reading process that uses "large areas of the brain that are interconnected to produce extraordinary effects, which affect our motor skills, our emotional system, our cognitive representations, and which sometimes -immediately or mediately- also activate our executive abilities." (Vázquez-Medel et al., 2020, p. 6). Bundesen & Rosenbaum (2023) have suggested fiction reading should be considered as a form of "consciousness of selves", like a rehearsal, or more like an opportunity to live and experience without all the risks and limitations of reality: "The term embodied simulation is derived from the discovery of mirror neurons that respond both to action execution, but also to observation that can serve as a biological correlation to mental simulation." (Bundesen & Rosenbaum, 2023, p. 313). When applying the principles of reading and writing to the therapeutic alliance or a group setting the feeling of being less alone and acknowledged, might be related to the concepts of *Embodied simulation* and *Resonance*: "Resonance has been used in musical and mechanic theory to describe how two entities amplify each other reverberatingly. In psychodynamic and phenomenological thinking, it has been used to describe intracorporal communication...There are reasons to believe that narratives as special forms of mediated intersubjectivity can enhance resonance processes by enabling readers' multiple relationships as a form of mind-training by simulation." (Bundesen &Rosenbaum., 2023, page 312). Kossak (2015) added another layer to the sympathetic response from the neuron mirror system previously mentioned, with his concept of attunement: "In Physics this would be called sympathetic resonance (the ability of a vibration to reach out through

vibrational waves to set off a similar vibration in another body).” (Kossak, 2015, p. 134). This experience according to the author, expands beyond the present and gives human beings access to another kind of memory: “In research studies, Sheldrake has found that this field is not just an organizing structure in the present, but also contains a memory of social groups in the past (a group memory). From these studies, it can be implied (as Carl Jung suggested) that vibratory attunement…reaches beyond individual connectivity into an extended field of resonance or connectivity to a collective consciousness.” (Kossak, 2015, p.114).

4. Definitions

The last part of this section is dedicated to differentiating expressive from creative writing. Expressive writing refers to free writing, meaning writing everything that comes to mind, to journaling just to let the words flow in the way they want to, experience some relief, maybe some clarity, freedom, and externalization. In the case of a personal journal, it gives the writer the choice to show it or maintain its privacy, partially or absolutely but “Journaling is different from therapeutic writing because the writer does not receive specific instructions on the contents and methodologies to be followed when writing, as it happens in therapeutic writing.” (Ruini et al., 2020, page 23) Creative writing for therapeutic purposes then it is guided by explicit directions given to the writers. But even with instructions, the writing can be, not creative. So, what does creative thinking mean? “The most genuine strategy of creative thinking is analogy, through which very different realities are connected in original and valuable ways.” (Vazquez-Medel et al., 2020, p. 7). So, a basic characteristic of creative writing for therapeutic purposes is the use of instructed exercises for creating new relationships between at first sight unrelated things and by that, in my opinion, and experience, re-establishing meanings that are no longer represented with common words and discovering new ones. Another key aspect of creative

writing is the use of fantasy and the voice (the narrator that is other than the person who is writing) to create, intensifying a sense of control: “When Freud likened writers to ‘children at play who re-arrange things in the world in the way which pleases them’, he showed an understanding of both the liberation of imagination and how creative writing gives a God-like sense of control in the writer's imaginary world that contrasts with their helplessness in the real world. Instead of being the puppets, they become the puppet master pulling the strings.” (Deveney & Lawson, 2022, p. 293). While expressive writing centers on release, creative writing adds other benefits for psychological therapies, like the cognitive processing of trauma and emotional difficulties in a gentle way as clients hand over their real-life personal issues to imaginary characters and, in the process, find an increased sense of detachment and objectivity, a changed perspective, self-empathy, catharsis, and healing.

I chose to conceptualize the main characteristics of creative reading and writing groups for therapeutic purposes as follows: applying creativity to writing, meaning working on instructed writings for finding new relations between words, reality, and fantasy; what is read and feelings, through experimenting with literary elements (voice, setting, rhythm, plot, structure, characters) to experience by sharing (cognitively, bodily, and emotionally) new possibilities for real life and feelings of empowerment and connectedness.

