'Don't just travel': thinking poetically on the way to professional knowledge

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Abstract
This paper describes how the medium of 'found poetry' is incorporated into a doctoral programme for nurses, educators and allied health and social care professionals at the start of their various doctoral journeys. It advocates a narrative practice approach to issues of researcher identity and reflexivity. 'Finding' the poems begins with the creation of collages as representational anchors for students to talk about themselves, their professional practice, their hopes and expectations of the doctoral experience, and their research ideas. (Re)presenting their transcribed talk as poetry involves culling and playing with words, phrases and segments, making changes in spacing, lines and rhythm to arrive at an evocative distillation (Butler-Kisber, 2002). This process enables each person to bring stories and/or fragments of experience into critical engagement with others. Poetic thinking functions pedagogically, helping students find a critical voice to enliven and hone their reflexive writing in relation to their doctoral experience and their research positioning. Arts-based methods of inquiry are an ongoing topic of interest in research communities. Found poetry is a useful starting point to explore creative means by which research participants can recount their stories, and equally, by which researchers can witness and disseminate what they have to tell.

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Introduction

> Language is charged with the task of making beings manifest and preserving them as such – in the linguistic work. Language gives expression to what is most pure and most concealed, as well as to what is confused and common. Indeed, even the essential word, if it is to be understood and so become the common possession of all, must make itself common. (Heidegger, translated from Krell 1993: 378)

The student cohorts who embark on the Doctorate in Health and Wellbeing at Wolverhampton University, UK include nurse practitioners and managers, allied health professionals and educators, working full-time or part-time. All are well established in their professional fields, often in positions of significant responsibility and authority, and with considerable financial investment (their own, or from a sponsoring organisation) as well as personal investment in the endeavour.

The social landscape of practice has been described as a resource for constituting professional identity through cognitive maps and a powerful sense of self, rooted in shared stories and repertoires for practice (Wenger, 2008). To this extent, professional knowledge and identity are 'territorialised' (Sanders et al., 2011: 117). But such certainty and familiarity can be problematic in the ontological quicksands of unknown terrain and the emergent possibilities of alternative vantage points. Holding on might create tensions among one's fellow travellers (e.g., peers and supervisors), but letting go is to feel exposed and vulnerable on the voyage, and as likely as not alienated from those back home (Petty et al., 2012). How will the 'researching professional', the 'practitioner-researcher', the 'scholarly practitioner' (the labels vary) be received? The ways that people let go of and negotiate new identities may be thought of as occurring in the liminal spaces of any new cultural environment in which we perceive threats to our established identities (Plump and Geist-Martin, 2013). Michael Bamberg (2011: 8–9) explicates this challenge as three dilemmatic spaces within which identity activities are navigated. They comprise: 1) constructing continuities and discontinuities (change) across time ('who I've always been' versus 'someone new and different'), 2) setting up a self vis-a-vis others ('I-am-who-I-am owing to my positioning in relation to others'), and 3) presenting a self as agent, or as subjected by social structures. Given that such a conceptualisation is 'shot through with valuating practices [and] morally infested', Bamberg (2011: 9) emphasises that positioning a sense of self in relation to it is a matter of degree, and that navigation is as much between as it is within these dilemmatic spaces.

Bamberg (2011) advocates a narrative practice approach to personal identity work that encourages the sharing of 'small' everyday, mundane stories with others. This is consonant with Glynis Cousin's view that 'The textual "re-presentation" of life is what the researcher does' (2013: 5). In relation to research, the fluidity of positionality demands that we do this out of an examination of place, biography, values, linguistic frameworks and discourses available to us. Critical reflexivity allows us to be transparent about how both big and small stories underlying this examination shape the analytic/interpretive exercise (Macbeth, 2001).

> We are . . . formed out of singular experiences. In particular, our biography includes what we have read, seen, touched and heard in terms of cultural experiences. . . . These are in the mix of what we bring to our interpretations. (Cousin, 2013: 5)

In this paper we describe how, as a supervisory team charged with helping new doctoral candidates find courage and confidence for this challenge, we encourage them to think

This activity is based on a qualitative research approach that uses art-like representation (e.g. sculpture, photographs, drawing, collage, drama etc.) "to elicit, challenge, and shift sense-making frameworks," *(Barry 1996 page 411).* It will provide the starting point for your personal stories of life, practice and your doctoral journey so far.

Using the magazines provided, find images that reflect your thoughts and feelings. Use these to create a theme board that will help outsiders to understand and interpret your story. Useful images are those that dynamically 'suggest', rather than passively 'stand for'.

> *The telling symbol may suggest forgotten details, reveal tacit and nonconscious understandings…suggesting new ways of knowing and being,"* (Barry 1996 page 413).

