

Museum of My Life

*A two-year creative writing, heritage and visual arts programme
with the museum sector of north east England*

Developed and managed by New Writing North

Reflections, evaluation and learning

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A Creative Touch
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Evaluation methodology

This report is the final part of the evaluation process for the Museum of My Life project. New Writing North commissioned an external evaluator from the outset of the programme, in advance of the first workshop programmes. They were keen to not only benefit from summative findings but also to embed evaluation and reflection throughout the project.

The evaluation process began at an initial regional project management meeting with the museums. This enabled vision, expectations and fears to be observed at this early stage. The process then ran through the delivery phases of the project, with the evaluator observing sessions, interviewing participants, museum staff, and the writers and artists, and where appropriate participating groups' 'managers', such as school staff. Many of the exhibitions were visited and the launches attended. At the end of each workshop the team delivering completed a short evaluation form to ensure that material was captured on an on-going basis and to enable visits and conversations to take place at the appropriate moments.

Once groups had launched their exhibitions, non-school-based participants responded to a questionnaire capturing their view of their progress and learning through the project – about writing, the museum and their own lives.

The structure of delivery – two phases, with three heritage sites in each phase – increased the opportunities for initial learning to have an impact on programme design and delivery. An interim report helped ensure that participating sites had an informed overview of the initial stage.

An external perspective proved valuable in such a region-wide programme involving so many people. It ensured that projects were visited on a frequent basis and gave participants another contact should difficulties need talking through, which did happen occasionally. Given the project duration and the depth of relationship built between the creative team and participants, in some cases a more neutral eye was able to capture the learning and growth of individuals in a way that could be placed within the larger project context and reported back. New Writing North were highly responsive to interim findings and delighted with the level of unexpected positive outcomes occurring, as well as those that related to the project's initial aims.

Thank you to the very many people who have shared their stories with me and are allowing their experience to be shared here to help inform future practice. Museum of My Life was often an emotional journey full of individual tales of pain, loss, joy and celebration. I feel honoured to have had the opportunity to find out more about the participants, and to have observed skilled professionals extending access to, and ownership of, dynamic creative approaches.

Gayle Sutherland

Museum of My Life

“I don’t think this project will ever be over, I’ll be thinking about it for a long time to come”

Bailiffgate Museum participant

The concept

Museum of My Life was designed by New Writing North, the writing development agency for the north east of England. By placing writers within museum and heritage sites it aimed to enable local people to identify and celebrate their own heritage stimulated through an inspiring journey of exploring and reflecting creatively on the museum collections. The project was also seen as an opportunity for museum professionals to extend their experience of working alongside writers, enabling them to strengthen their confidence and skills base in using creative writing techniques and projects within their museum programmes.

Additional aims of the project included attracting new visitors to the museums, improving literacy and/or confidence of creating writing in participants, encouraging museums to develop longer-term ambitious projects and supporting cluster working between heritage sites in the region.

Working with the North East Regional Museums Hub, six sites collaborated in the project. They were all very diverse in terms of size, type, interests and location. Each worked with two community groups, who usually met weekly for 18 sessions; the writer being joined by a visual artist for the latter nine sessions. These were:

- Bailiffgate Museum, Alnwick; writer Ann Coburn and artist Emma Holliday, in conjunction with a group from the University of the Third Age and a network of home-educated pupils with their parents
- The Captain Cook Birthplace Museum, Middlesbrough; writers Bob Beagrie and Andy Willoughby and Busy Ape Arts, supporting adults from Grangetown Library and an after-school group from Caedmon Primary School
- Durham Cathedral, poet Anna Woodford and artist Louise Bradley, working with an adult group from Houghton le Spring Library and sessions within the school day with pupils at The Chorister School
- The Museum of Antiquities, University of Newcastle; poet Maureen Almond and artist Gilly Rogers, collaborating with two groups of older people, some of whom were part of a local history society
- Monkwearmouth Station Museum, Sunderland; novelist Lisa Matthews and artist Alison Unsworth, joining with a group of Bengali women learning English as a second language and secondary pupils from Monkwearmouth School
- Preston Hall Museum, Stockton; playwright Carina Rodney and artist Effie Burns, along with community groups of adults and young people from Newtown Community Centre and Ingleby Barwick



The culmination of the work was to be an anthology of writing and, in each venue, an exhibition creating a museum of the participants’ lives, the scope and design of which would be developed in discussion with all involved.

