

# Poetic Reflexivity. Walking to Inform Poetry as a Response to Disembodied Research During a Pandemic

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Lucy I. Beattie<sup>1</sup>  and Stephanie G. Zihms<sup>2</sup> 

## Abstract

Poetry can be used as an adjunct to interviews in social science to build relationships and share meaning to create an artefact that provokes dialogue between the researcher and research study participants. Describing the sensemaking of researcher identity as a narrative walk, *Datawalking* is extended as an embodied post-data qualitative research method to inform autoethnography and poetry. These methods articulate the ways to support researcher wellbeing to counter the loneliness of remote research which can be heightened by external factors such as the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. We illustrate two poems used alongside phenomenological interviewing to inform reflexive knowledge in educational research. By exploring poetic techniques including meter, alliteration, and enjambment we seek to advance the understanding of evocative autoethnography as a polyphonic form of expressive scholarship to instantiate dialogue in social research. This approach, centred on identity and praxis, has uses for organisational studies in education.

## Keywords

autoethnography, interpretive phenomenology, methods in qualitative inquiry, phenomenology, philosophy of science

## Introduction

Higher Education (HE) provides the opportunity for members of the academic community to mutually engage with research for educational reform. Curriculum leadership at all levels requires ‘brokering’ (the co-ordination and alignment of perspectives) and the creation of ‘boundary objects’ (shared artefacts that can link communities or entities together) Wenger (1998) cited in Annala and Mäkinen (2016). We contribute to this special issue on embodied writing to explore poetry derived from an autoethnographic qualitative research method. The poems illustrated in this paper are used as artefacts to provoke dialogue in qualitative interviews to examine the lived experience of lecturers in Scottish universities. From this, the authors seek to explore how this may contribute towards organisational studies in the fields of curriculum design and educational leadership.

Situating autoethnography within an interpretive phenomenological methodology (IPA) enables an examination of identity and praxis according to Starr (2014) who argues that educational leaders and administrators should engage in

reflexive study of their positioning within practice. Here we illustrate how autoethnography uses imagination to develop a rich, subjective research of self through cultural experience which can be used to inform poetry (Ellis et al., 2010). Autoethnography emerged within anthropology over fifty years ago (Hughes et al., 2012) and is now used in various disciplines including educational administration, human resource development and organisational studies (Hains-Wesson & Young, 2016; Roy & Uekusa, 2020).

This paper positions autoethnography as qualitative method within interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand participants’ lived experience in the context of a

<sup>1</sup>School of Education and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland, UK

<sup>2</sup>Graduate School, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Lucy I. Beattie, School of Education and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland, High Street, Paisley, PA1 2BE, Scotland, UK.  
Email: [lucy.beattie@uws.ac.uk](mailto:lucy.beattie@uws.ac.uk)



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researcher's positionality. In this case, autoethnography was used to support remote interviews conducted to gather research data for a study during the 2021 COVID-19 lockdowns. Remote interviewing can present technical challenges (Archibald et al., 2019); but crucially it presents communication challenges and we argue that this approach to data gathering can overcome these challenges (King et al., 2018). In this instance examples of poetry are presented which were used to strengthen dialogue and share meaning between researchers and research study participants following qualitative interviews that looked at STEM lecturers' perceptions of the triple nexus of teaching/research/public engagement (Stevenson & McArthur, 2015).

IPA typically uses a combination of primary data collected through interviews to record participant's lived experience and interpret this through *eidetic variation*. This is a form of imaginative alchemy examines elements of a phenomenon which are changed and reduced to the essence, or element, of an occurrence being observed (Zahavi, 2018). Poetry was shared with research study participants between first and second stage interviews to elicit an understanding of the core essence of their experience (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020). This method, we argue, feasibly allows for the use of poetry as a playful and painterly medium to enact dialogue in phenomenological interviewing to inform curriculum research and management practice (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2015).

### Rationale: Walking in Mud

IPA tackles the complex, socially constructed, and ambulatory nature of the world which explores the human condition and experience in relation to the mind and the world (King et al., 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). The constructs of IPA were theorised by philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) who proposed interpretative methods anchored in communication and understanding to build on the theories of Edmund Husserl (1856 – 1938) (Neubauer et al., 2019; Zahavi, 2018). The concept of *Lebenswelt* or lifeworld was extended by Stephen Strasser (1976) cited in Zahavi (2018) who compares it to a fertile soil. Accordingly, this section presents the outset of the research journey in terms of the entrance to that lifeworld, as a soil that has been flooded by water, turning it to mud.

