

Poetic analysis

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WHAT MIGHT SUSTAINED EXCELLENCE IN TERTIARY
TEACHING BE? AN ANALYSIS THROUGH 'FOUND' POETRY

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Josie Crawley

POEM ONE. *My teaching lens*

Teaching is a passion:
we learn, reflect and grow.
Seek each fertile moment,
select a seed to sow.

Story with each student,
hear, engage, respond.
Value where they come from,
map journeys to beyond.

Shine a light on learning,
open many doors,
illuminate their climb
higher than before.

POEM TWO. *A collective student voice*

She
guides me with
care, **care,** *care*
I feel seen
She
takes time to
listen, **listen,** listen
I feel heard
ALWAYS
 willing, involved, creative,
 turns every learning experience into a positive one
 ties the course together
 dives to a deeper level –
 makes me look at things in more than one way.

In 2020, I was invited to apply for an Ako Aotearoa Sustained Excellence in Tertiary Teaching Award. My first instinct was to turn down the offer, as I didn't think what I did was unique or special enough to apply for a national award. But after a couple of probing questions about my practice and student feedback, I committed to what became my summer break journey of self-discovery. Collecting and collating years of teaching activities, feedback from students, colleagues, and my wider communities, and revisiting key research outputs resulted in a 20,000-word thesis spanning my 27-year career. Ruthlessly pruning my submission to 6,000 words required distilling the essence of both what I do, and the impact that it has on others. I was fortunate and privileged to be awarded a sustained teaching excellence award from Ako Aotearoa in 2020.

Poetry has the potential to concentrate complex concepts or focus on specific detail. The two poems above are my poetic analysis of my application, using words and phrases uplifted from the document, reflecting the essence of what is said. This qualitative process of research poetry is introduced below.

In poem one, "My teaching lens," I mine the repeated seams that are the foundation of my practice. The scaffolding of the teaching process to student outcomes and the repetition of this process again and again across time seemed to require rhyme, to give it direction and pace like a flowing river. This poem is what excellent teaching is to me: what I have done, what I do now, and what I will do into the future. When I can no longer do this, be this – then I will stop teaching.

While critically reflecting on poem one's creation, we can unpack or distil the concentrated message to illuminate my interpretation of excellence in teaching. As a poem found from a reflective statement of experience, poem one provides a summary of personal practice. I am a professional hungry for ongoing learning from evidence and narratives, students' and colleagues' stories. I use gardening and journey metaphors where I, the teacher, encourage student growth and forward direction, helping facilitate access to light, nourishment, multiple paths,

and potential. This might look very different with individual students and in the context of learning. The language of “we” and “with” suggests this can only be accomplished in partnership with the student. Excellent teaching is not about telling, it is about coaching through meaningful listening (“hear, engage, respond”).

In poem two, “A collective student voice,” we hear the multiple voices of my students, across 20 years of feedback. I found the feedback had a lot of repeated concepts, with caring and listening persistent themes, across personal, clinical, and traditional teaching contexts, so I use repetition, font and space to capture these voices across time. The word “always” was used by students in multiple contexts, hence the capitals. The formatting of the first half of the poem attempts to suggest some of these different voices and contexts to the reader.

My reflections on poem two conclude that students appreciate a lecturer who consistently listens to them, hears them as an individual with a context, and shows respectful caring. The lecturer does not take responsibility for student learning, but rather guides them through a journey, offers an alternate lens through which to view experiences, and appears genuinely passionate and interested in the topic, using multiple creative strategies to also engage students. The students were generally concrete in their feedback, so the poem is mostly concrete, other than the poetic language of “tying a course together” and “diving to a deeper level.” The imagery in the last half of the poem, where the lines stretch to fill the page, captures the students’ perception of what is involved in excellent teaching as a scaffold of actions, building upon each other, with the last line a resultant student outcome. The lecturer actions required to achieve excellent learning opportunities are hinted at in the students’ words. All are unseen activities that demolish a lecturer’s time: researching levels beyond content teaching, exploring history and criticism around theory, finding published experiences, and knowing course content so well that you can make connections across theories, across courses, and from theory to student practice or lived experience. No wonder we get exhausted!