Method

The choice was a Community Intervention that combined creative writing with expressive arts therapy, an experience for adults who wanted to participate voluntarily in a 4-hour workshop to create, share, and process something specific in their lives. It could be an event, a conflict, a feeling, something that makes them feel stuck, or a wound not well healed. The participants were convocated by an invitation that briefly explained the workshop sent to

family and close friends asking to share it with whoever could be interested. The only pre-requisite was to be older than 18. In one week, 14 people contacted me, and from that group, 5 could make it to the day and time we agreed on. Participants were between 35 and 42 years old, all-body abled, with a college degree, and identified as female. Four were native Spanish speakers, and one was from Holland and spoke basic Spanish but wrote in English (translations were made at the moment). Gender, education, and socioeconomic status were very similar. I will try to summarize what we did and then discuss the results in the discussion section. For clarity purposes, I will describe in order the activities done.

To register my personal experience as a facilitator I had a journal during the intervention and a journal for a week after. Also, I spent an hour a day making art to process.

The workshop started a week before the day we were meeting in person by asking the participants for a short text describing themselves as if they were a space and sending it by email. It could be a room, a type of construction, a nature-based space, or a totally fantasy invention. Instructions were total freedom, but one direction was asked: avoid generalities, and pay attention to the details as they symbolize traits, history, and personality. The facilitator sent back written feedback to each participant consisting mostly of questions and suggestions. Participants could send it back if they decided to work with it. This task was needed in the first place to be aware of participants' use of language and to screen the group to plan activities that meet the clients where they are. Also, it allowed reflecting symbolically, using fantasy, instead of describing literal traits or characteristics. Once we met in person, we started by sharing our names and a few words about the expectations of the workshop. After explaining the basics about what we were about to do (learning basic creative writing tools but responding in other arts modalities) and reassuring confidentiality, participants were invited to guided imagery to enter

the space they wrote about, to enter themselves, walk, observe the details, add or remove things, and sit with the things that they didn't like, accept them, or not, register their feelings without any judgments. The facilitator included frequently the invitation to keep breathing and scanning their bodies. This invitation was made to create a physical experience (according to Haeye & Staal, 2021, the body reacts to what is imagined) of being inside, to sit with different parts of identity, and to use imagination for the hope that change is possible. Participants shared and repeated each other's movements in a circle to express how they felt about that experience. Movement was included from this point through the workshop: "Through movement and multimodal art mediums (drawing, poetic writing, music making, singing), we can bring forward the material of our lives, reveal what has been hidden, and express old stories in a new way. The passion and creativity of the arts allow us to live with our suffering and find release through creative play. In such a process we can symbolically face the demons of the past and present. As our body posture changes, so does our posture in life." (Halprin, 2003 p. 24). Participants stood up and shook their bodies between activities and readings.

Since language is something, we use daily and most of the time, in the same logical way, to open its possibilities, the second activity was a creative language exercise and plot, or can also be framed as creative play with language. Inspired by many toys on a table we played to match them in pairs to create new things to say and compare how meanings change if we add metaphor using analogy, finding new symbolic relationships. As explained in the Literature Review section the creative process can give new meanings and add more than one meaning at a time while also including an emotional color to our words. For example, we match a plane with a cellphone and phrases like "time flies", "we travel through the web", "we travel in time through the pictures we take", "time changes when traveling", "imagination lands when we turn off cell phones", "a

tourist and a traveler are not the same", a "journey is a connection inside", "turn off the cellphone to fly". Then we play to make a story with the objects by turns adding something else (could be through another object or just by telling something). Based on our collective story creation we briefly discuss what makes a story a story, and not another kind of text, centering on "something happens to someone", even if that "happen" is nothing happening and that "someone" is an abstract figure. We discussed, just in general and very superficially, plot elements such as characters, structures, time, conflict, space, and voice.

As a break from talking and for transitioning, we did a percussion improvisation circle changing rhythms. This could start building the attunement needed for the next parts of the workshop and also give the experience of how different rhythms evoke different emotions. We discussed how the rhythms made us feel and remembered that stories also have a kind of music we create to give them a certain sense of emotion through how we play with punctuation and style. For example, short phrases separated by periods can create a sense of suspense, lowliness, calm, anguish, or repression. Writing with almost no pause can give a sense of confusion, urgency, desperation, excitement, or overwhelming, and adding a short sentence will cause a more powerful effect, for naming some possibilities.

Our first writing exercise consisted of choosing from a pile of images, one that represented the issue/feeling/ experience that each participant wanted to work with. For 90 seconds, each one had to write everything that came to mind about the image, a minimum of 30 words or phrases. The invitation then was to write a short story without using any of the words from the list. This choice is directly related to avoiding repetition, opening our brains to new words, and by that, to new possible meanings, emotions, and understandings. The first words to come to mind are probably the words that appeared mechanically, the easy and comfortable ones,

used to build what is already known or believed. Those words are heavy, fixed, and repetitive. By taking them away, we clean the space for new combinations of words, analogies, and images to emerge.