'I don't know where I fit in? Will I make it? Am I clever enough? What if I never meet my supervisors, how will we connect on days I really need them and feel like giving up?

I am in one of the most remote parts of the UK, a remote researcher, experiencing a the fallout and isolation of a global pandemic (Roberts et al., 2021). I am out-of-body, am I out of my mind too? I am suffering from the emotional experience of imposter syndrome (Caltagirone et al., 2021).'

Excerpt from research journal (Beattie, 2022).

The isolation and disembodiment from the academic community experienced by academic researchers during the 2021 lockdown was inevitable and brought about substantive changes to scholarly practice (Anderson, 2020). At the outset of the study, autoethnographic data were collected as notes in a research journal using creative writing voiced vulnerability (Mandalaki & Daou, 2021). An autoethnographic approach privileges the inner-self, which provides a possible antidote to imposter phenomenon and values the role of imagination to support the development of academic identity (Carr et al., 2020). Even though the researcher's personal experience is not central to the meanings of an interview produced, the use of autoethnography adds contexts and layers of thick description to the portrayal of participants' stories (Ellis et al., 2010).

The aim of the research study was to understand how lecturers make links between research, teaching and public engagement at undergraduate level (Brew, 2010; Healey et al., 2014). Research questions were formulated following a literature review which revealed that despite funding regimes and policies to support the evidencing of impact, in practice this does not sit alongside policy incentives, nor funding weighting (Papatsiba & Cohen, 2020). The UK professional standards teaching framework (UKPSF) (Advance HE Advance, 2011) favours 'impact-informed' teaching and engagement which suggests that the lecturer is fundamental to embedding research and teaching within a public engagement model (Joseph-Richard et al., 2020). Literature revealed a partial understanding of these links as they frequently overlap and it appears that the impact agenda has insidiously progressed to disenfranchise the role of the educator (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2018).

The neoliberal superstructure of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) adds to this feeling of disenfranchisement amongst academics, where academic research is incentivised, and the reporting of research case studies is directly linked to funding mechanisms (Baird & Elliott, 2018). The 2014 REF review conducted by Duncan et al. (2017), found that some academic disciplines are less likely than others to report on impact within case studies. Notably within panel B science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines – Engineering, Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Computing, Earth Systems and Environmental Science. In Scotland very few studies examine the teaching-research nexus, although some focus on social sciences, very few focus on STEM (McKinley et al., 2020; Rayner et al., 2020; Stevenson & McArthur, 2015). Consequently, interview participants were identified from STEM panel B disciplines following an open call for participants who were teaching undergraduate cohorts in Scottish HE Institutions (Healey & Jenkins, 2009).

### Methods: Sensuous Walking

Following ethical approval (no 13745) from the University of the West of Scotland School of Education and Social Science

ethics committee nine interviews were conducted remotely via video link, recorded on MS Teams, and transcribed to capture detailed descriptive interview data. After this autoethnography was used as a means to amplify the collection and interpretation of phenomenological data prior to second stage interviews being conducted (Keane, 2019; Starr, 2014). Autoethnography is a non-traditional approach to qualitative inquiry that enables personal reflection on positionality, which can be structured as narrative prose, poetry, song or filmmaking (Carless, 2020; Douglas, 2016). The uses of autoethnography as a research method are sometimes problematic, notably Douglas (2016) reflects on the situation of autoethnographic researchers who have ‘...struggled with how to keep the funders happy—funders who didn’t want poems, stories, or songs, but rather a scientific missile to load into their policy cannon.’” Autoethnography has consequently been criticised for its focus on self, however, according to Lapadat (2017) it has promising uses in research, which can bring people together to make changes in policy and practice.

The ethical challenges surrounding autoethnography explored by Lapadat (2017) point to the difficulties of maintaining distance which can impact upon the relational ethics of a study. She suggests mitigating by writing collaborative autoethnography, and it is apparent that this is a burgeoning approach to qualitative inquiry increasing in popularity with academic writing groups (Hains-Wesson & Young, 2016; Olmos-López & Tusting, 2020; Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Given the challenges surrounding relational ethics and the distance from collaboration possibilities brought about by the 2021 COVID-19 lockdown a non-collaborative approach was used. IPA was used as the overarching methodology with autoethnography as a method adjunct to the collection of phenomenological interview data to develop dialogue with participants (Starr, 2014).

