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Don't hold me back

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'Don't hold me back': Using poetic inquiry to explore university educators' experiences of professional development through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Abstract

Institutional schemes that offer financial and other support to carry out Scholarship of Teaching and Learning projects have a valuable part to play in the personal and professional development of academic staff. We investigated the experiences of 12 recipients of the University of Edinburgh SoTL Scheme awards, drawing on a poetic inquiry approach in order to understand what that development meant to them. We found that poetic inquiry surfaced stumbling points and frustrations as well as triumphs and transformation and provided insight into the kinds of emotional and practical support required by participants. Unexpectedly, it also shed light on methodological issues for the researchers.

Keywords: academic development; poetic transcription; SoTL; research methodology

Introduction

The University of Edinburgh SoTL Scheme offers groups of staff and students at the University of Edinburgh grants for pedagogical research or evaluation projects aimed at enhancing teaching, learning or assessment practices. The three authors of this paper, VM, DL and HM are all members of the academic development unit that hosts the scheme. VM is a former academic lead of the scheme, which is currently led by DL.

Hum et al. have considered evaluations of seven similar schemes worldwide (Dexter and Seden, 2012; Gray et al, 2007; Hum et al, 2015; Kember, 2002; Morris and Fry, 2006; Waterman et al, 2010; Wright et al, 2011) that together provide evidence for their efficacy at individual, departmental and institutional level. These evaluations (see Hum et al, 2015) used combinations of surveys, interviews, documentary and statistical analysis. However we chose a different methodological approach, poetic inquiry, to explore the different ways in which colleagues make sense of SoTL Scheme projects as experiences of personal and professional development.

Academic Development

There is increasing interest in how academics can be supported to develop as teachers and to enhance their teaching practice (Skelton, 2013; Stes, De Maeyer, Gijbels, and Van Petegem, 2013). Growing demands for accountability have raised the stakes for teaching and educational

development in higher education (Arthur, 2016; Boud and Brew, 2013; Deaker, Stein and Spiller, 2016). The decrease in public funding for universities in the UK (Locke, 2014) and elsewhere (Marginson, 2006) means that attracting fee paying students has become a sharper concern for some institutions. The prominence of the National Student Survey (Locke, 2014) has focused attention on teaching and assessment practices in the UK and there has been an increasing emphasis on accountability and competition between institutions internationally (Hutchings et al., 2011; Locke, 2014; Marginson, 2006). It often falls to the academic development units of universities to respond to these changing demands. In this context, it is crucial to explore thoroughly the full range of impacts of diverse forms of educational development, including engagement with SoTL.

SoTL projects as academic development

While teacher development in higher education often goes forward through formal programmes or mentoring schemes, considerable attention has also been given to the powerful opportunities for development which arise through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, which can be defined as:

> 'a broad set of practices that engage teachers in looking closely and critically at student learning in order to improve their own courses and programs, and to share insights with other educators who can evaluate and build on their efforts.' Hutchins et al. (2011: xix)

The values that inform these practices include collegiality, a commitment to sharing knowledge and understanding, reflection on one's own practice, action for continuous enhancement and a spirit of inquiry, all of which are very much in line with a narrative of growth (O'Meara et al.2008). From this perspective, development is seen not as something that is done to university educators in order to bring them into line with the external demands of political imperatives and changing markets in a 'narrative of constraint'. Rather, it is a way for them to:

> 'find meaning, continue to learn, and make commitments to rigorous and meaningful research, teaching and engagement' (O'Meara et al. 2008, p21).

The literature is replete with examples of the positive effects of SoTL on academics' development as teachers (Hutchins et al., 2011). The majority of participants in one institutional scheme, for example, felt their experience with a SoTL project would significantly change their approach to teaching (Wright et al., 2011). However change can be transformative for some and more modest for others. Limitations noted by participants in these types of schemes can include: the challenges of carrying out research within very different paradigms; difficulties with practicalities such as short

term recruitment; making sense of relevant ethical concerns and practices; and locating and understanding relevant literature (Morris and Fry, 2006; Wright et al., 2011).

