Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences, co-edited by Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo and Pauline Sameshima, features many of the foremost scholars working worldwide in aesthetic ways through poetry. The contributors (from five countries) are all committed to the use of poetry as a way to collect data, analyze findings and represent understandings in multidisciplinary social science qualitative research investigations. The creativity and high aesthetic quality of the contributions found in the collection speak for themselves; they are truly, as the title indicates, “vibrant voices". This groundbreaking collection will mark new territories in qualitative research and interpretive inquiry practices at an international level. Poetic Inquiry will contribute to many ongoing and energetic debates in arts-based research regarding issues of evaluation, aesthetics, ethics, activism, self-study, and practice-based research, while also spelling out some innovative ways of opening up these debates in creative and productive ways. Instructors and students will find the book a clear and comprehensive introduction to poetic inquiry as a research method.
Poetic Inquiry
Poetic Inquiry

*Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*

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POETIC INQUIRY:
VIBRANT VOICES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

EDITED BY
MONICA PRENDERGAST, CARL LEGGO
& PAULINE SAMESHIMA
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Social science methods get fuzzy on close inspection. Statistical studies are the type case for quantitative methods, of course, relying as they do on the premise that mathematical models have a “goodness of fit” with social reality. That is a challengeable assumption but nonetheless the clearest line drawn for the types of methods associated with it. Other studies show a broad mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, more or less dependent on logical-positivism and representing conventional science to that degree. Still others more qualitative in nature, but not far off the clone of conventional science platforms, leave the numbers behind and operate on the premise that their data will somehow “speak for themselves” if the research results can be laid out in a detailed descriptive account that hides the author, that is, as if things “just happen” the way they are said to happen and analytic snapshots of that appear on their own momentum in print. Those efforts always fail on one count: Nothing speaks for itself. Interpretation is as necessary to human life as breathing. Authors can be hidden but nothing in actuality can be done without them. Distancing oneself through reporting that avoids first-person constructions and other overtly personal appearances in the text usually comes with the posture of being “objective.” It has a long-established place in social science research, despite its fictional nature—a useful one, to be sure, but a fiction nonetheless because all research necessarily starts with an observer moving through the world as a personally-situated sensuous and intellectual being. Distanced accounts can only be created by passing through that universe of everyday realities, editing out anything that appears to be extraneous to the methods and problems selected, including the author. Moreover, another pot-stirring has it that successful representation often boils down simply to picking the right vocabulary for describing the problem at hand.

There is a muddle in this picture. Every method for mapping out realistic scope and depth of information about being human has a fuzzy thin spot or a hole in it. Some of the difficulty can be alleviated with broader coverage of both what is studied and how it gets done. The need for a plurality of methods that can be applied to individual research projects on the human condition has never had a stronger calling than it does now. What follows in this remarkable book is dedicated precisely to expanding that possibility through social science poetics.

Poetic methods are qualitative and call for self-conscious participation. Instead of being inverted like a telescope for a distancing effect, poetics turns it back around for magnified encounters with life as lived, up close and personal, and sets it in a mode where everything reported is proprietary, overtly as the authors write about their presence in the research or implicitly on the strength of always claiming
the representations as a personal product (interpretation) of sorts. Whether it is used or not, first-person language always (and frequently an I-Thou philosophy) fits the mode. Comparisons of such work are in fact more often tied to the creativity and skills of the authors than to the substance of their works, a lopsidedness that generally appears the other way around in quantitative studies. But this can also be carried too far. The differences are relative. They have overlapping middle ground. So the appropriate metaphor might better be shifted from telescope to teeter-totter, one of those terrific playground devices that locks the action into a zero-sum game while one person lifts the end of the board on a fulcrum as the other end sinks. Riders push up and down this way, ideally amusing each other with the exercise of being earthbound at one moment and free of it in the next. They can also try to balance it. With clever maneuvering, both ride suspended on the scale. Research methods are like that, up and down on the degree to which they rely on qualitative or quantitative principles and often ending up somewhere in a shaky middle, a continuum that prevents either extreme from being completely removed from the other. And while life itself is never absolutely a zero sum game, the teeter-totter analogy points nicely to the reality of our situatedness as actors who are always moving in Bakhtinian space, that is, always viewing, choosing, and communicating in contexts cluttered by communications, choices, and related behaviors from others. These patterns help to structure our understandings of the nature of the world and our place in it and thereby our language and associated behaviors, including picking methods and theories we think will improve our ability to represent experience.

Language is the key connector of the variable perspectives, styles, smoothings, and uncoverings of arguments in science and poetics. All language is poetic in the sense of depending on metaphors and related tropes at one level or another for communication. Poets use existing language in creative ways that differ from the special usages of chemists, historians, sociologists, and others. But even knowing the central tendencies of usage for special or heightened purposes in any language—assuming they can in fact be indexed sensibly—still doesn’t solve the problem of mapping precise boundaries for the cross-traffic of transition zones in the middle. Just as science has no monopoly on rigor or a high valuation of systematic thinking, so does poetry lack a monopoly on poetic processes. We find grains of poetics in everyday speech, wherever new or in other ways conspicuous metaphors are used (e.g., “tacking into terrible winds” as one speaker said recently about John McCain’s losing campaign for the U.S. presidency). Poetry makes an art form out of ordinary language use possibilities. Our lives and thoughts are shot through with poetic character. And so is science in thought and deed.

Consider cognitive scientist Raymond Gibbs, Jr., on the need to come to grips with the fundamental poetics of everyday thought:

Figurative language is not the novel creation of unconstrained imaginative thinking, because the evidence...clearly indicates a picture of figurative imagination as a systematic and orderly part of human cognitive processes. My plea is for a greater recognition of the poet in each one of us—to recognize that figuration is not an escape from reality but constitutes the way
we ordinarily understand ourselves and the world in which we live (Gibbs 1994, p. 454, emphasis added)

It follows as good advice to those who would judge this work exclusively in terms of how well it conforms to conventional scientific models that they need to get beyond that self-serving bias, as one might in trying to understand another culture. No one is offering poetics per se, especially poetry, as science. Poetry is not science, it does not aspire to be science, and it cannot be thought of rationally as a replacement for science. That would be absurd. But neither is any of this meant to obviate the overlap between poetics and science in cognitive and linguistic processes. None of it is meant to say that arts-based research lacks rigor or undervalues systematic thinking, that it cannot report accurately on the empirical world through various means, or that an important compromise in the form of artful-science is somehow impossible to achieve. Some middles are better served by their respective ends than others. Locating poets in serious conversations with scientists about plural methods for getting more than the name and address of everything in the universe is a middle worth pursuing, especially when it holds the promise of new and complementary information about shared objects of study.

This book shows plainly that poetic processes can be used both as tools of discovery and a unique mode of reporting research, that there are activities and domains of participation in life that can only be accounted for realistically with qualitative methods, with poetic-mindedness, thereby further opening the door to bricolage and a commitment by many social science and educational researchers to plural methods as the respected wave of the future. The trick is to remember that context is practically everything for determining meaning. The trick is knowing how to read the information on its own terms. The trick is to remember that sometimes it is better to have more than a hammer in your toolkit, especially if you are, say, building a house, or, more to the point, writing a poem about life as lived. There is more than one way to see things, to say things, and therefore to know things, each inviting different points of entry into the research equation.

If the common goal in the social sciences is to get to know humanity in all of its phases, foibles, tragedies, triumphs, histories, accidents, passions, enchantments, cruelties, creations, kinships, friendships, and concrete realities running from fire dancing in a jungle to deep breathing in outer space, a poetic mentality, and poetry in particular, has the advantage of covering any and every subject one can think of, literally and figuratively. Nothing is out of bounds for it. Conventional science cannot make that claim. Practices built on logical-positivism have a long list of things that cannot be studied in depth and for that reason are generally avoided. The black box behind the human face in old school psychology is to poets a huge and unending world of full-color activities—three-dimensional sights, smells, tastes, touchings, and sounds. Bathed in the phantasmagoric and eternal spring of salt water, the human brain is the launching pad for the passions and the prospects of acting out the meanings of being human—and the poets want to be there when it happens. They already have the equipment needed to share in the action. The problem is how to assess and communicate it, how to give it agency in substantive re-presentation and theory. No exception to that quest, one can find in this
text shades of phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, and several varieties of educational, feminist, queer, and literary theory integrated with poetic concerns.

Whether posited as reading writing or speaking thinking, sung out in shamanic rhythms, or just whispered in a mirror (performance prospects abound), poetics is every bit a sensuous-intellectual activity—centering, decoding, reframing, discovering, and discoursing ourselves in ways that show us something of what we are, literally, as embodied participants and observers. When pushed through new linguistic and imagistic experiences, that same body-centered system gives us unlimited meaning-making opportunities, weighed through our existing repertoires of information, verbal and non-verbal, as stored in our cognitive and emotional memory banks. This is the universe of, in, and through which we make meanings of all kinds, scientific or otherwise. It is the nature of the environment in which we learn, think, share, emulate, communicate, and otherwise act as culturally-saturated, sentient individuals. Making science or poetry out of it requires heightened sensitivity to its properties—more language-centered behavior that can be emphasized or deemphasized according to the demands of the moment.

Unafraid of sensual immersions, subjectivities, mutual constructions of meaningful relationships, and sometimes deliberately fictionalized realities that “ring true,” poetry is a way of constructing lines and meanings in spoken or written work for aesthetic results and more. The focus on composition and the conspicuous display of proprietary language used in poetics are the mainstays, not simply its forms of production (e.g., poetic prose, rich with metaphor and allegory; poetry as prose or verse; chanting, singing) or the kinds of messages sent (e.g., aesthetic, didactic, mythic, ritualized). Poets do not report their collected facts in a manner typical of the social sciences. Instead of writing or talking through abstract concepts about their research without ever immersing deeply in the culturally-constructed worlds of the people they study, as one might proceed in writing or applying scientific theory, poets write in and with the facts and frameworks of what they see in themselves in relation to Others, in particular landscapes, emotional and social situations.

Creating work in that earthy context obviously involves making choices among rules and prospects for form as well as theme. But only in the cobbler sense is the form the message. An obsession with poetic form is the equivalent of spending too much time nailing soles on shoes of known sizes and not enough time wearing them. Making poetry according to pre-existing forms is a wonderful activity. But it does not measure the uses to which poetry can be put as methods of representation about life. In that sense this is much less a book about words and forms—sharing meanings about being human that in turn can lead to social action, in and out of the classroom.

Poets can be pushy about remedies. They know that life is more than a newspaper story, that poetry is more than an amusement, a parlor game to play when leisure comes calling. Sometimes the action sought is a profound celebration of life itself, a re-valuation of the ties that bind in what poet Gary Snyder has called so handsomely the Assembly of All Beings. Sometimes it is aimed as criticism about what ails us in the weak spots of a shared planet. Some of it is pointed directly at
the blindness of our conventions and wants to go off like a firecracker in the brain in the quest for change. That poet asks:

Now that you have found my unfaced place in the census count and pulled me up as a person, and thus have heard my heartbeat, and had a glimpse of the interior of my soul,

How will you deal with living a life that includes rape, murder, bigotry, bombs, beatings, and the stoning to death of children, among other things that cannot be re-presented as numbers in a survey?

And if you cannot empathize with these things slicked up wet by floods of blood and tears, how will you ever deal honestly with the enthrallements and ecstasies of life that erase the pain reported so dutifully by your local poet?

Am I you? Can you find yourself in me? What is my number now?