The concerns

“We are used to doing big projects, but involving others in such a thing is much less common. It would be much easier if it was a school project: pupils have to come. With community groups it will be much more telling”

The Museum of Antiquities

At the outset of the project two aspects seemed to most daunt the museum professionals: finding groups that would want to participate for what was felt to be a very long programme, and scheduling a museum staff member to participate in and support the programme, given its duration. Among some there was concern that participants would get bored or have ‘had enough’ and leave the sessions, jeopardising the project, or that writing was ‘too worthy’ a thing to attract people and that it would be seen as an educational project, in a negative way.

The uncertainty was another factor. New Writing North encouraged the museums to develop links with their groups first so writers could be identified who would best match; some museums wanted to know who the writer would be and how they

would work so they had something definite to 'sell' to potential groups. In some cases there were concerns about the final exhibition: internal scheduling meant that spaces had to be booked in advance of the project and before anything was known about its scale and needs. The evolving and responsive approach to the more detailed planning taken by many of the creative practitioners challenged those whose preference was for detailed and tied-down approaches.

Occasionally there was an initial reluctance to take on local ownership, with a hope that New Writing North would remain the leader at a local level and run the project within the museum rather than a truer and active partnership developing. This usually related to fears around local capacity in terms of time, skills and experience and feeling overwhelmed by the size of the project.

Interestingly, another concern among a couple of the museums was that their collections weren't 'as interesting' and they weren't 'as knowledgeable' as some of the more specialised sites taking part.

"I am trouble, I hate writing at school but it's OK here, it's fun – well actually, it's great, I'm doing loads!"

Participant at Preston Hall Museum

The groups

"It took us a long time to establish the group; it was a lot of work, but it means the project has real value for us. We are working with communities we haven't worked with before"

Preston Hall Museum

The museums, supported by New Writing North, were ambitious about this project and in all cases wanted to work with new groups of people. Some were identified at an early stage but in other cases they were sought out and built from tentative starting points. There was some surprise at how long this process could take and in a couple of cases, museums felt under pressure as time was passing. All however felt that the time put into this stage of the project was worthwhile, as they realised they were dealing with groups very different to those they traditionally dealt with. In many cases it has stimulated new phases of work in other areas of the museum programme.

64% of adult participants had visited the museum they were working with less than once a year, with half of that number having never visited or only visited once before.

Three groups in particular brought together mixed age ranges, with parents and grandparents working among young people and surprising each other with their areas of interest and creative ideas. Three school groups participated but within very different frameworks, with two working in the school day and one after school. Two of the schools and the group of home educators varied their base for workshops between their usual site and the heritage building and this approach seemed particularly successful for them.

Group sizes varied significantly, which enabled different approaches and group dynamics. There was initially much concern about two groups where numbers became low, but it became clear that the impact on a small number of participants made it very meaningful. This could be sustained due to the overall numbers in the programme that allowed these museums a level of contact they would not usually have been able to justify, a benefit of being in a larger cross-region project. However, the dynamic of the larger groups was on the whole an essential part of the participant experience, with many talking of new friendships and a camaraderie in trying out new, sometimes scary, activity together.

Participant attendance was very consistent, with some drop-off typical in the first two or three sessions and then the remaining group cementing and being fully engaged for the remaining time. This was a very different pattern to that feared by some of the museums at the outset. Participants in the majority of groups also undertook substantial additional input, from completing written work and art work between sessions to coming into to the museums to prepare for the exhibition. According to one participant at The Captain Cook Birthplace Museum, "At times, two-hour sessions are just not enough – we could go on longer."

