



## Transformative Poetry – Creative Writeshop

*Timo Holthoff*

<b>Name of Activity</b> Transformative Poetry – Creative Writeshop	<b>Total time</b> At least 90 minutes
<b>Overview</b> This is a method to prove that everybody can be a poet and that poetry has an empowering and transformative power! After some techniques of venting body and mind, a collective brainstorming around a chosen theme provides the basis for composing individual texts (stories, poems) and possibly drawings. The results shared within the group often reveal unexpected insights into both the author and the topic.	<b>Materials/room</b> Chairs; paper, pens, crayons; talking stick; possibly items to create an inviting atmosphere like candles and objects related to the topic/motto of writing. Possibility to sit in a circle on the floor (maybe provide mats, pillows, blankets). Possibility to go for a quiet walk outside.
<b>Number of people</b> 5 – 20 participants	<b>Target groups &amp; Age</b> The method is suitable for any group with literacy skills, starting from an age of 10 years.
<b>Learning outcomes</b> Learners discover unknown potential within themselves and gain self-assurance by experiencing that they can be poets. Learners gain new perspectives on a given topic by exploring it through arts and silly ways rather than rational thinking. The group practices mindfulness and appreciation for each other.	

## **Background - Why poetry is a magic elixir for change**

Rational thinking is a gift in many ways but in its linearity and narrowness also obstructive in finding the unusual solutions that we possibly need to cope with our complex challenges. Other forms of knowing and creating meaning through our bodies, our hearts and our relations have been outruled in western mindsets. Poetry and creative writing can be used as a tool to break through the structures of everyday normality and to broaden our imagination by inviting queer and weird forms of wisdom, interrelation with the world and co-creation that go beyond the cognitive and logical, making more space for the heart, the belly and the magical. The writing in this method is around a topic set by the facilitator (or possibly negotiated by the group). With an unlimited variety of possible themes this method can complement almost any workshop, seminar or lecture - providing an unusual way of exploring the respective topic. The charm of this method is its simplicity that enables everybody to write and share a meaningful text. Especially to people that have never wrote in this sense, that would never have thought that they too can be poets, this method has an empowering effect. By the personal insights shared by the texts the method creates a lot of mindfulness and empathy within a group.

### **Steps of the method:**

#### *0. Preparation: Creating a Welcoming Space*

- Chose a topic as a theme for the writing. It can be anything, however, the more dimensions a theme has, the more diverse the texts will be. Something abstract and open (e.g. Social Justice) rather than something technical (e.g. tax regulations) usually works better. Examples for themes that provoked great writing: "Life", "Transformation", "Wilderness beyond our Fences", "Revolution", "Love", "Mother Earth", "Freedom", "Togetherness", "Fire".
- Prepare the room in a way that people can sit in a closed circle, ideally in a comfortable position on the ground (maybe provide blankets, mats or pillows). Arrange things in the middle that contribute to a cosy and creative atmosphere, like a candle, flowers and objects related to the topic (e.g. things from nature or daily life, pictures).
- Provide pens, papers and crayons.

#### *1. Intro (5 Min)*

- Welcome the group and explain the intention and course of the writeshop. Present the theme / motto for the workshop and why



you chose it (or let participants chose one theme they would like to write about together). Say something encouraging like: this room is full of poets who didn't know they are poets! Explain that a poem does not have to rhyme, that it can be any form of text, and that the artists should just start writing without feeling under pressure to create something great. Emphasize that even though the idea is to share the texts, everybody is free not to, hence first of all everybody writes for her- or himself. As a little ritual you might light the candle, symbolizing „the fire in our belly“ that the method seeks to ignite.