Ensuring interpretations grounded in self-awareness and author presence, poetics is also designed to keep premature closure on thinking in check while encouraging creativity in both research and reporting. Furthermore, because poets today are generally knowingly situated, morally and ethically accountable participants and observers who respect the integrity of their subjects, they have an opportunity to better inform the gaps of certain “Othernesses” that divide us, for example, in relations sorted by ethnicity, politics, gender, and age. By accounting for life’s exigencies in these personal terms, poetry forces the issue of making sense of numberless things that are instead personified, named, and filled with the rhythms of breathing, the music of life itself, albeit sometimes broken and off-key. That’s where the storytellers of life live, where they have always lived, as fundamental features of the human landscape. We are storytellers all, and poetry, an equally ancient part of that toolkit, is about all of us. It always has been. Many in the one, one in the many. The particular in the universal. Missing or misunderstanding those things in attempts to study the social in the social sciences, the human in the humanities, the habitual in the habitat, makes the research unnecessarily incomplete and unrealistic. A plurality of methods can cast a wider net, catch more, put us in the web of a truly productive artful-science—into a core of thinking that promotes robust discourse from ivy-covered halls to the hinterlands
of humans being. Like philosophy, poetry can catch us in the act of being. What could be more fundamental to knowing the human condition than that?

The voices raised in this work are diverse and clear about poetics as the artful assemblage of language raised to methodological strategy. Sharing these biographical and experiential spaces through heightened language and an ongoing process of resensualizing ourselves, and by aiming for representation from one self-conscious interiority to another in a manner that flags the language used as proprietary, finds the strange in the everyday, and takes us out of ourselves for a moment to show us something about ourselves in principle if not in precisely reported fact, poetics can add to the whole of our knowledge about any experience. Arguments in this collection about life as lived and how to study and represent it through poetics are organized appropriately by established principles and objectives of qualitative inquiry. The result is a primary reference work on poetics/arts-based research that will anchor related studies for a long time to come. I am honored to have had the privilege of addressing it at the outset.

Ivan Brady
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NOTES

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Three chapters in this collection have been reprinted, with permission:


A number of these chapters were presented at the First International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry, hosted by Drs. Prendergast and Leggo of the Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia on October 27 to 29th, 2007. Thanks to CCFI and to the Canadian Society for the Study of Education for their support.

The research presented in the Introduction was part of a postdoctoral inquiry carried out by Dr. Monica Prendergast at the Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry, University of British Columbia (2006-2008) under the supervision of Dr. Carl Leggo. This research project was generously funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Postdoctoral Fellowships program.

Additional presentations and other poetic inquiry contributions may be found in the special issue of *Educational Insights* (2009) on this topic, guest edited by Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo and Pauline Sameshima. Thanks to Lynn Fels and the staff of the journal for their kind invitation and support. www.educationalinsights.ca

Cover design courtesy of Pauline Sameshima.
INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENA OF POETRY IN RESEARCH

"Poem is What?" Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research

The poets march on, taking two principles of language very seriously: meaning is unlimited and everybody has some. So we say to the tinhorns: Kill and eat all the poets you want. We’ll make more—in the underground, in our hearts, our thoughts, our stories, and the backrooms of our academies. And when the sun comes around again, look for us. (Brady, 2004, p. 636)

An annotated bibliography/anthology of poetry in qualitative research that I generated as the data for a Canadian federally-funded postdoctoral research project (2006-2008) has, as of now (Spring 2008), the following:

Table 1. Statistics on Poetic Inquiry: An Annotated Bibliography
(Prendergast, 2007a)

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The bibliography contains poems found in peer-reviewed social science journals, bracketing out studies that have appeared in book form, theses and dissertations or what I call “Poet’s Corners”; that is, poems that appear as a regular feature within a social science journal, but not necessarily as the product of an inquiry. Examples of each of the bracketed-out poetry appear in the Appendix to the bibliography.
Poet’s Corners may be found in the following journals:

- Advanced Development
- Africa Today
- American Anthropologist
- American Indian Culture and Research Journal
- Anthropology & Humanism
- Educational Insights/Studio
- European Judaism
- Feminist Studies
- Gastronomica
- Journal of Family Issues
- Journal of Homosexuality
- Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies
- Journal of Medical Ethics
- Journal of Gerontological Social Work
- Journal of Sex Research
- Journal of Holistic Nursing
- Milbank Quarterly
- ReVision
- Rethinking History
- Social Alternatives
- Social Work

Figure 1. List of Poet’s Corners in Peer-Reviewed Social Science Journals

I am employing the term poetic inquiry as an umbrella to cover the multiple terminologies I have been finding in this meta-analytical study, a list of terms that in itself reveals the hybridity and heteroglossia present in this field of arts-based inquiry practice:

Multiple Terms for Poetic Inquiry

- research poetry or research poems (Cannon Poindexter, 2002; Faulkner, 2007; O’Connor, 2001)
- data poetry or data poems (Commeyras & Montsi, 2000; Ely et al., 1997; Neilsen, 2004)
- poetic representation (MacNeil, 2000; L. Richardson, 1994, 1997; Waskul & van der Riet, 2002)
- poetic transcription (Freeman, 2006; Glesne, 1997; Whitney, 2004)
- poetic narrative (Glesne, 1997)
INTRODUCTION

- poetic resonance (Ward, 1986)
- found poetry/found poems (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Prendergast, 2004b, 2006; Pryer, 2005, 2007; Sullivan, 2000; Walsh, 2006)
- anthropological poetry (Brady, 2000; Brummans, 2003)
- narrative poetry (Finley, 2000; Norum, 2000; Patai, 1988; Tedlock, 1972, 1983)
- aesthetic social science (M. Richardson, 1998)
- poetic, fictional narrative (P. Smith, 1999)
- ethno-poem (W.N. Smith, 2002)
- ethnopoetry (Kendall & Murray, 2005)/ethno-poetry (Smith, W.N., 2002)
- ethnopoetics (Rothenberg, 1994)
- transcript poems (Evelyn, 2004; Luce-Kapler, 2004; Santoro & Kamler, 2001)
- interview poems (Santoro & Kamler, 2001)
- map-poems (Hurren, 1998)
- poetic condensation of oral narratives (Öhlen, 2003)
- fieldnote poems (Cahnmann, 2003)
- field poetry (Flores, 1982)
- hybrid poem (Prendergast, 2007)
- poetic portraits (Hill, 2005)
- poetic self-analysis (Black & Enos, 1981)
- poetic analysis (Butler-Kisber et al., 2003)
- poetic format (Chesler, 2001)
- prose poems (Brady, 2004; Clarke et al., 2005; Saarnivaara, 2003)
- poetic texts (Dunlop, 2003)
- poetic monologue (Durham, 2003)
- autobiographical poems (Furman, 2004)
- poetic forms (Furman, 2006)
- collective poems (Gannon, 2001)
- poetic reflection/resistance (Kinsella, 2006)
- soliloquies/choral soliloquies (Prendergast, 2001, 2003a)
- research-generated poetry (Rath, 2001)
- autoethnographic verse, autoethnographic poetry (Davis, 2007; Ricci, 2003)
- performance poem (Finley, M., 2003; Richardson, L., 1999)
- verse (Simonelli, 2000)
- performative autoethnographic poetry (Spry, 2001)
- investigative poetry (Hartnett, 2003)

Poetic inquiry is an area of growing interest to arts-based qualitative researchers. This is a fairly recent phenomena in qualitative inquiry, as most citations in the bibliography I have gathered date from the past decade, with only a few stretching back to the early 80s. There are examples of poetic inquiry to be found in many areas of the social sciences: psychology, sociology, anthropology, nursing, social work, geography, women’s/feminist studies and education are all fields that have published poetic representations of data. Historically, poetic inquiry has been found in discussions and practices of autobiography and autoethnography as research methods and in narrative inquiry, although often relatively undifferentiated from prose writing forms (see Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The potential power of
Poetic inquiry is to do as poetry does, that is to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way. Although a certain amount of contextualizing may be necessary for the fullest appreciation of poetry in a research setting, it is my contention that the best examples of inquiry poems are good poems in and of themselves.

Poetic inquiry tends to belong to one of the three following categories, distinguished by the voice that is engaged:

– **VOX THEORIA** - Literature-voiced poems are written from or in response to works of literature/theory in a discipline or field. Or, alternately, these may be poems about poetry and/or inquiry itself. Some of these poems are overtly political and critical in their content (especially some poems written in the wake of Sept. 11th events). This voice form makes up 13% of the citations in the bibliography.

– **VOX AUTOBIOGRAPHIA/AUTOETHNOGRAPHIA** - Researcher-voiced poems are written from field notes, journal entries, or reflective/creative/autoethnographical writing as the data source. This category is problematic in that it could conceivably encompass all poetry, if positioned as an essentially autobiographical art form, taking its data from the poet’s (researcher’s) life experience. Of course, poems must be framed in a research context in order to qualify here, but all poetry could also be argued to be a form of research, a re-searching of experience and sorting into expression and communication through language. This voice form makes up to half the citations in the annotated bibliography (49%).

– **VOX PARTICIPARE** - Participant-voiced poems are written from interview transcripts or solicited directly from participants, sometimes in an action research model where the poems are co-created with the researcher. The voices in the poems may be singular or multiple. Also, inquiry poems may blend both the researcher’s and the participants’ voices. This voice form makes up to one-third of the entries in the bibliography (35%).

Method must lend itself to topic, as in any research design. What kind of topics are most suited to poetic forms of inquiry? The poetic inquiry bibliography I have been assimilating covers a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, including anthropology, education, English, health (nursing and social work), women’s studies, psychology, sociology, counselling and planning. Therefore, poetic inquiry – just as poetry itself – can function well within a broad range of topics. However, my sense is that the best poetic inquiry – again, as seen in poetry – will carry within it the power to move its audience affectively as well as intellectually and will deal with the kinds of topics that lead into the affective experiential domain. For example, some of the key questions answered in studies using poetry are:

– How do managers feel about losing their jobs (Brearley, 2000)?
– How do young Batswanians (sic) feel about their gender roles (Commeyras & Montsi, 2000)?
– How do primary elementary students feel about their relationship with their teacher (Butler-Kisber, 2002)?
– How do parents of autistic children feel about their interaction with the health and education systems (Beatson & Prelock, 2002)?
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– How does a young homeless person feel about her life (Finley, 2000)?
– How does it feel to be a mother (Barg, 2001), an art teacher (Buttignol et al., 2001), a parent with school-aged children (Freeman, 2001), a girl (Gannon, 2001), a gay teacher (Grace, 2001; Guiney Yallop, 2005), a teacher of colour (Santoro & Kamler, 2001), a refugee (Hones, 1998), a terminal cancer patient (Kendall and Murray, 2005; Öhlen, 2003; Philip, 1995), or a couple living with HIV (Cannon Poindexter, 2002)?

This list could continue up to the many dozens of citations found in the annotated bibliography that forms the basis of the meta-analysis of poetic inquiry offered here. In almost every case, a clear affective element in the topic under investigation opens the methodological possibility of poetic transcription, representation and/or interpretation.

WRITING POETIC INQUIRY: A GUIDE

The how-to of writing poetic inquiry has been almost absent in the literature prior to the recent past (late 90’s and 2000’s), although anthropologists Tedlock’s (1983) transcription of participant data into “narrative poetry” and Gee’s (1985) method of poetic transcription – dividing interview data into quatrain stanzas – offer useful early models that pre-date the recent development of arts-based inquiry. Glesne (1997) and Richardson (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994, 1997) both offer some poetic inquiry-writing techniques and/or advice, taken up below. Walsh (2006) and Butler-Kisber (2002) describe their processes of creating found poems from transcripts. Piirto (2002) and Neilsen (2004) address the important issue of qualifications in arts-based research and also present their own poetry. Others offer their own varied considerations of the value of poetic approaches to inquiry that range from the most pragmatic to the most philosophic.

Sifting through data, whether researcher data from field texts of various kinds or participant data, is the process of intuitively sorting out words, phrases, sentences, passages that synthesize meaning from the prose (see Glesne, 1997, pp. 205–207). These siftings will be generally metaphorical, narrative and affective in nature. The process is reflexive in that the researcher is interconnected with the researched, that the researcher’s own affective response to the process informs it. As Ely et al. (1997) state, “creating poems . . . has been an extremely successful activity for many qualitative researchers” (p. 136). They also note “one joyful thing about writing poetry is that, given the same data, different people create differing versions” (p. 136). The process is performativ in nature in that poetry is originally an oral art form deeply rooted in the sense of voice. Creating poetic inquiry is a performativ act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research.