"We have always wanted to be able to work with the school in a different way. Pupils have a very particular relationship to the cathedral through the singing, but don't get to explore it as a building with history. It is great for us to have this opportunity to work with them"

Durham Cathedral

"I am a member of Houghton Writers Group and was pleased when we had the opportunity to take part in this project, we had been looking for a challenge and an opportunity for some fresh input into the group. I tend to visit the cathedral once every couple of years and had fairly limited knowledge of the building and what it held. This has changed a lot: during the project I found the time to look around the cathedral and appreciate its beauty and surroundings. I was able to absorb the atmosphere and receive inspiration and will be very happy to make more regular future visits.

My confidence in my writing has grown through the project. Creative leadership does make a difference and the team were generous in providing advice, inspiration and opportunities. The motivation and encouragement I received enabled me to produce a surprising (in my eyes) amount of work. I found it rather painful at times as I thought about sad times in my life, but heritage has always been very important to me, and I enjoyed the humour and the many happy experiences I also remembered. I feel the project has given me more appreciation of my own life, my journey so far. I particularly enjoyed the session where we joined with the young choristers: it is so good to see older and younger people working together, and to see the family involvement too.

There were times that I felt uncertain about what I could achieve, and whether I could reach the higher standards I was setting for my writing. I was honoured to be able to read some of my work in the cathedral during the exhibition opening. I hope the visitors enjoyed the work."

Participant from Durham Cathedral

The inspiration

“I have been very inspired by the museum; it makes you want to be in it, it is a fantastic stimulus”

Participant at Preston Hall Museum

Part of New Writing North’s reason for developing Museum of My Life was writers expressing a desire to use their skills within the excitement of what museums offer, the richness of the collections and the doors into often everyday lives of the past and the inspiration they hold.

The way the museum resources were integrated into the projects varied considerably. At the Museum of the Antiquities, sessions included a short talk from one of the staff, from director to technician, extending participants’ understanding of the ‘backroom’ activities of the building and then the museum education staff introduced some of the collection which would become the stimulus for that week’s writing. Preston Hall Museum spent time focusing on *The Dice Players* painting within the collection, considering the thoughts and lives of those depicted. Exploring the building itself as well as the items within it, from miner’s memorial to religious iconography, supported the writing of the groups at Durham Cathedral.

Groups found that the writing gave them a new way into considering the heritage on offer, and a reason to be more inquisitive, more thoughtful and more imaginative about it, thinking around the actual item to consider the lives that linked to it. Both participants and museum staff commented on this:

“I did know the museum, well, I thought I knew it – I had been here a few times and visited the [Hadrian’s] wall, but now I realise I didn’t know it all... The project has definitely enabled participants to engage very closely with the museum artefacts, it has brought them into a much more considered relationship, they have looked in more depth and detail than you’d usually see”
The Museum of Antiquities

Whilst in some venues museum artefacts were integral to the approach, there were examples of both writers and museum staff being hesitant in fully linking the collections with more personal reflections. However by the end of the project there was more confidence and stronger ideas of how they could have utilised the buildings and collections more fully, having seen what had been achieved when they ‘got it right’ and ‘it really worked’. The writer’s vision and museum partner’s willingness and lateral thinking proved to be important in embedding this approach.

Monkwearmouth Station Museum had a particular difficulty as it closed for refurbishment over the period of the project, and its opening date was moved until after the workshops were to be completed. This did present challenges for the delivery team, particularly as the majority of participants had little knowledge of the collection there or, for some, of museums at all. A visit to another Sunderland museum proved important as did bringing items from storage out to the groups, animated by the museum staff. However there was often a frustration at not being able to be more firmly based at the museum.