After a coffee break it was time for our second writing exercise, inspired by the first one. I briefly explained the narrators. On one hand, the choice of a voice (first, second, and third voices. plural and singular), on the other hand, the narrator's types (the witness, the omnipresent, the one who narrates from the insight or the outside to name a few). and how the space where we situated the story can affect it. Similar to how context shapes behaviors, the setting in which a story is placed can offer different possibilities to the story (an open or closed space, nature or city, total fantasy, just to name a few). In this final stage of writing, the challenge was to rewrite the first short story based on the images, in another voice (changing the one that first came) and make it happen in the setting that they were in the guided imagery text they sent the week before about themselves as space). Regarding techniques, changing between the first and the third person showed to have an impact on the distance the writer has with what is written. I wanted to explore what happens by changing the voice to another than the first one that came to mind and how a story can change in another setting. The idea of using other literary resources goes along with enhancing the possibilities and meanings of that first approach to language and story by pushing creativity. Once the participants were finished, I explained that no one was going to read their own story so that the author could listen to their creation as it was written by someone else. I wanted to take advantage of how active reading and all that brain activity, resonance, and attunement could impact self-empathy, self-understanding, and self-mirroring. I explained that feedback would be given in another art form (mostly visual arts but music, drama, and movement resources were also available) based on how the story felt for each one, including the

writer's arts response about the experience of listening to their story. Here I need to highlight again my belief in Expressive Arts Therapy: “Unlike the dream, creative expressions integrate the conscious and non-conscious workings of the psyche and give the tangible expression in the present moment…in ways that are not possible in therapies based exclusively on verbal communication. Similarly, the use of all of the arts can further possibilities for expression and understanding beyond limits of what can be done with a single medium.” (McNiff, 1994, p. 13). Materials available were Play-Doh, paint, pencils paint brushes. Each text was read by another participant but the author, and then the others shared their art, leaving the author to be the last to share their artistic response to hearing their writing. We repeated the same with all participants. After a short stretch, we open the space for sharing thoughts, reflections, and feelings regarding the experience of the workshop. For closure, participants repeated the movement and mirroring circle from our first activity to express what they treasure from the experience and how they felt.

Participants were asked, one week later, to read their text again, and reflect on their process. Guiding questions were: Did you learn something new? How do you feel after the workshop compared to how you felt before?

There was an underlying poetic statement about changing the setting to ourselves, as a symbol. In the sense that stories happen to and inside us. We can use them to change, move, play. Our stories happened to us; they are not who we are.

Results

I worked as a creative writing and storytelling professor for almost 14 years. In every single class and even more in electives, creativity opened the door for intimacy, complicity, and deep reflection. But the workshops were made to practice and develop writing

skills so even if we had profound conversations, the focus was on techniques, communication, or the distance between what the writer intended and what readers understood or felt. I was curious to discover how adding other modalities as responses instead of critique can build a container for a therapeutic experience and how my new knowledge could contribute to building an expressive arts therapy workshop with an emphasis on creative writing. What to expect was shaped by my previous experiences. I thought that in the best scenario, shifting language and perspective would help the participants discover something new about their story and process feelings related to them in a safe space that promotes empowerment and the feeling of less loneliness. I was doubtful about how participants could react to activities related to the other modalities I included and if they would engage in playing Worst case scenario was that people would not engage and would leave the same as they came. In my previous experiences, workshops needed time to create a cohesive group and to build a space for digging deeper so I didn't know what this short experience could bring.

The first thing that I noticed was the absence of creative language in the drafts for them as a space they sent, and how by giving little feedback or invitations to explore the writing immediately changed, got deeper, more specific, and therefore, more personal. Literal transcription of thoughts evolved into conscious and playful writing. For example, "I am green and thin but strong" changed to "In the depth of soil, far away deep in the hills, my roots are looking for nutrients like hands looking for a treasure. Every morning, the sun wakes me up and I am ready to move. Summer doesn't scare me, nor that winter freeze me, because I am flexible. I love rainy days when the raindrops kiss my leaves". All participants shared that they didn't before really understand that creative writing was different from expressive. So it seemed that creativity, in the sense of connecting things in new ways, was something that needed to be

remembered. That is why I included as the first exercise one to first of all, install a conscience of words as new, better, deeper creative language and how it can express layers and emotions. Once we met, it felt, and participants expressed it when talking about expectations, like a thirst for meaningful personal time, like a gift for themselves, so immediately, they were all in and fully present after the guided meditation. I was surprised by how quickly participants engaged in each step of the process, taking into account that I didn't know them before, and they had never even seen each other before that day. They participated fully and expressed feeling very comfortable with the group almost instantaneously. That made me think how that could be different in a workshop in another culture or with participants suffering from a mental health disorder, how much more careful the facilitator has to be, and maybe, how much longer and slower (or not) that comfortability of the group could take.

