Exposing Scholars to Poetry for Teaching Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This article stems from dialogues in the context of the 15th TQR conference themed “Qualitative Inquiry: Access Denied?” where a workshop on *Poetry in the Teaching and Learning Qualitative Research* has resulted in participants creating a poem conference organizer encouraged to share with the readers of TQR. In this article, I provide an overview of the background and rationale for the workshop, the activities leading to the participants writing the poem, and a reflection on how the participant-created poem connected with the conference theme and the potentials of utilizing artistic practices in teaching and learning qualitative inquiry.

Keywords

poetry, teaching, qualitative research, artistic expression

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Acknowledgements

Amber Mullens, doctoral candidate in Ed.D. in Higher Education, and Megan Mitchell, Ed.D., Curriculum & Instruction, were former students in my qualitative research class who collaborated in facilitating the workshop and sharing their poetry and experiences with workshop participants. I thank Sally St. George for the encouragement to share the participant poem and the context of the workshop with TQR readers.

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Exposing Scholars to Poetry for Teaching Qualitative Research

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This article stems from dialogues in the context of the 15th TQR conference themed “Qualitative Inquiry: Access Denied?” where a workshop on Poetry in the Teaching and Learning Qualitative Research has resulted in participants creating a poem conference organizer encouraged to share with the readers of TQR. In this article, I provide an overview of the background and rationale for the workshop, the activities leading to the participants writing the poem, and a reflection on how the participant-created poem connected with the conference theme and the potentials of utilizing artistic practices in teaching and learning qualitative inquiry.

Keywords: poetry, teaching, qualitative research, artistic expression

Introduction

Over the last few decades, qualitative inquirers have shared how incorporating artistic and creative practices into qualitative research offers new ways of analyzing, exploring, and presenting research data, evoking, and connecting with participants and audiences, and offering new ways of seeing, knowing, and experiencing research (e.g., Eisner, 2012; Faulkner, 2019; Janesick, 2016). The use of poetry in qualitative research has been offered to make sense of data, represent participant voices, capture an essence of an idea from the data, or evoke emotional responses, among other potentials for poetry uses in conducting and presenting qualitative research. Debates about who can use poetry and how to evaluate the poetic quality of research poems have increased in books and articles in qualitative methodological literature (e.g., Faulkner et al., 2016; Lafrenière & Cox, 2013; Lahman et al., 2019; Piirto, 2002). However, what has received far less attention is how both new qualitative scholars and those who have long practiced qualitative methodologies, can gain exposure to the very idea of poetry as a form of inquiry and expression.

In this article I offer an overview and some of the reasoning for a workshop my students and I offered at the 15th Qualitative Report Conference. In the workshop, we engaged participants in experiential learning of poetic practices and encouraged them to create poems individually and in teams. One of the teams created a poem I then shared with TQR conference organizers, who encouraged to share the poem, and the context of the workshop, with the wider TQR readership.

Pedagogical and Scholarly Background for the Workshop

As a professor of qualitative methodologies, I have increasingly turned to arts-based practices to help students explore varied ways of thinking, learning, writing, and connecting with themselves, their participants, fields, and audiences. I have utilized drawing, painting, photography, and poetry to expose students to new ideas, normalize discomforts (Skukauskaitė et al., 2018), and emphasize learning and qualitative inquiry as iterative longitudinal processes open to various forms of creative and authentic interpretation and expression. At the end of the
semester, encouraged to use creativity and metaphor, many students have turned to music, images, painting, video, poetry, baking and sports (among other metaphors) to showcase their learning of qualitative research (Skukauskaitė et al., 2022).

As I continued to integrate creative practices in my own teaching, I turned to qualitative methodologies literature to see how others utilized poetic inquiry and other artistic forms in their pedagogical practices. To my surprise, despite the abundance of writing on arts-based practices in qualitative data analysis, I found far fewer publications focused directly on qualitative pedagogies in general and use of poetry to teach qualitative research in particular (for sample publications encompassing qualitative pedagogies with practical examples that include poetic and arts-based practices see Richards et al., 2022; Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2018). Consequently, I wondered how can I, as a qualitative methodologies professor, bring other professors and students along in exploring the potentials of poetic inquiry for teaching and learning qualitative ways of thinking and self-expression? How can I help others gain access to poetry as part of the learning process, not only poetry as means for data analysis and representation, as is more commonly discussed in the literature. After all, for someone to consider using poetry and other artistic practices in their qualitative research, they first need to be exposed to the idea, its possibilities, and to try it out. Therefore, for the 15th Qualitative Report Conference themed “Access Denied?” I decided to propose a workshop that would create access for others to use poetry in teaching qualitative research.

Workshop Overview

After submitting the proposal for the workshop, I decided to invite as co-presenters two of my students, who had dared to try poetry and artistic expression for the first time in my class. In their class journals, they had shared how the artistic practices helped them try new things, learn qualitative research, and connect with themselves, their feelings, histories, and potentials. Exposure to art and creativity also led one of the students to a dissertation of an ethnographic study that explored tensions, including tensions with creativity, doctoral students experienced in an introductory qualitative class. The two students, Amber Mullens and Megan Mitchell, who are co-authoring a forthcoming longer article stemming from the workshop, brought student perspectives, and helped facilitate the workshop.

We started the workshop by sharing a poem we created in our three voices as we prepared the session and considered the perspectives we brought to the team. We then invited workshop participants to create a blackout poem using the printed abstract for our workshop. A blackout poem is a type of found poem in which a poet takes any text—a page from a book, a magazine, a technical text, a syllabus, or in this case, a conference abstract—and finds words or phrases that speak to them to create a new message. The rest of the text gets marked out with a black marker and the chosen words become a poem. Blackout poetry begins with thousands of words on an already existing page rather than a blank page, which may be intimidating to new writers, poets, and learners not sure where to start.