## 2. Preparatory Techniques to Vent both Body and Mind (15 Min)

In order to have a cut from whatever works the minds of the participants and to invite a broader imagination some warming-up methods can be useful. These two have worked well:

- **Breathing Exercise** for creating mindfulness, a sense of connection and venting the body: Invite participants to get up and stand in a circle with their eyes closed, in order to be led through a short meditation (with shoes off if room and temperature allow): „Take a few deep but natural breaths. Feel how the air is flowing into your body – and out. Feel where your feet touch the ground - the thin border between your body and the earth. Feel how the earth supports your weight, carries you. With every breath you take, the border between your feet and the ground dissolves more, as if your feet were growing roots into the earth. It's like the earth was pulling you closer to itself. You feel grounded. Rock your body back and forth a bit – and to the sides - like a tree in the wind, held safe by it's roots. Now, imagine you had a hole at the top of your head – like the breathing hole of a whale. When you breath in, air flows through that hole down into your body and with breathing out it

flows out of your feet into the ground. Take deep breaths to vent your body. And now change the direction of breathing: you breath in through your feet and breath out through the hole on your head – let all bad engergies and hard feeling vaporize to the sky. Take a few calm breaths before you open your eyes again and put your attention back to our circle.

- **Silliness Exercise:** Ask participants to take a chair each and individually spend 10 minutes with it. First, studying it, trying to grasp and feel it's history: for example, the tree that it's wood came crome, the rocks from which it's metal was taken, the hands and steps it went through in being built, the roads it travelled to get here, the many bodies it carried, the talks it witnessed. Second, trying out what ELSE it is good for, using it for anything BUT a chair, putting yourself into differet relation to it, playing with possibilities unthought of. Participants might leave the room / building for that. After the exersize you can share the experiences with the group.

### 3. Collective Brainstorming (10 Min)

- Participants sit in a circle. Provide each person with a pen and paper, folded in 3 parts (like a letter). Ask everybody to think of 3 things that they associate with the given theme and to write their 3 words on the 3 parts of the paper.

- Ask people to hand the paper (folded) to the person sitting to their right. Ask everybody to look for the first word on the paper – and next to it to write down another word that they associate with this word.

- Repeat this process for the second and third word. Than have all papers handed back to their original owners.

- In the end everybody has 6 words associated with the given theme, as a trigger for his or her writing. An example:

<b>Theme: Transformation</b>	
<b>Caterpillar</b>	Butterfly
<b>Fear</b>	Love
<b>Revolution</b>	Power

#### 4. Individual Writing (at least 15 Min)

- Based on the collectively brainstormed 6 words everyone is invited to write a poem, making use of all of the 6 words – which might already tell a story. Give at least 15min time for this.

- Additionally you can provide crayons and invite people to embellish their poem with drawings (or even just draw something if they don't feel like writing).

#### 5. Sharing of Results - different options (at least 30 Min)

- Invite people to put their (un)finished poem to the wall and then to walk around the gallery reading all poems. If they find a poem very appealing, they are invited to take the floor and read it out aloud.

- Take people on a silent walk outside, e.g. to the forest. Brief them that at a certain point you will stop and then everybody should find a position in a hearable distance. One might start to break the silence by reading out his or her poem. Others can follow until nobody rises to speak anymore. Then you walk back in silence – or already use the time for a debriefing (in pairs if the group is very big).

#### 6. Debriefing (15 Min)

- Start by appreciating and thanking everybody who participated and those who spoke and listened.

- Ask people to share what they experienced through the exercise, how they felt and what they take out from it. Use a talking stick or the like so that everybody gets the chance to speak.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Timo Holthoff* works for the Association of German Development and Humanitarian Aid NGOs (VENRO e.V.) as coordinator for the Bridge 47 - Building Global Citizenship project where he experiments with innovative educational approaches as part of a European network. For 8 years he has been working for NGOs in the field of Global Learning and as a freelance lecturer and trainer for transformative and decolonial education. As an activist he is committed to radical educational change, e.g. with his film *Learning Transformation - Voices for Another Education*.

He is currently undergoing a major transformation himself: He has become a father and is looking forward to rediscovering himself and the world through the eyes of his daughter.