Schemes for funding and supporting SoTL

One subset of possibilities for SoTL arises through schemes which provide funding and support for academics to trial and evaluate innovations or to research their students' learning. Such schemes are now common internationally and are seen as a useful alternative or supplement to educational development courses and workshops (Morris and Fry, 2006). The funding can support participants successfully to develop skills in educational innovation and research, provide a starting point for future research and development activity related to student learning, and build communities of staff and students with an interest in enhancing teaching and learning (Morris and Fry, 2006). Schemes such as the University of Edinburgh SoTL scheme can help to resolve one of the most significant barriers to educational innovation, the lack of time, by buying in additional support and freeing up project team members (Wright et al., 2011). They also provide legitimacy for pedagogical inquiry and teaching innovation projects that might otherwise not be prioritised. Success in such competitive schemes can be valuable to academics trying to evidence the quality of their practice to support promotion applications.

Here we focus on developing rich understandings of the lived experiences of a small number of SoTL Scheme participants. We identified the following research questions:

1. What has been participants' experience of a SoTL Scheme project?
2. What do they perceive to be the influence of the SoTL Scheme project on their continuing professional development for teaching?

We did not originally pose a methodology question, but over time we became very interested in the ways in which poetic inquiry was working or not working for us.

Methodology: Poetic Inquiry

Poetic Inquiry draws on the reading and writing of poetry at any stage in the research process to promote reflection, support analysis or disseminate findings. Despite the growing popularity of poetic inquiry, including in educational research (Galvin and Prendergast, 2016; Leavy, 2010; Leggo, 2018) we are aware that for this investigation it was not the most obvious choice. We decided upon the approach for a number of reasons. Firstly we wanted to do justice to the complexity of our participants' experiences, including intellectual, emotional, conceptual and personal dimensions. We judged that with poetic inquiry there would be more possibility of this holistic outcome, than with the usual modes of investigation. However, we were mindful of Leggo's (2018:90) warning 'that there are no wholes without holes' and we took into account the risk of alienating the academic colleagues who were our potential participants and audience. Academics who have themselves been trained within more traditional empirical research traditions can be resistant to the idea of arts-enriched inquiry (Burge et al. 2016). But this in itself is an argument for experimentation and innovation, so that we may begin to heal "the ache of the false separation of arts and sciences" in academia (Leavy, 2010: 240).

Secondly, we wanted to acknowledge and value our own voices as researchers; we took into account our own skills, needs and interests. One of the authors is experienced in drawing on arts-enriched methods and sensibilities in higher education research and has used collage, poetry, imagework, mask-making and sculpture. One had previously experimented with poetic inquiry. One had extensive experience of conventional higher education research, and a curiosity to extend their methodological repertoire. Just as we were concerned with our participants as whole persons, so we saw in poetic inquiry the possibility of integrating our, 'artist–teacher-researcher qa(a/r/t) identities' (Leavy, 2010:240) so as to produce holistic and fulfilling work. Finally, we hoped that a deeper, more personally–engaged understanding of how colleagues make sense of their professional development experiences as well as attention to our own sensemaking processes would help us to maximise the benefits of the SoTL Scheme in our university.

Poetic inquiry is a way of exploring, understanding and representing research so as to bring into view some of the more nuanced elements of participants' experiences while maintaining an individual level of analysis. In particular this methodology allows us to recognise and acknowledge the ways in which participants' narratives make explicit some of the more conflicted or contradictory elements of experience. In a thematic analysis these narratives are often broken down into isolable, coherent themes based on quantitative measures to enable an audience to see where the greatest volume of experiences lie. However this can mean that context disappears and that some valuable elements of

the narrative are lost. Of course poetic transcription is also a partial representation of experience, but one that both has the potential to bring a different range of elements to the fore and explicitly to draw attention to its fragmented and interpretative nature.