REFLECTING ON EACH OTHER'S THEME BOARDS:

As you listen to each person talk about their theme board,

- make a note of words, phrases and/or images that have particular meaning for you, or which simply strike a chord in you.

- think about how and why you relate to these words, phrases and/or images and share your thoughts with the rest of the group.

- consider to what extent each person's theme board retells stories you already know, but in a different way.

Figure 1. Using theme board technique to talk about practice.

poetically through stories, as a first step on their way to thinking reflexively. We describe how we use the medium of found poetry to help each new cohort consider the idea of elusive thought and reflexive voice in anticipation of their doctoral voyage within, through and between dilemmatic spaces, and their research positioning. Finding the poems begins with creation by the students of theme boards (Figure 1) or collages (Edgar, 1999; Keller et al., 2008; Vaughn, 2005). These graphic representations, four examples of which are shown in Figure 2, along with some student comments, serve as anchors for talking to peers and supervisors about themselves, their lives as people and professionals, their hopes and expectations of the doctoral experience, and their

"The theme board has acted as a powerful visual stimulus and each time it is revisited more metaphorical images seem to emerge. It has also enabled me to reflect on what is important to me within my own professional practice as well as consider issues relating to my own professional identity."

"Combining this activity with the reflective writing…has been a liberating activity and will help my critical thinking as part of my portfolio. I have also now been exposed to alternative ways to express myself through pictures, stories and poetry, which has given me another perspective to think about and consider for the future"

Figure 2. Student responses to the theme board activity (presented with permission).

research interests and ideas. In earlier iterations of the programme, Vinette (co-author) crafted poems from each theme board narrative, and these were the focus of discussion and further creative development. But confidence in the value and effectiveness, as well as the practicability of the process, has grown. Now, within the context of a one-day workshop, close listening and taking notes of the evocative language generated by their chosen images is the basis for students' (re)telling their own, and each other's stories in poetic form. This combination of graphic and linguistic artefacts is a starting point on their way to reflexivity. In ensuing months students are encouraged to revisit their theme boards and poems, to rework them, and to go on to create

poems *de novo* as part of their personal epistemological project. At the same time it affords them an opportunity to consider the potential for poetic inquiry as a research approach.

Poetic inquiry

Definitions of poetry, and aesthetic concerns about what constitutes 'good' or 'effective' poetry, are subjects of much debate (Faulkner, 2016). The scope of and enthusiasm for poetic inquiry as a way of knowing through poetic language and devices, and as an expression of affective experience, is wide (see Prendergast, 2009 and Faulkner, 2016 for comprehensive accounts). It may be categorised in terms of the voice engaged, for example researcher-voiced 'poetic re-telling' derived from field notes, journals or auto-ethnographical writing. Participant-voiced poems may be created *de novo* by participants or in collaboration with researchers, and may reflect singular or multiple voices. Other participant-voiced poems may be crafted from interview transcripts by researchers as an interpretive strategy. This is a type of found poetry that reconfigures research participants' transcribed talk in poetic form (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Cross et al., 2016; Sherwin et al., 2014; Sparkes and Douglas, 2007). This involves culling and playing with words, phrases and segments and making changes in spacing, lines and rhythm to arrive at an evocative piece.

Theme board poems

Ann, Eney and Lawrence are doctoral students from the fields of nurse education, women's health and mental health, respectively. They were generous in offering us their poems for this paper in their own names. The first poem, 'Don't just travel', conveys the sentiment behind the title of this paper as expressed in Vinette's found poem created from Ann's theme board narrative. The next two: 'My theme board poem' and 'Finding me', comprise Lawrence's found poem crafted from his own narrative, and Eney's found poem crafted for Lawrence from his own narrative.

Don't just travel
Keep things simple, like my poster
Past, present, future   I
Tension
Slices of difference, demarcations
Where at first you see only a whole

Let's rewind
Simple beginnings   II
But lots of books

I began working in an office
Got the bug to find out more   III
Don't just travel
Explore!

Different angles
Places in the dark and light   IV
You're not what people see but

Be what people expect (sometimes)
It's rare for everything to be accepted

I like to be in the lead
Searching for sense in all this
It's about the student journey   V
Making a place for them to grow
About them making good choices
And us choosing them

I can't imagine not being happy
In what I do   VI
Fun is seen as frivolous
But that's not true

You don't have to stay
At the top of the mountain   VII
Come back down
And start again
Don't just travel
Explore!

(Vinette's found poem crafted from Ann's theme board narrative 2012)

My theme board poem
I am a true reflection of myself
Mirror, Mirror does not lie
See myself as others do   I
The road is not clear
But I can see the way
I have challenges on my way
Reading books is the only way

Find comfort by hiding away
Deep, deep down
I need friends, colleagues   II
And mentors
Researching is my job

Finally I did it
I did it   III
How???
I do not know!

