Expressing research experience through pattern poetry

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Introduction

The range of potential outputs from qualitative research listed by White, Woodfield & Ritchie (2003: 291) does not include 'poem'. While unfortunate, this is perhaps not entirely surprising in a textbook on qualitative research practice designed to help researchers seeking "to explore, unravel and explain the complexity of different social worlds" (247). After all, more conventionally 'realistic' modes of representation have traditionally been far more evident in most ethnographic writing (Glesne 1997), which itself was under attack from supporters of objective-quantitative research designs during the paradigm wars of the 1980s (Gage 1989); this was a time when qualitative researchers were still struggling to make their voices heard. The situation has changed, but while ethnography, critical theory and some of the research outputs researchers working within these paradigms employ, including the presentation of 'photographic or video evidence' (White et al. 2003: 290), have tended to gain much more widespread acceptance since, poetry has unfortunately continued to be explicitly excluded as a legitimate research output by some funding organizations, as Cahnmann (2003) laments. Cahnmann's view is that poet-researchers are 'easy targets' for rejection (30).

Nevertheless, as Glesne (1997) reports, experimental ways of presenting research, including the poetic, have been more apparent since the 'crisis of representation' (Lincoln & Denzin 1994) of the early 1990s, a time when ethnographic researchers and critical theorists, grappling with the realization that their writing needed to be reflexive, were struggling with how to represent themselves and their research participants in their work. This may have encouraged some to turn to 'poetic inquiry', an umbrella term used by Prendergast (2009) to cover poetry in qualitative research. Indeed, Prendergast's meta-analysis reveals a recent upsurge in the coining of related expressions. These include 'data poetry', 'poetic representation', 'poetic transcription', 'poetic narrative', 'anthropological poetry', 'ethnopoetry', 'autoethnographic verse', and 'investigative poetry', most of these dating from the early 21st century (Prendergast 2009). This begs the question 'why'. Besides having the potential to become "a vehicle of researcher reflexivity" (Sherry & Schouten 2002: 218), poetry, together with other non-traditional forms of sharing research experience, including pictures, photos, and drawings, may allow the possibility not just of intellectual stimulation but also engagement of the emotions (Glesne 1997), thereby supporting in readers deeper, more nuanced, reflexive engagement in the social worlds being opened up (Sherry & Schouten 2002).

Various disciplines, including education, psychology, medicine and nursing, have started to embrace such 'arts-based research', this using the genres and methods of different forms of artistic practice such as poetry to support

creative, transformative ways of knowing (Hanauer 2010). One of these discipline areas is ELT. In this, there has been growing interest of late in experimental ways of presenting research that encourage reflexivity and support emotional as well as intellectual engagement with research experience. Such interest has been stimulated by, for example, the *ELTED* call for contributions on innovative research writing that elicited this response, and the recent work of the IATEFL Research SIG. Regarding the latter, the SIG's pre-conference events in the last two years have been characterized by multimodal poster presentations that seek to extend the boundaries of the ways in which teacher research can be presented, with a view to facilitating "the empowerment of teachers and their learners", encouraging creativity and widening access (Bullock & Smith 2015: 11). Likewise, the SIG's newsletter, *ELT Research*, edited until 2015 by Richard Smith, Ana Inés Salvi (who continues as co-editor) and Gosia Sky, has included experimental research-writing.

Such developments have inspired my own efforts in this direction, for example as presented in this special issue of *ELTED* (the poems on pages 8 and 9). In writing experimentally, I can draw on a background of working as a poet (in the 1980s, my poems appeared in magazines such as *Ambit* and *New Statesman*, and an Arts Council anthology) to blend with my more recent research interests that have drawn upon writing skills earlier developed but which left me no space/time/inclination to write poetry as a separate genre; indeed, despite intentions to return to poetry one day, prior to the poems presented in this special issue, I had not written one for 12 years. In this article, then, I discuss the use of poetry as a non-traditional means of writing about research experience (since prose, as Richardson [2004] reminds us, has too often been reified as the only means of presenting or discussing research), focus on the characteristics of pattern poetry (the specific form of poetry I am utilizing here) with reference to my own experience as an author, and then introduce and present my own pattern poems on research themes relating to English language teachers.