We chose this method because of its potential, in line with other arts-based approaches, for generating insight, allowing us to pay attention to complexity. Valuing and making sense of mess and complexity is increasingly emphasised in social research, rather than trying to reduce complexity to the point that important process and meaning is lost (Fenwick et al., 2011; Law, 2004). It is also appropriate as a way of exploring teachers' experiences and development. As Jones (2010: 591) puts it:

> 'Teaching is a highly complex activity that is at once intellectual and emotional, conceptual and personal. Thus it is important that there are means of expressing this in ways that capture something of the myriad strands that make up what it is to be a teacher in higher education.'

We saw poetic inquiry as a way to combine researchers' and participants' voices in an honest way, allowing our readers to appreciate the presence of both parties in the completed analysis (Glesne, 1997). We wanted to make it abundantly clear that the analysis of this data was informed by the identities of both the participants and the researchers.

The ethics of poetic transcription

Poetic transcription, one of the methods used in poetic inquiry, has been defined as:

> 'the process of using words from transcripts or field notes from our studies and transforming them into a form of poetry.' (Butler-Kisber, 2017, video)

Poetic transcription was approved by our local research ethics committee. Participants were informed that their words would be distilled into poems and were given reading on the topic if they expressed an interest. We received some positive comments from participants about the poetic transcription and no objections.

In both the analysis of data and the presentation of findings, there is always a selection process. Some researchers and commentators are wary of poetic transcription as a way of distilling data. Some of the suspicion surrounding the ethics of this method can be traced to a particular set of epistemological assumptions: as if interview data resembled pieces of coal, already formed, relatively stable and able to be straightforwardly carried by the researcher from the interviewee to the reader. If, by contrast we consider knowledge to be dynamic, distributed, and capable of being

reactivated through complex communication acts in a range of different contexts, then the responsiveness of poetic transcription is just what is required.

At first glance it may seem that the researcher is misappropriating the participant's words. But traditional methods of writing up research can also be seen as doing violence to participants' narratives. We rip out quotes from their context and superimpose our own analysis, obscuring nuances and destroying wider patterns of meaning. Indeed, Scheurich (1995) argues that we should radically re-think the way we both collect and represent qualitative data. Of course poetic transcription also interferes with the participant's story, but without hiding behind the mask of objectivity: it can be a more honest form of co-construction. Jones (2010) argues that conventional methods do not successfully convey the essence of participants' stories and proposes the use of 'poetic inquiry', arguing that poems 'make us see the individual experience in a unique voice and to consider both the commonalities and the contradictions and cross-currents' (pp.594).

What we did

We interviewed 12 recipients of SoTL Scheme awards in an attempt to understand their experiences of and reflections on continuous professional development, related to their participation in one or more SoTL projects. All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Each of the researchers chose one or more of the interviews they had carried out, and created a poem from the relevant transcription.

The participants were not involved in the creation of the poem. Rather than seeking out a singular, coherent truth, we sought to construct our poems around any points in the transcripts that struck us as significant and that felt pertinent to our research questions. In order to structure this process we needed some boundaries and each author defined a set of parameters for themselves. All three authors began by reading and re-reading the transcripts of their interviews and gradually removing words until they were left with that they saw as representing the essence of each participant's experiences. EM also listened again to the audio recordings of the interviews. DL and VM maintained a commitment to the sequencing of the original narrative, where participants would visit, move away from and revisit topics fluidly. However, HM organised participants' words around particular ideas that had struck her within the participants' narratives, allowed herself to repeat words and phrases for to represent participants' emphasis or that she felt particularly captured the essence of the narrative and inserted punctuation to try and communicate the original rhythm of the dialogue. In doing so she did not adhere to the original order of the interview and used time as one of the

dimensions through which her voice was inserted. These variations in practice allowed the researchers' individual voices to emerge in different ways. Each of the three researchers wrote a reflection on the inquiry as a whole, and then a short commentary on one of the poems they had created from the interview transcriptions.

In the following section, each of the researchers in turn (HM, VM and DL) reflects on the findings of the inquiry as a whole, presents the poem they created from one of their transcribed interviews and provides their individual commentary on that poem. HM and VM pay attention to what they learned about participants' experiences of professional development, whereas DL reflects on methodological questions.