(Lawrence's own found poem crafted from his theme board narrative 2015)

Finding me
In a mirror I can see myself
Slow and fast I follow my road   I
The books I read guide and mislead me

But I know I am going
Outside my comfort zone I am growing

Can't hide
But always digging in and out   II
Aiming to find myself
I am first and I have done it
Not sure how

Guess I need models   III
To find myself

(Eney's found poem crafted from Lawrence's theme board narrative 2015)

Within the relatively few lines of these three poems there is much to conjure with, not least epistemological questions about what and where knowledge is – 'Fun is seen as frivolous/But that's not true' (Ann, Verse VI); 'I have challenges on my way/Reading books is the only way' (Lawrence, Verse I); 'The books I read guide and mislead me' (Eney, Verse I). So, we may ask, what books (or – more narratively – texts) do we trust to clear the path? What if these texts appear to mislead us along unmarked byways? Should we delight in exploration or curse the delay? Setting the title for this paper, Ann's poem 'Don't just travel' portends this dilemma. She talked about her belief that all new experiences should be explored to the full, and her expectation that the doctoral experience would be transformational, not merely instrumental. Hence the potential for lost opportunity is highlighted in the line 'Don't just travel/Explore!' (Verse III). Discussing the importance of this to her, when she heard the poem she suggested adding a reprise of the line as the poem's closing message (Verse VII). Similarly, the poem sets holding on against the need to let go (Verse VII), to be unafraid to start out afresh from a new, less certain (liminal) position: 'You don't have to stay at the top of the mountain/Come back down/And start again'. The poem does further work by setting up a tension in the reader's mind: 'Keep things simple, like my poster/Past, present, future', against 'Slices of difference, demarcations/Where at first you see only a whole'. On the one hand this might suggest coherent, linear narrative as represented by Ann's discrete (not overlapping) theme board images (Figure 1) of past, informing present, and projections of an imagined future. But a more ambiguous interpretation that invites us into the spaces is possible. In this we might welcome a diversion, and look around for as yet unseen fragments rather than be too easily persuaded by a presumed 'whole'. Is staying exposed between the lines a more adventurous and authentic option than 'Find(ing) comfort by hiding away/ Deep, deep down' (Lawrence Verse II)?

When we decide to use stories, Frank (2010) says we should consider what we want to do with them, which raises issues of representation and subjectivity. So we must consider what purpose it serves to appropriate each other's texts in this way. In suggesting that Ann's poem 'does work' we adopt Frank's (2010) approach to narrative, which is not so concerned with what stories reveal about the mind of the storyteller, but is more interested in seeing the story as a living actor dialogically engaged with us, as tellers and listeners. The important work that stories achieve is to provide a 'selection/evaluation guidance system' to direct our attention. 'To select is already to evaluate; the processes are continuous, separable only upon reflection' (Frank 2010: 46). The evaluative work of selection inherent in creating found poetry challenges students to assay multiple critical readings of each other's text; to

not only think about stories, but to think with stories. Thus, in conversation with Lawrence and Eney, 'My theme board poem' and 'Finding me' draw us into Bamberg's (2011) dilemmatic spaces of identity work by appearing to wrestle with the 'Who am I?' question. First, an essentialist, same and continuous self appears to speak: 'I am a true reflection of myself/Mirror, Mirror does not lie' (Verse I). But 'See myself as others do' suggests a constructionist leaning towards self as positioned in relation to others, begging such questions as 'What do I represent in the system, and what do other people think of my representation?' Such a reading directs our attention to getting away from 'who we think we are' towards the question of how we perform 'who we do'. 'Finding me' offers a different reading, a different image in the lines 'In a mirror I can see myself/Slow and fast I follow my road' (Verse I). So we might ask ourselves, 'Is the man in the mirror in the act of walking away from a ''same and continuous'' self towards a different ''positioned'' self?'.

The poem 'Don't just travel' contributes to this conversation: 'You're not what people see but/Be what people expect (sometimes)' [Verse IV]. But it offers a critical twist – if we read Verse VI as a representation (the voice), of the doctoral programme (rather than hearing an individual student voice) the ambiguity of this tensioned space between structural discourse and dilemmatic narrative practice is revealed: 'Different angles/Places in the dark and light/You're not what people see but/Be what people expect (sometimes)/It's rare for everything to be accepted'.

Final thoughts

Reflexivity is a social constructionist endeavour in which knowledge claims are negotiated and contingent. Hence the students' collages are fragmented, non-linear and contingent. They make no secret of their fabrication as biographical texts. Nevertheless, we remain mindful that while reflexivity's epistemological position is that what we see is shaped by how and where we have learned to look (Cousin, 2013), the challenge is to craft an account that is not simply self-consciously confessional, bounded by the limitations of a personal perspective.