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH POETRY

The two poems above are the result of qualitative analysis by poetic inquiry, using my personal application to Ako Aotearoa as data. The poems meet the definition of ‘found poems’ in that they take quoted words and phrases from my source (Miller, 2019; Wiggins, 2011), a text that would not traditionally be regarded as poetic, then shape them together to create a poem. Poetic inquiry (also known as research poetry) merges the data reduction stage of qualitative analysis with the craft of writing poetry (Miller, 2019). The two genres of qualitative research and poetry have a lot in common. Both embrace diverse interpretations and attempt to portray a depth of lived experience, an emotive state interacting with environmental and temporal contexts in suggestive but meaningful ways.

Findings/poems may be concrete, use metaphor, or remain abstract. It is a very small step from Narrative Inquiry (my favoured method for qualitative research) to research poetry. Miller (2019) describes five clear steps for poetic inquiry as a research process: immersion (in the data), creation, critical reflection, ethics, and engagement. These steps provide a guide for qualitative researchers.

Poetry has many potential attributes but very few rules. Repetition, humour, rhyme, rhythm, metaphor, irony, hyperbole, sound, alliteration, textual format, and imagery may be employed; or they may not! Because of this narrative fluidity in describing what poetry is, Rosen (2016) rather discusses what poetry can do, such as: suggest things, give an impression, express a belief or culture, play, be symbolic, or be personal. It can capture a moment and can borrow voices. Poem one expresses my personal belief of what excellent teaching involves, while poem two borrows from the voices of thousands of nursing students across the decades, sharing their lens for ‘good’ teaching.

USING FOUND POETRY TO BUILD EXCELLENT TEACHING

Within my clinical teaching, I encourage students to create reflective responses both as formal assessed reflections (part of their clinical portfolio) and within informal journalling. Some choose poetic formats. Student poems are not part of poetic inquiry; many are reflective poems without 'found' qualities, yet some create poems 'found' from clinical practice quotes that stayed with the student. Although I have not formally researched which students most benefit from this approach, anecdotally students with diverse learning needs frequently comment positively on assessment in clinical portfolios that allows the creative flexibility of expression through poetry.

I employ poetic language techniques as the base to some classroom exercises. For example, students are asked to mine their own experience or sometimes a clinical experience to generate similes, metaphors, and beliefs around health; or key phrases that describe a client's resilience. Anonymous student generated responses are collated, and read back to the larger class – so that group feedback starts with a 'found poem.'

A different way of students creating poetry is within lectures; 'flash' poems can link theory and practice or capture student summaries of key content or personal learning. For example, in a lecture introducing grief and loss, I ask students to start by writing a three-minute acrostic reflective poem on 'grief' then, after the content, repeat the exercise again, this time 'found' from the lecture content. I often role model the first reflective poem with an off-the-cuff example – the standard does not need to be high! Such as:

Grief sucks

Really, really sucks

I think – I haven't actually experienced it myself

Ever –

For now.

I do not role model the found poem, nor require the students to share this – although I offer them the opportunity after class. For the second poem, the 'found' one, I encourage students to use words and phrases from the lecture, or describe images seen. The lecture includes a children's picture book and client testimonials resulting in diverse student poems; perhaps summarising content, reflecting on images noted or pulling key words and phrases together. Each student's two poems viewed together make personal learning visible.

Other teaching strategies rely on the student 'finding' a poem from reading. This requires close attention to the reading and can be done individually or as a group. This use of language really engages some students. Students in a formal presentation once included an unsolicited 'found' poem (no marks attached) from their preparatory readings encapsulating experiences of racism in New Zealand.

As I have said, I am a teacher committed to ongoing learning and narrative research techniques. In the future, as a narrative inquiry researcher, I intend to include poetic inquiry methods when transcribing research participant interviews as part of my own researcher fieldwork notes and as an additional qualitative analysis tool.

If you would like to privately build your poetry writing skills and your confidence, I recommend Kate Clanchy's (2023) *How to Grow Your Own Poem* and Michael Rosen's *What is Poetry?* (2016) as good starting places.

Josie Crawley (Associate Professor at Otago Polytechnic School of Nursing, Te Pūkenga) has won national awards for her tertiary teaching and Editors' choice for her reflective writing. Her research platform explores narrative inquiry, phenomenological experience, narratives for education, reflection, and compassionate care. She has published in a variety of academic journals, and her poetry has been included in a collection of poems by Aotearoa New Zealand Nurses, and health and nursing journals.

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