Forging strong links to poetic practice in literature is one way to validate poetic inquiry in research that is under-examined (see Faulkner, 2007, for an exception to this rule). For example, poetic transcription mirrors the practice of found poetry that has an established history and practice in literature, including works by
prominent poets such as Maya Angelou (1991), Annie Dillard (1995), Rick Moody (2001) and John Robert Colombo (1966). Ezra Pound included elements of found poetry in his famous work *Cantos* (1948), as did T.S. Eliot in his works. Contemporary poets such as Christian Bök and Daniel Nussbaum set themselves extremely difficult tasks to create what I call constrained poetry. Bök’s *Eunoia* (2001) is limited by words containing only a single one of the five vowels used once or more per word. His award-winning collection is therefore divided into five sections: A, E, I, O and U. Nussbaum (1994) writes found poems using only text from Californian vanity license plates. The self-composed constraints of these poets’ work can be paralleled to the constraints of working with data to create found poems in a research context. Finally, the work of poets across time who have written about themes of social injustice, poverty, war, alienation, and so on, offer strong inspiration to a social science scholar who wishes to explore poetic methods in his or her own work. An example of this is seen in the American poet Muriel Rukeyser’s remarkable 1938 achievement *The Book of the Dead*, an ethnography of a West Virginia mining town where the miners were dying of lung disease due to unsafe working conditions. Rukeyser interviewed miners, their families, union officials, company officials, lawyers and many others and wrote a suite of twenty poems that has been described as, “one of the major poem sequences of American modernism” (Nelson, 2000, p. 655). To read Rukeyser, alongside other social poets such as Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Richard Wright, and Carolyn Forché – to mention only a very few English-speaking poets – is to begin to understand the potential of poetry in the context of inquiry.

A comparative study between found/constrained poetry, social poetry and poetic inquiry – the focus of which would be to measure whether or not poetic inquiry succeeds as poetry – is another important contribution yet to be made to this debate. In a most positive development along these lines, Melisa Cahnmann’s (2003) article in *Educational Researcher* considers the use of poetry in educational research practice and shares her own ethnographic research poems, one of which has been published in both research and literary journals, and also in a large daily newspaper. She writes in her abstract:

> Developing a poetic voice prepares scholars to discover and communicate findings in multidimensional, penetrating, and more accessible ways. The author explores the craft, practice, and possibility for a poetic approach to inquiry among teaching and learning communities and encourages all researchers, especially those using qualitative methodologies, *to consider what poets do and learn how to incorporate rhythm, form, metaphor, and other poetic techniques to enhance their work*. [T]he use of poetry [is] a means for educational scholarship to impact the arts, influence wider audiences, and improve teacher and graduate student education. (p. 29, emphasis added)

Moving on now, from poetry in literature to poetry in inquiry, leads us to the work of Laurel Richardson (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994, 1997) and Corinne Glesne (1997). These two writers are most commonly cited in studies employing poetry,
specifically in the poetic transcription and representation of participant interview
data. Sociologist Richardson does not focus on the how-to aspects of her lyrical
ethnographic research poems, preferring to tell how her work has been received.
But she does make the comment that:

> By settling words together into new configurations, the relations created
> through echo repetition, rhythm, rhyme let us see and hear the world in a
> new dimension. Poetry is thus a practical and powerful means for
> reconstitution of worlds. It suggests a way out of the numbing and
> deadening, disaffective, disembodied, schizoid sensibilities characteristic of
> phallocentristic social science. (Richardson, 1993, p. 705)

Glesne (1997) breaks down for the reader how she goes through a sifting process
(p. 206) to create two versions of poetic narratives from participant interview
transcripts. The first version is “chronologically and linguistically faithful to the
transcript” (p. 207), the second “draws from other sections of the interviews, takes
more license with words” (p. 207). She describes how she worked from a more
typical qualitative data analysis involving coding and sorting data by themes and
then moved into the poetic transcription process:

> I found myself, through poetic transcription, searching for the essence
> conveyed, the hues, the textures, and then drawing from all portions of the
> interviews to juxtapose details into a somewhat abstract representation.
> Somewhat like a photographer, who lets us know a person in a different
> way, I wanted the reader to come to know Dona Juana [the participant]
> through very few words. (p. 206)

Glesne later attempts a definition of poetic transcription that “moves in the
direction of poetry but is not necessarily poetry” (p. 213). She goes on:

> Poetic transcription approximates poetry through the concentrated language
> of interviewee, shaped by researcher to give pleasure and truth. But the
> truth may be a ‘small t’ truth of description, re-presenting a perspective or
> experience of the interviewee, filtered through the researcher. It may not
> reach the large “T” truth of seeing “with the eyes of the spirit” for which
> poetry strives. (p. 213)

This stance raises a key philosophical issue in arts-based research, that is: Is
research of this kind art or merely “art-like”? Barone (2001) addresses this, and as
with Glesne here, seems to fall on the safer side of the fence, positing arts-based
research as not-quite-art: “[T]he research may be characterized as arts-based
rather than as full-fledged art” (p. 25). My intention to articulate a methodology for
poetic inquiry is to position it as an artistic practice carried out within a research
framework that cannot and must not diminish the critical/aesthetic qualities of
these kinds of poems as poetry.

Here, I am grateful for Piirto’s (2002) criticism of arts-based research being
carried out by unqualified or under-qualified researchers, or, I might add, by those
who are insufficiently contextualizing their work within aesthetics and fine
arts/humanities as well as social science. She asks questions as her criteria for conducting arts-based/arts-informed research:

- How can the artistic way of knowing be honored in education, a field of the social studies?
- How much should a person have studied or practiced an art before utilizing it in educational discourse, especially high-stakes discourse such as dissertations, products in peer-reviewed scholarly venues, or theses?
- What is the difference between accomplished art and art used for social purposes and personal expression in the field of social studies?
- In an era that cries out for interdisciplinarity, is it necessary to have studied or performed the art in order to attempt to do it, display or perform it, use it? (p. 432)

She also makes a strong call for aesthetic qualifications for arts-based researchers:

A field is transformed through individual creators pushing the boundaries of their domains. People working within the domain decide that change is called for. This is what the arts-based researchers are doing currently, in the domain of educational research. They are saying that in certain ways the social studies way of knowing is inadequate, wanting. In order to transform a field, the researcher, the creator, must have mastery of the theory, the rules, the ways of knowing of that field, and also of the domain that is being used to transform it. (p. 433)

Piirto emphatically suggests here that researchers undertaking arts-based projects have solid educational and/or practical backgrounds in the arts in order to qualify themselves for this method of inquiry.

Along these lines, Neilsen (2004) is a professor of literacy education and a published poet in her own right. She “offer[s] the following observations in the hope that they will provide support for others who are beginning to explore poetry, not only as a form of representation (data poems, for example) but, also, as a legitimate form of inquiry itself” (p. 42):

- Poetry and inquiry ask us to listen deeply. We must put ourselves in the context; we must feel, taste, hear what someone is saying. Sometimes we must learn to listen under the words, to hear what is not being said. We must be empathetic, aware, non-judgmental, and cautious. We owe our participants and ourselves nothing less.
- Language is always inadequate. We dance with impossibility each time we put words on the page. It is far better to dance with impossibility than to accept the first ordinary word that comes to mind, the easy cliché. Honouring the circumstances and the individuals by careful, hard-won description is, fundamentally, an ethical choice we make each time we approach the page.
There are rhythms to the inquiry process as there are rhythms in poetry. (I refer here to rhythms – rhyming is another issue entirely). Just as a good interview is not forced, but evolves, led by the rhythm of the participants’ voice and flow of ideas become a creature with its own particular rush, or sway, or meditative motion. Again, listening helps us work inside and with the process.

Less is more. Always. Data poems, for example, are not just transcriptions of interviews or observations with random line breaks – they must be spare, economical, rich and resonant. An elixir. Potent. An effective data poem is no different from an effective poem – each word, right down to the or and, matters. Each line break matters; each space matters.

The complex and the difficult are necessary. This is why the “less is more” truism is such a challenge. We are lured by the easy answer, the simple emotion, the tidy summary, what we think we see, the happily ever after – yet we know that life, people, emotions, and circumstances are extraordinarily complex and sometimes...not easy to face. Yet how can we turn away from each others’ pain, how can we refuse to honour their winding paths, the complex journeys they have made?

Our apprenticeship never ends. We can look at this prospect as a life sentence, or an opportunity. When I began to do research twenty-five years ago, I thought that very soon, I would have it right, that I could, with enough effort, know all there was to know about inquiry practices. A few years later, thankfully, I became less naïve and, I hope, more humble (there is something about education and our rapidly-changing perspectives, our search for the all-purpose right way, that seduces our profession). When I began to write poetry seriously a few years ago, I knew that this would be a long journey of listening. What I didn’t realize was what a gift it would be when poetry and inquiry came together. (p. 42)

A few more entries in the annotated bibliography address issues of craftsmanship in poetic inquiry. Cannon Poindexter (2002) describes her method of creating research poetry as the “‘diamond-cutting’ activity of carving away all but the phrases and stanzas that seemed most evocative in emotion and clarity” (p. 709). She presents participant-voiced poems, taken from interviews with a couple living with HIV. Carr (2003) presents poetic transcriptions of her participants who are long-term family caregivers in a hospital setting. She says in her conclusion:

The main goal of the experimental text is to evoke the reader’s emotional response and produce a shared experience. Poetry, as an experimental text form, can be an effective way to reconstruct and confirm the lived experience of others while challenging researchers to learn about their abilities to communicate qualitative inquiry in a different way. (p. 1330)

Clarke, Febraro, Hatzipantelis and Nelson (2005) offer poetic transcriptions of interviews with formerly homeless mentally ill participants. They say that:

The initial report was a qualitative evaluation of the perceptions of this sample of formerly homeless mentally ill people of the benefits of the housing currently provided. It offers a categorical analysis of personal,
relationship, and resource issues across childhood, adulthood, and since supported/supportive housing. The present analysis, based on the same interviews, destabilizes the original findings and offers a different window into the lives of the study participants. It does this through prose poems that replicate the language, the central issues of the participants, and their braided logic-in-use among other things. (p. 913)

Here we can see the potentiality of revisiting data with a fresh eye that poetic transcription offers (see also Commreyas and Montsi [2000] for another example of this revisiting of data approach).