The project has positively affected the participants’ attendance patterns at the museums, increasing their own engagement and bringing others, such as family members, to them. This was not just during their own exhibitions: 71% of adult participants said they would be increasing their visits to the museums, with the remainder questioned staying at about the same level, which for most was already at least twice a year. All surveyed feel they have more knowledge of the collection now as well as increased awareness of issues such as the way the public can become involved within museums.

“I will be coming along more often now I know it is there; there are interesting local exhibitions as well as hands-on child-friendly installations. I had never been there before this project”

Participant at Bailliffgate Museum

“This was one of the most enjoyable experiences I have had, taken with friends, some of whom were merely acquaintances at the outset. Each of whom became, in their own right, authors of amazing backgrounds and histories, tellers of great tales.

When I heard about the project I thought it sounded intriguing. I love museums, admire the Romans and felt I would be among like-minded people. Also I love a challenge! I usually visit the museum every few months so thought I knew the collection quite well. However I will now visit the museum more frequently – the items on display now have much more meaning to me and I can relate them to my life in different ways. I feel a new kinship with these people who lived here in the north so long ago and who left an indelible memory, one that I have inherited. I have a better understanding not just of the collection and interests of the museum but also the ways the public can be involved and the different roles within the museum.

I hadn’t done any creative writing since leaving school – which was quite some time ago, and did not feel very confident about putting pen to paper. Any writing I had done more recently was connected to my work as a civil servant – boring! I felt I had forgotten how to use my imagination. Reflecting on my own life in response to the museum objects and the tasks we worked on I kept remembering things I thought were forgotten and I was amazed at how rich and varied life has been for me, an exile from Yorkshire, whilst living in Northumbria. A lot of the information about their lives that people shared was funny, sad and even tragic, but rich with local colour – even giving rise to many a risqué story! I was full of admiration for those in the group, glad to know them.

Our mentors, writer, artist and museum staff were great. They encouraged and chivvied us, showing us how we could do things we didn’t think we ever could. I am very confident about approaching creative writing now – yet my biggest surprise about this project is that I could do it at all!

Whoever conceived this project is to be heartily congratulated – it was brilliant.”

Participant at The Museum of Antiquities



Reflecting on the heritage presented by the project venues was only half of the inspiration within the project, the other half being participants' own lives. The level to which the adults in particular shared their memories and objects of personal value was especially touching. Writing offered a way both to reflect and re-evaluate, allowing very personal responses and giving new distance when appropriate.

“One participant wrote a poem about her mother in law’s prayer shawl. She had never really liked her but the poem was very generous, considered her perspective; she was moved to tears reading it”

Preston Hall Museum

This power of writing was also commented upon at Bailiffgate Museum, where participant comments included:

“People have been moved to tears at times. I didn’t think we’d get to know each other like this”

“I have got a lot out of talking to my grandchildren about what I’ve remembered, and with my husband too – we have remembered things that have brought a new depth to our conversations”

“We have shared so many secrets – this kind of therapy would cost thousands of pounds!”

For the young people there was obviously less depth of experience to call upon, but many remembered earlier childhood moments and reflected upon the nature of how and where they live now. They thought about what objects were precious to them and why and what was important to them about their surroundings. At Bailiffgate, for instance, the group dug into their family and local heritage, talking about family tree research and developing – and performing – border ballads about their families.

“We decided to take part in the project because, as a home educating family, we were interested in seeking out opportunities to participate in group projects, especially creative workshops. Additionally, the theme of this project complemented our own work in researching our family tree, exploring our world and connections with the world.

I had visited the Bailiffgate Museum before, but probably only once or twice. This will change – we discovered a wealth of resources there, some of which we can even borrow. The staff were friendly and accommodating and on top of the permanent display, the temporary exhibitions seem to tap into the local community in a very appealing manner.