In Scotland a daily walk for an hour was the sole activity permitted in the lockdown within government guidelines for the purpose of exercise. Initially for expedience the researcher used a walk as a place to reflect upon interview findings immediately after an interview had been conducted on MS Teams. The purpose being a place and space to clear the head and to seek a different scene from the confined space of homeworking in a busy family home. Walking, as an embodied research activity allowed a sense of “*suspensive freedom*” (Gros, 2014). This mirrors the philosophy of phenomenology which urges researchers to suspend belief to uncover the core essence of participants’ lived experience (Zahavi, 2018). The act of walking embodies the research process which flips Cartesian theory from ‘*I think, therefore I am*’, to ‘*I am*’ as a starting point (Carr et al., 2020). During a walk, reflective observations were recorded as voice notes on a handheld mobile device which were then used to inform autoethnographic writing.

Embodied movement supported the researcher’s reflective practice, analysis, and critical thinking and the method was formally adopted in the methodology even after the

lockdowns eased. These reported benefits are congruent with findings that link improved metacognition with regular physical activity (Alvarez-Bueno et al., 2017; Erickson et al., 2015). The value of embodied, somatic movement to gather data is ordinated by van Es and de Lange (2020) as *data-walking*; a pragmatic approach to gather sensory-immersive data. In a research setting Amoroso (2021) posits that walking is a counter to *epistemic injustice* which can frequently be encountered in traditional settings. Furthermore, walking can be characterised as praxis, or ‘*pedagogy of hope*’ during the era of COVID-19, as an activity to engage with a sensuous approach to the co-location of mind, body and space (Blades, 2020). In this instance *datawalking* as a research method (van Es & de Lange, 2020) was extended to *post-data-datawalking*, which is positioned as a sensory method for data gathering through critical reflection.

Data was gathered in a three-stage process after first stage interviews:

### *Post-Data Reflexive Datawalking*

Walks were conducted in a rurally isolated area of the North-West Highlands of Scotland. The walks followed a public footpath to a Glen called *Strath Nimhe* in Ross-Shire, Scotland, OS Grid Reference NH 19,849 90,587. By following the same route, the researcher was able to ensure the location and time frame for the walks stayed roughly the same, with the exception being time of day and weather conditions. Walks commenced following video interviews and reflections were recorded on a handheld recording device (*iPhone XR*). Following this, voice notes were replayed to support the writing up of written autoethnographic pieces.

### *Embodied/Sensory-Immersive*

Even though *datawalking* is not a physical activity promoted or used as exercise per-se, we can learn from sports and exercise research around the promotion of and engagement with physical activity (Smith & Wightman, 2021), walking is *not* a sport according to French philosopher Frédéric Gros (2023). It must be considered that *datawalking* as a physical activity could exclude researchers with disabilities or chronic illnesses and this is identified as an area for further research that could engage with movement in many forms. Alternative activities to accommodate embodied engagement are beyond the scope of this study but an interesting area to consider for further research especially regarding inclusive research environments (Kattari, 2015).

During the data collection process the researcher was mindful to experience the sounds of the walk and the feel of air on her face, similar to the sensory approach used by Blades (2020) in her discussion of Freire’s *Pedagogy of Hope* (2014). This approach was timely given the experience of sensory dislocation reported by the study participants during the

lockdowns in the COVID-19 pandemic; “We’ve had to look at different ways of [teaching] and I have found that the students have been absolutely amazing at changing things and adapting, and they got, you know, support. There’ve been some really fantastic things. I mean some things fell through, we had a lot of ideas that just didn’t work, because of the pressure” (Epsilon M).

Datawalking, as an activity is therefore presented as a method for qualitative interviewers to anchor the collection of reflexive post-data during a time when temporal and spatial dimensions of lived experience had radically altered during the pandemic (Blades, 2020). Given the sensory, embodied nature of this approach to reflexivity there may be scope and uses for datawalking in other applications where qualitative researchers are undertaking research using virtual and remote interviews (Roberts et al., 2021).