Sparkes, Nilges, Swan, & Downing (2003) consider the advantages of poetic representation:

- Since poetry embraces the notion of speech as an embodied activity, it can touch both the cognitive and the sensory in the reader and the listener. Therefore, poetic representations can touch us where we live, in our bodies. This gives it more of a chance than realist tales to vicariously experience the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation.
- For the researcher, producing and sharing poetic representations can make them more attuned to the lived experiences of others.
- Poetic representations can provide the researcher/reader/listener with a different lens though which to view the same scenery, and thereby understand data, and themselves, in different and more complex ways. It is, therefore, a powerful form of analysis.
- Constructing poetic representations draws upon both scientific and literary criteria and allows the researcher to satisfy the desire to integrate the scientist and poet within themselves. Thus, different aspects of the self are integrated in this form of writing.
- Writing up interviews as poems honouring the speaker’s pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on, is a more accurate way to represent the speaker than the normal practice of quoting snippets in prose.
- Normally the orchestrations and constructions of the researcher as author are glossed over when realist tales are produced that draw upon interview data. In contrast, transforming data into poetry displays the role of the prose trope in constituting knowledge, and is a continual reminder to the reader or listener that the text has been artfully constructed. Here, the facticity of the constructedness is ever present for both the researcher and the reader. This dissolves any notion of separation between observer and observed. (p. 154)

Walsh (2006) and Butler-Kisber (2002) both write about the creation of found poems from interview data:

To create found poetry, I read and reread the transcripts, made notes, and delineated a number of recurring themes. I culled words and cut and pasted segments of conversation into specifically labelled files, then played poetically with the segments of conversation in an attempt to distil themes and write succinct versions of them. I tried to stay as true as possible to the original words of the women. I did, however, make choices that were both
academic and artistic. I included only those phrases that I saw as pertinent
to the theme that was emerging. I reordered phrases at times to improve
clarity for the reader. I wrote, walked away, rewrote, and revised in an
ongoing recursive process. The use of poetry situates me too as poet and
reminds the reader through its very form that, as poet, I too am the poem. I
resymbolize what occurred in the group according to my own life and
experiences. I cannot do otherwise. There is no one true account of what
happened and how it affected each, or any, of us. (Walsh, 2006, p. 990)

- Interview material is the easiest to work with because it most closely resembles
  natural, everyday talk that in turn can be portrayed in ways that evoke the
  reader.
- Audiotaped material to a certain extent, and definitely videotaped field texts,
  make the task that much easier. Audiotapes retain dimensions of the interactions
  that help to get at the sensory elements not apparent in prose. Videotapes
  preserve both the auditory and the visual, making revisiting the material even
  more authentic.
- Because poetry has a performance/auditory dimension, in the process of
  creating found poetry it is useful to read it aloud repeatedly in order to fine-tune
  the work. As in all qualitative work, getting a response from the participant(s)
  helps deal with ethical issues, but also contributes to crafting the product.
- A working collaboration between the interviewer and interviewee that is built
  on trust and reciprocity over time is most conducive for producing a context in
  which interesting and important stories will emerge. The trust and reciprocity
  tend to produce symmetry in the relationship between the participant and
  researcher. This helps balance the power differential inherent in such work and
  encourages researcher reflexivity.
- Whether found poetry is used as a public form of representation or as an
  analytic tool within the inquiry process, it will bring the researcher closer to the
  data in different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important
  insights.
- Reading poetry, and reading about poetry, and attending workshops or courses
  all help to develop and hone artistic skills. (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 235)

In a variation on these themes, Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallrado & Kulkani
(2007) provide a collaborative model of poetic inquiry where poetry “is used as
data, as a means of data representation, and as a process of inquiry [in order to]
explore the nature of poetry as a tool of qualitative research for investigating
human phenomena” (p. 301). The authors describe their method:

Poetry is used in a four-step process in this research: 1) the first author
created autobiographical poems as data; 2) the second author created
research tankas using the first set of poems as data; 3) the third author used
a variation of a grounded theory analysis to analyze the original poems and
the tankas; 4) the third and fourth authors responded to the original poems
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and the ‘findings’ from the grounded theory analysis as responsive poems. (p. 301)

Furman (2006) writes another poetic inquiry employing autobiographical poetry and a detailed description of the writing process. He says that while writing autobiographically of a traumatic emergency visit to the hospital his goals were “(a) to represent faithfully the salient affective and psychosocial issues, (b) to create an aesthetically satisfying poem, and (c) as a means of self-exploration and even self-therapy” (p. 561). Furman (2004), a committed poetic inquirer, also writes that, “[t]he images inspired by a poem engage the reader in a creative relationship that moves beyond passivity to co-creation” (p. 163).

Kendall and Murray (2005) transcribe interviews with terminal cancer patients into poetic form. They reflect on this decision made “[b]ecause people often respond more directly and emotionally to poetry, a clinician interpreting a patient’s ‘history of the presenting complaint’ in poetic form may be enabled to appreciate more of the emotional toll of the cancer journey; it also raises new challenges in the research process regarding processes of re-presentation and voice” (p. 733). Psychoanalyst Robert Lundquist also reflects on the value of the poetic process, saying “[w]hat the poetic process implies, to me, is that there is something extremely valuable about solitude, and to offer this to an analysand, to enter into solitude, paradoxically, together, is a rare opportunity within most of our culture in America” (p. 290). The potential for empathy and the value of contemplative solitude are two key elements of poetic writing, whether literary or scholarly (or both) in its intent.

To conclude this section, we can see that quite a significant number of scholars have not only made use of poetry in their work, but also have reflected on the hows and whys of this approach to arts-based inquiry. The next section of this paper moves in to a more consciously philosophical reflection on poetic inquiry that draws on a number of foundations, especially phenomenology and hermeneutics, along with key concepts such as relationality and the ever-opening question of how to live well in the world.

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON POETIC INQUIRY

A number of poetic inquirers choose to speak more philosophically than practically about their use of poetry. Norum (2000, p. 249) writes reflectively about her poetic transcriptions in poetic form:

the desire
the decision

to poetically re present lives
an adventure
a foray into new genre
no innocent writing task
“messy” text
a challenge a puzzle
fraught with writerly (courageous?) judgment calls

I’m no Laurel Richardson
Can I do this? Dare I do this?
What will they think?

What do I think?
I think I like it!
this adventure
this challenge
this puzzle
this foray

O’Connor (1997) makes a strong case for not talking too much about the poetry-writing process when she says: “If the poem does not succeed without these words, these words cannot succeed even with the poem. If I were you, I wouldn’t read them” (p. 20). And Rath (2001) comments: “In crafting poems from the transcriptions of interviews, I do something with data, rather than saying something about it” (p. 117). Ricci (2003) compares poetry with inquiry: “Poetry and qualitative research share in their goals of providing meaning, density, aestheticism, and reflexivity. They are also evocative” (p. 591).

From a different and more internalized perspective, Clough (2000) writes about the working of the unconscious and its connection to poetry:

The unconscious is a turning—not so much the subject’s turning in, looking at herself, but a turning around of vision so to see the other side of the scene—the other side of seeing, not quite seeing from another’s perspective but imagining that there is another perspective—for oneself.

Seeing another, seeing as another sees—both are impossible or impossibly so; that is to say, both only can be desired/desirable.

This desire haunts. It is a ghosting of vision, a shadow at the edge of vision. This ghosting of vision is generations long; it is a familial unconscious. It is that which makes vision turn; it is that which urges poetry. (p. 318, formatted as in original)
In a very early entry in the bibliography, anthropologist Flores (1982) reflects on her use of “field poetry”:

In sum, it seems to me that my experiment in writing “field poetry” produced some suggestive results. I did not do the same things, investigate the same phenomena, reach the same understandings as I would have had I written in prose. The result was not ethnography chopped into short lines. I conducted my own, private psychotherapy. I paid a great deal of attention to the concrete, sensually apprehended realities of a people’s existence. I paid a great deal of attention to the singular and unique, especially to the particular person, the individual. I used metaphors, images, and sensual details to analyze the problems I had set out to investigate and also to locate the problems and concerns that the Cangueses [participants] themselves deemed important. In attending to particular selves, I also had to attend to the relations between selves, to the problems of crossing cultural boundaries, and to the concerns of our common humanity. Finally, I created for myself new and deeper understandings of my own being. If I also created some decent poetry, that will be an unlooked for gift. (p. 22)

Freeman (2001) concurs with both Clough and Flores from a philosophical hermeneutic perspective, stating that, “[t]he challenge for interpretive researchers is incorporating in their understanding of a topic the physical, emotional, situational, and relational conditions within which communication and thus understanding occur” (p. 646).

Miles Richardson (1998), an anthropologist and poet, writes:

Poetry, as a special language, is particularly suited for those special, strange, even mysterious moments when bits and pieces suddenly coalesce. These moments arrive with a sharp poignancy in the field, when the ethnographer, away from home and in a strange culture, has a heightened sense of the frailty of being human. In such a sense, poetry appears to be a way of communicating instances when we feel truth has shown its face. Finally, poetry, although a special manner of speaking, may in fact be closer to what it is to be human than more ordinary talk - given that we humans, that is, you and I, are not ordinary facts stored away in nature’s warehouse. (p. 451)

Another anthropologist, and also a significant American poet, Jerome Rothenberg (1994) writes both poetically and politically about the turn to poetry in anthropology known as “ethnopoetics”:

The ethnopoetics that I knew was, first & last, the work of poets. Of a certain kind of poet. As such its mission was subversive, questioning the imperium even while growing out of it. Transforming.
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It was the work of individuals who found in multiplicity the cure for that conformity of thought, of spirit, that generality that robs us of our moments. That denies them to the world at large.
A play between that otherness inside me & the identities imposed from outside.

It is not ethnopoetics as a course of study—however much we wanted it—but as a course of action.

“I” is an “other,” then; becomes a world of others.

It is a process of becoming. A collaging self. Is infinite & contradictory. It is “I” & “not-I.”

“Do I contradict myself? Very well I contradict myself. I is infinite. I contains multitudes.”

Said Rimbaud/Whitman at the very start.

It is from where we are, the basis still of any ethnopoetics worth the struggle.

For those for whom it happens, the world is open, & the mind (forever empty) is forever full.

There is no turning back, I meant to say.

Here the millennium demands it. (pp. 523–524)

Yet another anthropologist and postmodern poet, Armand Schwerner (1986), reflects on his challenging and fascinating poetic translations of ancient Sumerian tablets in aphoristic writing he calls ‘divagations’ (“A divergence or digression from a course or subject” [www.answers.com]):

The commentator takes on a more active part. His ‘notes’ become ‘poems.’ What does that mean? What are the differences in the first place? “Poem” is what?

Poetry is the processual impulsion toward identity, an identity which is intermittently arrived at through image and through pattern. Each poem is a new start from a minutely different place.

Poetry must make us live and perceive more intensely, not by the direct use of symbols, but by a religious concern for the present real—the destruction of almost dead categories and nostalgia.

Only from such destructions will present life arise. Urban destructions. The aim of my poetry is to reduce the ‘gulf between the unconscious and the ego.’

Prose is eloquence, wants to instruct, to convince; wants to produce in the soul of the reader a state of knowledge. Poetry is the producer of joy, its reader participates in the creative act.
And suppose the fear of any discovered world is so great as to make writing almost impossible?

A fish can only swim. If a poem is a fish it must discover that swimming’s what it does. (pp. 357–379)

Wolff (1986) a phenomenologist and sociologist, writes:

The power of the poem’s language is that it seizes the poet, and thus the listener or reader, by virtue of its sedimentedness, the poem (in contrast to the cliché) being the latest layer in a process of building it up since time immemorial. A poem thus is a palimpsest, with sedimented language shining through. (p. 357)

These metaphors of impulsion toward identity, producer of joy, swimming fish, sedimentedness and layered palimpsests may prove useful to poetic inquirers as concepts with which to talk about their work. What are the many layers in a poetic inquiry process? What is the nature of the sediment upon which the poem is written in response?

Carl Leggo, a professor of language and literacy education and published literary poet, writes about poetry as a way of living, a way of being in the world. He calls his scholarship “rumination” (2002, 2004a, 2005a) and “speculation” (2004b, 2005b) on living poetically. Much of his writing is poetic in form and autobiographical in content:

More and more I find my living and teaching and researching are poem-making—meandering, lingering, constantly surprised by twists and turns revealing views and vistas that take the breath away and then fill me with oxygen enough to explode the lungs. (Leggo, 2001, unpaginated)

And:

Because we are constituted in language, because we know ourselves in language, because we constantly write ourselves, and rewrite ourselves, and write our relations to others, and seek to understand the loneliness alienation separateness we know always, we need frequent opportunities to engage in discursive practices, and an environment which nurtures desire, insatiable desire, to know, to quest/ion, to seek. So, I explore ways of writing that expose lies like vermillion threads tangled in the illusion of a linear composition
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that composes lives as lines
by experimenting
with composing in poetry,
posing in poetry,
seeking composure and repose
without imposing, always afraid
of disposing and decomposing,
constantly proposing and supposing
the fecundity of composting.