The idea of incorporating other modalities for sure brought some strange faces to the participants but once we did movement, and played with objects or improvised music, they rapidly opened to the experiences, and we had so much fun (lots of laughing and humor). Participants expressed that they never experienced doing art as adults because they were not "artistic". Specifically with visual arts, all participants stated that they were terribly at it, but then built beautiful and deep artworks that touched the receiver and themselves. Regarding the changes in writing itself, it was quite confirming and revealing. One participant started in the I voice, then changed to the third person but centered on her 4-year-old sun and came up with a different perspective, changing from a conflict with the relationship between her son with her mother (his grandmother) from the questions about how her son sees her and how sometimes she lost herself in being a mother, the role confusion that she feels. She stated that *she would never see what she now sees if not for the change in perspectives.* Another participant shared that by

changing the setting to “herself” or the space that she wrote about as herself, stated that she realized that part of herself is deeply rooted in her grandmother's memory and influence and that her sense of home was her. Another participant stated that she was surprised by how the more meaningful details she gave about character, setting, and emotions the “closer you get to the heart of what you are trying to express”, and realized that that might relate to different interpretations of her text (that she was also surprised by). For the same participant, the experience of writing in the first person was very strong “because you feel involved, not like you are outside, and that necessarily involves feeling, emotions, and memories”. I’ve never tried before the exercise or someone else reading someone else’s story, and that was the most emotional part of the workshop for participants. A few broke into tears and said that the receiving of artistic feedback *warmed their hearts*. When asked if something changed in the way they read or listened during the sharing, they expressed that they felt more connected, concentrated, and touched by the texts. Participants felt the need to ask questions when receiving artistic feedback. At first, I tried to avoid it but when they insisted, I felt they needed the space to dialogue, so the discussion took place around the artwork itself, and how it represented what the story meant and the feeling around it. When writers shared their artistic response of listening to their texts in someone else’s voice, they wanted to explain their writings. I added to the discussion the question of whether they could find something about their text in their art piece and tried to keep connected to the art to protect the space for transforming in a conversation about trying to “fix” situations or conflicts presented. After a week participants shared the following reflections: “I tell you that now I read the text again and see how what an unresolved internal conflict was previously is now something that has a name, and I even glimpse how to give it a way out and eventual solution/healing. However, more than the collective exercise,

paraphrasing helped me a lot when we changed narrators…it was therapeutic". Another participant shared: "My way of communication is also way deeper in writing than in speech, but this what you taught was unique and new. I learned so much. I am still digesting". Unfortunately, one participant didn't reply to the one week after email.

This brief experience, allowed me to observe the benefits of most sources from the literature review about creative reading and writing in groups and how adding other modalities and experimenting with writing techniques, deepens and opens a personal issue giving participants new perspectives and new emotions. It was a surprise how emotional hearing their text in someone else's voice was for participants. I never tried that before this workshop, but I am sure that I will keep including it in my practice to gather more information about this particular experience. Is this only because all reading benefits are used towards oneself? Also responding artistically to that hearing seemed to be very powerful.

Regarding my process as a facilitator, I tried to use the same time participants had to do their tasks to journal. Brief phrases were written regarding fluidity, joy, and being present. Images like gently moving water, or chemistry experiments came to my mind. I played with colors more than figurative art. Once the workshop was over, I kept journaling. Mostly about the joy and fear of building my practice, excitement, and anxiety about the future, and how building a workshop like this could work. One big reflection was about the difference between the role I used to have as a teacher and my future role as an expressive arts therapist. I know now, that I want to work with people who voluntarily want to attend workshops or even private practice. I think the therapeutic and cognitive benefits of creating writing and reading practices, even very much present in my teaching experiences, will be of better use in an environment that serves mental health and not a grade, a career path, or ego. I feel much more comfortable and happier

accompanying others, side by side, and I feel optimistic about how my literary knowledge and experience could help others. I was amazed and touched by the last movement circle because it was full of gratitude, love, and wonder from each participant's individual toward themselves and also towards the group.