### Generative/Dialogic

The overarching aim of the methodology is to generate knowledge about the lived experience of the study participants at a given time, in a given context. The use of autoethnography as a method within IPA addresses researcher positionality as a dialogic process with research participants which is *reflexive, reciprocal and dialogic* (Jones et al., 2016). The embodiment and awareness of how these accounts portray other people underpins the ethics of autoethnography (Ettorre, 2016; Lapadat, 2017). Autoethnographic writing is therefore positioned as evocative autoethnography that is a narrative presentations to open up conversations and evoke emotional responses (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). In the following section the findings from interviews are presented as poetry that was shared with the study participants for approval, comments, and feedback prior to second stage interviews which were conducted six months after the initial interviews in January 2021.

### Starting out on the Study: Going up the Mountain

*Datawalking* is described in this paper as ‘*Going up a mountain and coming down a hill*’. The phrase is derived from a film in popular culture ‘*The Englishman who went up a hill but came down a mountain*’ which is exemplified as a metaphor whereby fuzzy concepts can impact spatial phenomena (Fisher & Wood, 1998). In the film an English cartographer arrives to map a Welsh village. The village has been hard hit emotionally by the fallout of World War 1 which is quickly apparent to the cartographer who finds the hill falls slightly short of the proscribed 1000 feet to be classified as a mountain. The villagers enhance the height of the hill with aggregate and soil which enables the cartographer to map the hill as

a mountain, which restores the self-esteem of the villagers. The description of *datawalking* in this study acknowledges the playful interplay of words and geographical, fixed, boundaries between *mountain/hill* (Fisher & Wood, 1998). This illuminates the potential of metacognition through self-awareness which Carr et al. (2020) denotes a way to enhance problem-solving skills; that is reducing a problem from a mountain size to a lesser-sized hill.

‘The walk begins looking at the mountain ahead. As I walk it seems inaccessible. I am an imposter. I’ll never get up there alone.’

Excerpt from research journal (Beattie, 2022).

The purpose of autoethnography is to aesthetically reflect on researcher positionality and is characterised through reflexive, dialogic storytelling which prompts a move towards social action (Berger, 2013; Jones et al., 2016). Qualitative research presented in storytelling form is a potentially empowering process which allows the researcher and the researched to re-construct relationships and breaks down the barriers between *outsider* and *insider* (Aaltonen, 2011; Beals et al., 2019). This positively collocates phenomenology with autoethnography to explore the lived experience of the social world.

This form of expressive scholarship is *polyphonic*, that is involving many sounds or voices, which can be justifiably used to supplement conventional qualitative findings (Sandmann & Jones, 2019). However, Beals et al. (2019) point out that storytelling can be biased, and they question, *whose story?* It should be noted the limitations of these findings must be acknowledged as a subjective account derived from dialogue which could be influenced by privilege power; politics and positionality (Bruhn & Jimenez, 2020; Lahiri-Roy et al., 2021). The weighting of the different voices within the research is important as IPA is primarily concerned with the core experience of participants. Therefore, to mitigate the impact of researcher subjectivity, early stage reflections were presented to research participants for critical feedback prior to second stage interviews to support member checking (Robson, 2011).

Here we will share poetry derived from autoethnography as narrative examples of findings which focus on the core essence of participants’ experience of the interaction between the triple nexus of teaching, research and public engagement in STEM (Stevenson & McArthur, 2015). The structure of the paper allows for the embodied ‘*playful potential*’ that autoethnography advances through developing self-awareness and metacognitive skills (Carr et al., 2020). Consequently, the reflexive methodological approach adopted aims to illustrate what Knoblauch (2021) asserts is becoming a normative practice within social science and educational research.



## Identity Conflict: The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Researcher

‘I’ve never met my supervisors face-to-face. But I feel supported anyhow.’

Excerpt from research journal (Beattie, 2022).

From March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the shutdown of all HE campuses in Scotland and long periods of social isolation required a shift to virtual research (Crawford et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2021; Schwartzman, 2020). The additional layers of pressure and loneliness instantiated by these circumstances unquestionably affected both doctoral students and supervisors, particularly in the context of shifting doctoral identities (Carter et al., 2021). However, it must be considered whether the nature of the student/supervisor relationship is overplayed, given that all postgraduate students must ultimately work towards independence. This is acknowledged by Delamont et al. (2004) who note that although postgraduate researchers may experience intellectual isolation, it is desirable and necessary to foster self-determination. Even so, they observe that social or emotional loneliness is problematic, particularly for humanities and social science students, who typically do not work as part of a research lab team.