The use of poetry in writing about research

There are various criteria that can be used to distinguish between different types of 'poetic inquiry' (Prendergast 2009). First, there is the voice (the 'I' of the poem), typically researcher and/or research participant. If the former, then the data the poet-researcher draws on might come from field notes or journal entries. Inspired by the research experience, the poetry might be reflective, creative or autobiographical in nature. Where the voice utilized is that of the research participant(s), the source might be interview transcripts, as in Glesne's (1997) well-known life study of an 86-year-old Puerto Rican educator and researcher. Interestingly, while some researchers, for example Sherry & Schouten (2002), clearly also see themselves as poets, Glesne (1997) shrinks from calling her 'poetic transcriptions' poetry. However, while faithful to the transcripts in the way she presents exact phrases that retain the rhythm of her research participant's speech,

she also juxtaposes these phrases, plucked from different segments of the transcripts, in highly creative ways, producing poetry that is memorable. This is an extract from her poetic transcription: ‘That rare feeling’, one of a series of portraits of the elderly professor, here reflecting on the social context of her early teaching career in Puerto Rico:

How hard for country people
picking green worms
from fields of tobacco,
sending their children to school,
not wanting them to suffer
as they suffer.
In the urban zone,
students worked at night
and so they slept in school.
Teaching was the real university.

(Glesne 1997: 202-203)

Prendergast (2009) considers it important that the researcher drawn to poetic inquiry can write well, as Glesne (1997) manifestly can do. If the benefits of such endeavour, for example the presentation of emotionally-charged findings in a condensed appealing way (Sparkes & Douglas 2007), are to be realized, it would seem crucial that the poetry or ‘poemlike compositions’ (Glesne 1997) employed do engage the reader. However, not all ‘poetic representations’ necessarily achieve this. This, for example, is the beginning of ‘My Dad’, a poem written from the perspective of a woman golfer, and central to arguments put forward by Sparkes & Douglas (2007) for the use of poetic representation in writing up research:

Dad was a keen golfer
Seemed the natural thing to do
My dad was out playing golf
And that’s what I wanted to do

(Sparkes & Douglas 2007: 178)

Discussing reactions to this poem, the authors reported sharing it with the woman golfer whose story it narrated. She responded extremely positively, with the words “that’s *incredible*” (original emphasis), and subsequently reported gaining further insights from reflecting on this and other similar poems produced by the researchers. This led Sparkes & Douglas (2007) to claim that ‘catalytic validity’ had been achieved, since the poetic representation had contributed to transformative

self-knowledge growth in the golfer. This may have been the case, but the golfer also described herself as "a lazy reader" (183), and it is possible that not all readers would react to the poem in a positive way. Indeed, I am afraid my initial reaction to 'My Dad' was to cringe. For me, it is doggerel, loosely defined by Beattie (2001: 95) as "the kind of verse which expresses trivial sentiment in the context of a weak subject matter, or any rough, badly made verse that is notably monotonous in its metrical pulse, and clumsy in its rhyme scheme". I am afraid such failings are also evident as the poem continues. This, for example, is the second verse, which is even worse than the first:

> I got a little club cut down.
> I would have been 'bout four
> I remember being chuffed to bits
> Playing 3 holes 6 then 9
>
> (Sparkes & Douglas 2007: 178)

If poetry or poetic representation is to be used as a way of meaningfully sharing research experience with a discerning audience familiar not just with techniques in versifying, but also with approximate developments in poetry since the shock of Modernism a century ago, it needs to meet certain quality criteria (Neilsen 2004); it is no good pretending the 20th century in poetry did not exist. To use an analogy, if, for example, a budding musician writing songs to play to a contemporary audience of discerning teenagers, and hoping to achieve 'catalytic validity' in their enthusiastic reactions, were not to bother to listen to (and thus remain immune to being influenced by) any pop music since the early 20th century, even early Jazz, the outcomes (perhaps Victorian music hall in the 21st century in front of a bemused audience?) might seem rather odd. And yet, sadly, like this imaginary deluded musician, most writers of doggerel would appear to be taking their lead from the 19th century and not the 20th.

