



“To Avoid Embarrassment, Poetry Should Keep Itself to Itself”: An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Place of Poetry in Adult Literacy Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the reasons for the author’s reluctance to bring examples of her own poetry into her practice as teacher educator on a program for adult literacy tutors. The paper begins with the author’s poem, “The Place of Poetry,” which is used as a tool for reflection on the author’s assumptions about her identities as poet and as educator. The paper ends with poems written by the author’s students, which demonstrate that the use of poetry in education has the potential to facilitate transformative learning.

The Place of Poetry


*To avoid embarrassment, poetry should keep itself to itself.
It should be private, not shout out loud
or pretend that it can sing. There’s virtue in the repetitive detail
of a daisy, or the simplicity of a tulip; you must agree that
orchids are utterly tasteless and profane.*

*Poetry should sit quietly in a corner, knees to its chest, fiddling with its
hair. It should make no jerky movements, or appear too suddenly. It should be
obedient, perform decorously when requested, and be silent and calm. It should
never ever strut about proudly, or dare to overwhelm you; it’s just a lesser trickle
and never a wave.*

*Poetry should know it's finite, limit itself to the specific, the particular:
the edges of a shell, one single white rose-petal,
a smearing of silver across a fish's back,
the winking blue eye at the core of a snail.*

*I knew a tree once that leaned itself back against a riverbank, growing
wide and flat and shameless where some grasses used to grow. But there's no
poetry in that: we all must adapt ourselves, never making statements about
miracles or art.*

*Don't let poetry confuse you.
You know it's not momentous.
Be on your guard; deny it access, and keep it in its place.*

his poem emerged from my practice as teacher educator on a program for adult literacy practitioners. It was provoked by the negative responses of more than two thirds of my students in three successive cohorts to my suggestion that they incorporate poetry reading and writing into their literacy classes. In a survey, these students indicated that they felt excluded by poetic language, were not particularly fond of poetry, and thought that the learners whom they were teaching would not enjoy it. Two of the main reasons cited for this aversion to poetry were: not knowing where to start when commanded to write a poem in class, and the sense conveyed by their English teachers that they alone held the key to the one and only correct interpretation of a specific poem.

Poetry has a very different place in my own life from that of most of my students: I have been writing it since I was a child, and the practices of reading and making poetry are woven into the fabric of my everyday life. My poetry has been published in conventional print formats, such as anthologies and journals, and in less conventional ones such as on a CD of recorded poems and on a glass sculpture of short pieces which toured Ireland in 2003. In October 2005, my sense of identity as a poet and my ideas about the appropriate “places” for poetry were tested when I was invited to participate in the annual week-long Canadian event of Random Acts of Poetry (online) as the Belfast contributor. These random acts involved asking individuals or groups of people in venues not normally associated with poetry if I could read one of my poems to them. The venues I chose included the greenhouses in a botanical garden, a bus stop, an art gallery and a railway station. Most of the responses to

my random acts were positive, although I will never forget the look of disgust on the face of the woman behind the till at the garage when I offered to read a poem to her; it was as if I had made a particularly lewd suggestion. That entire week, I was filled with anxiety about putting my precious poetry out there, and concerned as to whether presenting poetry as a surprise has the effect of marginalizing it as eccentric and shocking, as conveyed in Sandra Faulkner's lines below:

*Poetry is
when I lift my brown hemp skirt
in the packed metro car, show
some stripped tights in orange,
rusty red and plum purple.
But my fun flushed face and toes
are only a dream of a dream
I told you about just now,
like writing some poem.*

(Faulkner, 2007, p. 229)

The Random Acts of Poetry experience and the process of writing my poem about the place of poetry helped me to identify a major contradiction: my poetry is out there in the world to a certain extent, but I find it challenging to be "out there" as a poet. Until I wrote "The Place of Poetry," I had never identified myself as a poet in my practice as a teacher educator, nor had I brought any of my own poetry into the classroom, even when I engaged my students in creative writing. This paper explores the reasons for my "hiddenness" about poetry, how and why I eventually "came out" to my students as a poet and a poetry lover, and how poetry enhances reflection on the processes of learning and the nature of language.