(Leggo, 2002, unpaginated, right-formatted as in original)

This section has shared philosophical thoughts from a number of poetic inquirers who have considered the multiple meanings and values of poetry and poetry-making in general and poetic inquiry in particular. As sociologist Lemert (2002) says:

Stand on a street corner and look. You may see, but you may not understand. Sit on a corner and listen; you may hear but not quite understand. After a while, you might ask someone, “What the hell’s goin’ down here?” They may lie. They may tell you a story. Do this for a long while on as many corners as you can stand. Then, you may be able to make poetry. Then, you may be able to make sociology. Then, you will be living a public life. (p. 390)

Clearly, to engage in poetic inquiry is as much a calling as it is a method; a calling between the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’, a call-and-response, a song that is sung, a voice that wills itself to be heard, in many spaces, both private and public, whispered (or shouted) into multiple ears.

CONCLUSION: TWENTY-NINE WAYS OF LOOKING AT POETIC INQUIRY

In homage to Wallace Stevens’ poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (in Nelson, 2000, pp. 127–129), and in an attempt to summarize my findings, I offer the following:

POETIC INQUIRY IS...

I
Poetic inquiry is a form of qualitative research in the social sciences that incorporates poetry in some way as a component of an investigation.

II
Poetic inquiry is found in the social science fields of anthropology, education, geography, nursing, psychology, social work, sociology, women’s studies and more.

III
Poetic inquiry is rooted in the arts-based inquiry movement that has seen growing acceptance in both conferences and peer-reviewed publications over the past decade or so.

Poetic inquiry is, like narrative inquiry with which it shares many characteristics, interested in drawing on the literary arts in the attempt to more authentically express human experiences.

Poetic inquiry is, in exemplary practices, indistinguishable from literary poetry.

Poetic inquiry is, sometimes, a failed experiment that may function effectively for the purposes of the inquiry but does not sustain nor reward reader engagement as in a successful poem.

Poetic inquiry is always aware of ethical practices in the use of human participants when engaged in poetic transcription and representation of the voices and stories of others.

Poetic inquiry is the attempt to work in fruitful interdisciplinary ways between the humanities [literature/aesthetic philosophy], fine arts [creative writing] and the social sciences.

Poetic inquiry is a response to the crisis of representation experienced in postmodern critical perspectives on traditional approaches to ethnography and other social science research paradigms.

Poetic inquiry is, like all poetry, interested in creative language-based processes of constraint, synthesis, crystallization, image, and lyrical forms.

Poetic inquiry is sometimes presented or published as a single poem or suite, context free.

Poetic inquiry is sometimes presented as a prose-based essay that includes poetry woven throughout.

Poetic inquiry is sometimes presented and/or published with visual images or art or photography that interplay with each other.

Poetic inquiry is most often found in autobiographical, autoethnographical or self-study investigations.

Poetic inquiry is also commonly seen as poetic transcription and representation of participant data.

Poetic inquiry is occasionally seen as a way to artistically present the work of theorists and/or practitioners using the technique of found poetry.
Poetic inquiry is sometimes a socio-political and critical act of resistance to dominant forms and an effective way to talk back to power.

Poetic inquiry is sometimes a phenomenological and existential choice that extends beyond the use of poetic methods to a way of being in the world.

Poetic inquiry is a way of knowing though poetic language and devices; metaphor, lyric, rhythm, imagery, emotion, attention, wide-awakeness, opening to the world, self-revelation.

Poetic inquiry is used by scholars to express various kinds of affective experiences such as being a girl, a student, a teacher, a social worker, a caregiver, a nurse, a cancer patient, a refugee, an immigrant, an anthropologist in an alien culture.

Poetic inquiry is called by a multiplicity of names in social science but is always interested in expressing human experience, whether that of Self or Other or both.

Poetic inquiry is practiced on the margins of qualitative research by a small number of poet/scholars, a number of whom are also literary poets.

Poetic inquiry is very challenging to evaluate, assess and/or review as little established criteria exist.

Poetic inquiry is often published without full peer-review, even in peer-reviewed journals; rather, it is selected by the journal’s editor[s] or, in some cases, by a poetry editor.

Poetic inquiry is philosophically aligned with the work of poets through literary history who were and are committed to using poetry as a means to communicate socio-political and cultural concerns, as an act of witness.

Poetic inquiry is philosophically aligned with the work of poets through literary history who were and are committed to using poetry as a means to communicate experiences of memory, identity, place, relationality, hope, fear and/or desire.

Poetic inquiry is most often seen as free verse, although there are some examples that make use of particular poetic forms [haiku, tanka, pantoum, sestina etc.] or that employ some kind of rhyme.

Poetic inquiry is distinct from poetry therapy; that is, a field of art therapy interested in using poetry reading and writing as a therapeutic technique.

Poetic inquiry is, along with all arts-based inquiry approaches, deeply concerned with aesthetic issues around quality, qualifications, preparedness, elitism and expertise.
REFERENCES


INTRODUCTION


PRENDERGAST


INTRODUCTION


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SECTION I: VOX THEORIA
THE USE OF POETRY CLUSTERS IN POETIC INQUIRY

Humankind has forever been attracted to poetry because of the musicality and poignancy it portrays in the rhythms of its contracted form, and because of the mystery it suggests in the ambiguity it retains. So much can be said in so few words and in such compelling ways. Poetry is an imaginative awareness of experience expressed through meaning, sound, and rhythmic language choices so as to evoke an embodied response (Flanagan, 2007). It portrays particular qualities of being, elicits metaphorical wondering, synthesizes various modes of perception, and shows a way of paying attention (Wormser & Cappella, 2004). Poetry allows the heart to lead the mind rather than the reverse. It can be used as an analytical or reflexive approach as well as a representational form in qualitative work. It is a form of inquiry.

The use of poetry in qualitative research is not particularly new. There is evidence of poetry in anthropological research that dates back until at least 1982 (Flores, 1982). As well, there are instances of a burgeoning interest in poetry in nursing research that emerged at approximately the same time (Oiler, 1983). However, the possibility of using poetry in qualitative research became more widely known, particularly in educational circles, with advent of sociologist Laurel Richardson’s work in the early 1990s. We would suggest that Miles and Huberman’s second edition of their book entitled the Handbook for Qualitative Research: An Expanded Sourcebook (1994) raised researchers’ awareness of her work beyond the confines of sociology when they devoted a section to her research on page 110. This brief overview of poetic possibilities attracted researcher interest. In 1993, Elliot Eisner initiated the first American Educational Research Association (AERA) Arts-based Winter Institute on qualitative research. It was a novel idea that brought together both artists and researchers from Canada, United States, Australia and Japan and the interest in poetic inquiry, among other art forms, expanded and grew.

It was only natural in this post-modern era that researchers who were grappling with issues around voice and representation would turn to other ways of communicating narrative work in which they were involved (Glesne, 1997). Richardson used “found” poetry, words extracted from sociological interviews and crafted into poetic form, to “re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses” (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). Others have built on this work to counteract

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the hegemony inherent in more traditional texts, to bring the reader closer to the work, and to permit silenced voices to be heard (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 230).

It has become apparent that since form mediates understanding (Eisner, 1991) non-traditional texts bring new and unexpected insights into the world of everyday experience. Found poetry not only mediates different kinds of understanding, but also enhances the relational dimensions of research. Because it relies on the words found in the data, found poetry is restricting. However, those limits can be comforting because the researcher is not compelled to find the “perfect word” but rather plays with the existing words in ways that most closely portray a particular story and its emotional nuances (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 1999).

In the last decade, qualitative researchers have begun to move from found poems to more autobiographical or “generated” poetry. Generated poems are created using words that come from within to express researchers’ understandings of their own and others’ experiences, or to explore and reflect upon research memories, roles and assumptions (Butler-Kisber, 2005; Neilsen, 1998; Stewart, 2003; Sullivan, 2000). Unlike found poetry, generated poems have unlimited possibilities. This freedom may be exhilarating for an experienced poet, while potentially daunting for a novice. This suggests that initial forays into poetic inquiry may be made easier by starting with found poetry.

In our experience with poetic inquiry, we have become aware that creating a series or “cluster” of poems around a theme is a powerful way of expressing a range of subtle nuances about a topic while simultaneously producing a more general overview (Butler-Kisber, 2005; Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2007). These simultaneous perspectives that are provided by poetry clusters give a richer and deeper understanding of a phenomenon.

If a goal of ethnography is to retell ‘lived experience,’ to make another world accessible to the reader, then I submit that the…poem, and particularly a series of…poems…comes closer to achieving that goal than do other forms of ethnographic writing. (Richardson, 1994, p. 8)

Poetry clusters help to show the tentativeness of individual interpretations, that is, how each understanding of a theme, topic, or concept is limited by the time, place, context and stance of the researcher at the time it is written. A poetry cluster that represents different events, moods, topics etcetera, can acknowledge the “truth” of each of the poems in the series while simultaneously uncovering something more. The “something more” is the revelation that often occurs in the unveiling of a poetry cluster. The reader, and/or author(s) herself, can see for the first time dimensions of a theme that might not otherwise be revealed. The clustering of poems that are unique and at times even contradictory allows for an up-close and granular reading of a theme and a more general reading simultaneously. This simultaneous appreciation of experience removes the need to move back and forth from the particular to the general and, as mentioned earlier, provides a richer understanding of the phenomenon.

In what follows we present two types of poetry clusters. The first on “Death and Dying” is a cluster composed of each of our generated poems. The individual
Poetry clusters were written during times when the authors were grieving the loss of people close to them. It was a way to come to terms with emotions connected with these experiences. Each poem was created somewhat differently. In general, the process used was to free write about the remembered experience and then to highlight words and phrases from the free write that seemed to carry special significance. These highlighted bits served as a starting point to another free write, and this process continued until enough words and phrases warranted laying them out on a page. At this stage, the authors focused more closely on line breaks, rhythm, and the general structure of the poem while still attending to other poetic features.

Each poem is able to stand on its own and provides a specific viewpoint on the experience of dying. Read together, however, we would suggest that this cluster provides various nuances that point vividly to the mundane aspects of dying, the inevitable interconnectedness between the living and dying, to life’s irony, and the reluctance to name death that denies the inevitable, but in so doing, protects the players. Furthermore, clusters that are generated by a number of individuals around a single theme allow for a more multi-vocal understanding of a phenomenon than single-authored clusters, and lend themselves to team inquiry.

The second cluster of poems entitled “School Days” is a single-authored series reflecting poignant and unforgettable events that occurred in elementary and high school days. It should be pointed out that the author considers her school experiences to be largely positive, but has found it noteworthy that these events remain so vivid so many years later (Butler-Kisber, 2005). To create these poems a series of words most reminiscent of both the auditory and visual contexts of each experience was generated. Then these words were worked to shape the poems by adding and subtracting using rhythm, line breaks, pauses, repetition and word play to re-create each memory.

We would suggest, again, that each poem can stand on its own, but the cluster provides the nuances and an overview that illustrate the power of intimidation both physical and verbal, and the resulting humiliation and possible guilt that produces a profound silencing. It speaks to the multilayered effects of schooling and the dark side of interactions that go on largely unnoticed, but that can have cumulative effects.

Sullivan (2007) has indicated that there is a delicate architecture in poetry that includes concreteness, voice, emotion, ambiguity, tension, and associative logic. We would contend that although these qualities are present to a greater or lesser extent in any strong poem, poetry clusters make these characteristics more robust because of the wider offering to the reader, the more complex web of connections that can be made within and among the texts and the richer rendering of meaning that results. As such, poetry clusters have value in qualitative inquiry because of the varied possibilities they afford, the simultaneous close and more distant lenses they provide, and the richer meaning they portray. We have not shown clusters using found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2001), clusters created by multiple contributors, or how multi-authored clusters can be used as an analytic tool and/or a final representational form. These are some other possibilities that can be used by novice as well as more experienced poets/researchers. However, it is the flexibility, as well
as the richer and deeper insights that can result from invoking both a close and more distant reading that make poetry clusters an appealing option in qualitative inquiry.