Returning to the notion of quality criteria, first and foremost, perhaps, poetry focused on research experience needs to engage the audience through being "spare, economical, rich and resonant" in telling an interesting story (Neilsen 2004: 42). As with all poetry, it should intrigue the audience and help them listen carefully (Holmes & Moulton: 2001), so that they can "feel, taste, hear what someone is saying", listening deeply "under the words" (Neilsen 2004: 42). It needs to avoid easy clichés, for language is always inadequate, as Neilsen emphasizes, and to do justice to the genre of poetry our descriptions need to be hard-won. Over-use of rhyming (a feature of doggerel-like quatrains such as the above) may be entirely counter-productive.

Unfortunately, tastes in poetry are often under-developed, perhaps partly as a result of its treatment in schools. Collins (2002), cited in Cahnmann (2003, 29), for example, has argued that school is a place "where poetry goes to die".

Nevertheless, the contemporary poet-researcher who has survived school without having developed a lifelong distaste for poetry might have a whole range of forms and influences to draw upon. This is partly thanks to cross-fertilization among many traditions and languages in the 20th century. Furman (2006), for example, uses the pantoum, a type of French poem based on Malaysian forms which, he argues, has a contagious, repetitive energy and can "have a haunting effect"(564), and the tanka, a compressed Japanese form "that creates a sense of mystery through what is omitted or implied" (565). Another distinctive form, the one which I have used in writing about research experience for this volume, is the pattern poem, and I introduce pattern poetry from a personal perspective below.

Pattern poetry and my experience of it

I first started writing poems in patterns or shapes just over thirty years ago, in 1985, several years after I had begun writing poetry that had very visual influences. For example, I had been deeply impressed by Ezra Pound's famous 1913 haiku 'In a Station of the Metro', which I have only more recently learned, through Bohn (2001), was originally (in 1913, but not in 1915 when it was reprinted) written in a way that dispersed the words on the page like petals:

> The apparition   of these faces   in the crowd
> Petals   on a wet, black   bough

(Pound 1913, cited in Bohn 2001: 33)

I had also been influenced by the heavily metaphorical poetry of Craig Raine and Christopher Reid's 'Martian School', with its striking images, as the everyday was reinterpreted as if through alien eyes. However, my knowledge of pattern poetry was limited in the years before Dick Higgins' influential volume *Pattern poetry: Guide to an unknown literature* appeared in 1987. I was familiar with its origins in antiquity and with a few classics, such as George Herbert's 'Easter Wings', depicting two birds flying side by side, published in 1633, and Dylan Thomas' 'Vision and Prayer', in 12 diamond and hourglass-shaped stanzas, written in 1944. However, I had not come across the pattern poems of John Hollander, such as 'Swan and Shadow', published in 1966. Produced on a typewriter in the days when these gave equal space to every letter and gap, this uses shape as an exact form, so that the shadow of the swan in the water is a perfect mirror for the shape above. My early pattern poems, which were also 'persona' poems, that is, poems in which the author assumes an alternative identity, used a very similar technique to Hollander's, in that an exact form was created through a precise number of letters and spaces per line, this form somehow emerging with the concept of the poem and usually its initial words, through an unfathomable inspiration process. An example of one of my early pattern poems is 'Yellow', written in 1985, below. (This was one of a sequence of six poems using colours as

personae that I produced some time after a friend who was a poet-teacher had recalled inviting primary school children to write poetry on the theme of their favourite colours, which seemed a great idea. Incidentally, some of the delightful children's poems in Holmes & Moulton [2001] are on colours.)

Yellow

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                         I
                      am your
                   cowardly lion
                waking up for lemon
             tea in a barn full of hay
          What is this egg yolk? My hands
       overflow with blonde hair. Once I ran
    through the desert on sandpaper feet, posed
 as a sphinx beside beached and bleached Norwegian
getting a tan, became gold bars in a pyramid. Now I lie
here with you picking buttercups in May or daffodils in April
I melt in your mouth like vanilla ice cream on a hot summer's
day. You count out your riches in Olympic events. Why I
 always come first! Yet how long will preciousness
    last, not to be numbered at August's close?
       I can be as flabby as parchment, lazy
          as wax but renew myself so that
             I'm sunshine as you scoop
                out cereal bowls. A
                   honeycomb won
                      halo am
                         I
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Discussing the impetus to create pattern poetry, the "wish to combine the visual and literary impulses, to tie together the experience of these two areas into an aesthetic whole", Higgins (1987: 3) highlights that it has always been a minority activity, cloaked in obscurity and sometimes heavily criticized for being unnatural or decadent, but recurring constantly throughout the centuries, and evident in "almost every Western literature and many Eastern ones". Many of the surviving pattern poems in different languages are religious ones, for example those from ancient Greece in the form of a pair of wings, an altar, an axe, or an egg. According to Higgins, the great majority of the pattern poems written in English in the 16th and 17th centuries (a time when wider access to the ancient texts helped the Greek poems become better known) were produced in these shapes, although there were also columns and geometrical forms, such as squares and circles. Religious poems in other languages have also used the cross, the sword and the chalice, while a 16th century Latin poem "represents a head in profile with a prominent nose wearing a papal tiara" (53). Other poems have used shape quite playfully, for instance the 18th century 'Berlin Bear' by Frisch, produced in German, which depicts a bear walking forward (menacingly?) with outstretched arms (86).

