

Big Stories, Written in Wrexham (and the Cloud!)

By Elen Caldecott and Joanna Nissel

Occasionally, there is a delicious confluence of a funding call, the work you actually want to do and the art you are intending to make. We were lucky enough to have these particular stars align earlier this year. This article is a report on the community-based writing project that grew out of this funding call and will be of interest to writers wanting to work in a hybrid way with diverse communities.

In 2022, Elen had published a book for children, *The Blackthorn Branch*, set in a contemporary community in North Wales. She wanted to share that work with children and families in that community and use it as a launching off point for their own creativity; Lancaster University – the institution Elen calls home – wanted to support the impact of its researchers' work with a small pot of money. So, a funding bid was written, and schemes were laid.

The Blackthorn Branch was inspired by local folklore and legend, so with that in mind, Elen planned to run three creative writing sessions in libraries across the Wrexham district, where the people attending would be encouraged to write flash fiction and poetry based on wishes, folklore and local stories. These would be Big Stories, Written in Wrexham. So far, so good. However, Lancaster University was also hoping for a social or policy impact (with the language of REF looming). So, Elen decided that the writing workshops would just be the beginning, the catalyst for a longer-term project. We would start in a community, in-person space and fly online, to the cloud. Wrexham has pockets of high social deprivation and a tradition of manual and blue-collar work. Our Big Stories could evolve in a shared, digital space which would increase our writers' familiarity with teamworking via the internet – potentially opening up new avenues of work and employment.

What did this all mean in practice?

As part of our plan, Elen ran the workshops on the ground, with the enthusiastic and very welcome help of the local librarians. Joanna, who was at the time resident in Germany, served as the cloud-based editor and collaborator for the writers. The initial meetings took place over three successive Saturdays in the Easter holidays. We had 40 people attend and write. Some had signed up, intending to take part, while others had anticipated being chaperones, but were tempted into writing on the day. There were a mixture of children, parents and grandparents, and adult writers. The workshops had been advertized as part of Wrexham's 'Carnival of Words' and were well attended. Using map-making, photo prompts and lists of magic wishes or memories (depending on the age of the participants!), the writers produced first drafts of flash fiction and poetry about beloved family members and pets, memories of their own childhoods, journeys to fantastical lands and one very memorable concrete poem about Wrexham striker Paul Mullin.

Crucially, everyone wrote their stories on paper and added a contact email address. This email address was used first to share our plans (including data protection info) and then as the main point of contact for the writer. Elen gathered up the handwritten paper, scanned it all and uploaded the scans to a shared Drive.

At this point, we moved online. Joanna deciphered the handwritten texts and transcribed them to a Google doc – one for each writer. She added praise where it was merited and offered editorial suggestions; we considered using track-changes for this, but an initial assessment (using pre-project questionnaires) indicated that many of our participants were very unfamiliar with word processing programmes and we felt track-changes were a step too far. Instead, Joanna simply added her comments in green ink.

When all the documents were ready, Elen changed the access to the cloud documents, enabling anyone with the link to edit. We did consider limiting access to specific email accounts, but were fairly certain that would create an unnecessary barrier to participation, as people inevitably logged in with a different email address to the one they had given us or – as with one blended family – had children living in multiple homes sharing one point of contact.

Over the next two months, the participants were invited to edit the Google document in situ, then copyedit and proofread it – all with Joanna’s help and oversight. This was all done asynchronously, online.

We are so proud that we didn’t lose a single participant in this move online; everyone who wrote a piece of flash fiction or poem at one of the Saturday workshops ended up publishing that edited piece with us in an anthology. Pieces like this, by Jan Wilkins, on visiting a colliery:

“We left the sun shining valiantly across the hills and descended lower than the sundance valley shadows. Conversation was impossible in the rattling pulley lift, chains clanking in the unoiled mechanism. The darkness was palpable in the corners and unlit tunnels. Lamps shone from heads, men like puppets, time managing their strings. I put my notebook away.”

Because this was the final piece of the project and we wanted to come full-circle, we returned to the in-person physical world with a printed, published anthology. This was typeset and designed by Elen using Canva and Kindle Direct Publishing. As part of the funding, we received enough money to buy a print-on-demand copy of the book for all our writers. They returned to the library where the workshop had taken place to collect the book from the ever-welcoming librarians – and complete their post-project questionnaire.

We were able to compare pre- and post- project questionnaires for 21 participants (the remaining participants didn’t return their post-project questionnaires). In terms of the impact of the project, we were looking at self-reported confidence levels in writing, editing and working online as part of a team, using a five-point Likert scale. Analysis of the questionnaires suggests the project had a significant effect on confidence around writing (with an average of half a point improvement on the scale), a smaller effect on confidence in online working (with an average of a .2 point improvement on the scale) and a detrimental effect on confidence in editing (with an average of a .3 drop on the scale). It’s possible that the participants were being edited for the first time and perhaps left the project with a greater degree of understanding of what it means to edit and this was linked to a drop in confidence.

As well as the Likert scale, we also invited qualitative comments, and these were overwhelmingly positive. The young people said things like, “It was an awesome experience” and “I’d like to do it all again”. One parent reported that her son went on to write more stories, another said her daughter was able to talk about personal loss after writing about a recent bereavement. Of the adults, one called the experience “priceless” and another intends to enrol on a creative writing course.

So, as facilitators, we are delighted by the outcome and have reason to believe that the participants are too. We are grateful that the funding body – and the amazing librarians – made it possible to create our *Big Stories, Written in Wrexham*.

With thanks to:

Wrexham Carnival of Words

Lancaster University

The Librarians who hosted us so wonderfully

And all the brilliant participants.

Author Biographies

Dr Elen Caldecott is an author for children and young adults whose work has been twice longlisted for the Carnegie Award, shortlisted for the Waterstones Children’s Book Award and has won the Tir Na n’Og Award. She teaches Creative Writing at Lancaster University in the UK. Poet and researcher, Joanna Nissel, is currently completing a PhD in poetry mentorship at the Universities of Southampton and Bath Spa, funded by the SWWDTP. Her debut poetry pamphlet, *Guerrilla Brightenings*, was published in 2022 by Against the Grain Press.