What we found, HM

Thinking about the full collection of poems that we created as a research team has given me (HM) space to think about both poetic inquiry as a method of analysis and the substance of the interviews. For me using poetic inquiry opened up a question of emphasis, which is perhaps more invisible or I attend to less in other methods of analysis; I asked myself whether I should prioritise the form of the poem (primarily for the purpose of communication to our readership), or the content of poem (quite how much I could pack into it), or a balance of both. Looking at my colleagues' poems some ended up longer, with more dense text: which could feel as if they were losing poetic form, whilst others were more conventionally poetic perhaps to the detriment of including substantive matter. I hope that the balance of the more poetic with the more substantive will give our readership insight into our participants' highly reflective, often quite emotional answers, and allowing, in their brevity, the reader space to think about the pertinent issues raised and to develop their empathy to our participants' situations.

Thinking more specifically about our research questions, I was struck by how many of the poems, whether implicitly or explicitly, served as a critique of participants' specific local contexts. Deciding to embark upon a SoTL Scheme project often seemed to have been in some ways reactionary: reacting to a cultural issue within the department, whether that be redressing the research/teaching balance, trying to improve mechanisms to both identify and help students who are struggling without support, or to prove the existence or efficacy of something which they were being challenged on.

Some participants really felt quite strongly that they needed the justification of the SoTL project to validate their time and energy being spent on teaching innovations. For me therefore it seemed that the development that people spoke about wanting to achieve was not purely their own individual

professional development but actually some sort of organisational development aimed at progressing their department. Bringing this all together, for some participants in this evaluation project the SoTL Scheme served as a way of stepping back from a departmental culture which was in some way either hostile to, or at least not supportive of, the kinds of developments or progress that the individual wanted with the ambition to then step back into that culture with a change agenda (although it must of course be acknowledged that there were some for whom this was not the case).

For those organising these kinds of teaching award schemes therefore I think it is important to think about the kind of isolation that may accompany individual SoTL teams stepping back from a departmental culture. One participant talked about the central unit that manages and supports the University of Edinburgh SoTL Scheme as being an important place in which they felt they could flourish and grow creatively, however for others there had been moments of loneliness and perhaps this is something that we have the potential to address by facilitating more connections between those participating in SoTL projects whilst they are completing the projects (in addition to our end of year conference). It may also be that it would be useful for us to think about helping our participants to think about influencing departmental cultures, as otherwise this transition stepping back into a culture that may well still be resistant to change could also be rather challenging.

Poem 1: Kept

The opportunity to do some actual research

I found really useful

And

I think often in my area of work

We don't always make

enough

time

Actually giving that opportunity

To try something out

To try something new

Very new

Without really knowing where to start

Exploring how that would work

Exploring how that could possibly come together

I have actually been involved in another [SoTL] project I realise!

When I first came to the university I came on a [SoTL] project

That first project is still in use

Apparently they're still using it

Exploring how that could possibly come together

Fuzzy matching

Masculine Feminine

Miraculously.

The university kept me

That changed my life.

I (HM) chose this poem because I felt like it highlighted some of the huge strengths of the SoTL scheme: justifying time to work on something a bit new or different which despite being small has the ability to have a huge impact. The participant featured in this poem reiterated throughout the interview that they felt like they did not have a huge amount to add to our project, however this in itself was insightful; even those who had been directly affected by the SoTL Scheme did not necessarily conceptualise that their development was particularly remarkable, perhaps because of the laden nature of the term 'development'. I particularly tried to communicate this kind of tumultuous flow of dialogue between being a life-changing experience and more modest reflections on their experiences in the use of shaping in the poem, trying to represent that this interaction was one of rapid changing pace moving between reflections. The participant featured holds a non-academic role, however their involvement in the project was clearly hugely important both to their project but also to their career development. Taking this time to reflect on the SoTL projects meant that we (the project team) were able to see the significance of the project to the person, but also that they got to do some similar reflection on the project that had been relegated to the depths of their memory.