The blackout poem workshop participants created from the printed abstract for our workshop fostered a dialogue about our and participant goals for the session, the backgrounds, and experiences they brought, and what they knew or had done with poetry in qualitative research. We then presented some of the literature on poetry in qualitative research and why we may consider it not just for data analysis, but also for teaching and learning. We discussed some of the challenges and opportunities presented in literature, after which we shared student poem examples and reflections of opening to poetry in the context of a qualitative research class. Building on student examples, I shared some of the things I have done with poetry in my qualitative research course, including found poems, haikus, identity poems, and blackout poems. Sharing explanations and resources for understanding and teaching different types of
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poems, we displayed poems my students and I created from the syllabus, observation notes, journal entries, and free verse poems as part of student learning and my teaching in the introductory doctoral qualitative research class.

After providing overviews of five types of poems and sharing a link to a document with resources about poetry, we divided workshop participants into five teams and asked them to begin creating one of the poem types: a Free verse, Found, Blackout, Identity, or Haiku poems. We walked around the room and watched as people—professors, students, researchers, and program evaluators present at the conference—deeply immersed into the dialogue with each other, played with words, and tried out the process of creating poems. While about 10 minutes in a 50-minute workshop was not enough for each team to complete their work, some teams chose to share their poems out loud with everyone, including the beginnings of a collective identity poem, and a free verse poem. The team who created the free verse poem wrote it out on a piece of paper and gave it to us at the end of the workshop.

Conversations and the playful mood continued as we packed up and proceeded to the closing session of the TQR conference. After the closing, I shared the participant poem with Ron Chenail and Sally St. George, whose own reflections in the closing keynote session echoed some of what our workshop participants had written and shared. Sally later emailed me, encouraging me to share the poem and the context of the workshop.

Participant Poem

The poem below is a collaborative free verse poem one team wrote toward the end of the workshop. They gave me the handwritten poem and permission to share it. Poem authors are Daniella Bendo, Annabelle Nelson, and Denise Dziwak:

The TQR conference
Learning new things
now here
inside outside people
access the couch
do get swallowed slurped
inside outside zones
moving positions positionality
seeing new perspectives
vision

Connections: The Poem, the Workshop, and Conference Themes

In the workshop, after presenting different types and elements of poetry, we invited participants to work in teams to create a poem. We suggested they could reflect on their conference experiences as a common ground for the poem. In this poem, Daniella, Annabelle, and Denise reflect on their learning and encounters at the TQR conference, utilizing strong verbs, adjectives, alliteration, repetition, line, spacing, and imagery—elements of poetry we mentioned in the workshop and shared in the resource document. The repetition of “inside outside,” a “moving” from position to “positionality,” and a reiteration of closely related concepts of “seeing,” plural “new perspectives,” a “vision,” invoke an opening that builds a vision from the “now here” learning to a “vision” of future possibilities. Learning new things leads to a vision, through encounters with inside outside people and zones, access, deep engagement, and getting “swallowed slurped” into the encounters at the TQR conference.
The theme of the conference, “Qualitative inquiry: Access denied?” rings through the poem both indirectly through inside/outside, people/zones, positions/positionality juxtapositions as well as through direct references to “moving” and “access.” In “access the couch,” the authors connect to both the conference theme and one of the keynotes. In the keynote, J. Wolgemuth, S. A. Shelton, and K. Guyotte displayed an image of a couch as an anchor for discussing access, boundaries, status quo, and discomforts in qualitative research. The keynote speakers drew on queer theory and reimagined Sara Ahmed’s (2004) “comfortable chair” into a couch on which persons and groups of people who have access to the couch leave their imprints and create their spaces or “zones.” Sitting and returning to the couch over time creates comfort, safety, ownership and “inside outside zones” for who belongs and does not. The poem’s authors show how “learning new things/now here” with “inside outside people” at the conference opens “access” to the qualitative research couch and swallows, slurps us all in, creating new “zones.”

These learnings and [slurping] encounters enable moving of positions, reflection on our positionalities, and seeing “new perspectives” to create a possible “vision.” Vision is not defined by an “a” or a “the” grammatical determinants and for now stands on its own in the last line, but without a period to mark the end. “Vision” is thus a possibility—not fully formed yet, but there, an end of the poem and the TQR conference, and a possible beginning. It may be in fact be a beginning for “Co-creating our Impact: Invitations to Change,” the theme for the 16th TQR conference in 2025.

Concluding Reflections

As I envisioned the workshop, partnered with my students in developing and facilitating it, and engaged with workshop participants, I reflected on the power of language, poetry, and open sharing to create access and new possibilities for learning and teaching “with” and “alongside” others who are also us—students, teachers, researchers, scholars, humans. In interpreting Daniella, Annabelle, and Denise’s poem through my lenses and reflecting on and with the poem, I created new meanings for my own experiences and positionings inside and outside the varied zones within qualitative research. Daniella, Annabelle, and Denise, like many students who try out poetry in the context of learning qualitative research, created possibilities for new perspectives and connections. As a reader and teacher, I may never fully know what the authors meant. Do the authors ever truly know themselves? Does it really matter what they meant at that moment in time? Poetry is about imagining, creating meanings and varied interpretations, playing with words and ideas, relating, and connecting with others, us, our lives “now” and “here” and future possibilities. Introducing poetry into the teaching and learning of qualitative research may enhance creativity and play for some, discomforts for others, and open doors to conversations about the importance of openness to varied perspectives, expressions, and worldviews we teach and enact through our varied qualitative research approaches.

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