

# POETIC INSIGHT INTO STUDENT MOTIVATION AND EXPERIENCE

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## Abstract

Poetic inquiry is an approach which has been gaining popularity as a qualitative research method. This paper presents transcription poems (Miller, 2019) which have been generated using data from a project looking into student experiences of interrupted study.

Sixteen mature undergraduate students studying part-time at a distance learning university were interviewed about their experiences of having a break from their studies. The resulting transcripts were indicative of emotional complexity around their attitudes to study, the situation which interrupted their studies and decisions to pause or resume. Such nuanced emotion can be lost when reporting the summaries of student situations whereas turning to poetry can (arguably) provide a more authentic representation.

This paper seeks to demonstrate the power of poetic representation as an analytic means to portray student experiences. Using the exact words from interview transcripts gives authentic voice to the participants in portraying their lived experience allowing the reader or listener an embodied experience where they 'feel with, rather than about a poem' (Faulkner, 2020).

Keywords: Poetic inquiry, transcription poems, poetry, student experience, interrupted study

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The fundamental purpose of research is to generate and disseminate knowledge founded on systematic enquiry. Whilst many knowledge dissemination approaches are embraced by a variety of different gatekeepers, academia tends to rely on specific styles and traditional approaches to both generation and dissemination which may limit both the understanding and the range of audiences which are able to access research findings.

Although having been recognised as a valid form of research representation for some time [1], poetry has been under-utilised as a form of analysis in research [2, 3]. In the first five years of publication, 1995-1999, the journal *Qualitative Inquiry* published sixteen articles, coming from nine authors, which included poems or poetry as a keyword. In the most recent five years, 2016 – 2021, one hundred and twenty-seven researchers have contributed to ninety-six articles fulfilling the same criteria. In both time periods these articles account for roughly fifteen percent of the total articles published by the same journal. The increase in articles indicates an overall increase in poetic or poetry linked articles, but a steady state in the proportion meeting these criteria. This suggests that poetic approaches are gaining popularity but there are potentially more opportunities to embrace these creative approaches within research.

Parini tells us that 'poetry matters because it serves up the substance of our lives and becomes more than a mere articulation of experience [...] it makes the invisible world visible' [4, p181]. This is what makes poetry, or poetic representation, such a valuable tool within research. Researchers in the social sciences are seeking to develop and share understanding of social phenomena including the nuance of lived experience which is embedded within contexts and often challenging to articulate. Through harnessing the power of poetry it is possible to convey a more embedded and expressive portrayal of research participant experience. Giving authentic voice to research participants within a poetic structure allows the reader or listener to 'feel with' rather than simply 'listen to' recounted experience, or in the words of Faulkner 'poetry is about showing, not telling' [5, p222] and offers an 'embodied experience' [6, p226].

The poems presented here come from a research project looking at part-time distance learner experiences of interrupted study. Sixteen part-time mature students who had been studying part-time towards an undergraduate degree were interviewed about their experience of taking an unplanned, and

often unexpected, break in studies part way through their qualification. The students shared details and reflections on why they started their program of study, what triggered their study break and what happened at the end of their study break period. Nine of the students had resumed study at the end of the break period, two were resuming after an additional twelve month break and the remaining six had not resumed study. The student interviews were recorded and later transcribed, producing a corpus just over 100,000 words. This paper presents three of the resulting sixteen transcripts poems, the full set will be published in my forthcoming doctoral thesis.

## **2 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

There are a number of different approaches to incorporating poetic representations within research. My project is working with 'found poetry' [3] by using interview transcripts as the raw material from which to generate transcript poems. Key words and phrases are identified within each of the transcripts then edited together to form poetry, poem-ish or poem-like prose [3]

Miller [3] proposed a five-step process for generation of transcription poems; immersion, creation, critical reflection, ethics, engagement. The immersion phase is common to other analysis techniques to become highly familiar with the data. In this instance the immersion was carried out for the purpose of both poetic analysis and to support a thematic coding (reported elsewhere) of the same data. For the poetic analysis each transcript was addressed individually through identification of the most pertinent words or phrases. These excerpts were then paired down in an iterative process to produce succinct poetic representations for each participant. Only participant words were used and always presented in the order they had been spoken. This promotes realism in the poems but also restricts the lyric creativity. The outputs from finding poetry using such defined rules will vary from poem-ish to true poetry as the words obtained from transcripts vary with the language, grammar, and rhythm of the research participant. The term poem-ish was suggested to describe work which attempts 'to blend the aesthetics of poetry and science of research into something which may be said to be poem-like' [7, p215]

