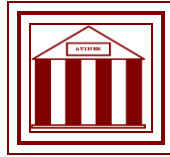


**Athens Institute for Education and Research
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
PSY2013-0606**

**Interaction between Literature,
Psychology and Psychiatry: From
writing to Word, an Example of
Multidisciplinary Care**

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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Abstract

The discovery and practices of writing, multiple voice readings, theatrical productions, or poetry, may take part in the rebuilding of a suffering person.

Indeed, when speech cannot come forth, hindered by a lack of skill with language, or discouragement inherited from the school experience, or just plain decency, or mental suffering, or psycho-traumas, creative / created work may serve as a substitute for the teen's speech. For example, during a writing exercise, a metaphor sought to give color to the text may open an encrypted and symbolic world, and thus lead the youth to a passion for writing, and allow

him to express himself. Similarly, a character's repartee in a novel or drama, an excerpt of a literary work, a poem can affect the young reader's imagination.

The objectives of this communication are to present the various forms of verbal or written expressions spontaneously adopted by teenagers in psychic suffering, during the literary workshop. We shall tackle the question of interaction(s) between literature, psychology and psychiatry, and the bridges, built within a systemic framework, established between all the actors of various backgrounds of this encounter.

Keywords: Literature, Psychology, Psychiatry, Pluridisciplinarity

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Introduction

Medical literature concerning writing workshops is abundant. Indeed, for several years, many writing workshops have been developed in different forms with varying objectives and processes. But the common denominators to all of them are the strengthening of everyone's motivation to write, the encouraging of the expression of ideas, emotions, and the development of imagination. Most articles concern the writing workshops offered as part of an individual support or a group therapy, led by two therapists¹.

Written texts can be distinguished as neutral, expressive or literary texts: the neutral text is characterized by the narration of precise and objective facts; the expressive text highlights the opinions and feelings mirroring the author's real-life experience; the literary text makes use of diverse literary genres to tell a fictitious story.

Through this interdisciplinary and interaction work, we address the impact of writing on teenagers in psychic suffering, and hospitalized in full-time care units.

Adolescence and Psychic Suffering

Adolescence is a period of self-change, movement, turbulence, upheaval, which organizes both somatic and psychic entrance into adult life. In a process of separation and individualization, the teenager goes from the state of dependency to a state of autonomy. He has to find new interests². If we refer to the etymology, adolescence comes from Latin *adolescere*, which means growing up. This period is commonly perceived as difficult to live through, and leads to much questioning, in many ways, on the teens' part. The confrontation to the adult world is often frightening. The young adult in construction can feel insecure because of fears of not being up to par, not being in sync with himself and the others, because of questionings about the perceptions of the world, the feeling of having soon to assume their own choices, the bodily transformations and the awakening of the sex drive³. This introspection often isolates the teenager, leaves him helpless in his capacities of interaction and expression, as well as in front of the understanding of his self he tries to have.

In psychiatric clinical practice, the psychic suffering of the teenagers stresses this withdrawal, this difficulty of communication, this impossibility to establish contact with what or who surrounds them, and this increases even more their ill-being.

Artistic practices, as well as their free choice rather than obligation, favor the deployment of creativity. The discovery and development of talent participate in the soothing of narcissistic wounds. Writing (*handwriting*), in all

¹Chidiac, N. (2010). *Therapeutic Writing workshops*. Paris : Masson.

²Marcelli, D., Braconnier A., (1995). *Adolescence and psychopathology*. 4th edition. Paris : Masson.

³*Ibid.*

its incarnations, be it poems, tales, life narratives, autobiographies, is spontaneously invested by teens as means of expression and communication. During this transition or crisis period, their production is generally rich, varied, diversified, intense. They also invest other medias such as graphic arts, drawing, and combine them¹.

The specific means of expression or statement chosen by the teenagers, the final presentation of their written production, the more or less importance they grant it, their decision to submit it or not to the adults or their peers, are many clues which will help decipher what the role of writing can be in the psychic care of teenagers, pathologies notwithstanding.