Identity conflict is also experienced by researchers and educators, and this is voiced within the findings of the study. The deep vulnerabilities exposed by the experiences of lecturers who are torn between the vocational demands of teaching appear to be in opposition to the constraints of funding regimes and neoliberal rhetoric espoused by middle management. Six out of nine participants interviewed discussed REF and how it impacted their experience. Their experiences are congruent with Kenny (2017) who outlines the disempowerment experienced by academics when working towards REF submissions. REF is driven by metrics to measure performativity in HE which is problematic and highlights the commodification of this approach to scholarship (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2020). This suggests that all metrics are problematic and this was echoed in the findings of the study (Heffernan, 2021; Kinchin, 2014; Spence, 2018; Wheaton, 2020).

‘What have you done for public engagement? Tick this box.’

(Extract from interview with Iota C)

Critics claim that REF is inconsistent with the rich qualitative landscape of educational impact and academic identity which arguably raises the question – *who owns knowledge?* (Baird & Elliott, 2018; Czerniawski et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2019; Pirrie & Fang, 2021). The following extracts reveal the loss of identity experienced by academics when it comes to submitting REF-returnable research.

‘Whether or not I as an academic will ever see any of the funds which the university gets from my role in that submission is dubious. It will probably be lost in that centralised administration. It’s not teaching, it’s not research, it’s a kind of commercial thing.’

(Extract from interview with Beta A)

## Walking in an Antique Land: The Pedagogue’s Sonnet

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century French philosopher, Auguste Comte, mapped out the doctrine of positivism which highlighted a bifurcation between knowledge transfer and knowledge production. However, the deindustrialisation of education since these times has resulted in a shift in knowledge production which Knoblauch (2021) denotes as a dissolution of boundaries whereby science can no longer be regarded as a closed field or subsystem. This has the potential to reform the constitution and leadership of HE institutions, particularly with regard to the relationship between science and society in STEM (Knoblauch, 2021; Weingart et al., 2021). However, this shift remains at odds with the positivist technical rationality which foregrounds HE management which means funding allocations are typically linked to the analysis of performance metrics (Baird & Elliott, 2018; Cohen, 2021; Papatsiba & Cohen, 2019; Spence, 2018).

This inculcates a positivist worldview to applying a systematic and rigorous approach to scholarship, which Sandmann and Jones (2019) argue can impair the dialogic knowledge that can be engendered through public engagement. Dialogic approaches to knowledge generation echo a shift in teaching practices where knowledge transfer is delivered as a deficit model through communication from experts to perceived non-experts (Braha, 2017; Metcalfe, 2019). However, this step-change continues to challenge academics (Canfield et al., 2020; Shulla et al., 2020) and increasingly science communication has repositioned to dialogical and participatory models (Bensaude, 2014; Davis et al., 2018; Menlove et al., 2019; Metcalfe, 2019; Preece, 2016; Schalet et al., 2020). A reflexive methodology therefore recognises that autoethnography allows space for dialogue between people, which has broader implications as a necessary aspect of any social interaction to reconfigure the relationship between science and society (Knoblauch, 2021).

Shelley’s sonnet ‘*Ozymandias*’ resonated with research findings in terms of the similarities between the two legs of the immovable statue and the power of the two traditional pillars of the university – that is research and teaching (Brennan et al., 2019; Collini, 2012), which consequently inform scholarly identity (Reid & Gardner, 2020). The interviews conducted revealed the pedagogical struggles of academics in Scotland. Furthermore, a split, or schism was revealed in the types of institutions that promoted research or allowed academic autonomy to foster research-mindedness in their lecturing staff.

Shelley's poem is a mainstay of traditional English Literature teaching in schools and his poetic works are noted by Carter et al. (2021) as a link between creative imagination and the scaffolding of new knowledge. She goes further to suggest that '...making use of cultural artefacts provides an ethical, moral, and aesthetical approach to neoliberalism' (ibid., 2020).

The allegorical description given of a traveller from '...an antique land...' describes a solid stone statue 'Ozymandias, King of Kings' which has crumbled and changed over time. Leaving a 'Half sunk...shattered visage' on the ground beside two pillars described as '...vast and trunkless legs of stone...' (Shelley, 2014). The sonnet depicts the fragility of the human condition which is exemplified through the transience of the imagery of the broken statute of Ozymandias. The poem suggests that power and pride can succumb to change, and be transformed over time through external, environmental pressures, such as weather. This forms a backdrop to reflect upon the nature of HE, and how it is organised beyond the traditional model of scholarship which rests upon two pillars or '...legs of stone...' – research and teaching. Contemporary universities are challenged to incorporate a third mission - public engagement, that represents its social and economic contribution to communities and people outside academia which challenges the traditional HE models (Collini, 2012; Knoblauch, 2021; Reid & Gardner, 2020).