Thinking about our own lives and heritage was enriching, but it was more challenging than I expected, especially coming up with the final display work. The topic seemed so vast sometimes that it was difficult to commit to a set of ‘limited’ themes. I think I’d have appreciated a clearer plan for the project set out from the beginning as it would have given participants a greater sense of security and the chance to prepare more in advance if they chose to. However I suspect that its absence gave the group leaders more flexibility to go with what they thought would suit the individuals in each group best. I really appreciated all three of them: they were extremely positive, friendly and approachable.

A real surprise about being involved in this project is the way in which I seem to have come to a better understanding of my daughter and the ways in which she works with others. Initially my enthusiasm seemed to have overwhelmed her – causing her to shy away. But, as time went on and I gently backed off, she grew in confidence and was able to express her own voice and ideas.”

Participant from Bailiffgate Museum

“I can see the light again. I have done so much in my life and I never realised that until this project. I had never visited the museum before or been involved in a writing project before. I found about it through the library and thought I’d give it a go. I am really amazed by the stuff in the museum, I have started bringing the grandchildren in. With my background as a sailor it has been particularly interesting: I brought in a copy of my ‘crossing the date line’ certificate and they have added it to the education collection and are using it with children visiting the museum. I have shared a few other things too.

The writing has been about all sorts, my tattoos even – turns out the first person to have a tattoo on The Endeavour was a guy from Darlington. After we did sonnets in a session I took some books out of the library on them; it’s really interesting. I have been to some of the poetry sessions that Andy and Bob (the writers) run at Linthorpe Road, that was interesting too. We are talking about maybe one of my pieces being included in a publication of local writing. I never thought about anything like that before, but this project means other people are reading what I have written and that is a real shock. I have had a look at the university writing course and might progress that in the future.

I was coming out of a period of depression when this project started. It has really helped me to focus and look forward. It has been good be involved. I will keep in touch with the museum and keep doing things there.”

Participant from The Captain Cook Birthplace Museum

The writing

“There were so many enlightening experiences: so many life experiences I’d forgotten and the emotions attached to that past life were often painful and surprising. The whole experience was truly inspiring”

Participant at Durham Cathedral

Two-thirds of adult participants described themselves as having little or no experience of creative writing at the start of the project, with most of that limited experience being school-based. 6% were much more familiar with the experience, saying they regularly undertook such work. Participants frequently expressed surprise at what they achieved, both in terms of the quantity and quality of what was produced and amazed that the writers made it all possible for them.

In the adult sessions the approach was often to introduce writing styles and exercises but the majority of the time was spent sharing work from the previous week and discussing the current task and sharing their first attempts. Between sessions, considerable time was given to completing this work, often emailing pieces to the writer to ensure feedback at the next meeting.

“I was concerned that participants didn’t want to do much writing when they were here: they wanted to chat about ideas. But they really do go away and write at home, they do it as ‘homework’ and bring it in the next week. I was amazed – I thought they wouldn’t do it, but they really did, every week”

The Museum of Antiquities

One common discussion between the groups was what the definition of poetry could be, moving from the desire to see rhyme as essential to finding that at times it limited ideas and forced strange syntax.

Participants were introduced to a wide variety of styles from sonnets to kennings. Laughter rang out at one session when a frustrated person announced she was much better at writing haiku than cinquain, the task at hand. There was an appreciation of how forms forced decisions, ensuring you had to “ration your words” and “cut things down to the bare bones”. Editing became appreciated as its impact was seen within the work.

Perhaps not surprisingly, for the young people it was far more common for the sessions to be where writing happened, although there were exceptions. Even when attending within a school group, participants seemed to separate the experience from their usual taught experiences, with many of the writing exercises being new and the atmosphere and style of the sessions differing.



The level of teacher support for the projects was an essential aspect that allowed the best work to take place. There were times where school and writers’ priorities differed, such as spelling accuracy during ideas generation, but on the whole the mix worked. Interestingly, at one venue it was the teachers who wanted to push the sessions further from the ‘classroom style’ and encouraging writers to be more adventurous in their approach.