Some transcripts are rich with detail and metaphor whilst others are more concise and plain-spoken. Not all transcripts or topics will be suitable for a poetic approach [8] so an assessment of the data is needed to confirm suitability. Alongside my own judgements of the resulting poetic representations in this project, the critical reflection step was supported by sharing the poems with a small number of interested people to seek feedback. Ethical considerations had been embedded throughout the process but come to the fore in step four when the poems were reviewed to check participant anonymity and that they 'remain faithful to the spirit and voice of the transcript' [3, p28]. As with any other approach to data exploration and representation, it is important to give a truthful representation of the data. In poetic analysis there could be a temptation to select for rhythm, rhyme or repetition to improve the aesthetic qualities of the poem but at a cost of misrepresenting the data. Care also needs to be taken if a participant uses a particular turn of phrase which could potentially make them identifiable. Whilst it may be poetically pleasing, where anonymity has been assured some potentially useful data may need to be excluded. This check on research integrity is as applied with all other qualitative approaches. The final step in the process is engagement. Creation of poems can be both a method, providing a useful tool to help the researcher engage with their data on a deep level, and an output of research [9].

## **3 POETIC REPRESENTATIONS**

In my research, a thematic analysis of the data had been carried out alongside the poetic analysis resulting in interrelated views of the data. The thematic analysis identified themes and allowed for theoretical testing of the data but did not fully convey the emotion which was embedded in the interviews.

Here I present three of the poems from the student experiences of interrupted study research. All names are pseudonyms.

### 3.1 Alice

It was just for general interest because I had the time

I thought I had the time

I was a carer, caring for my mum, and my dad, and an aunt, and an uncle

Deaths

every time: sort the funeral, sort the house.

Guilt throwing stuff away

got no more room, can't keep everything!

Just couldn't study

just didn't have the time

something had to give

I'm lucky, I've got no family now

Apart from the dog!

Alice had retired from a career in nursing when she commenced her studies thinking she had plenty of time available. However, taking on caring responsibilities for several elderly relatives became a bigger commitment than she expected and led to her deferring her studies several times. The poem is able to convey the challenge of experiencing multiple bereavements but also the relief of ending up just Alice and the dog.

### 3.2 Ingrid

Suited my lifestyle, suits my work

best option for me

Something happened, always something

we want to be educated

but we have a life

I needed time, more time

extra time to finish

enough time to finish

A huge load lifted

I had enough time.

Ingrid spoke extensively about her choice to study part-time at a distance because it suited her lifestyle as a working single parent. But in reality it did not fit with her lifestyle as well as she had hoped it would.

She talked about how being a working parent resulted in multiple minor interruptions which made it challenging to study. The issues compounded to a point where she felt unable to complete her assessments to the standard she wanted and knew she was capable of.

### **3.3 Maggie**

Life was getting busy  
it all got too much  
the time, the inclination  
too far behind, can't catch up

The relief of deferring  
The feeling of failure  
A student on hold

Maggie also experienced multiple small issues that together become overwhelming. However, where Alice had been highly motivated and need a study break to ensure she was able to submit her best work, Maggie had lost motivation and opted to defer in order to take a break from studying. Although relieved at the instigation of her study break, Maggie later felt a sense of failure for not having completed her module and was soon waiting to return.

These three examples of transcription poems demonstrate the way poetry can add emotion and additional dimension to reporting of participant experience. These poems need to be presented within the context of the research project along with an explanation that they are connected to experiences of deferring study. Consequently, they may be classified as poem-ish or poem-like, rather than true poetry, as they do not have the lyric and aesthetic strength to stand alone without explanation. However, they fulfil Lahman and Richard's [10] criteria of being 'good enough' as their function is to enrich the research reporting, not to win a pushcart prize. 'Poets have done their job is they simply note what is happening [...] in language that neither distorts nor covers over the situation' [4, p128]. These poems seek to present the findings in a way that is engaging and accessible that allows a connection to be formed between participant and reader. This poetic approach distills the data to focus on the essentials of each participant's study experience which moves beyond reporting a sequence of events.

## **4 CONCLUSIONS**

The three poems presented give an insight into the possible use of transcription poems in a poetic inquiry of interview transcripts. This poetic presentation of data allows for a succinct summary of data to be presented which, I believe, retains the emotion of participant experiences. Restricting to using only their words ensures the participants are given authentic voice within the reporting and maintains research integrity.

Further exploration of this data and research approach will be reported elsewhere.

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