Discussion

This project, combining research and the experience of doing an expressive arts therapy workshop, centered on a clear definition of creative writing, opens many future possibilities for individual and group therapeutic practices using creative language and reading. Group benefits such as empowerment, a sense of mastery, and connectedness, appeared clearly in the research. Brain and body benefits of reading and writing as tools for relief, control, a way of finding new possibilities by changing the story, and the *Resonance* experience, interact and contribute to deeper reflection and embodied cognition and attunement between participants and with oneself. Creative writing defined as having analogy at the center of its practice (in words, changing narrative elements, using fantasy as an expression of internal and external realities) allows clients to sculpt with reason, paint with new colors through language, and use it as an experience and not only as an explanation for both writers and active readers. As described before in the Literature Review, someone well educated in both literature and mental health or including both as facilitators might be the best choice for an experience like this because it gives participants a sense of mastery by being recognized as capable of creating and experience a therapeutic experience outside of a mental health diagnosis. Thinking about this workshop, I think that in the future, I will implement them differently. Participants expressed leaving experiencing a “bomb” of information and feelings that a regular workshop once a week would

help process, deepen, and contain. This experience was a skinny surface layer about some elements to use when creating a story. Still, the many different possibilities for each aspect (the voice, structure, settings, rhythm effects, and character building), could be explored in consistent sessions where stories could dialogue between weeks and artwork through time, adding a new layer of introspection and discovery. As an expressive arts therapy believer, I find that the expressive arts feedback offers a holistic experience that generates a virtual circle of mind, body, and spirit, I am just adding language as a creative material and highlighting its benefits for expressive therapies, not as something separated from the arts. Language is such a huge part of daily life, learning, understanding, and communicating. Maybe including creative uses, different from just reason and logic, other understandings, learnings, and communications can challenge, change, and build healing experiences. I am a writer in Spanish, and many times as I was studying in the US, I was asked to choose my modality to start an exercise or an artistic response. I felt like an arts orphan, without experience or training in other art disciplines, and barely enough English to write something that was never close to what I wanted to express. The experience was wonderful for me, wanting to become an Expressive Arts Therapist, but might not be the same for clients. In that sense, offering language (which most people use and have) but with creativity (which everyone can learn) could feel less threatening as a starting point and a first step forward to experience other arts modalities and new perspectives.

Depending on the population, some adjustments should be made. Especially regarding trauma survivors, there is a risk of experiencing the effects named before, negatively. When writing negative thoughts or feelings, mental rumination can turn intense giving them more emphasis and power, the same applies to positive issues (Ruini et al., 2020). The importance of trauma-informed care must never be underrated in any treatment or intervention to protect clients

as much as possible: “When working with explicit memory, words are used to express what we are thinking or feeling and to make sense of our experiences both past and present; we can create stories and put them into perspective. Implicit memory is associated with the subcortical parts of the brain; the primitive parts that are not under conscious control and have no linguistic representation. Implicit memory is created without words, only including sensations and images. Rotschild (2014), Van der Kolk (2014), and Levine (2015) found that the language center shuts down when experiencing traumatic events.” (Haeye & Staal, 2021, p. 2). I am very curious about what benefits or harms turning on the language center in a safe way, in a creative way (using analogy and fantasy) could bring to clients for processing traumatic events. Could creative writing and reading help in connecting implicit and explicit memories? How does a therapist prepare to use language tools safely? Of course, research is needed, but I think some protective factors would be useful, like working on fantasy to avoid going back to a traumatic situation or to open a safer door to face a hidden one, center the attention on emotions, and offer other modalities to navigate them in a less threatening way. Used with caution and sensibility (because involves many parts of the brain) creative reading, and writing could benefit almost anyone as long as a solid safe space for emotions is in place to transform that brain activity into meaning and will to change. It might be beneficial to include activities that, for those with excessive logic and language use, could open bridges to the body and soul, calming the nervous system and creating holistic experiences like the ones the arts or meditations offer.