What we found: VM

What struck me (VM) most on reading through all of the poems together was the marked significance for the participants of these modestly funded projects. This came through partly in the strength of the emotions expressed in the poems. Participants talked about experiences which were 'fabulous', 'brilliant' and about how they were 'excited' by their projects. Even for ultimately successful projects, however, strong negative emotions could be part of the process. One participant felt that some of what they learned during a project was 'worrying, awful' another talked about administrative issues around their project as a 'hellish, nightmare'. These negative emotions signal the participants' care about the project to me as much as the more positive accounts. The poems also gave me a sense of participants who felt legitimated in their work by the SoTL project or who felt the projects had contributed to their personal or career development. So participating in a SoTL project could mean learning to 'trust students much more' or feeling that the project 'really does change your perspective' or perhaps being 'externally validated by very senior people'. One participant went as far as to say 'That first one changed my life.'

Another strong impression I had from reading the poems was the emphasis placed by the participants on exploring and finding out about what could make a real difference to students' learning. For some the opportunity to do a more thorough evaluation or educational research project was notable. For one participant who 'actually did find evidence' this then made it easier to respond to those who were doubting an initiative. Another spoke more directly of the value to students how it 'enhanced their understanding' and noted 'a total change in rank statistically'. As well as this sense of intrinsically valuing improving the student experience, I did get a sense of more performative values being discussed in some of the poems, although the participant might resist these. So I read about 'time saving, efficiency' or 'I'm supposed to tick the "contributing to the student experience box"'.

Finally, my attention came to the ways in which a number of the participants reflected thoughtfully on the cultural change processes which might need to go alongside SoTL Scheme projects. This could be to do with how best to persuade colleagues to engage in educational change: 'when you are speaking to academics you have to give very very well researched, informed perspectives'. Another participant realised that having a funded project could create impetus for change to actually happen: 'what it does is it forces us to do things'. Of course things did not always go smoothly and there could be a sense of, 'The disruptive effects of development.' but also 'A safer place to have those disagreements.'

Poem 2: The Catalyst

We decided there was potential for proper evaluation,

It's the first time I've found a way of understanding that was revelatory,

It opened up a whole new way of looking.

He's also very interested in learning and was excited,

I couldn't have pursued this kind of project without him,

It had been a very lonely furrow.

So it was, let's say, not without controversy,

My own prejudices and priorities, drags up some deeply held views,

A failing of mine to communicate my reasoning and my approach,

Very different expectations,

I'm not involved and somebody else will be taking it in their own direction.

Having a longer developmental approach to teaching,

Interestingly, it was very positive.

The disruptive effects of development,

A safer place to have those disagreements.

I stumbled, I really struggled and I turned for help,

This was an epiphany, to see how tangible having some sense of theory and

practice can be.

More a facilitative approach, rather than something like leadership,

Mindful that you don't want to alienate, demotivate.

Cultural change, and structural change,

Speaking to people as researchers gets me much further, the language and the

norm.

It's part of the cultural transformation,

Being much more engaged in the hard end people are facing,

Break down some of the barriers.

It's a natural part of an academic's life and not an extra thing,

or something between this or that.

I think it would be not true to myself and who I am to turn back,

This journey I've begun to go down, a possible path.

Looking for people I can talk to, I am worried that it's a pipe dream,

Test the waters, see if there is some other path you can forge.

I (VM) chose this poem to include because I felt it was the most evocative and rich of my poems in relation to our research question about the personal and professional development of SoTL Scheme participants. I have edited the poem down from the original to focus in on personal and professional development and to anonymise the poem more thoroughly. I think this poem gives a real sense of the rough, emotional and meaningful journeys that can take place for colleagues who are engaged with teaching development projects. This participant had moments of revelation and epiphany on his project journey but also stumbled and struggled. There is a sense in the poem that he has reflected deeply and learned a great deal through his teaching development work about himself as a change agent and how change might be taken forward in his local context. I have a sense of his commitment to his journey as a teacher, despite possible risks and setbacks. Companions for the journey seem to really matter and may be hard to find. Set against his commitment to this journey is a strong feeling that he is also tentative and uncertain about the road forward.

