

SEEN

John Simmons discovers creativity underground while Paul Belford visits the V&A's Surrealism show plus, Pick of the Month and books

Tube Tales

John Simmons has just spent a year as London Underground's first writer-in-residence

Go into the unknown. Who knows what you'll find or what might happen? It sounds like obvious advice for the junior explorer's club but I offered it to myself in a different context. It's difficult, if you work in the "creative industries", to keep the brain refreshed with the moisture of inspiration. Most advice seems to focus on inspiring yourself with examples of great work. After a working while, a decade or two or more, there's a temptation to say "that worked before, let's do it again". Not plunging into the unknown becomes the safe option.

A few years ago I decided to see what business life offered for the writer beyond the corporate formula. Because there is a corporate formula to creative consultancy, reluctant though we may be to admit it. It took me a few years, though, to realise that you only find the completely unknown outside yourself – that other minds are the great unknown. Finding a way to connect with them leads to real discoveries.

One example is a project I initiated for 26 (www.26.org.uk); a project that turned into an exhibition, posters on the Underground and a book called *From Here To Here*. It was based on the stations of London Underground's Circle Line. The project was a collaboration between writers from 26 and students from the LCC with London Underground's Platform for Art. Everyone involved

seemed to discover new things about themselves and about the connection between words and images.

So I was keen to push it further. I suggested to Peter Tollington, who's the head of the Circle Line, that a "writer-in-residence" would be an interesting experiment. He surprised me by agreeing to the idea and I found myself installed as writer-in-residence at King's Cross tube in April 2006.

This really was unknown territory, the road less-travelled. I'd written books, worked for years as a brand consultant and as a copywriter, run writing workshops (and continued to do all these things during the residency). But I had little idea what might lie behind my newly acquired title. Neither did London Underground. They had not had someone in this role before. What did a writer-in-residence do?

London Underground has a programme called *Platform for Art* that brings artists of various kinds into its working environment. The programme is headed by Tamsin Dillon and my particular contact became Cathy Woolley. Cathy arranged introductions for me at King's Cross, through its manager Peter Sanders, and I was away. Or so it seemed.

Perhaps, given the lack of a well-trodden path, it should be no surprise that it was a struggle at first to get anything going. The goodwill was

John Simmons (below) has just completed a year as writer-in-residence at London Underground's King's Cross station. Starting with simple tasks such as filling in forms, he eventually had platform assistants, ticket-sellers and control room staff

penning poems and working on novels. It might not make the trains run on time but Simmons believes that unlocking a little bit of the creativity in people who seldom get the chance to exercise it will prove to be of "immeasurable benefit". Photographs by the author



there but so was a certain amount of puzzlement. Should I literally go into residence and set up my furniture on the southbound platform?

Certain things became clearer. London Underground is an organisation biased towards engineering. It sees its job – rightly, no doubt – as keeping people moving on trains around London. It doesn't use a lot of words to perform that task. Managers and staff do little writing. Reports are mainly statistics. Drivers are reticent communicators. Platform assistants seldom have to say more than "please stand back".

There is a natural reluctance to use words unnecessarily. Words could become a distraction, even a safety hazard. For three or four months the programme revolved around the purely practical as a way of gaining trust. I helped people write better CVs, letters, applications. It seemed a breakthrough when one of the Control Room staff got a promotion and transfer, partly through writing a good application form.

While hanging around the station, or simply passing through, I wrote observations, stories, poems about things I saw. On 7 July, the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks, I attended the opening of the memorial garden at King's Cross. And of course I wrote something to commemorate the occasion.

Things seemed to be settling into a pattern of "official laureate" writing



plus practical help with staff's basic writing needs. One or two conversations turned into lengthy therapy sessions as staff recalled the traumas of recent King's Cross history. I kept trying to engage people in more expressive writing but there was a resistance that was difficult to overcome. Perhaps it was too emotionally raw, or the memory of bad experiences at school, or the fact that English was not the first language for many members of staff. Whatever the reason, it was becoming frustrating.

Cathy Woolley persisted. She stepped in, determined to make some creative writing workshops happen. My main ally at King's Cross had become a supervisor called Abdul Habib who enjoyed writing. I knew he had talent as he had shown me some of his writing, much of it about cricket. Abdul became the champion of the programme, recruiting staff to come along to workshops.

I became a shift worker out of necessity. This simply reflected the fact that staff at King's Cross work shifts and there is no point expecting to yank someone off the rush hour platform to attend a writing workshop. We settled on the evenings as the only feasible time in the working day to engage with staff.

So for the last three months of the residency I ran a series of evening workshops attended by six to eight staff members – different ones each

time because of the vagaries of the shift system. Something magical happened. People came along to the Quiet Room at King's Cross and for an hour or more we tried out different writing exercises and different kinds of writing: stories, the openings of novels, poems.

Word spread. Enthusiasm grew. People started to produce some good writing in a very limited time. So we began collecting the writing from the workshops and Cathy Woolley suggested that Platform for Art should publish a book.

That's what has now happened. The book *King's Cross is Rising* is for London Underground's own staff and it shows the potential of people who are not generally respected for their creativity – platform assistants, ticket sellers, control room staff. From this collection of writing by myself and staff you get a snapshot of what it's like to work on the Underground.

What lessons does this offer? Can we learn anything about work or writing or creativity? There are lessons, and there were certainly benefits to the organisation and the people involved, but it would be fanciful to trumpet these as performance or productivity improvements. The trains won't run more efficiently as a result of this programme but that was never the intention. The main benefits were for the people who joined in and got the chance to be creative in a job that ►



◀ usually offers little creativity. They gained enjoyment and confidence. They felt better about themselves. That has immeasurable benefit for the organisation itself.

I learnt a lot too, about the potential that's too often suppressed at work and about ways to unlock that potential. Here are five lessons I learnt, or perhaps relearnt afresh by connecting with other people's minds.

Find a different place: A change of scene leads to a change of thinking. The scenery that changed for me was to spend time in this underground environment. The change of scene for London Underground staff was to gather with colleagues in the Quiet Room, focused on an unusual activity.

The security of privacy: People can be reluctant to expose themselves through writing, so you need to recognise the inherent insecurity. I started each workshop with five minutes of "automatic writing", simply getting people to write and write without any thought of editing. The important thing was to stress that no one would read this writing except the writer.

The spur of competition: If the barrier of insecurity can be overcome, people enjoy reading and hearing all the writing produced within a workshop. Participants are all in the same boat so they encourage each other, often surprised by seeing colleagues in a different light. And the example spurs them on to produce

better and more personal writing.

The need for belief: Writers need confidence. It is all too easy to knock confidence out of a writer. Teachers, parents, colleagues, friends are often expert at destroying a writer's self-belief. You then have to keep stiffening your belief – and keep belief high in others.

Constraints are liberating: It seems counter-intuitive but the tighter the constraint, the more creative the outcome. People turned up for workshops having not written a word since schooldays. They had spent years ignoring the chance to "write whatever you want". Yet faced with rigid constraints of time and form in the workshops, people broke free from inhibitions.

The residency started as a six-month pilot scheme, then was extended to a year. It needed time to build trust and spread the word. It will now be up to London Underground whether to develop the scheme in other stations with other writers. I hope it does. There is a joy in creativity: and there is too little joy and creativity in working life. Writing releases it. ■

John Simmons is author of Dark Angels: how writing releases creativity at work (Cyan Books) and director of The Writer (www.thewriter.co.uk)