Thinking about group configuration and specific pathologies to work with, I think that diversity could bring richness and prevent in some way the negative possible effects of being trapped in a specific worldview or symptomatology. Even every human being is a particular universe, and empathy could work easier when sharing common grounds, could be a tendency to

stay where is known and hide behind others' sameness to repeat and repeat because, in that way, clients feel connected and understood. However, I believe empathy and connectedness could be enlightening and enhanced with diversity. Of course, more research is needed to examine this matter, and in general, to build common definitions and practices of creative writing and reading to develop and use it to its full potential. But I think its benefits are clear and can be implemented easily, offering a toll to every culture, gender, or socioeconomic status population since language and creativity are human capacities and realities that belong to all humankind. Thinking about socioeconomic status and accessibility to therapy, in a recent study "It was found that enhanced expressive writing (i.e., writing with scheduled contacts with a therapist) was as effective as traditional psychotherapy for the treatment of traumatized patients. Expressive writing without additional talking with a therapist was found to be only slightly inferior. The authors concluded that expressive writing could provide a useful tool to promote mental health with only minimal contact with a therapist." (Ruini et.al, 2020, p. 24) Even if it is not in my opinion ideal, adding creative writing and reading to online therapy, or more spaced sessions for economic reasons, can nurture clients well well-being.

I always loved the psychology of literature. There is something like a sixth sense in readers and writers for seeing underneath the surface, for smelling between the lines, to understand deeper human complexity: "Empirical investigations have shown that people who read literary texts improve their social cognition, especially when reading fiction stories that are emotionally engaging and gain insight into complex characters which we might not encounter in real life." (Bundesen& Rosenbaum, 2023, p. 31). All my life I thought about how reading and writing could serve healing but did not occur to me that could also serve the ones who want to help others with their well-being. Maybe the most original finding for me was the fascinating

benefits of creative reading and writing for training mental health professionals exercising abilities: “To see the particularities of a single person against the background of a general picture. This requires abilities to observe, sense, reflect, and synthesize the parts of a narrative, either spoken or written…by connecting dots …an understanding of dominant narratives and characters can help the physician in the assessment of a problem and thus start a therapeutic journey where the patient creates new narratives instead of those repeating the sufferings.” (Bundesen. & Rosenbaum., 2023, p. 311). I didn’t realize how mental health professionals, could benefit so much from training in creative writing and reading, cultivating narrative sensitivity “as a basic human capacity for making meaning out of other people’s actions by deciphering intentions and placing actions within biopsychosocial contexts. Narrative mind reading (Bruner,1987, 2004)—the practical capability of inferring the motives that precipitate and underlie the actions of others—will be seen as a skill important for both the doctor and the patient in the clinical encounter. As a mental capacity, it has a lot of similarities with mentalization and metacognition.” (Bundesen & Rosenbaum, 2023, p. 310). A close reading of literary texts can serve as a simulation of selves in action allowing experiencing a wide range of scenarios and reflecting on how differently the client, and the therapist as well, could behave, decide, and act in a similar situation, and how that experience made them feel offering endless embodied learning opportunities (that will take many lives to have) to prepare for hundreds of scenarios in real life, nurturing response-ability to clients and therapists.

The beauty and difficulty of applying and proposing techniques to the creative writing and reading experience (besides not much research) is that there is no manual or secure outcome, and many considerations might be taken depending on each client. I think it works the same for any therapeutic intervention though. Instructing therapists about creative writing and reading

possibilities (with benefits and risks as all tools have), would offer consciousness about with whom, when, what, and how those creative writing resources and which readings can help a client. Specific suggestions to experiment with for each client's needs can be made, for example, for someone expressing feeling trapped, writing a journey story in an open space as a setting could offer a contrasting freedom experience and a sense of agency. For someone having difficulties accepting someone else, write in the third person from another perspective, for someone feeling stoked in the same actions, write an absolute fantasy story to name a few. Therapists and clients cannot preview what an individual will create or experience in a session, and a lot of what therapy is about is giving space for the unknown to emerge safely. For that to happen, is possible to incorporate useful techniques and proposals to have in hand to offer. I hope creative language can start to be one more of the expressive arts materials.

I witnessed throughout my life how connectedness, hope, optimism, identity, meaning in life, and empowerment (chosen as core components of mental health recovery by Bunden, 2022) were protagonists in every classroom or group I had the privilege to work with. Most of that work was made through creativity, creative writing, and reading, and neuroscience backs me up on how those experiences can improve mental health. I have lived experiences when words, even if creative, are not enough to heal and witness students and clients trapped in explanations. At first, I believed the reason for choosing expressive arts therapy as my path was to free myself from words. Now I think that creative language can offer wonderful opportunities for freedom, healing experiences, and grounded knowledge. That is why a brief description of creating writing and reading resources with the corresponding possible effects and symbolisms they bring might be an endeavor I would love to attempt, at least for expressive therapists to have in mind when

the time to write and read comes for clients, to use it as proposals, the same as a table full of visual arts materials or music instruments.

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