What we found, DL

Like my two fellow researchers, I attempted to write here a commentary on what I had learned about participants' experiences of professional development. However, the salient findings for me were about my experience of the method. There were two outstanding findings for me (EM). First of all, on the whole, I didn't find the poems as interesting in themselves as I had hoped. Based on my previous experiences of poetic inquiry (or inquiries with a poetic dimension) I had hoped for something more exciting to happen. It took me a while to admit this, to my fellow researchers and to myself. I had imagined that I would notice enticing details, make connections, and reveal surprising

insights. When this did not happen, something important seemed to be at stake: it felt like a betrayal of my fellow researchers, or a going back on my commitment to arts-enriched methods. However, the fact remained that I was disappointed. It seemed to me that we had not supported Jones's (2010) assertion that poetic transcription could:

.'..open up material for readers in a way that is at once subtle, concise, unique, powerful and new.' p. 594

Nor, it seemed to me, had we fulfilled Peseta's (2007) desire of restoring to research and writing about academic development:

'the spirit and vitality of the conversations that take place among us – the wonderful laughter and energy of our practice; occasionally its sadness, longing, regret' p. 17

However, when I shifted my focus to the exchanges between us as researchers, it seemed to me that poetic inquiry had in fact moved me on in my thinking. For example, VM queried why I was clinging to the term 'poem-like artefacts' instead of straightforwardly saying 'poems.' At the time, I thought I was being appropriately cautious, avoiding overstatement, agreeing with Glesne (1997) cited by Jones (2010) that: "poetic transcription moves in the direction of poetry, but is not necessarily poetry."(p.593). Now I see I was being honest: I did not experience the things I was producing as poems at all. Similarly when HM questioned our use of "poetic transcription" instead of the more familiar "poetic inquiry" this brought into view an important distinction between the mechanical act of writing down in poetic form and the more inclusive term of investigating in a poetic way. I think we went some way toward the former, but I personally didn't come close to the latter.

VM also raised questions about how we should use punctuation and line–length and queried my assertion that the method of poetic transcription would enable us to pay attention to silences and visual dimensions of the interviews. I became aware that I had been working in rather an unreflective way. I realised that I had simply replaced the trappings of social science methodology, for example meticulous coding, with the trappings of poetry, for example the use of short lines. It is true that my placing of the words on the page signals that this writing differs in some important way from other formats and genres, and alludes to the shape of poems we have encountered. However it would be difficult to show that I have self-consciously used these formal aspects in meaningful ways. Only one of the transcriptions really 'spoke' to me. It was the one that gives its title to this paper: 'Don't hold me back.'

Poem 3: Don't hold me back

I came here from elsewhere*

Elsewhere there is a sense of being stifled

So if you're pushing the boundaries

there are people above you

that will try to pull you back

Here you've got a lot of autonomy,

the boundaries are open

'Go and explore,

go and develop yourself,

bring some expertise and knowledge from outside

let's share and celebrate that.'

So the Money People saying 'No'

was just the big difference between

'Go and fly and explore the boundaries'

and somebody saying

'You can do it but we're keeping the engine,

or the oil

of this mechanism

and we're taking control over it.'

I'm in a different place now,

I want to fly,

Don't hold me back.

*I inserted the word 'elsewhere' to replace the name of the interviewee's previous place of employment.

This speaker has a warm, rich voice and a very vivid and engaging way of speaking. The story he tells is of moving from a very constrained working environment to one where he feels valued and encouraged to develop. In this new post, he was offered a SoTL Scheme award to investigate a topic that was very important to him. However, because of technical and HR complications, he was not at first able to take a lead role. I love the way he gives voice to the encouraging and discouraging pressures in academia: 'go and fly' versus 'we're taking control.' I love the way he uses the metaphor of flying for professional development, and the way he contrasts a feeling of flying freely (like a bird?), with the mechanical experience of trying to fly an aeroplane, with someone else in charge. 'The money people' suggests his contempt for the bureaucrats who got in his way.