Hospital Context: The Literary Workshop

At the Care Unit for Teenagers of the Medical Center of Rouffach, a literary workshop has been running for several years now, only supervised by a Doctor in Compared Literature. Its peculiarity is that it is not considered as a therapeutic writing workshop, a priori. The functioning is flexible and adaptive. The group is to voluntary participation : each adolescent can, or not, join this workshop, on a temporary or regular basis. But all hospitalized teenagers are concerned, whatever their age, the reason for their hospitalization, their schooling, their level of study, their psychic suffering or the psychiatric disorder they suffer. Various literary strategies such as writing, reading, analysis or copy of texts, giving sounds to texts (voicing) or the staging of texts or poems, but also music, singing or graphics, are proposed. No theme or writing form are imposed. Productions are not systematically handed over to the supervisor or to the healthcare professionals. Likewise, no medical data are given to the expert in literature. This workshop is friendly : it is a place of meeting, of sharing, of exchange, of communication and of valuation, where the link takes place and makes sense. Generally, hospitalized adolescents invest it with great interest.

Literary Techniques

Writing strategies could be described as the coordination of sometimes complex actions to achieve a production or a scriptural creation. They are varied and tailored to each moment of pain, according to the desire or the creative intention of the youth. Techniques are made available to the teenager, who then chooses freely or after consultation with the literary expert. The proposed strategies are weaving (*composition from an author's text with recovery or transformation of elements*), mosaic (*composition made out of poems, words, or fragments of sentences*), four-hand composition (*composition*

¹De Mijolla Mellor, S. (1986) 'Writing in secret'. *Adolescence*. 4 (1) : 93-103. Penloup M. C. (1999). *The out-of-school writing of the schoolchildren. From reports to the didactic perspectives*. Paris : ESF. Deseilligny, O. (2009). 'Practices of adolescent writing: the example of skyblogs' *The newspaper of the psychologists* 272 : 30-35.

of a text by two persons, each taking his turn), clerical work (simple copy of an author's text, in which the teenager modifies the graphics or the writing police with the objective of creation), the work of the messenger (composition of texts to be sent to a third party), the story of a life (diary, biography, autobiography, prose or poems), the narrative text (composition of a detailed paper of objective facts in a literary form). Ex : F. writes a poem consisting of excerpts of verses copied out in a book of poetry, linked by some words she adds.

Creativity or innovation in their heads, teens may adopt very personal writing techniques which come from their inspiration. Some focus globally on the graphic, typography, or the overall presentation of their texts. Others, more particularly the copyist work, act on the visual aspect of the text, on the polysemy or the modal form of each of word: for example they shift to the right or the left on alternate verses, or write in capital letters what was in small letters ; through this process, they write a kind of « anonymous letter » with words « cut » from writers' texts, which they appropriate, transform, untie, highlight to transmit their real-life experience of the moment. Out of context, separated from the initial corpus, the words then become those of the teenagers : receivers of a message which they contemplated relaying intact through a copyist's work, they become transmitters of a message inserted in a different graphic shape in a text seemingly practically unchanged. Others, through a determined choice, copy out extracts of texts or parts of sentences of authors' texts which they associate one after the other and thus create their own text.

Ex.: Graphic shape: H. begins her poems at the top of a page on the right as a cobweb which would hang on the computer screen: these "little poems in corner" are kinds of custom-made calligrams, whose number she increases day by day and through her inspiration.

Ex.: Modal shape: in a copyist work, N. transcribes numerous poems without any fault, but in every text, for certain verses, he copies a word in capital letters: « We shall make a big stake of the fears of the earth / To dedicate it to *DEATH* ¹ » Or: « The pleasure which *KILLS* ² »

Then, the capital letters create a new message which changes meaning. In French, the grammatical mode of the verb, in « Le plaisir qui *TUE* » becomes the imperative mode and not the indicative mode, and so, it becomes an order. Added to the word *DEATH* in capital letters, it creates the beginning of a new original message that N. wants to transmit in a personal way. Silently, by means of writing and grammar, he says that he wants to die.

¹Supervielle, J. (1938). *The Fable of the world*. Paris: Gallimard.

²Baudelaire, C. (1972). *The Flowers of Evil*. Paris: Livre de Poche, p. 223.

The Teenager in the Literary Workshop: The Group, Personal Commitment

The group is a meeting between peers in inter-relation and also in inter-dependence in a frame defined with common and individual projects¹. Common projects are developed by the whole group, individual projects can be shared with the group if the author decides so. So, the teenager is free to reveal his papers, his poems, to the adult or to his peers, or he can keep them for him only.