“This has been a great project for one of our pupils in particular. He isn’t very academic and tends not to apply himself and has been caught playing truant. He usually doesn’t stick at things but he hasn’t missed a single session of this project”

Monkwearmouth School

In Durham pupils were delighted to have a wrapped-up item to write about, defining and describing it before being able to see what it was; in Stockton, young people compared their home area to songs, sweets and types of holidays, and in Middlesbrough the much-loved reality sandwich:

“My best piece was when I wrote my reality sandwich because I found that in my brain I could find ideas that I thought I didn’t have. I have learnt that when I use my imagination I have lots of ideas”

A high level of cooperation developed among the young people. For instance, at Preston Hall Museum, siblings supported each other; in general there was a strong sense of writing as a group activity accessible for all.

“No one expected F to join in. He is only four and his mum brought crayons etc and sat him down with them. But he joined in right from the start, giving ideas, speaking pieces that others wrote down”

Bailliffgate Museum



The art work

The move into the second phase of the workshop period where an artist joined the groups to assist with the journey to the final exhibition was a definite shift in focus for participants. In some places the groups were really ready for this different impetus and ran quickly with it. Others felt resistance to a change, having settled into a way of working and being so engaged with the writing process. Sometimes there was an awareness that this discomfort reflected that felt at the outset of the writing period.

“When I started I was thinking, ‘Ohhh poetry, heck’ but now it is time to move on to the painting and I’m thinking, ‘I don’t want to paint I just want to write poetry!’”

Participant from Bailiffgate Museum

The artists’ tasks at this stage varied, as did the approaches taken. The need to balance the relatively short time period with both developing an exhibition concept with the group and realising it within a quality standard did create some pressure. Where artist and writer had been able to have early discussions about how the work might develop and kept informed as the writing phase progressed it was easier to find coherence with visual notions for what the group wanted to share. Where this wasn’t possible, for instance in some cases where the visual artists were not appointed until the writers were already delivering, the task was more difficult. Also, some writers were reluctant to give the workshop space for the visual work, having reached a stage where written work needed to be edited and reviewed to be ready for the exhibition stage and final anthology. Another pressure at this stage was often the museum’s need for detailed information about the exhibition so it could be built into staffing and management plans.

With these dynamics the projects which probably best managed the second phase were those where the artist had a clear notion of the general shape of the exhibition within which participants could still make a high level of choice, and where the writer and artist had mutual respect for each other’s roles and saw the exhibition as a joint responsibility.

Many participants were quick to understand the breadth of artform open to them, even relishing the opportunity to experiment:

“Making a mess with paints was fun, you think you aren’t ‘allowed’ to do that when you are older”

“I’m no good at art, but I’m getting into photography: this project isn’t about being able to paint; it is great that I can use my new skills”

Approaches were developed that allowed the precious objects that were at the centre of many of the pieces of work to be represented and the breadth of people’s lives and interests to be displayed within a design that also utilised original text.

The visual work was often the first point at which the two groups at the venue made contact, as they developed a vision that would be jointly realised, or at least brought into some sort of unity. On the whole this was quite exciting for participants, but occasionally led to difficulties such as adults being concerned that their work would be lessened by being within too childlike an environment, or a group wanting to keep its independence rather than collaborate. However all these concerns were addressed before the exhibitions were in place.

“It’s good for the pupils to come out of school, to be in a different space and surrounded by all these different objects. To have their work up in a space like this is beyond their expectations, it is so important”

Caedmon Primary School

The museum staff

Central to the project design was the idea that museum staff would be a part of the creative team, offering their resources and skills while learning from others in the team as the project was delivered. The opportunity to see the writers and artists at work, in a real situation, helped the museum staff to assess techniques and gather ideas for their own future work. Some had the opportunity to deliver writing-based workshops within the project, testing out approaches while also able to call upon the writers' support. This work will be disseminated more widely through the resource handbook developed from the project.