I did, however, notice the ways in which his often very physical way of speaking (stifled, pushing, pull, go, fly, hold) was placed alongside the mission statement language that seems more familiar in contemporary academia (expertise and knowledge, share and celebrate). I wonder, does it hold him back?

Discussion and Implications for academic staff development

From the poems, it seems that participants' experiences of SoTL projects have been deeply significant for them. They describe their engagement in emotional terms, both positive and negative, indicating the degree to which they care about their research and innovation activities and their results. They highlight the sometimes transformational influence of the SoTL Scheme on their continuing professional development for teaching; the completion of a project is often seen as a beginning rather than an end. Although they have criticisms of teaching practices and attitudes in their institution, they retain faith in the potential to make real changes that go beyond the routine and familiar. One lesson here for schemes such as the University of Edinburgh SoTL Scheme is that the journeys participants embark on, in developing these projects, involve stumbling points and frustrations as well as triumphs and transformation. That being the case, we need to engage with research methods that will allow the full range of these experiences to be surfaced and explored so that we can understand what kinds of ongoing emotional and practical support participants will require in order to achieve the best possible outcomes. For example, we suggest that these schemes should always require a team of participants to bid, rather than individuals, thus providing an initial layer of peer support.

Senior management support, as required in the Edinburgh Scheme process is also important. The organisers of these schemes can also develop mechanisms for wider peer support between projects and for providing academic development support to project teams. Secondly, and paradoxically, our strong focus on individual experiences of personal and professional development provoked responses that were concerned with wider issues of organisational development. We recognise that we should be proactive in offering ongoing support to our participants in managing processes of local organisational change, to increase the chances that the findings from their projects will be taken on board in cultures where there may be resistance to change.

A third lesson relates to the methodological choices we made. The poems retain the liveliness of the original interviews; because of their brevity and their engaging qualities, they seem to create a space for readers' responses so that they can make empathic connections with their own practice. However, until this paper has been published and read, we cannot be sure that we have produced a text that promotes insight and inspires action.

What we can draw on, however, is our own experience as researchers. The commentaries show how the process of making the poems developed our empathy with the participants: we had a sharp sense of their triumphs and their trials. The poems retain a particularity that is often lost in thematic analysis. They also exhibit the quality of 'productive ambiguity' (Eisner, 1997:8) that is, they invite, rather than close off multiple interpretations and in this way help us to expand the range of questions we can ask and encourage us to wonder about other people's experiences and perspectives. They represent something different that appealed to us as researchers, and may appeal to a different section of our audience: practitioners who are looking for evocative rather than merely denotative reading material. These qualities: empathy, particularity, ambiguity, wonder and diversity are the five areas which Eisner identifies as the 'promise' of research approaches that do not attempt to reduce all data to numbers and propositional statements. He also points out the limitations of these approaches: a lack of precision, and the risk of alienating potential audiences.

The findings from our study are likely to disappoint those who are looking for precise answers to specific problems, and they may seem opaque to those who are unfamiliar with arts-enriched research. The authenticity of the voices may convince some readers of their trustworthiness. Others will apply a different measure of validity and find them wanting.

There are a number of passionate and articulate advocates of poetic inquiry who provide evidence of and arguments for its value and a number of their opponents who either argue against such approaches or simply pay them no attention. Our methodological findings in this study are unusual, in that despite a shared approval of the aims of poetic inquiry, we experienced a range of responses

in our small team, from satisfaction to disappointment. Interestingly, it was the most experienced arts enriched researcher who was disappointed. This highlighted the tensions inherent in an approach that draws on uncertainty and ambiguity in order to persuade and inform.

Finally, we suggest to other academic developers and educational researchers that undertaking poetic inquiry together can be a valuable way of surfacing and examining some of our assumptions about research that might be holding us back.

Acknowledgements

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