

The Craft, Practice, and Possibility of Poetry in Educational Research

by Melisa Cahnmann

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. Examples are presented of poetic techniques from research. The author discusses the use of poetry as a means for educational scholarship to impact the arts, influence wider audiences, and improve teacher and graduate student education.

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

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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 con-

clude 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 “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” (Kowitz, 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.¹

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

Poetry is a risky business.

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 (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 Eisner, Lawrence-Lightfoot, Barone, 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 re-

ciprocal, 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-spire” 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 thát the Éverlásting hád not fix’d/His cánon gáinst self-sláughter! Ó God! Gód!” (Hamlet).

Educational researchers such as discourse analysts and microethnographers 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,³ to highlight what stands out from the underlying repetition. A contemporary structure is often referred to as listing, 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 lan-
guage.
(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 His-
panic 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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 Philly⁶

I see them. The shoes
on eighth street—there must be
30 pair of them—perched upside down,
an uneven silhouette of sneakers
slung over the 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 his 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 desk-
tops,
on-time straight lines in the yard.

For weeks I wonder until I stop
to ask a kid from the neighborhood.
And we both study each other: a black
boy,
backpack over left shoulder, pants big
enough
for two of him; a white woman dressed
like a teacher
with a notepad and loopy earrings. “Be-
cause 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 and think how impractical to let the 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. And I think how little I know about what this joy is. What it’s like to throw something up in the air that’s important, that weighs something, that takes you places—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.⁷ 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 Stanford, 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 *Journal of Humanist Anthropology*, 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 con-

sider more “rigorous” training as writers and thinkers, beyond the inherited toolbox from the past.

Conclusion: The “So What Test”⁸

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 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 my poetry writing has been 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 (Piiro, 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.

NOTES

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. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Betsy Rymes at the University of Georgia and Dr. Mike Rose at the University of California, Los Angeles for their invaluable input on this article.

¹ Poetry is less appreciated in the United States than it is in many other nations (e.g., Ire-

land 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.

² “No ideas but in things” is a line from William Carlos Williams’s 1927 poem “Pater-son” and can be located at www.en.utexas.edu/wcw/back/94fall/hahn.html.

³ The villanelle has 19 lines with five tercets (three-line stanzas) and ends in a quatrain (four lines). The first and third lines of the opening stanza are repeated, as is the “aba” rhyme scheme (abaa for the quatrain). 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).

⁴ This emerging poem has gone through several phases of revision and will likely go through additional edits before I feel it is complete. 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 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.

⁵ 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).

⁶ Due to space constraints, it was not possible to maintain the poem’s original line length. Readers may view the poem’s layout at www.coe.uga.edu/language/faculty/cahmann.

⁷ See Piiro (2002) for further discussion on how much study and practice in art is necessary before using it for various purposes in educational discourse.

⁸ Kenyon (1999) talks about the “so what test” in her collection of essays on poetry.

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