Languaging

*The art of knotting words together,
loose but still connected,
leaving spaces for absences
and pathways of butterflies,
wings almost touching.*

In its focus on some of the subjective aspects of writing poetry and teaching, this is an exploratory and not an expository paper. It is a reflexive autoethnographic unravelling, in prose and in poetry, of the web of assumptions which I had created about my roles and responsibilities as educator, and about learning and poetry, and shares the processes of developing insights and understanding. At the same time, I acknowledge that these insights might be partial, agreeing with de Freitas (2008, p. 471) that although reflexivity acknowledges and builds on the writer's subjectivity, the self-awareness and truths that emerge from the process are not absolute, nor is language sufficiently transparent to convey these processes accurately. As a poet, I am particularly aware of the limited capacity of language to reveal and describe the subjective explicitly and definitively; poetic language is dense and complex and the use of metaphor and other poetic devices provoke and resonate with a variety of realities, experiences and texts. These resonances limit my own certainty about the meaning of my own words.

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*Outside the room where meaning's being created,
the sky's deciding how it might like to be:
the underbelly of a riverbed
transforming through the flowing;
or perhaps a winged seed prying loose
from deep inside the flesh of day.
The light is sliding through the clouds,
or possibly the clouds are endsmoke
of a light that overheated.
The winter trees, inclining,
have turned their backs,
shaking their heads,
pretending they were never present.*

While I have memories of and notes about drafting and writing the poems in this paper, these memories add little to my knowledge, for memory is mutable and accumulates and discards meaning over time. I will refer to the poems included in this paper to supplement its themes, but will not analyze them in detail or explain them to the reader. I lack the confidence to boast that I own the unique interpretation of my work, unlike the English teachers of some of my own students!

Coherence

*What is tenuous lets meaning through.
The moon burns through the porous urban night.
I like the stillness of the sleeping houses;
they all make sense.
In the morning, I feel resistant.
This intense new sky imagines me somewhere else, or in a painting,
always stopping to look, not having to move on.
Leaves edged with frost so perfectly specific: one statement at a time.
The outsides and insides of things
might not recognise each other,
but it seems as if we might be less uncertain.*

These lines reflect my belief that poetry offers opportunities to engage with the complexities of meaning making and to access imaginal worlds of possibility and learning. As a teacher educator, I support my students in entering these imaginal worlds through the use of a range of arts-based methods for reflection, besides the traditional one of writing reflective journals (Tracey, 2009a). This paper explores poetry as a tool for reflection on my identities as poet and teacher educator. This exploration draws on different notions about reflection in its application in two models of reflective practice. In the first instance, I agree with Hiley's suggestion (2006) that reflective practice is intrinsically poetic by nature, with reflection occurring through the mode of poetic expression. The poem "Coherence" is the result of my reflections on my practice.

In contrast, Brookfield's model of critical reflection (1988, 1995) focuses on critical rather than on creative thinking, and involves educators in examining critically their assumptions, beliefs, values and practices. The poem with which this paper began acted as a stimulus for the examination of my own assumptions about my practice. Although my reflection on these assumptions was written a few years ago, it appears here in the present tense to capture my thinking processes:

At a distance of three or four years since the poem was written, I identify less with it as its creator, and more with the ideas about the place of poetry which it conveys. The image of poetry sitting in a corner fiddling with its hair provokes thoughts not only about the concreteness of this image, but also the way in which I have kept my poetry out of my practice, as if I need to maintain a separate identity as a poet from that of

educator. My reflections on my poem lead me to observe and question my notion, based on my study of the work of Carl Rogers, that my main role as teacher educator is that of a facilitator of learning and self-actualization. My understanding of the nature of facilitation appears to be intertwined with an assumption that this necessitates the withdrawal of my individual and creative self from my position as educator. This accords with my personal reticence and unwillingness to appear to be “showing off” to my students and imposing my interests on them; this reticence is reflected in the images of privacy and intimacy in the poem and the tone of secrecy, however ironic they are.

In contrast, as teacher educator on a programme for adult literacy tutors, I am more than willing to declare myself in my role as the monitor of the correct uses of language. I remind students that I am the Guardian of Grammar, a member of the Apostrophe Protection Society, and the Sentence Structure Supporting Act. While there is humor and playfulness in this list of ironic titles, they reinforce my power as maintainer of academic standards and as assessor of student coursework and of their teaching practice. I begin to wonder whether I have not shared my own poetry with my students because it might threaten the personal power with which my role endows me. I give a variety of reasons for not presenting my own poetry to my students, including my reluctance to “force” it upon an unwilling audience, some of whom might feel they have to admire it to please me. I am also aware of my fear about negative responses to my poetry. My identity as poet is so important to me that it seems threatening to bring it into the classroom and risk it being undermined. At the same time, my concern about the risks of exploring poetry with my students, both mine and that of established poets, could prevent me from stretching the students and provoking their engagement with aspects of language and literature which are outside their comfort zone, but nonetheless worthwhile and inspiring. Poets whom I admire such as Ben Okri suggest that it is precisely the responsibility of the poet to extend the possibilities of language and the boundaries of the known: “Poets are set against the world because they cannot accept that what there seems to be is all there is. The poet is the widener of consciousness” (Okri, 1997, pp. 3–4).