CLUSTER 1

**Putting my father down**

Propped up  
in the velvet wing chair  
in my parents’ bedroom  
my father looks like  
a fevered child waiting  
in the principal’s office  
to be taken home.

Quietly, knowing  
my role I slink  
to the basement  
and make the call.  
Bring him in  
I am told  
his numbers  
are way off.  

As if luring  
a puppy into a cage  
I offer half truths  
and help him pack  
the old razor, the one  
that won’t get stolen,  
into his soft-sided  
luggage next to  
seven hundred pages of Serum  
and crosswords.

He jokes about the cute nurses  
at the General  
And I, laughing,  
follow his shortcuts there.

(Stewart, 2001)

**Walking my mother**

Like a large insect  
moving toward its prey
the chair rolled steadily
through the bland corridor
only her small silver head
peeked above
the handles hard
between my hands.
Careening thoughts
resounded noisily
love, sorrow
fragility, finality
questions…
She said, “I used to push you.”
We laughed
at life’s irony.

(Butler-Kisber, 2005)

**Death Eyes**
They sat
silent
an invisible shroud
warding off intrusion.
Knowing pools sunken
reflecting
flickering fear
on bloated cheeks
agony of the inevitable.
They gazed
transfixed by food
slow ritual
mundane promise
frozen
amid kaleidoscope
of life.

(Butler-Kisber, 2002)

**Fani**
You sat
diminished
breathless on the couch.
The cough
a ripple that interrupted
erupted
wracking every sinew.
Your luminous gaze
chided my inner thoughts
bathed me in warmth.
Gently, you said,
“I thought
I would be
one of those miracles,
I won’t.”
Like giving birth
taking death is slow
an arduous argument
between spirit and body.

(Butler-Kisber, 2008)

CLUSTER 2: SCHOOL DAYS
(Butler-Kisber, 1999)

Miss Good

A grade one teacher
called Miss Good
at her desk
never stood.

A rule of silence reigned supreme

launched each day
by the queen.
A small black notebook
provided means
keeping track
of grand misdeeds.
Question
secret
wonder
dream
Monstrous crimes
indeed.
A twelve-inch weapon
marked the way
doling out
smacks each day
A thundrous call
strike of three
lurking demon
unleashed all.
A ruler-wielding power source
eliciting fear
not remorse
Anna
David
Paul
and Lynn
delinquents
of course.

A searing moment
acute chagrin
not what exists
deep within.
A grade one teacher
called Miss Good
pillar of pedagogy!
never
understood.

**Shattered**

Dancing and skipping
Whirling and squealing
over concrete
Abruptly stopped
to pluck
the pale blue oval
shimmering
in the grass,
a robin’s loss.
Gingerly
slowly
fingers entwined
to the stairs
Carefully
Trembling
over the threshold.
Excitedly
Cautiously
to her spot.
Suddenly
it plopped
splattered
on the Kinder’s floor

Mrs. Meekle’s frown
piercing from the door
commanded
to the naughty chair
a dismal wound
most unfair.

Despicable Bill

*Where are you despicable Bill?*

Still
carving insults on a desk
sexist slurs
women’s breasts.
Lurking, slinking
down the hall
raiding lockers
grabbing all.
Sporting leather
boots and chain
sneering threats
bully’s game.
Colour yellow
underneath
running scared
of pending heat.
Leaving scars along the way
faceless wounds
etched to stay.
*Where are you despicable Bill?*
Oblivious
Colourless
Mindless Bill
Still?

Bus Ride

Tired but happy
the game won
she rushed
for a bus
a commuter’s nightmare.
Crowded ride
cloth over tunic
books askew
forced to retreat
to the stern
a pew
in the middle.
She closed her eyes…
her stop was called
she moved forward
and recoiled
then pushed past
the arm
a weapon
that groped
for her innocence.
Shaking, weeping
after the stop
fearing…
she succumbed to silence
not voice.

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THE CRAFT, PRACTICE, AND POSSIBILITY OF POETRY IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer House than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors—

Of Chambers as the Cedars—
Impregnable of Eye—
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky—

Of Visitors—the fairest—
For Occupation—This—
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise—

—Emily Dickinson

Writing is a vital element of any research inquiry. Thus, the more varied and practiced the art of writing, the more possibilities there are “to discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it,” (Richardson, 2000, p. 923) and the more vital our writing will be. There has been recent interest and support for alternative forms of data representation including poetry, story, and theater as means to increase attention to complexity, feeling, and new ways of seeing (Eisner, 1997).

However, accompanying the demand for alternatives has been a call for tough critics, those who advocate alternatives but will not substitute “novelty and cleverness for substance” (p. 9). To foster a tough, critical community, more arts-based educational researchers need to share the techniques and aesthetic sensibilities they use to prepare other researchers to understand, sensibly critique, and further develop arts-based approaches to scholarship. In this article, I focus on poetry as a method of discovery in educational research and examine some specific techniques of poetic craft that can help increase the value and impact of qualitative data collection, analysis, and representation.
If poetry, as others before me have argued (Richardson, 2000; Eisner, 1997), offers a means to say what might not otherwise be said, how do educational researchers with an interest in poetry develop sufficient skill in this genre to bring back its riches to qualitative inquiry? I begin by examining why poetry has been largely dismissed in educational research and argue for the value and validity of poetry in our processes and publications. Specifically, I share some elements of the craft and practice of poetry that I have found helpful in my own data collection, analysis, and publication. I conclude by discussing the possibilities poetry offers for taking risks and expanding the potential for empiricism and for educating graduate students in educational research.

WHY NOT POETRY? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

According to 2001–2002 U.S. poet laureate, Billy Collins (2002a), high schools are places where poetry goes to die. Where Collins’s (2002b) approach to poetry would be “to take a poem/and hold it up to the light/like a color slide,” he believes schools are where students learn to “tie the poem to a chair with rope/and torture a confession out of it,” or “beat it with a hose/to find out what it really means” (2002b). In essence, critical analysis of poetry has taken away from what might otherwise be a pleasurable experience, an unlabelled appreciation of the language, image, and music in verse. Thus, many of us are left with distaste for poetry since our own high school days of a “subsistence diet of male American poets with three names” (Collins as quoted in Stainburn, 2001).

However, many of us have questioned our high school diets and sought out our own adult varieties of poetry, only to scan literary journals filled with obscure references or attend monotone readings in a room of black turtlenecks (or at least that’s what we think we’d find there if we attended poetry readings). The stereotyped image of the self-important and incomprehensible poet may not be entirely false. A modernist language and literary movement in poetry that began in the first half of this century has been alternatively described by some poets as “playfully subversive” and “freshening attention” (Hass, 1999) and by others as filled with “obscurity and self indulgence” (Naik, 1999), “high flown gibberish [and] . . . impenetrability (Kowit, 1999, p. 115). Despite the simultaneous presence of highly accessible and moving public poetry in regular newspaper columns such as the Washington Post’s “Poet’s Choice,” on subway systems such as the New York City transit’s “Poetry in Motion” series, and in oral performance venues called “Poetry Slams,” many Americans have not been exposed to what Webb (2002) refers to as “Stand-up poetry,” highly accessible poems filled with humor, insight, and imagination. Because of its undeserved reputation as exclusive and technical, many U.S. intellectuals pass up poetry as part of their reading lists as they would undoubtedly pass up an MRI or sophisticated triple by-pass surgery.2

However, even if an intellectual, as most of us would consider ourselves to be, happens to find a love of poetry (despite the plentiful deterrents), few of us would ever consider using poetry in our research. Naturally, “it’s not science!” is the first accusation we hear. By mentioning the role of creative writing in an academic study, one risks the impression that one’s research is less a piece of scholarship
than an invented narrative (Ceglowski, 1997, pp. 193–194). In fact, this impression may be reality according to a recent report from the National Research Council (Shavelson & Towne, 2002), which explicitly distinguishes poetry from scientific inquiry. For example, in defining basic principles that differentiate educational research science from other forms of scholarship, the authors dismiss arts-based methods of inquiry such as “connoisseurship” (Eisner, 1991) or “portraiture” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann, 1997) as methods that are unreliable, unreplicable, or ungeneralizable in rigorously “scientific” ways (Shavelson & Towne, 2002, pp. 75–77). If researchers dared to speak of poetry in their research, they would be easy targets for dismissal from funding agencies and major research organizations under the following criteria for distinction made in this report:

We realized for example, that empiricism, while a hallmark of science, does not uniquely define it. A poet can write from first-hand experience of the world, and in this sense is an empiricist. And making observations of the world, and reasoning about their experience, helps both literary critics and historians create the interpretive frameworks that they bring to bear in their scholarship. But empirical method in scientific inquiry has different features, like codified procedures for making observations and recognizing sources of bias associated with particular methods. (pp. 73–4)

According to the authors, poetry may be empirical but it is not science. However, the report is careful to recognize qualitative research as science and avoid distinctions between qualitative and quantitative or basic and applied research (p. 19)—all of it having the potential for rigorous, codified, and generalizable findings. Many of the report’s “guiding principles” are more in line with paradigmatic traditions that exclude many examples of research in the qualitative tradition. In fact, many of the same descriptive words they use to support quality science are the same types of descriptive language that have been used in attacks from nonqualitative proponents (Peshkin, 1993) and more recently the political right (Lincoln & Cannella, 2002, p. 4).

Despite a long tradition of figurative language and poetic representation in all types of scientific research to express novelty, such as the clockwork metaphor for the solar system and the pump metaphor for the heart (Angelica, 1999–2000, p. 209), qualitative researchers in general and ethnographers in particular have been the most avid and publicly reflexive about using poetry and other expressive forms in research. Perhaps this is so because qualitative researchers are accustomed to responding to detractors, having worked hard to distinguish qualitative work (e.g. to funders, editors, the academy) as science rather than art, journalism, or other (often poorly paid) writer identities. The results of this tradition have been at least two-fold. First, qualitative researchers have strategically adopted the language and structures necessary to gain legitimacy, authority, and power (i.e., to seek funding, publish, achieve tenure, etc). This type of response has provided a 20-year foundation in qualitative inquiry, with journals, training programs, and conferences supporting this work. Second, many of these same scholars have sought to push at the edges of methodological inquiry (Eisner, 1997, p. 4, Barone & Eisner, 1997). Qualitative
researchers such as Elliot Eisner, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, Tom Barone, Laurel Richardson, and others—confident that alternative, arts-based methods are rigorous, relevant, and insightful—have taken risks and explored new methods for analysis and publication that experiment at the scientific perimeter to push our questions outward and enhance the field.

However, despite many qualitative researchers who are advocates and public users of arts-based research methods, little is written about how this approach takes place and the specific techniques used by artist-researchers (see Glesne, 1997, an exception). Poetry is a risky business. If poetry is to have a greater impact on research, those engaged in poetic practices need to share our processes and products with the entire research community, and the terms of its use must be clearly defined. The remainder of this article speaks most directly to those working in qualitative traditions. However, knowing that researchers continue to cross borders and collaborate across methodologies, I hope this article also informs researchers in other traditions about the possibilities of poetry in a wide-range of investigations. To quote Elizabeth Barrett Browning, let me count the ways.

WHY POETRY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH? COUNTING THE MANY WAYS

Gaining legitimacy, guiding traditions, and pushing at the edge of tradition—these are aspects of research with which qualitative proponents are very familiar. Good qualitative researchers know they are always proving themselves, each time, over again—proving their ideas are the most exciting, their research is worth talking about, their theory understands paradox and contradiction, their methodology is the most rigorous, their excerpts are the most memorable, their relationship with participants is the most honorable and reciprocal, their implications are most vital, and their criticism is the most astute. Most of all, qualitative researchers are long accustomed to proving through words that qualitative work is important, rigorous, and valuable as “a science.” The burden of proof through language is one of many reasons that we cannot separate the form of writing from the content of our research: we have to show through writing that what we have done both builds on what has been done before and adds to it in fresh and vital ways.

