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Poetic Voice in the Research: A Social Sciences Exploration in Verse

Jason D. DeHart
Appalachian State University, dehartjd@appstate.edu

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Abstract

This article doubles down on the notion of poetry as a vehicle for expression in qualitative research. Following from the work of Cahnmann (2003), Stenhouse (2014), and Lahman et al. (2010), and drawing from additional inspiration including Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Kuhn (2012), the author constructs the argument for poetic voice in research in the form of a series of poetic interplay with research concepts. The article makes the case that rich sources of data may be found in alternative representations of findings, and research questions and the people who are invited to research projects should influence researchers' choices and data collection and presentation.

Keywords

qualitative design, methods, methodology, poetic analysis, alternative representation

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Poetic Voice in the Research: A Social Sciences Exploration in Verse

Jason D. DeHart

Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA

This article doubles down on the notion of poetry as a vehicle for expression in qualitative research. Following from the work of Cahnmann (2003), Stenhouse (2014), and Lahman et al. (2010), and drawing from additional inspiration including Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Kuhn (2012), the author constructs the argument for poetic voice in research in the form of a series of poetic interplay with research concepts. The article makes the case that rich sources of data may be found in alternative representations of findings, and research questions and the people who are invited to research projects should influence researchers' choices and data collection and presentation.

Keywords: qualitative design, methods, methodology, poetic analysis, alternative representation

Introduction – Background of the Problem

This paper presents the poetic form
as a vehicle for finding voice in social sciences
research – it's not your typical take on
the process,

but may we move beyond
typical. Take Kuhn's (2012) idea that
structures are continually

paradigmatic
updating,

like the refresh button your webpage.

Our knowledge increases, rooted in the soil
of daily human living, watered by the Heraclitean
flux that ensures the research process will flow on,

we are learning, pressing, yearning,
but are we growing? The positivist paradigm,

that root of measures that tries to take
virtue and place it in numerical values
would have solved our educational and social

dilemmas decades ago if this was the only story
to be told. Words matter, stories, and identities
are part of this experience.

Words are the essence of what we wish to capture,
 the building blocks of our social and educational
 bricolage,
 that which we collect and distill,
 which we then share with others,
 the flame of our questions lighting up someone
 new
 burning again and again.

Humanity cannot be summed up in a series
 of digits, and a Likert scale will not suffice
 for all of our narrative. So, what has led me
 to this quandary, you might ask.

(not always)

Problem Statement

Much work has been done in the field
 of educational research (citation: everybody),
 and a number of voices have argued
 for the potential for poetry
 as a method of expression in research.

I will list some names and dates
 in a citational stanza:

Cahnmann (2003)	Hopper & Sandford (2008)
Lahman et al. (2010)	Stenhouse (2014)

(for a few, and not to name the hundred
 thousand poets, famous and little-known, whose words
 have shaped our lives along the way, whose cadence
 comes to mind much more quickly than some
 article abstracts do).

In this literary and academic space, I take
 up the charge and wrap our questions
 in metaphor and lyrical style. It's a little different,
 not everyone will like it, some will try to lay
 a ruler against the side and get the word count

on this exercise in theoretical exploration
 and broken lines (but then, those are merely
 some of the limitations we accept in this endeavor –
 more on this later).

First and foremost: What is the mode
 that researchers respect? By which words do we
 communicate? Call this RQ1a and 1b.

Is the meaning of life really only

42 (Adams, 2002)?

Secondly, can writers find alternate ways to craft this human narrative for the eyes of the learning community?

Call this RQ2.

It would seem so (see citations above).

Don't believe me, and still want to mark qualitative research as notoriously suspect?

Let's review.

A Lit Review

Kicking off with Cahnmann (2003), our work is wrapped in words, our dominant expression. This need not be “self-impressed” and “incomprehensible” work (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 29). After all, there is enough meaning to root out in research projects without striving for more incomprehensibility.

What freedom we can find in being understandable, in verse and in our office-corner reporting.

Here we find the “edge of tradition” that Cahnmann (2003, p. 31) mentions, that place where literature mirrors life, and life is captured like a butterfly, bashing its wings against the researcher's glass observation window.