This poem is presented as a parody of Shelley's work. Although it is true to the form of a sonnet in terms of its length, being fourteen lines with rhyming couplets this is immaterial as Illingworth (2020) points out the purpose of scholarly communication through poetry lies more heavily with the process than the product. The poem uses certain literary techniques such as alliteration and imagery to enhance what Amoroso (2021) describes as 'literary artfulness' to write in an aesthetically compelling way, without necessarily having the skills of a seasoned poet or writer (Ellis et al., 2010). Drawing on the parallels of the Scottish enlightenment (Swanson & Akdag, 2018) and Scottish HE policy (Arnott & Ozga, 2016), the narrative is partly presented in Scots language and idiom.

## The Pedagogue's Sonnet

I met a being in a VLE  
 Who said: "Two aspects of my self lie here  
 Betwixt devotion and precarity,  
 On a desk, a shattered paradigm exists, whose bounds,  
 And stifled breaths, made slim by high command,  
 Tell of its making through neoliberalism  
 Which yet survives, counted on league tables,  
 The hand that ordainates, and creates a schism:  
 "They ca' me REF, King o' Kings:

Keek at yer wirk, big man, and despair!"

Nothing beside remains, save the desire

Of colossal freedom, and research to share,

A lonely lectern, my attire.

(Beattie, 2024).

Notes: VLE - Virtual learning environment; *Keek* – Scots, to look; *Wirk* – Scots, work; *Big Man* – An idiomatic Glaswegian phrase that can describe someone who is perceived to be older or bigger; it can be used informally amongst male friends, and jokingly may not always imply a greater stature.

## Walking Tall: Finding my 'No'

'When I interviewed Iota C I felt distressed, it was clearly visible as the video stream came online that she was dealing with ill-health. Her matter-of-fact stoicism about her medical condition put me at ease to some extent. But I really did not want to pressure her as it became clear that her workload, (which she jokingly described as being 150% of contracted hours) is immense.

Iota C is courageous, a so-called, and so-felt foreigner living in post-Brexit Britain (Pietka-Nykaza et al., 2020). At the intersections of academia in STEM she is aware you need to work extra-hard if you are a woman, of colour, of a different culture or LGBTQ+ (Canfield et al., 2020). It made me think about my positionality again. Made me re-examine my place of privilege. Privileged to share Iota C's story. Mindful of my intentionality (Han & Ellis, 2019). Does the academic community take this on board? I feel helpless as she unravels her story. But Iota C doesn't want to speak out.

She is an early-career researcher and whilst her shoulders are wide and strong to take on this burden, her role is precarious (Kinchin & Francis, 2016; Wheaton, 2020). She wants to find her "no". No, to unrealistic contractual demands; no, to devising a system to measure the impact of public engagement; no, to additional tax burdens for EU academics post-Brexit; no, to gendered rhetoric that has no tangible outcomes for change.'

Notes from research journal (Beattie, 2022).

The following poetic investigation fortifies the findings of the interview as a poetic portrait (Dixson et al., 2016; Muccio et al., 2015). Poetry as a process transforms narrative to provoke, engage, and stimulate the reader which Muccio et al. (2015) denote as a '...sensuous, intellectual anchor'. The use of the word anchor in the poem captures the ways in which academics link into their own identity, or side identity to augment real-life research with public engagement which extends Vygotsky's theory of proximal development (Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016; Rayner et al., 2020; Stevenson & McArthur, 2015). The use of literary devices such as

*enjambment* (where the meaning ‘runs over’ or ‘steps over’ from one poetic line to the next) adds surprise to the lines and draws the reader to understand themes that interjoin and arise from a single sentence ‘*Finding my no*’.

The poem addresses three key themes identified in interviews:

- i) The teaching/research/public engagement triple nexus (Stevenson & McArthur, 2015).

The writing explores the nuanced and ill-lit conceptions and imagery of the *ivory-tower* which draws on an artistic description of intersectionality as *chiaroscuro* (in Italian *light-dark*, this word is used in art history to describe clear tonal contrasts which suggests the density and volume of an artistic image) (Canfield et al., 2020; Watermeyer & Lewis, 2015).

- ii) Academic identity (Guidetti et al., 2019; Watermeyer & Rowe, 2021a; Wheaton, 2020).