However, more important than the burden of proof, a focus on language and a variety of writing styles not only enhances the presentation of ideas, but also stimulates and formulates the conception of ideas themselves (Rose & McClafferty, 2001, p. 29). The emphasis in poetry on formalist, free verse, and experimental techniques takes as a given that alternative possibilities of form imply alternative possibilities of content (Hass, 1984, p. 126). Just as the microscope and camera have allowed different ways for us to see what would otherwise be invisible, so too poetry and prose are different mediums that give rise to ways of saying what might not otherwise be expressed.

Next, I explore three of the many ways poetry can contribute to how qualitative researchers go about doing their work. First, I discuss the craft of poetry. What are some of the devices poets use that are also useful as we develop theories and heuristics for understanding education and communities of learning? Second, I explore poetic practice. What professional development practices do poets engage
in that are similar to and might enhance those in qualitative research. Third, I explore the possibilities poetry offers for alternative ways to view what educational researchers do and their impact on the public and political community at large.

POETRY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS CRAFT

Poets often refer to visits from the muse and her ability to see truth before the writer sees it. However, most writers will also agree they are much more active in the creation process than this romantic image of a visiting muse suggests. Rather, poets develop craft to sustain and fortify their original impulses, moving between what former poet laureate, Stanley Kunitz, called “letting go and pulling back” (Kunitz & Moss, 1993, p. 13) using structured forms to support creative play.

Below I describe some of the devices poets use that are also useful to qualitative, and perhaps all, researchers. Though not an exhaustive list, I highlight central devices such as meter, rhyme, form, image and metaphor that make important contributions to a qualitative researcher’s interpretive frame and presentation.

Rhythm and Form

First and foremost to any poet and valuable to the qualitative researcher’s craft is a heightened sense of language, from the sounds of phonemes, prosody, and tone to syntactical structures of word order to the way phrases and sentences are ordered to create images, meanings, logic, and narrative. Though many poets have broken free from the strict confines of sonnets and villanelles from the past, elements of formal craft such as meter, rhyme, and repetition appear in the work of the most free verse poets from Walt Whitman to Gertrude Stein to Robert Hass. Formal elements of craft are critical to all poets because their existence offers the writer techniques to play with for greater effect.

Meter, Greek for “measure,” is a term used to describe the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line (Addonizio & Laux, 1997, p. 141). For example, “cre-áte” and “in-spíre” are iambic words because they have unstressed syllables followed by stressed ones (often represented as “U /”), making up what is called a “foot.” Thus, Shakespearean iambic pentameter (five iambic feet) is often rhythmically associated with the “daDum daDum daDum” we hear in a heartbeat: for example, “Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d/His canon against self-slaughter!/Ô God! God!” (Hamlet).

Educational researchers such as discourse analysts and micro-ethnographers have a tradition of analyzing speech for its rhythm and meter, pitch and tone. For example, Erickson and Schultz’s (1982) seminal study of counselor and student interactions found that distorted rhythms were heavily associated with cultural and racial differences. Different social identities and communication styles between counselor and student had the potential to adversely affect the outcome of these gatekeeping encounters (p. 169). It is no coincidence that one of the authors, Fred Erickson, has a great interest in music composition and theory. Thus, experience in the study of sound patterns in music and poetry may allow researchers to develop
what poet Richard Hugo (1992) called “obsessive ears,” enhancing our ability to notice, name, and make sense of both regularities and irregularities in the stress patterns of everyday speech in educational settings.

In my own work I studied the way a Puerto Rican inner-city teacher made use of “rhythm as a resource,” relying on traditional African-American and Puerto Rican speech patterns such as call and response and repetition to enhance students’ engagement and learning (Cahnmann, 2000a). This work is within a tradition of scholarship that recognizes the relationship between different ways of talking and social identity; equity; and access to cultural, linguistic, and educational capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Erickson, 1982; Phillips, 1983; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

In addition to assisting analysis, the study of written poetry forms may enhance our presentation of recorded data, building on previous transcription conventions to best represent the authenticity and dimensionality of an observed interaction (Edelsky, 1993). A researcher who is exposed to various poetic approaches to line breaks can exploit the possibilities to control representation and effect. For example, poets work alternatively with end stop lines, lines that end with a period, comma, or semicolon, or enjambment where one line runs into the next. Researchers too might use end stops, punctuation, white space, and short lines to slow down a transcript and focus visual and auditory attention. Alternatively, a researcher might enjamb lines of a transcript to convey the speed of an interlocutor’s contribution and use long overlapping lines to show motion in turn-taking. Taking in the many different visual layouts of poems on the page offers researchers new ways to represent interview data that respect the tone and movement of the original conversation in ways that may not yet have been imagined in education research before. In sum, I believe it is in paying attention to the rhythms of speech in communities where we carry out research, and learning how to adapt that speech to the page that we learn to ask new questions and use poetic structure to represent and interpret complexity in educational settings.

Image and Metaphor: “No Ideas but in Things”

Another shared aspect of craft in poetry and qualitative research is documentation of everyday detail to arrive at what Erickson (1986, p. 130) called “concrete universals.” Images, anecdotes, phrases, or metaphors that are meaningful are those that keep coming back until the researcher-poet is sure the concrete detail means something more than itself (Wakowski, 1979, p. 114). A poetic approach to inquiry requires a keen sense of noticing from data collection and analysis to descriptive writing as foundational for an interpretive outcome that “engenders new concepts but also elaborates existing ones” (Peshkin, 1993, p. 26).

Just as William Carlos Williams wrote “So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow,” so too good qualitative researchers incorporate poetic images and metaphors drawing attention to the rhythms of everyday speech and images of the ordinary, particular, and quotidian. For example, the title of Heath’s (1982) seminal article, “What No Bed-Time Story Means,” serves as a metaphor for middle class care-taking norms that dominate the school system and unfairly
privilege communities that have middle class child-rearing practices. Another example is the play on words used in the title of Olsen’s (1997) book, *Made in America*, which conjures both a stamp of national pride on U.S.-made products and stands metaphorically for how the assimilation process works in this country to “make” different kinds of first, second, and third generation “Americans” out of differently raced and classed immigrant communities. Similarly, Erickson (1996) draws on ocean metaphors such as “turn sharks” and “conversational dolphins” to interpret what he describes as an “ecosystem of relations of mutual influence between speakers who are also hearers and viewers” (p. 54).

Poet Jane Kenyon (1999, pp. 139–140) wrote that if one believed and acted on Ezra Pound’s assertion “that natural object is always the adequate symbol,” then poems would not fly off into abstraction. This sound poetic advice can be translated to qualitative research writing. Increasing the use of ordinary language and concrete, resonating images and decreasing the use of academic jargon and theoretical abstraction, we are more likely to communicate intellectual and emotional understanding of classroom life.

In sum, all phases of a qualitative research project can benefit from poetic sensibilities. By reading and implementing poetic craft, researchers can enhance their abilities to listen and notice in the field during data collection, creatively play with metaphor and image during analysis, and communicate with more liveliness and accuracy when representing data to larger audiences. A poetic approach to inquiry also understands that writing up research is a part of a critical iterative feedback loop that informs ongoing decision making in the field.

**POETRY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS PRACTICE**

Keeping a poetry journal, reading copiously and variously, taking notes on favorite lines and techniques are some of the many practices poets engage in that also serve the interest of qualitative researchers. A poetic approach to inquiry requires the careful study of our own written logic, technique, and aesthetic. This section focuses on journaling techniques that might be shared by the poet and educational researcher to enhance the quality of data collection and analysis. Just as qualitative researchers keep a field notebook on visits to research settings, so too poets keep writing notebooks, only their fields are not limited to a particular site. Qualitative researchers might enhance their fieldnotes by learning from a few practices poets use to document a wide scope of seeing.

One poetic practice to educational research includes the use of a notebook both in and out of the field setting. Having a notebook at the bedside, the office, the carwash, or the dentist’s waiting room allows the possibility for researchers to write down images, metaphors, and overheard phrases that may have direct or indirect relationship to our studies in the field. A poet’s pursuit is to find fresh ways of expressing themes that have undoubtedly been addressed before—themes about love, death, social justice, home. A fresh way of seeing requires the practice of noticing—whether in everyday life or from copious and varied reading—such as a Lakota-English dictionary, Aesop’s fable, Emily Dickinson’s verse. By drawing on the unexpected and “assuming and exploiting a common frame of
reference” (Gioia, 1999, p. 31), poets achieve a concise ability to give language to the unsayable. Just as Whorf (1956) used Einstein’s theory of relativity to explore his notion of linguistic relativity, and Lévi-Strauss (1962/1966) used the concept of the bricklayer to explore ingenuity within constraint, so too educational researchers might find the practice of noticing through note taking to connect common frameworks to uncommon perspectives on traditional educational themes. In other words, by keeping our notebooks with us both in and out of the field and taking notes on everyday observations and from varied academic and nonacademic reading, we are, like poets, more likely to be surprised by unexpected connections and understanding.

However, poetic practice is not just about taking notes but about how one takes and revises notes to reimagine ways of understanding the familiar (Cahnmann, 2001). One approach poets use is to write within formal constraints such as meter and rhyme. Another approach is to use the principles of formalist poetry, such as the repeating lines and words in the villanelle and sestina,4 to highlight what stands out from the underlying repetition. A contemporary structure is often referred to as anaphora, using repeated phrases such as “if only,” “because,” or “I remember,” to build rhythm in the exploration of a particular context. One can hear this technique in poetry as well as prose, as in the Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech or the repeating “we” and staccato rhythm in Gwendolyn Brooks’ (1999) poem “We Real Cool”:

**We Real Cool**

*The Pool Players.*  
*Seven at the Golden Shovel.*

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

Gathered in eight units of approximately three-beat lines, this lean poem is thick with meaning, ironically juxtaposing a playful, sing-song form with tragic content. Brooks achieves this juxtaposition when she breaks the predominant rhythm—two strong beats, one weak beat—with two strong beats that stand alone at the end. This poem leaves the reader without the identifying “we,” the tragic consequence of a society divided by race, class, and education.
Just as important as what is included in the poem is what is left out. In this poem we hear the pool players’ voices because of carefully selected word choice reflecting African-American dialect and experience. Formal aspects of poetry help the writer make these selections, synthesizing large transcripts from life into a block quote or a three-beat line. Rhythm, repetition, and other formal considerations offer researchers creative tools throughout the research process for identifying salient themes and capturing them in imaginative and poetic ways.

I have found the use of rhythm and repetition particularly useful when taking fieldnotes and beginning to think about analysis. Below I include an excerpt from an interview I had (personal communication, April 9, 2002) with the principal and lead English-as-a-second-language teacher of a low-performing school where they explained reasons for the school’s rank of 1,052nd in the state. I am less interested in the poem-in-progress itself as a product and more interested in how the poetic device of listing helped me capture the fervor and paradox in these administrators’ reflections. The poetic repetition enabled me to draw attention both to pattern and deviation from common underlying deficit theories and where the principal thought she had some power to critique and change the situation:

**So Many Plates Spinning**

The principal says our test scores are

ABYSMAL.

because tests don’t show progress.
because politicians aren’t educators.
because everyone is not created equal.
because of IQ.
because other schools have a top that pulls up the scores.
because the school board doesn’t want to hear.

because 30% have Spanish as a first language.
(Every teacher should be able to say “zapatos”)
because they don’t read.
because parents are illiterate.
because Mommies can’t even sign their own name.
because it takes 5 years to learn a language.
(I have to cut that down in half).
because the state doesn’t care about the process.
because of a capital L for LAZY.
NOT because they can’t.
I don’t want to hear “our kids can’t.”
I can’t hear it,
I can’t.
because we’re left with Black and Hispanic kids.
Even our OWN students don’t know how to speak English.
because of school choice.
because of white flight.
SOMEONE should have seen THAT coming.