Some voices need to be heard. Some voices demand an echo in the halls of academia, in the corridors of marble journals, and even in the resounding rush of poetry. This leads the qualitative researcher to new

ways to discover, probe, and represent. Take Ellingson's (2008) image of the phenomenon seen from many angles, brought from a remote location to the reader's space of consideration – crystallized and tangible. What I intend is not the overthrowing of measure, nor the abandonment of prose –

no more than the first poem written undid a language (it didn't, so far as I can tell). Rather, research is a way of finding and (re)presenting voices – and so is the poetic form (Stenhouse, 2014). So, the merging of method with material focus, the alignment of verse with research questions, is a marriage that is natural and potentially enduring.

The work is not limited to poetry, as we find in the work of Bogumil et al. (2015) and Gunaratnam (2007)

for artistic expressions and explorations,
 Prosser (2013) for more analytic play, including displays
 with Legos – all leading to the conclusion:

Let the question (and the person in the study)
 make some choices about expression, a fine-tuning
 of the harmonic chords of hermeneutic ensemble,
 a co-construction/collaboration/collage.

May the question guide the method and methodology, and so,
 measure when a number is needed, but let us argue here for inclusion
 of literary life when that is our study's aim.

Let the person be at center.

You Call This Research?

You bet your sweet p value
 and null hypothesis I do. Let me back up a step,
 because that's not written in ivory tower speak.

Here goes:

It seems reasonable to affirm that, given the proliferation of academic research that has drawn upon poetry as a method which has been cited heretofore, an exploration of the verbal and visual mode of research in poetic form may have academic and literary utility.

The exploration of cognitive and social
 self in a visual/verbal display or mode,
 organized according to literary
 and cultural agenda –

There's potentially more research in that line
 up of concepts than yet another t-test –
 again, depending on the question.

I know the t-test too –
 I can use a computer, after all.
 But let's take a closer look,
 under the skin, and admit for once

that research is not bound up in unreachable
 figures, scales, and graphs. No need to hide
 behind words and claim great findings with an
 N of 10. We can learn much from the voice

of one person who has experience
 with the phenomenon under inquiry
 (Merriam, 1995).

Let's look beyond the epidermis
of what we suggest and pretend to suggest
(now, there's a social justice work for
you straight from Delpit, 2008).
What's the role the word plays, and how
do we enact it?

Let's dive into meaning, establish
reliability through an honest (though creative)
account. That's the charge. Reliability might
be finding the same verse in other places.

Let's find validity in an accurate record –
who said this? when? how?
Document, back up, don't diffuse.
If they say no, you report no. Even if you

disagree. Honor the voice of the person
that's represented first and let your conclusions
follow – just tell the story the way you found
it. Don't turn a stone into soup if it's not even

wet. Spin the yarn with truth and be mindful
of the biases you carry. It's better to be
honest and looking for a job, than dishonest
and not replicable anyway.

So, research indeed. Find the story that shaped
you, and then look for it in others.
Our questions begin with us in some way,
after all.

Exploring the Poetic Self

What of this singular voice, seeking additional
threads, this self-as-the-researcher, the subjective I (Peshkin, 1988)?

A rural self, a stationed and geographic I,
A teaching self, seeking inquiry and dialogic I,
A researching being, adding fibers of further
information, clarification through
multiple invitations.
A learner who will never be done.

First, I found my voice in notebook
papers full of superhero drawings. Only later
would I discover the beauty of a stanza.

Poetry is a way of expressing
language in short spaces, and captures

human experience. It is comprised of literary elements, and can be simple or complex in its delivery. Understood, accessible, elusively complex.

Some poetry rhymes, while other poetry works like this – no rhyme needed, just free verse. Why ask someone in a research study to report their experiences in rhyming pairs? That forces life to match form. Form, in this case, matches life. It's not always so neat and clean.

Only years into living and writing did I finally learn APA, and years after found a voice a journal would publish.

There was a song all the time, and songs that beat, thrumming in the minds, reaching out from the experiences of others in the field.

For literacy, the roots of language matter, for literature, the living breath of words can hold great truth.

Even for health sciences, a poetic exploration may be more welcome than another syringe.