The experience of reflecting on my Place of Poetry poem supported me in developing my understanding about the importance of poetry in my practice. The poet/educator/researcher Carl Leggo argues for the inclusion of poetry in all aspects of learning, claiming that, “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, p. 439). In my own practice, I use acrostic and shape poetry to engage students in playing with language and exploring ways of giving the beginner writers in their classes a voice. These forms of poetry appear to generate a playful attitude to language; they also

seem to be vehicles for deep learning, providing adult literacy learners with opportunities to synthesize their learning experiences and to convey the emotional as well as the cognitive impact of their learning (Tracey, 2009b).

Exploring my assumptions through the lens of my poem has stimulated me to bring my own poetry into my practice. The poem below, which is as intensely personal and as charged with emotion as some of those written by adult literacy learners in my students' classes, was one of the first which I shared with my students:

Like Trees: for V.K.

*Some people are easy to see:
Like trees, they declare themselves, exposing
their yearnings without any shame. They are wonder
made conscious, a canvas for light. Risking the storms,
they articulate slow transition. Visible, substantial,
they acknowledge their wounds.
Some people, like trees,
are easy to see. Some people are easy to love.*

There is a direct contrast between this poem with its references to visibility and transparency and the “hiddenness” of the Place of Poetry poem at the start of this paper. Sharing “Like Trees” with my students was risky; while some of them expressed their approval, others worried away at the initials in the title, wanting to know the history behind the poem and ignoring the content and language of the poem itself. Some students were dismissive, saying that because the poem didn't rhyme, was very brief and didn't “sound like a poem”; it was not a “real” poem. However, the risk of presenting the poem for scrutiny appeared to be worth taking, because students' questions about it provoked a discussion about creative processes, rhythm, repetition and metaphor, and generated suggestions about using poetry in literacy classes. Each time that I have shared one of my own poems in class, at least two students have subsequently given or emailed me a poem which they wrote after that class. As Leggo suggests, the use of poetry in education supports the development of trust and creativity.

To support students in using poetry as a form of deep learning, they are given a group task to write a metaphor poem about their learning. Working in a group encourages collaborative reflection and reduces what might appear to some

the insuperable challenge of being required to produce a poem as an individual. The following example from the class of 2008 to 2009 suggests that this is an effective activity:

My certificate course is.....

*Reflective as a lamp in a window
when the outside is dark,
or cat's eyes
caught in the headlights.*

Eye opening as matchsticks at the end of the night.

*Confusing as a one legged man
in a prosthetics shop
looking for an arm.*

*Inspiring as a one legged man
finding a new arm in a prosthetics shop.*

Stefanie, Jacqui, Moyra and Paula

Risking the foregrounding of poetry and my identity as a poet in my practice appears to have encouraged students to have taken a similar risk in engaging with poetry. The poem below is by a student who recently completed the first year of the program. This poem, which is the first she has ever written, conveys her deep involvement in the learning process, as well as its profound impact. The poem synthesizes her understanding of reflection with the format of acrostic poetry and an exploration of the possibilities of language.

Reflections

*Reflecting on this road I've travelled
Regard the distance I have come
Recall the places where I've stumbled
Face all the fears I've now undone*

*Each footfall on this winding pathway
Stretching far behind my back
Has brought me to a new position
From which there is no changing tack*

*Fearsome foes, inclement weather
Many things to overcome
Not least of all the inner demons
Each tried to break me, one by one*

*Learning always from each other
Sharing spools of common thread
Has made the journey go more quickly
Inspiring confidence, not dread*

*Engaging with my adult learners
Has taught me more than books could do
Walking sometimes in their footsteps
Has helped me know just what to do*

*Clear, before me, lies the ocean
Foaming waves break on the shore
I watch in silent contemplation
Reflecting now, that I know more*

*Trials and tribulations over
I rest amongst the shady dunes
I bathe my feet in healing water
At once revived, refreshed, renewed*