Ex.: In session, M. writes a text very quickly, a metaphor of life, rich in teaching and in wisdom, which she wishes to share with her peers.

Ex.: J. proposes spontaneously to the author of a text to illustrate it with a pencil sketch.

Whatever the literary strategies, commitment gradually builds, maintains or strengthens from one session to the other. The teenager appropriates his work, his text, gets involved in it, projects himself in it, he puts his hopes, his questionings in light, which already gives him, in a first time, a retreat necessary for his own evolution. He measures up, and on his own, his investment in this activity, to his own rhythm, according to his capacities, without ever being worried about performances to be reached or his work to be judged. He gradually takes pleasure in this.

Ex.: C. is adamant about group work for fear of facing potential criticism, but after consultation, accepts the reading aloud of a text, in duet with the literary expert, and away from the group. Then gradually, from one session to the other, he practices in front of his peers up to the moment when he spontaneously urges them to a theatrical production all together. In parallel, C. engages in a personal project and writes a free text which depicts an imaginary character who comes out of the abyss into which he had lived until then.

From writing to Word

The discovery and the practice of writing, reading, staging theatrical texts, constitute a real alternative on how to first get in touch with a teen and shows itself to be an effective vector for the reconstruction of the psychic integrity of the subject, the perception which he has of himself, and the improvement of his capacity to communicate. For example, during a writing exercise, a metaphor sought to give color to a text may open an encrypted and symbolic world, and thus lead the youth to express himself. Indeed, when speech cannot come forth, hindered by a lack of skill with language, or discouragement inherited from the school experience, or just plain decency, or mental suffering, or psycho-traumas, creative / created work may serve as a substitute to speech for a teen, unable to express or even understand himself : « Writing appears because there

¹Cavin Piccard, M. C. (2007). 'The writing workshop. A tool to develop the process of autonomy at teenagers in break.' *Family therapy* 28(4): 523-531.

is an impossibility to forget and an impossibility of integrate¹. » Thus, as the artistic activities, the literary practices facilitate, enable the expression of the unspeakable and channel intense emotions. Writing then allows a psychic work of connection and link.

The shape which the writing takes is a key parameter to address, because it testifies to the suffering or the impossibility of the subject to reveal his real-life experience or his trauma. Through certain literary techniques or personalized processes of writing, some teenagers convey their moods without creating texts with their own words, but by redesigning those of others and giving them a violence which reflects their silent message: with a « neutral » writing, they create a « meaningful » message. These processes enable them to make a substitution, to drain the significant of their intended meaning, and to substitute their own meanings; they sneak in their silent messages through the corpus of chosen texts. Others express themselves with their own words, using syntax, grammar or sometimes incorrect spelling, but which corresponds to the oral style used by teenagers in everyday conversation; some others use neologisms, word associations by assonance, enunciation clues, emotional punctuation, plays on words or patchworks. Still others else use the third person singular or plural, male or female pronoun whatever their sex, or give a name or a first name to the character or the narrator: they put them to existence in the text, without designing them by the word which is usually used: the "I" followed by a verb. The writing style grows rich and allows suggestions.

Ex.: By writing in capital letters some words of the text which he was copying out, N. stopped the flow of the original meaning of the text; then, with a personal graphic process, he put his words back into circulation. Disconnected from others, they are detached from the rest as a superimposed message. Thus, as if bound by an invisible thread between three texts, he has reconnected them. He treated the words as objects into which he could reintroduce his voice, and which he could remodel to his liking, without destroying the works which he was copying.

Ex.: J. added, after two texts which she had just written, a single sentence written completely in capital letters, and without punctuation, at the bottom of a sheet. This sentence evoked the theme of the secret impossible to say.

By using other singular literary techniques, adolescents address the readers so as to be recognized by them, through or in spite of the traditional rules of writing. They transform this act into an opportunity to innovate, to address the other one, to have the dimension of their word acknowledged. They are recognized by writing in a personal way, and which lies outside the traditional experiences, and taught practices. They show their originality and throw bridges between the various professionals involved, embody an initially unspeakable, invisible or inaudible word, a stake in an intervention which usually remains anonymous. Dialogue is then possible.

¹ Chidiac, N. (2013). 'To write the silence: therapeutic writing workshops'. *Clinics* 1 (N° 50): 106-123.