There were definitely many equal partnerships at work between the three types of professionals – artists, writers and museum staff – showing how the different skills could enrich the process. It was unfortunate when this wasn't quite realised, particularly given the level of commitment from the museum in terms of staff time. The reasons varied but more joint planning would have assisted in all cases, ensuring clarity about each person's role in the overall process and unique skills set.

Techniques learnt from the writers? Well, plenty really... The Reality Sandwich really sparked the children's imaginations. The use of photos to inspire writing was a great idea, as was the use of objects. In fact, we are doing a gifted and talented workshop soon, and I'm going to use the 'call my bluff' idea from their work in these sessions.

I was really surprised to find out how possible it was to use the same exercises with very different age groups and I have learnt about new ways of delivering ideas – in a way that gets really good writing out of the children. I will really use the techniques I have learnt from the writers in the museum's education work.

It has also been a good project to get to know some teachers and I now feel confident in approaching those teachers if I feel I need advice or suggestions for what schools are looking out for in other projects.

The overall 'journeys' theme was a brilliant idea, a good way to link the James Cook element of the museum and the 'journey of life' element of the project.

Captain Cook Birthplace Museum

I was new in post and this was the best introduction to the collection I could have had! I have had to research the artefacts in advance of the sessions – it has given me a great way into knowing the collection. You always mean to do lots of in-depth stuff but there often isn't the time – I had no choice. It was in at the deep end, it has been great. It was so staggering to find out participants focussed from the introduction I gave – I learnt a lot about what captures people's imaginations and helps them think about the artefacts.

This project has given me food for thought for future education work and it will fundamentally inform my practice.

The Museum of Antiquities



I have so many more ideas about things to do with different groups – it has really extended my awareness of how to use the collection

Bailiffgate Museum



Dissemination

Each of the writers who led the project was commissioned to produce an example of a creative writing exercise that they had used during the project. In partnership with the North East Regional Museums Hub we created a resource pack aimed at teachers, museum staff and writers, providing practical writing-based techniques and exercises for encouraging engagement in museums.

The plan at the beginning of this project was also to run a series of training sessions for museum staff who had not been involved in the project, but who were interested in how creative writing could be used in a museum education context. The steering group, which was made up of representatives of the participating museums, plus MLA North East, the Regional Museums Hub and Arts Council England, decided that this may not be seen as a priority for museum staff and that take-up might be limited. So it was decided that we would run two training sessions in partnership with the Hub towards the end of the project, which would also be a way of further promoting the resource pack. The Hub promoted the opportunities, which were half-day workshops in the Bailiffgate and Captain Cook museums, led by writer Carina Rodney, and aimed at museums staff. In total, 12 museum staff took part in the seminars, which was quite a low turnout, but the training was appreciated by those who took part.

"The whole idea of breaking down the stages of writing and from that developing exercises linked to each stage was a real insight into the 'mysterious' world of creative writing... The writer leading the session was very encouraging and

boosted participants' confidence. I realised that creative writing can be more accessible than I previously thought and learnt techniques for encouraging shorter pieces."

"I'll definitely use the ideas when developing teachers' information and other resources for education groups. I'll also spread the word when delivering ITT. I will try to use the techniques with groups I may teach in the future. I will also try to set aside more time to write in my spare time."

"Carina, the writer, was a very encouraging and creative workshop leader and I'd like to see her working again with museums. The Museum of My Life booklet is very useful. [The Training] increased my confidence in developing literacy-based sessions. On a personal level it has also inspired me to join a creative writing course. I feel more confident about it and I'm sure with planning I can deliver a successful session. I've got lots of ideas that I can't wait to try out, I feel very inspired! I have some great ideas which I would feel confident in leading and also to train other colleagues in at my museum."