*I gaze into this tranquil mirror
Reflect on all I've seen and done
I've learned so much along this journey
I can't believe that now it's done*

*On this quiet shore the gentle lapping
Soothes me into slumber sweet
I'll rest a while 'til it is morning
The onward will I further seek*

*Not at an end, my quest continues
 A new path must I seek and tread
 For learning is an onward journey
 That will not end till I am dead.*

Nicola Toner

Conclusion: Reflections and the Place of Poetry

This paper began with my poem about the place of poetry as a stimulus for reflections on the challenges of incorporating poetry into my practice. It seems fitting that the paper should end not with another example of my work, but with a poem written by one of my students on a teacher education program for adult literacy practitioners. Nicola's evocative words provoke me into further reflections: about the differences between our poems, about transformative learning, and on the place of poetry in teacher education.

Unlike Nicola's "Reflections," my poem is tentative in terms of theme, imagery and language; the use of irony allows me to distance myself from the "embarrassments" of poetry. Nicola is far more present in her poem than I am in mine. She reveals the painful aspects of her learning journey directly and courageously. The alliteration, rhymes and half-rhymes in "Reflections" reinforce its tone of conviction and determination. The metaphors of movement and struggle in her poem convey the impression that Nicola has fully engaged with and been changed by the learning process; this contrasts directly with my image of poetry sitting in a corner fiddling with its hair.

"Reflections" is about the changes which learning brings; the nature and processes of these changes are conveyed in the reflective content of the poem, the movement from past to future and in the poet's assertion that her experiences have "*brought me to a new position/ From which there is no changing tack.*" In its emphasis on change and the sense that her "new position" represents a fundamental alteration in the poet's perspectives, this poem embodies transformative learning. In its classical sense, transformative learning entails a permanent shift in frames of reference, often beginning with a "disorienting dilemma" or series of dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991). The "Reflections" poem subsumes several of the stages which occur in the process of

transformative learning, according to Kitchenham's list of these phases below (2008, p. 105). Illustrative excerpts from "Reflections" have been added to the relevant phases (in italics).

Table 1:
Kitchenham's List of Phases

<p>Phase 1 A disorienting dilemma <i>"the places where I've stumbled"</i></p>
<p>Phase 2 A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame <i>"...the inner demon/Each tried to break me, one by one"</i></p>
<p>Phase 3 A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions <i>"Engaging with my adult learners/Has taught me more than books could do /Walking sometimes in their footsteps/Has helped me know just what to do"</i></p>
<p>Phase 4 Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change <i>"Learning always from each other/Sharing spools of common thread"</i></p>
<p>Phase 5 Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions</p>
<p>Phase 6 Planning of a course of action <i>"Clear, before me, lies the ocean/Foaming waves break on the shore/I watch in silent contemplation Reflecting now, that I know more"</i></p>
<p>Phase 7 Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans <i>"I gaze into this tranquil mirror/Reflect on all I've seen and done/I've learned so much along this journey"</i></p>
<p>Phase 8 Provisional trying of new roles</p>
<p>Phase 9 Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships</p>
<p>Phase 10 A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective <i>"a new position, From which there is no changing tack"</i></p>

While Mezirow's classical model of transformative learning foregrounds the rational and cognitive aspects of learning (Mezirow, 1985, 1994), Dirkx's conceptualization addresses the affective, imaginal and transpersonal aspects (Dirkx, 1997, 2001; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006). The process of transformation in Dirkx's sense occurs through "inner work" (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003, p. 115), incorporating profound self-searching. In its self-searching and its reflective enquiry, emotionality and expressive use of language, "Reflections" seems to encompass both the rational and imaginal aspects of transformative learning.

The poem "Reflections" is suggested as a useful stimulus for discussion in teacher education programs about the nature of the learning journey and about the reflective processes which foster this learning. The structured format of the acrostic poem provides a supportive framework within which student teachers might reflect on their practice. Poetry has the potential to support them, as it did the author of this paper and her students, in examining their assumptions about learning and about their identities as educators.

At the end of this paper, I replace my initial concerns about poetry in my work as teacher educator with an acknowledgment of its right to be there, and a continuing commitment, in the words of my poem "Like Trees: for V.K", to making it "Visible, substantial." The place of poetry is in my practice.

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“To Avoid Embarrassment, Poetry Should Keep Itself to Itself”: An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Place of Poetry in Adult Literacy Teacher Education

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