From Literary to Lived Experience

Poetry, of course, finds its natural home in the language arts classroom, where I'm from. Please forgive the reference to Lyon's (1999) work. Inside a cramped

and noisy classroom, poetry is sometimes overlooked, and at times is held in esteem. It curls in the corner, plays along the walls, and waits lurking in standard curriculum – but also in the music of people.

Sometimes poetry withers in the classroom, beat by too many observations, or a teacher that doesn't know how to hold fire and cools the coals instead of stoking them.

The songs we sing are nothing more than poems set to instrumentation. The love we find in each other often gives rise to this voice. This is why, in my classroom, poetry was often singing and even celebrated.

This form, arched up in Old English, wrapped

into iambic pentameter, or set free in the sounds
that echo along almost-deserted streets at night,
is human experience distilled. Take a drink of this
elixir, Poe might say, and see what I mean.

Invitation: Sing This Song with Me

The poem is not simply for me.
It's not my story to tell. Research is a co-
Construction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Oh, wait. You thought that
those brilliant words you shared with us
were all your own making. You found them
in another's yawning mouth (that person who
signed the consent form).

Think back to Kuhn (2012). The fire we find in the wild
wind was always there, waiting for us to feel its heat.
We are simply first on the scene, those who stand
close to the phenomenon. So, we do the humble thing
and name the discovery after ourselves.

We were driven there, born on the work of others,
the shoulders we stand on. I cannot do ethnography without
thinking of Geertz (1985). I cannot do phenomenology without
thinking of van Manen (2018).

And this report I render? It is my job
to capture the wild-man and wild-woman words of those
in the field. Imagine them, if you will, preening in their
beautiful rituals, ready to share the truths locked inside
memories and thousands of lived days.

I interview and then take credit
as though I gave birth to the words.
Researcher-child, those birth pains belong to
another mother. You were, at best, a doula. Stop
naming all the babies you stand next to after yourself.

Give some credit to the real mothers and fathers.

Limitations Section

The boundaries of this work are in its
hearing and making in the hands of others.
I may paint a portrait of my research subject,
either in oil, acrylic, or with word.

What of a poetic voice on the recording?

It must be retained for an honest account.
 What of a research who is also a poet, or tries
 to be (ah, there is the distinction, said the voice
 of a critic). Perhaps the reporting takes on the form
 and color of the reporter just as much as the object
 of the report. I cannot step into a room without raising
 its temperature with my own.

My self shapes the interview, the focus group,
 all parts. I am the one who drives to the site, and there
 I step in with only my voice speaking first. This is true
 in numbers, words, and even in illustrated forms.

It is my knowledge of this truth that reshapes
 the accounting I do, including

bias	subjectivity	bracketing
bridling	perception	inclination

So, I write it up in full. I'm a researcher trying to advocate
 for a form they love. If I didn't wrap my arms
 around poetry, I would hardly ask someone else
 to embrace it.

Take Another Step (Outro)

So, now the call is yours, imaginary reader
 who has become real upon this page. Do you
 take up arms against a sea of words,
 Hamlet-style, and push back notions
 of artistic and literary interactions, even
 in a research space? Do you press to find new
 ways to discover yourself and others?

This is the qualitative task, to describe the world
 around us with the chiseled tools of nouns and verbs.

Or do you say we end the heartaches
 brought about by an account that refuses to take
 into full stock the linguistic powers of our age,
 that fails to honor that first page, the voice of the speaker,
 raspy in your data set?

How rapidly I spread this message to you now
 over the digital fibers that let us meet one another.

The next step in research is not poetry, sorry
 to alarm after so many stanzas of stating the case.
 We reach the end and I sweep out the rug, so
 carelessly. Damn it

this is not about poetry at all.

The next step is, perhaps, finding voices that need to be honored, stories that need to be told – and if those are music, let them be music, if they are stones, let them be concrete, and if they are poetry, how dare we do anything less than share an account that represents the one we meet in the field? Or our own field? Or our own voice?

Let it be heard.

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Author Note

Jason D. DeHart is an assistant professor of reading education at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. DeHart has written poetry, and values traditional and well as new ways of looking at research questions. Please direct correspondence to dehartjd@appstate.edu.

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