Participant in creative writing for museums staff training

The outcomes: intended and unexpected

This was a project that exceeded expectation and the level of engagement from motivated participants was exceptionally high, the work produced of a high quality and the range of techniques shared by the creative team diverse and relevant to future work at the museums. Participants wrote more than they ever expected to in a wide range of styles and 90% left feeling more confident about writing creatively than they did at the outset. The majority of participants developed a writing practice at home and extended their knowledge of the museum and its collections, leading to increased visits. Participation levels remained consistent, with the length of the project being cited as a positive aspect by many. Memories were rekindled and lives valued.



The exhibitions brought further new audiences into the museums and the openings were well-attended events at which participants read a selection of work. There was pride in the work produced and an understanding of its personal value. An anthology representing all the groups has been published as a lasting reminder.

There were many unexpected outcomes realised too, including:

- Participants attending new writing events in their locality, often when 'their' writer was sharing work
- A writer being commissioned for more work by the museum, responding to the collection through poetry as a documentation and celebration of the museum before it moves venue
- Exhibition periods being extended due to their popularity
- Participants adding to the resources of the museum through offering artefacts or becoming volunteers
- Participants continuing to display their final exhibition piece at home
- One of the community groups is developing a community curator post, partly supported by their experience in this project
- Other heritage and community professionals are adapting the project concept to their own settings
- Museums committing additional resources for the groups, such as Preston Hall Museum's publication of writing
- The Museum of Antiquities staff Christmas party including the writing groups where they partied and shared their work

It was a feature of this project that people shared their own stories and in doing so they also opened themselves up to the creative process and changed. For New Writing North, one of the most important outcomes has been that personal change, which for a few of the participants has made a real and substantial difference to their lives.

"I'm still saying, 'Is this a poem?' when I've written it. I want to check. I know it is really but I just can't quite believe that I could have written something that is a poem"

Participant at Bailiffgate Museum

The learning

Key strengths

- Writers can support museums to work with local communities in a sustained way, with high quality end points
- Museum staff can utilise a diverse range of creative writing techniques to assist people in exploring the collection and mainstream such approaches within local practice
- Writing-based projects can attract new audiences to museums
- Museums can run projects over an extended period, with participants becoming more rather than less motivated
- Museum collections are really inspiring to local people and can stimulate a wide range of personal reflection
- Long-term projects allow more developed relationships to grow and can result in more outcomes and with more embedded impact
- Regional partnerships particularly enable smaller museums to be involved in larger projects, while still allowing for local variation in project design and delivery. The learning can be relevant to the wider sector



Key challenges

- Developing new groups takes time; the more ‘challenging’ groups need even longer planning stages and project delivery schedules have to allow for this
- Multi-disciplinary teams need a high level of mutual respect and excellent communication. Involvement of the full team at the outset increases the coherence of the project, bringing increased value for money
- Museum staff need to remain confident about their ‘offer’, understanding its value even when external professionals are involved in projects
- Working as a regional cluster takes time and commitment: developing and understanding best practice may involve visiting other museums and committing time for meetings and networking
- Personalities matter and building the right team is not a science
- Initial fears need to be acknowledged, but not allowed to limit the potential of projects. Taking risks is an essential aspect of developing practice

“It has brought the museum into context. I used to look at it in terms of stones, now I think of it in terms of people”

Participant at the Museum of Antiquities

“One pupil has been off due to an emergency appendix operation. His mum sent a note to school asking if he could still be involved in the creative writing project – it was that important to him”

Monkwearmouth School

“It is such a long project, it means it isn’t a gimmick: it is about sustained effort”

Preston Hall Museum

“It takes me a whole week to think about it, it just goes round and round; then the night before the next session it has to come out. It isn’t always that good but sometimes I’ve been really pleased”

The Museum of Antiquities

“18 weeks sounded a long time but it has just flown by. The thought of art work scared me but something has been produced, I’m amazed”

Bailiffgate Museum

“I realise now that the writing wasn’t so difficult, as it was already in our heads – it just needed teasing out”

Durham Cathedral