My 71 pattern poems (29 written in 1985, 39 written between 1992 and 2003, and 3 written in 2015) use a variety of shapes. There are geometrical forms (square,

circle, rectangle), poems in the shape of maps (Africa, Britain, China); there is a boat, a house, a key, a bottle, forts, mountains, beaches, hearts, heads in profile. There is falling snow, an oil slick, clouds and a tree, the last of which, written in 1998 and drawing inspiration, I think, from children's art, I reproduce below:

Tree

Birds
used to make straw hats
in my hair.
Monkeys used to swing chattering
from my arms.
Butterflies used to rest on the tips of my fingers
before flitting away into the forest.
Cousins and distant cousins
all dressed in brown boots and coats in shades of green
had spread over the hills,
had spread further than the eye could see.
The wind was our messenger
carrying solemn creaks and groans across the valleys
in winter and light,
fluttering breezy whispers in summertime,

the time lovers
came, bringing
picnics, peals
of laughter, to
feed each other
long kisses in
the grass. They
were the first
invaders here
but then came a
plague of angry
mechanical wood
peckers and now
there are houses
but the forest's
gone and all its
animals are dead

Poems about research experience

If poetry is to be used in the expression of research experience, then there is the possibility of drawing on emotions that may sometimes be suppressed or simply not listened to, and these may not necessarily be the emotions of those who traditionally hold the power in research interactions, for example academic researchers who are too often in a privileged position in relation to those they are researching, which may influence their actions in ways they do not always realize themselves. Perhaps through poetry and the use of personae, the voices of the dispossessed may, to some extent and though filtered by another's imagination

(the poet's), be heard (although of course there are other channels for this too!). This was my motivation when I embarked on this enterprise, the fruits of which are presented in the pattern poems included in this volume: 'Surrendering during a bad research interview' and 'Hamming it up in an observed lesson'. To introduce them very briefly, the central characters appear to be victims of insensitive research methodology employed by academic researchers. The researchers imagined here would appear to have a great deal to learn about how to (in the case of the first researcher) conduct research interviews in deeply ethical, reflexive ways (Mann 2016) and (in the case of the second) use observation to support teacher engagement in reflective learning while conducting research (Wyatt & Arnold 2012). I will refrain from commenting further, as I have no wish to spoil these poems for the reader, but will highlight the shape they have in common: hands raised above the head - in surrender, as part of a song and dance? My hope is that, by publishing them here (on pages 8 and 9), these poems might stimulate creativity and thus help open up new ways of expressing research experience.

On a personal note, I should emphasize that writing poetry about research experience in the form of patterns is just one of many options. My choice of this form reflects my earlier experience as a poet and my interests, and I would argue that other forms are equally valid. However, it also occurs to me that pattern poetry might have particular relevance in our field. Holmes & Moulton (2001) argue, for example, that the predetermined shape of the pattern poem provides a mould into which beginning writers can pour their ideas. This stimulating use of the shape as mould could feature at workshops on research, for example, where teacher-researchers interested in the idea of expressing previously unarticulated research experience could be encouraged to write pattern poems. These could be subsequently presented in the form of posters, for, in combining the visual and literary, the pattern poem might lend itself very well to poster presentations, for example at future IATEFL ReSIG events. In terms of publication, there are various education journals in general that include poetry; Prendergast (2009) provides a list. More particularly too, in our field, the editors of *ELT Research* would welcome submissions of poetry (in whatever form, including patterns) expressing research experience. So there are many possible avenues through which to take this further.

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