If you create good neighborhood schools, people won’t go running.
If you stop blaming and start doing.
If you work with parents.

It’s because I’m working two jobs.
You work like a dog to change a program.
I’ve never had so many plates spinning.

“So many plates spinning” is a synthesis of the quotes I took from a group interview with an African-American principal and White teacher that incorporates some rhythm from the mixture of African-American and Southern dialect. In my original handwritten fieldnotes, I distinguished quotations from each participant and included much more than what I include in this poem. After the field I returned to my office to write up my notes in the computer and used poetry to help me capture the essence of what was said—the feelings, contradictions, dualities, and paradoxes. My identity as both a poet and researcher gave me license to adjust what was “true” (with a lower case “t”) in the original and the detailed accuracy to capture “Truth” (with a capital “T”), that is, the depth of feeling and music in the original situation. All researchers, whether they adjust numbers or extract quotations from a transcript, find themselves somewhere along the continuum between what is “true” and “True.” The difference may be the claims to fact or fiction that are made (Richardson, 2000, p. 926; Clifford, n.d., as cited in Van Maanen, 1988, p. 101). Once we realize that all claims to “scientific truth” are suspect, influenced by the culturally bound nature of the researcher’s text, we can free ourselves to write in ways that name and claim feeling, story, and relationship. In so doing we will be better equipped to communicate findings in multidimensional, penetrating, and more accessible ways.

Another example of the way poetry helped me understand contradiction in both my fieldnotes and analysis is from a previous study of bilingual schooling in inner-city Philadelphia (Cahnmann, 2001). While driving to my fieldsite I found myself musing on numerous pairs of shoes I saw hanging off an electric wire. Through a listing of images in my fieldnotes of inner-city life, I realized the deficit theories I brought with me everyday and my limitations at seeing the full scope of life in this community. The child’s voice in the poem is a collection of wisdom from many children at my research site, Black and Latino. Their answers came from questions I was hesitant to ask because they seemed unrelated to my research project on bilingual education. Yet these questions were most revealing of contradictions I had otherwise been unable to see.
Driving through North Philly

I see them. The shoes
on Eighth Street—there must be
thirty pair perched upside down.
An uneven silhouette of sneakers
slung over electric wire;
the lightness soaked out of them,
except for the eager cleats,
less familiar with the whims of weather.

Here a boy doesn’t give up shoes
unless they give up on him;
a face bruised with September
and measured kicks through corn chip bags
crushed in the side-pockets of this city.

I think of other reasons for these pairs in flight:
maybe a test of gravity, feet got too big,
or a protest against restrictions
on tilted chairs, names gouged on desktops,
on-time, straight lines in the yard.

For weeks I wonder until I stop
to ask a kid from the neighborhood.
We study each other: a black boy,
backpack over left shoulder, pants big enough
for two of him, and a white woman dressed like a teacher
with notepad and loopy earrings. “Because it’s fun, Miss,”
he says, as if the answer were scrawled on the wall
behind me in oversized bubble letters.
And then, “So they remember you when you’re gone.”

I think of the thirteen apartments I’ve lived in
over the last nine years and how I’ve never left anything behind.
I look at the newest pair, think how impractical
to let color fade, perfectly good and out of reach,
an empty walk on sky.

“I done it lots a’times, Miss,” he says with a grin.
I consider how little I know about joy.
What it’s like to throw something up in the air
that’s important, that weighs something, that takes you places—and
and not wait for it to come down.
I provide these examples of fieldnote poems as one model for what is possible in ways we document and understand educational settings. The act of writing and revising “Driving Through North Philly” helped me understand and share with others the complexity of working class and inner-city life in ways that my training in largely deductive, Marxist thinking did not allow. Writing poetry and poetically inspired fieldnotes allowed me to be honest with the limitations and assumptions in my own understanding in ways that might never have been questioned otherwise.

POETRY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS POSSIBILITY

Does exercising the craft and practice of poetry mean all educational researchers should become poets? My answer: God help us. As far as I’m concerned we do not need anymore struggling poets in the world. However, I do advocate all researchers be exposed to what poets do and how researchers might reap the benefits of poetic craft and practice in our work. Through poetic craft and practice, we can surprise both ourselves and our audiences with new possibilities. Using elements of poetry in our data collection, analysis and write-up has the potential to make our thinking clearer, fresher, and more accessible and to render the richness and complexity of the observed world. To use a now banal, but useful metaphor, poetic craft and practice are “tools” we should not overlook in the repertoire of devices we use for conveying meaning, analyzing data, and attracting a broader readership.

Formal poetic devices give writers of all genres the tools to work at the height of convention just as researchers work within traditional forms that structure the presentation of our data. However, poetry is also about risk. Walt Whitman and Gertrude Stein are examples of poets who used surprising language and play to transform old forms and ideas and make something new. Educational researchers can benefit from arts-based approaches to research that question the limits of tradition just as an architect might question the institutional use of cinderblock walls. For example, we often instruct students to use citations rather than teaching them to explore their own words and imaginations. This reduces knowing. Rather, we need to teach students to develop their own voices. Poetry can be an important means to that end.

There are themes and patterns in human experience that can only be grasped in narrative renditions, beyond historical and anthropological nonfiction to include other verbal formats such as fiction, plays, and poetry. There is increasing recognition that researchers who develop a poetic voice are better prepared to write ethnographic prose in ways that are lyrical, engaging, and accessible to a wider audience. Thus, education and social science scholars such as JoBeth Allen at the University of Georgia, Mike Rose at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Renato Rosaldo at New York University, among others, are teaching courses that blend techniques for ethnographic and creative writing (Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Piirto, 2002). We also see scholarly journals, such as Qualitative Inquiry, Harvard Educational Review, Anthropology and Education Quarterly, and Anthropology & Humanism, publishing an increasing number of arts-based informed research and writing. Additionally, the Society for Humanist Anthropology annually awards the Victor Turner prize for the best written ethnography, hosting an annual open mike
for anthropologists who are also poets and fiction writers at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, promoting writing that is simultaneously engaging and scientific.

In sum, if we value engaging a diverse and wide-ranging readership, we ought to consider more “rigorous” training as writers and thinkers, beyond the inherited toolbox from the past.

**CONCLUSION: THE “SO WHAT TEST”**

Arts-based approaches are not an either-or proposition to traditional research paradigms. We do no service to ourselves as arts-based researchers to define ourselves in opposition to traditional practices. Rather, the literary and visual arts offer ways to stretch our capacities for creativity and knowing, creating a healthy synthesis of approaches to write in ways that paint a full picture of a heterogeneous movement to improve education. In educational research and practice we are working with human beings in all their ever-changing complexity. Incorporating the craft, practice, and possibility of poetry in our research enhances our ability to understand classroom life and support students’ potential to add their voices to a more socially just and democratic society. Thus, I do not suggest a poetic approach replace qualitative or quantitative study, merely that poetry enhance and add to our research.

Likewise, the work of ethnographers in education can enhance the direction of contemporary poetry. Social scientists often work from the presupposition of social responsibility. This is especially true of ethnographers of education, aiming to inform and improve education for all youth. Poetry has a lot to learn from disciplines that take on social and cultural themes, political activism, and social change. Our audiences should help dictate the kinds of genres we use but should not eliminate the possibility for mergers between the work of artists and social scientists, adding dimensionality and empowerment to both.

As mentioned earlier in this article, one can read a poem such as Brooks’ (1999) “We Real Cool” over and over again, sharing it with lay and academic audiences alike and each time realizing new depths of understanding. Thus, another value of reading and writing poetry alongside fieldwork is to share it with a much larger readership than that of a typical educational study, with more immediate and lasting impact. For example, I frequently incorporate poetry with educational and cultural themes into my courses directed to teacher education and research students. I find poems and short stories profoundly influence my students’ abilities to connect and transfer learning from more dense and abstract academic readings. I have also found that when luck and craft merge my poetry writing has the potential to be well received by lay and non-educational audiences. For example, the poem “Driving Through North Philly” was published in The Philadelphia Inquirer (Cahnmann, 1999) and Quarterly West (Cahnmann, 2000b), a national literary magazine, and thus the “findings” contained therein about crossing race, class, and culture boundaries were shared by large local and national communities. Educational researchers may not all write quality poems (Piirto, 2002), but we all can make greater efforts to incorporate rhythm, form, image, metaphor, and other elements of
poetic craft into the ways we write through and about our investigations. Instead of “yak[ing] endlessly about the need for a more engaging, passionate social science” (Foley, 2002), let’s teach ourselves and our students how to do it.

Last, my answer to the “so what test” is to answer, “why not?” The available traditions for analysis and write up of research are not fixed entities, but a dynamic enterprise that changes within and among generations of scholars and from audience to audience (Gioia, 1999, p. 32). We cannot lose by acquiring techniques employed by arts-based researchers. We must assume an audience for our work, an audience that longs for fresh language to describe the indescribable emotional and intellectual experiences in and beyond classrooms. We may not all write great popular or literary poems, but we can all draw on the craft and practice of poetry to realize its potential, challenging the academic marginality of our work. We might decide to read more poetry, take a creative writing class, and take more risks in our field notes and articles. My hope is for educational researchers to explore poetic techniques and strategies beyond those mentioned here to communicate findings in multidimensional, penetrating, and more accessible ways.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

I am grateful to my colleagues, teachers, and friends who have joined me in scholarly writing groups, helping to keep one another’s writing clear and vibrant.

NOTES


2 Poetry is less appreciated in the United States than it is in many other nations (e.g., Ireland where poetry is held in much higher public regard). This article is primarily addressed to an American audience and most references here are to American poets and arts-based scholars. I am hopeful that a colleague can write a piece more international in scope on the use of poetry in scholarship abroad. My advance apologies to the many scholars working in arts and poetic approaches to inquiry that I was unable to cite here.

3 “No ideas but in things” is a line from William Carlos Williams’s 1927 poem “Paterson” and can be located at www.en.utexas.edu/wcw/back/94fall/hahn.html.

4 The villanelle has 19 lines with five tercets (three-line stanzas) and ends in a quatrains (four lines). The first and third lines of the opening stanza are repeated, as is the “aba” rhyme scheme (abaa for the quatrains). The sestina has six stanzas of six lines each (sestets) and ends with a tercet. The end word in each of the six lines gets repeated in a specific order throughout the poem and all six words are used in the final tercet. For further explanation see Addonizio and Laux (1997, pp. 138–161).

5 This poem-draft has gone through several phases of revision and will likely not become a stand-alone poem I am satisfied with but rather serves as a part of the process of poetic scholarship. Nonetheless, it may be helpful for readers to know about the process of the data-to-poem-draft that appears here. Though my field notes began with many of these same lines, I have used poetic sensibilities to delete some words (such as excessive articles—i.e., a and the—that slow down the poem) and entire lines that were redundant and/or didn’t read as powerfully as those I have selected thus far. I have also added the repetition of the word “because,” emphasizing the list of disparate and often contradictory reasons given for school failure. In this piece, representation is fine-tuning a process that began in data collection.
The difference between truth and Truth is a controversial topic worthy of more discussion than space allows here. Entire articles and volumes have been written about this subject (e.g., Anderson, 1996; Barone, 2000, 2001; Eisner, 1991). I invite readers to respond in the most productive (and least confrontational) ways to further this discussion as modeled by Ellis (2002).

Two years passed from the time I wrote the first poetic observation to the time I crafted the first full draft of this poem; I have subsequently revised this poem over 8 years to the current version you see here in 2008. One major disadvantage of writing poetic representations of data is that the poet-scholar cannot rush the poem or insist the poem be “about” the subject of our research. Poems take on their own natures and timelines and when rushed can result in an aesthetic that feels forced and either over or underwritten, compromising both Truth and Beauty.

See Piirto (2002) for further discussion on how much study and practice in art is necessary before using it for various purposes in educational discourse.

Kenyon (1999) talks about the “so what test” in her collection of essays on poetry.

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