The notion of the academic ‘*community*’ is essentially flawed according to Spence (2018) who states: ‘*Once metrics start to appear, dysfunctional behaviour often ensues, and intelligent judgement can easily be thwarted.*’ In this poem the description of a ‘*convivial community*’ points to the reported dysfunctionality of the academic community and draws on the notion of the university as a ‘*mushroom factory*’ (Wheaton, 2020). The reference to ‘*mutinous mycelium*’ suggests an underground network of mushroom roots driven by passion that subverts in times of tension. This builds on the findings of Schwartzman (2020) who denotes the use of poetry in the pandemic to address the normative and aesthetic dimensions of resilience.

- iii) The final stanza critically engages with the disconnect between neoliberalism which underpins the problematic approaches to measuring public impact (Papatsiba & Cohen, 2020; Watermeyer & Rowe, 2021a).

The concept of ‘*reaching in from the outside*’ is drawn from the interview with Iota C which fortifies the critical engagement with public engagement discourses and the seeming ill-fit with academic business models. Poetry as a catharsis fortifies this argument according to Carr et al. (2020) who says ‘*The object is to find bulwarks against an encroaching business model of academia that might suck the soul out of our work.*’

### Finding my “no” – a poem

Finding

out. Re-searching,

searching the half-lit ivory tower.

Intersections contrast like chiaroscuro,  
depending on your lens.

Finding my

real me. Beyond the walls,

of the convivial community.

Mutinous mycelium,

that spreads like a dangerous idea.

Finding my no

way out. Set on a track

measured by metrics.

Reaching in from outside,

authentically anchored.

(Beattie, 2024).

### Discussion

At the outset of interviews, the task seemed immense, a *mountain*. This section will reduce the data findings to a smaller-sized *hill*. The findings are foregrounded by the frictions and challenges that lecturers experience in their practice as STEM lecturers (Weingart et al., 2021). These are changing and increasingly the positivist view of scientific knowledge generation is outdated and dichotomous which underlines the close connection between science as a discipline and science as a social practice (Knoblauch, 2021). This undoubtedly gives rise to a need to demonstrate how social science methods can be used in STEM to break down systemic organisational barriers to reconcile this. This represents areas for organisational change that relate to funding (Papatsiba & Cohen, 2019); intersectionality (Canfield et al., 2020); gender; (McKinnon & O’Connell, 2020) and staffing issues (Watermeyer & Rowe, 2021b).

This paper has illustrated examples of poetry created using autoethnographic data gathered through post-data *data-walking*. This advances the proposition that poetry acts as a disrupter (Höpfl, 1995) which Illingworth (2020) asserts as an appealing vehicle to enact dialogue between scientists and non-scientists. The foregoing methods outlined illustrate an alternative social approach to a reflexive method which can be used to scrutinise the lifeworld of educators from practitioners’ perspectives as a *sonorous* or *polyphonic* discourse. By constructing poems to explore the findings the authors lean heavily on the science communication work of Illingworth (2019; 2020) using a narrative, evocative approach to discuss data findings (Amoroso, 2021; Dixon et al., 2016; Muccio et al., 2015).

The value of this work may appear at first glance merely an aesthetic portrayal of the human condition and

social circumstances, yet it is hoped it may present findings and analysis in a way that can be shared as a means of teaching leadership concepts in education as well as highlighting the key themes and findings of research interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Callahan & Rosser, 2016; Golsteijn & Wright, 2013). Significantly, the harm caused by neoliberal management was shown to foster anxiety and dissociation amongst those interviewed which strengthens the case to embed the “*I am*” of embodied inquiry in educational research, particularly in relation to STEM education which is typically bounded by positivism. (Olmos-López & Tusting, 2020; Wheaton, 2020). Exploring the embodied, personal aspects of research prompted discussion from participants concerning the interpretation of interview data through poetry:

‘...the poem is very different, and I thought it was a really personal kind of research output. So, I thought that was really nice.’ (Gamma S – participant)

The first poem communicates the personal struggles of lecturers who were interviewed and conveys the apprehensive precarity of their role as pedagogues whose research capacity is dictated by middle management and neoliberal funding mechanisms such as REF (Kenny, 2017; Kinchin & Francis, 2016). The poem offers a counter to the bleak outlook for lecturers, which chimes with the assertion that ‘...*the richness of life is lost in the process [of assigning numbers to the qualitative features of education]*’ (Baird & Elliott, 2018). This provoked a reaction from one participant who agreed that the essence of the poem captured their feeling of trepidation around the submission of REF returns:

‘Your [poem about] REF thing where [it talks about the big man] – ‘**I’m going to look at everything you’ve ever done**’, it was like yep, that’s... and that trepidation of well what’s actually going to happen with that.’

