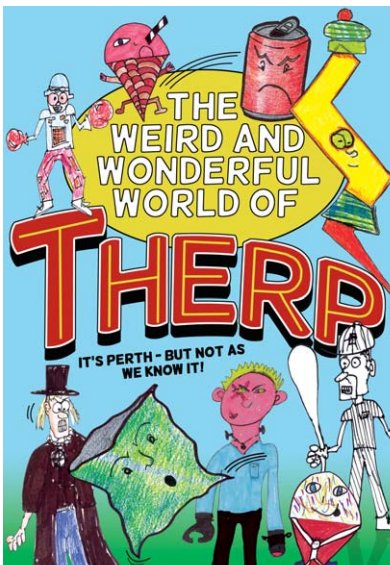


# ADULT LEARNER PUBLICATIONS 2011

## THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL WORLD OF THERP

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Working with young people is often challenging, exciting and unpredictable. This project which resulted in the publication of *The Weird and Wonderful World of Therp* was all of these things.

For many young people reading and writing is a chore. Often it is seen as something they have been told to do to get into college or to get a job. Sometimes it seems that attendance at literacy provision is something young people do, not for themselves, but to keep parents, carers or workers 'off their backs'. The first challenge in my work is to find ways to engage and re-engage young people with literacy learning.

Working with different young people from different environments, different backgrounds and with different perspectives on learning means I am constantly on the lookout for techniques and approaches to use as way of engaging groups and individuals with literacy learning. The graphic novel is a genre which I have found to be effective both in groups and with individuals as a tool for the development of reading and writing skills. The graphic novel comes in many different styles but is characterised by its combination of visual images and short chunks of narrative and direct speech texts. This combination of graphics and text, works well as device to support reading development in a multi-sensory way. It is also an effective way to encourage learners to experiment with text and images to express views and ideas and to acknowledge their own taken for granted skills.

One aim of the project was to encourage young adults to express and value their own ideas and opinions and in doing so develop their literacies capabilities. The other aim was to enable participants to recognise themselves as successful learners and value skills and knowledge which they had acquired informally in different environments beyond the classroom.

The project was initially envisaged as running over ten weeks. However for both practical and pedagogical reasons it became evident that a much shorter time frame would work better. It was therefore decided to offer a series of photography, drawing and writing workshops over a period of two days together with several follow up sessions to review and revise materials. The approach in using photography, drawing and writing recognised that the participants may have obtained these skills informally but did not value or even recognise this. For example many young people have acquired highly sophisticated ICT skills in relation to mobile phone use and computer gaming through peer learning but take them for granted and don't recognise them as learning.

The aim of the project was made explicit to participants. This was to create a publication about Perth written from young people's perspectives. The project was promoted as an opportunity for young people to express views and ideas about Perth and at the same time learn and develop skills in photography, drawing and writing.

The participants were all young people whom I had previously worked with in a variety of different settings. Some of them had attended regular literacies

drop-ins whilst others had taken part in transition projects designed to prepare young people for work. All of the participants had responded to an open invitation to participate.

The workshops fostered an environment which encouraged participants to be creative, take risks and support each other, something that they probably did already in different environments but did not recognise or acknowledge as learning. Having a product in mind helped concentrate minds and get things done. Having a product in mind was also particularly useful because it provided a short-term achievable goal which is important in keeping young people motivated in their learning.

Three half day workshops and a short follow-up session with each of the participants, to finalise materials, all took place during February/March 2010.

The impact of working with professional writers and artists was that participants began to recognise and appreciate the value of their own ideas, perspectives and creations and recognise pre-existing skills. The workshop process supported a collaborative approach and provided the opportunity for participants to contribute and offer support to their peers according to their different strengths, interests and abilities – the sort of thing that happens socially but isn't always recognised as learning.

The participants also thrived in their creative role and with the understanding that their work would be professionally published for circulation across Scotland.

The project was co-ordinated and supported by a youth literacies worker. The workshops were facilitated by a professional artist and writer and a youth worker with a formal training and background in photography.

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## **PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP**

Participants were given cameras on a cold wintry day in February and asked to go out and about in Perth and photograph things that they liked, disliked or found interesting. Before setting off they were given some

advice about using the cameras and framing and capturing images. A morning was spent roaming around Perth taking photographs of places and things which were later uploaded onto PCs so that the participants could identify and print the images they wanted to use. All of the participants were familiar with the ICT skills involved many of these having been learned informally through use of mobile phones and PCs and with peer support. All of the photographs that appear in the publication were selected by the participants.

## DRAWING WORKSHOP

Participants were introduced to different drawing techniques and then encouraged to try them out and create their own characters. The idea was that these characters would be used with the photographs to create stories about Perth. Some of the participants were quite accomplished artists while others had limited experience of drawing but all the participants produced creative and colourful characters.

## WRITING WORKSHOP

In the writing workshop the participants were encouraged to come up with names for their characters and identify story themes. Photographs and characters were used to generate stories, comments and opinions. The creative writing process was often chaotic, frequently noisy but highly productive. By the end of the session the participants had pulled together the essence of *The Weird and Wonderful World of Therp*.

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What had been a fairly conventional brief generated a highly unconventional and unanticipated response from participants. The creative freedom of the workshops resulted in the production of fantastic characters, legitimised personal perspectives and sowed the seeds for absurd storylines. The result was Perth reconfigured through the minds and eyes of the participants as Therp – a world in which characters like Robot Boxer admired works of sculpture; Crispy O’Bag and his mates hunted for their home; the Undertaker took time out to watch the Tay flow by and the Heart Family dispensed love and good will around Perth. The sheer capacity for

imagination and creativity of the participants and the enthusiasm of the way they engaged in the project was unanticipated.

A book launch event was held to celebrate the publication of *The Weird and Wonderful World of Therp*. Family, friends and colleagues were invited to enjoy refreshments, meet the authors and collect a signed copy of the book. All of the young people who participated in the project are now employed either on a full or part-time basis. Two participants continue to engage regularly with various youth literacies provision. Feedback from the young people involved in the project suggests that it contributed to increased literacies capability in learning, leisure and employment through greater self-awareness of the skills that had already been acquired in everyday life.