> When it comes to practice, the process of engaging in reflexivity is perilous... Researchers have to negotiate the 'swamp' of interminable self analysis and self disclosure. On their journey, they can all too easily fall into the mire of the infinite regress of excessive self-analysis and deconstructions at the expense of focusing on the research participants and developing understanding. (Finlay, 2002: 212)

However, reflexive researchers do not leap fully formed into the nascent research endeavour. They do not begin and end in the research proposal. Their emergence is an emotive, often confessional process of letting go, exploration and risk-taking, honing and becoming. Finding a way through the swamp is predicated upon stepping into it in the first place. Our task as supervisors is to offer creative resources and fresh linguistic tools that will help students emerge, muddied but triumphant, on the other side. Our students work towards this achievement by moving away from familiarity into the space of liminality, first by fragmenting the narrative fragments in their theme boards and rearticulating these through found poetry and, yet again later, through their own original compositions. What we try to show is that by thinking poetically, both individually and collaboratively, students can, on the one hand, interrogate how their poems work as representations of (lower case) truth, meaning and reality as dialogically contestable objects, not as narrated (upper case) Truth. At the same time, through the narrative practice of poetry each of their stories takes

on a history of its own, one that no longer resonates solely with the theme-board maker, but which is constituted through those others who have interacted and conversed with it. In this sense, they work to uncover, or un-conceal the 'being-ness' of doctoral study. Their small stories become less idiographic, more detached from the subjectivity of the teller, so multiple subjectivities among the observers (hearers) can be privileged. They move towards a more thoughtful, perspectival, and critically reflexive account.

We opened with Heidegger's (translated by Krell 1993) suggestion that thinking does more than merely represent or explain, and for familiar language and common speech to conceal more than they reveal (Heidegger). We are less likely to 'hear' or examine context in a critical fashion. Poetic thinking and writing, on the other hand, encourages un-concealing or uncovering through allusions, syntax and unexpected metaphors.

> Poetry engages us with language, nurtures the inner life, acknowledges the particular and local, encourages us to listen to our hearts, fosters flexibility and trust, and invites creativity and creative living. (Leggo, 2005: 454)

Leggo's (2005) claim that giving attention to poetry, poetic knowing and living can revitalise pedagogy and foster transformative learning is (in a small way) borne out by examples of evaluation feedback from students (Ann, Ruth and Jacqui) who have chosen to respond to us in verse (Figure 3). Poets make poems out of fragments of memory, images, sounds, feelings, thoughts, and the relationships between these which 'for some reason become luminous' in their mind (Hughes, 1994: 2). By engaging and re-engaging with their own and each other's collage-inspired poems, our doctoral students invite others to contribute new layers of reflexivity and dialogue around personal and professional knowledge. This discourages premature foreclosure and keeps open a space for possibility. It helps prepare them for reflexive inquiry in their own practice contexts, when they will bring into the open the luminosities and contingencies of their participants' lives, interweaving these judiciously

Ruth
I felt challenged to say thank you in verse.
You gave me new mots and I have begun to rehearse.
A bringing together of threads, a meeting of minds
Weaving a pattern, whereupon….
It is possible - rapprochement!

Jackie
Whilst the module has been challenging and tiring,
Listening to your discourse is so inspiring.
Although change is not so easy, experience it we should.
Central to our metamorphosis is to be understood,
On our journey we may create turbulence, but,
'Uncertainty is good'!

Ann
My journey with you, mentor and doc buddies
Each step has been enriching, authenticity the goal
Exploring ourselves and practice, searching for the whole
Language, prose, interpretation, our narratives beginning to unfold
True to our doctoral community. Oh our emancipation
Please behold!

Figure 3. Feedback poems from students.

and critically with their own, to construct a compelling research account that extends knowledge in their chosen field. Drawing upon poetic inquiry to enliven our sensitivity to the ambiguity, messiness and poetry of people's lives (including ours as researchers) offers fascinating opportunities, provided, as Freeman (2015: 29) suggests, we are bold enough to embark knowing that 'narrative understanding is interpretive through and through, and although we can certainly hope for *better* accounts – more fully able to accommodate the known facts – there is no final point of arrival' (original emphasis).

Key points for policy, practice and/or research

- Scholarly challenges come to us from many directions and in often alarming guises. Our important task is to equip ourselves with the flexible and the unexpected response. Better to rejoice and engage in what we call critical reflexivity rather than attempt the discovery of poorly defined and outlandish research project claims.

Author's Note

The untimely death of my best friend brings home that narrative does not do normal, just entanglement. The work of Dr Cross has inspired not only me, but the many she has guided, cajoled and enabled in such imbroglio. Mess and muddle is what she enjoyed and taught me to recognise its poetic potential and I like many miss her anarchy.
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