(Beta A – participant)

The second poem shares findings which suggest that using poetry in an autoethnographic approach to qualitative inquiry enacts a better understanding of relationality within the research, namely:

- i. A better understanding of the research process through self-reflection
- ii. An appreciation of positionality in terms of strengths and weaknesses and the ability to resource resilience through reflexive practice
- iii. An ability to develop sensitivity in social science interviews
- iv. Enhanced academic literacies through writing and creativity
- v. Incorporating academic identity into research findings to anchor the centrality of the researcher or research team

- vi. To develop new ways of mentorship through dialogic autoethnographic discourse

All participants from second-stage interviews felt positive towards the use of poetry as a creative adjunct to interviews to interpret the essence of their lived experience (Knoblauch, 2021; Starr, 2014):

‘[I’m]...very happy with the poem. I wish I could hear it read out loud from your voice.’ (Iota C – participant)

‘I loved the poem by the way. I absolutely loved the poem.’ (Beta A – participant)

Two participants remarked on the novel approach to qualitative inquiry, and felt positive towards its cultural positioning and relevance to identity in Scottish culture (Leith & Sim, 2020):

‘I enjoyed that it was written with you know, the kind of more colloquial Scots language. And yeah, because it was just very different to what I’ve kind of seen previously, in terms of that sort of thing. So, I haven’t previously seen anyone use that kind of language in reflection, and I don’t think I would use that type of language in reflection, but it was very effective from a reading perspective and getting me then to think about what was in the sonnet. So, no, I think because it was very novel for me, I’d never seen anything like that before.’

(Theta A – participant)

‘...as soon as I got to the bit about the big man, I could hear myself in a Glasgow accent just saying it. I was like God; it does sound like West Scotsman doing it. It’s not something I’ve come across before, but reading it I enjoyed it, and I could see things in it that does tie up with everything that I’ve been going through. I suppose everybody else has been doing it. I enjoyed it, and I have started since you sent that, I’ve started looking at autoethnographic [methods].’

(Delta I – participant)

## Conclusion

Poetry arguably provides a useful form of qualitative inquiry to understand social relationships which can be used to inform research into educational research and organisational studies (Hains-Wesson & Young, 2016). Poetry as a method of qualitative inquiry has largely remained informal within the domain of anthropological studies in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and little used within other social sciences and there are very few examples of how this method can be used to amplify qualitative research methods such as interviewing (King et al., 2018; Klein, 2012). Poetry as a creative output from autoethnography is a supportive practice and this



approach to qualitative research can be used to unpack the nuances of human experience within cultural and organisational settings.

Walking as described earlier, can be used as an embodied method to collect reflections post-data which was used in this study to write up autoethnographic reflections the form of poetry between first and second stage interviews within an IPA methodology (Gros, 2014; van Es & de Lange, 2020). The degree to which researchers feel isolated during their studies depends on research field, research mode and external factors like the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Going forward, beyond the pandemic, the use of embodied movement and *datawalking* is proposed as a useful method to collect reflexive data to support any form of virtual qualitative research (Roberts et al., 2021).

The foregoing methods helped to make sense in a time when temporal and spatial norms were dislocated, supporting the call for ‘...social researchers to extend their sociological imagination to study the unique social reality of the current [COVID-19] crisis’ (Lahiri-Roy et al., 2021). Specifically, autoethnography is presented as a method to support virtual qualitative data-gathering that invokes researchers to extend their writing through aesthetics, rhythm and tone (Douglas, 2016; Muccio et al., 2015). This has positive implications which can offer a stimulating insight into relational understanding for the formulation of organisational change in educational research (Callahan & Rosser, 2016; Starr, 2014).

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### Ethical Statement

#### Ethical Approval

Following ethical approval (no 13745) from the University of the West of Scotland School of Education and Social Science ethics committee nine interviews were conducted remotely via video link, recorded on MS Teams, and transcribed to capture detailed descriptive interview data.

### ORCID iD

Lucy I. Beattie  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8571-8051>

Stephanie G. Zihms  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2342-9988>

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