Ex.: N. made his presence felt in the textual corpus to mean that he wished to bring about his own absence in the real world. Without intervening as agrammatical subject in the text, he found a process which allowed him to fill this text with his will to stand out, to construe his refusal to live, his discomfort and his suffering.

Similarly, a character's repartee in a novel or drama, an excerpt of a literary work, a poem can affect the young reader's imagination, and favor the identification to the character or to the author. The reader then leans on the characters or the authors whom he identifies with¹. « It is by agreeing to feed on others that we become ourselves », that we develop our own creativity and that we become aware of our skills. (P. Jeammet)

From a Psychological Point of View

The teenager tries to capture the experiment of others, absorbs and identifies with the music, acts and words of his idols, and for lack of being able to speak, writes texts, a diary, secret words to confide his confusion to paper, as a last resort, in particular when he feels misunderstood. Or if he is afraid of writing, he copies out or reads aloud, in duet then in group, texts of contemporary or classic authors.

Writing allows a remoteness between the subject's thinking, acts or facts, and promotes awareness. So, the teenager has the possibility to project in his work, marking the various stages of his progress. He rewrites his history, re-develops his difficulties, and from there, imagines a more convenient world for his self-fulfillment, less dramatic and more realistic. He uses and learns to handle, sometimes spontaneously or without realizing it, or after a personal research, the registers of symbolism and imagination; he eventually apprehends the real world and identifies his fears, which he sometimes considers vital to this reality.

These transitional objects allow him to stage himself « by proxy », to resolve the fantasies built around his questioning or stemming from his difficult or traumatizing real-life experiences. They also allow him « to speak about him » without having the impression that it is really him who is put on the spot, and this transposition has therapeutic effects. They allow him finally to integrate his real-life experience, his vision of the world, to approach his fears and, later, to share them with the others, thus to be situated in a singular interpersonal dimension, a factor of reconstruction and balance. These processes lead him to begin gradually a reflexive approach, a distancing favorable to his own positioning, to others, to the world which surrounds him.

The created work, which becomes his, and which lets him into the realm of imagination and of symbolism, also allows him to open and go towards the others. The recognition of his appropriate identity is favored with the aid of

¹Jeammet, P. (1997). *Adolescences: marks for the parents and the professionals*. Paris : Syros, Découverte Fondation de France. p129.

these original productions in relation with his singular story and his current difficulties.

So, for some teenagers whose life journey is marked by traumas and self-aggressive acts, the writing appears to be continuous, constant, as if it maintained them in reality and avoided a complete break. With writing, creativity is then implemented, even through an episode of intense suffering, and allows everyone to put their existence as subject in their texts, without naming it with the words usually employed. They innovate by inventing processes which are markers which are substitutes for their words. Through writing, by the creation of characters or literary processes, it will be possible to say what is or seems unspeakable.

Interdisciplinarity

The outside space, outside care but inside the Care Unit, which the literary workshop is situated in, confers to the literature expert a singular position and function. His mission is to accompany, motivate, support the teenagers with mental health problems in the writing process and to open the field of literary or artistic possibilities to teenagers who, for the greater part, have an altered self-respect.

Numerous teenagers are in the incapacity or the impossibility to express their affect or their feelings of anger, of aggressiveness, betrayal or rejection. By agreeing to present or read their productions or some of their texts to the healthcare professionals during the conversations, they throw bridges between the various partners who take care of them. They give shape to an invisible and inaudible speech.

The circulated text can thus take its place in a secured environment, where practitioners of different obediences work for the sake of the teenager: a joint dynamics between the various actors of the same strategy of care, as closely as possible to the specific and changing needs of the young person, without ideological cleavage; a multifocal and cross reading to seize the unspeakable, support and answer the intensity of psychological distress, the complexity of the contextual factors and the specificities of each teen.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the important emotional charge which usually accompanies the literary works, the discovery of new capacities (renarcissisation, self-confidence), the possibility of sharing with peers other than by « things to prove », make that this medium is completely adapted to this population. Through writing, the teenagers approach the problems which worry them in a secure « playground », which allows a representation and an elaboration of their suffering. The creative and constructive dimension of speech or writing makes sense when it allows the subject to invest, to take a place among the

others as an actor of his life, to reconnect the links and to restore a sense of belonging, depending on the capabilities or skills at the time. The therapeutic power of writing is, in fact, a diversified tool in the care and management of teenagers.

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