Like fish in the pond
Thinking poetically on a professional doctorate

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Abstract
This paper describes how students on a professional doctorate programme are encouraged to think poetically, through the device of ‘found poetry’. It is suggested that this has value in helping them find a reflexive voice in which to recount their research experience, and as an introduction to the notion of poetic inquiry.

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Introduction
Say what you have to say, poem!¹
You’ve been invited here, what do you know?

In this epistemological challenge to ‘poem’ perhaps David Hart (1998) was echoing the view of fellow poet Ted Hughes (1994) that poems “have a certain wisdom. They know something special…something perhaps which we are very curious to learn” (page 10). The various practitioners who embark on the Professional Doctorate programme in Health and Wellbeing at Wolverhampton University are well established in their professional field, often in positions of significant responsibility and authority. So with extensive professional knowledge and a wealth of experience, what are they especially curious to learn in the company of their particular cohort of doctoral candidates from a wide range of differing disciplines? How to become a ‘researching professional’ perhaps, or ‘practitioner-researcher’, or ‘scholarly practitioner’, the labels vary. As importantly, how do we as a doctoral team, charged with helping them in this endeavour, attempt to feed and sustain their curiosity? In this short paper I consider this question from the point of view that encouraging candidates to think poetically can be an enlightening point of departure on a challenging voyage of discovery.

In the Advancing Professional Practice Module, the second one of the Professional Doctorate in Health and Wellbeing, the focus is on the multiplicity of our practice contexts and the various ways the doctoral endeavour might be constructed in relation to these. Insofar as story telling is a well-recognised way of trying to understand ourselves, our environment, and our relationships in it, a narrative approach is adopted (Frank 2010). The notion of a voyage of discovery is consonant with this. But not everyone is disposed to conceive of her/himself in a narrative way, to see life as connected, or sequential, in the form of a story (journey or otherwise), or even a collection of stories. For “non-narratives” life is no more than a series of disconnected fragments, “…we

¹ From ‘Playing the stories’ by David Hart. A poem commissioned to mark the visit of the Chief Medical Officer to Withymoor Surgery in Dudley, West Midlands in January 1997
have at best bits and pieces rather than a story” (Strawson 2015, page 300).

Hughes (1994, page 16) describes learning to think poetically as the struggle to catch interesting but often elusive thoughts and ideas, and collect them together long enough to “…hold them still until we can get a really good look at them.” Otherwise they lie in our minds like “…fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.” Poetic (re)telling is a reflexive device used by some researchers to examine and write their fieldwork experiences. During the module we use the medium of ‘found poetry’ (Butler-Kisber 2002) as one way to help students try out their reflexive voices in relation to their doctoral experience, and their research positioning. Where do we ‘find’ the poetry? The discovery begins with the creation of theme boards or collages (Keller, Fleury et al 2008). The images serve as representational anchors for students to talk about themselves, their professional practice, their hopes and expectations of the doctoral experience, and their research interests and ideas. (Re)presenting their transcribed talk as poetry involves culling and playing with words, phrases and segments, making changes in spacing, lines and rhythm to arrive at an evocative distillation. The order, syntax and meaning of the original are maintained, although particular phrases may be repeated as a refrain. This process feels inclusive of both narrative and non-narrative perspectives by enabling each person to tell stories and/or fish up fragments of experience and hold them still long enough to be examined critically with others. The three poems that follow are examples.

**Moving not drifting**
Difficult talking about me
Myriad, mishmash
Abstract, cats
I never really know
Where I’m going
Lust for a journey
A new discovery
Nursing but yearning
I didn’t drift
I moved

Education
Motherhood
Humpty Dumpty’s wall
But I didn’t fall
Never seemed the right time
For another direction

But now I’m here

Revolutionary consciousness
Awesome!
Thinking I’ve grasped it…
But no
Never really know where I’m going, but
I quite like that

**A professional life**
Lovely lady
Body and soul
Obstacles, problems
Courage to dive in
Right mental tools to make it through
Challenge makes you stronger

Free
Exhilarated
Eyes on the next goal
Look at the stars
Happy achievements
Almost orgasmic
Should be like music
Beautiful like a flower
It’s the only thing
You know how to do

**Remember**
My pictures have no meaning
I don’t have strong feelings
I just do what I think I want
I like cars, eat what I like
And the ladies
Why not?

I recognise struggle
And breaking the mould
I’m a free person
I’m a Russell Brand

Having fun now
Because I remember
I remember the ones
Who made all their plans for the future
Until the cancer came

My pictures have no meaning
I don’t have strong feelings
But I remember them
Curiosity is one thing, following where it leads is another and in this regard what might be considered practitioners’ strengths can prove to be their weaknesses (Sanders and Kuit et al 2011). The bulwark of their professional knowledge, a powerful sense of self, positioned and referenced by the contextual influences of familiar communities of practice can prove handicaps in the ontological quicksands of unfamiliar terrain and the emergent possibilities of alternative vantage points. So coming as they do so early in the programme, perhaps we might think of the students’ words as ‘embarkation poems’? In Moving not drifting ontological disturbance is depicted as a journey that is uncertain but also purposeful. A professional life conceptualises an intense relationship between practitioner and practice, perhaps one that has and will continue to provide tools to tackle new challenges as they arise. Finally, Remember warns against investing our lives in plans. Recognising difficulty but relishing good moments without concern for meaning does it echo Salter’s (1975, page 35) view:

There is no complete life. There are only fragments. We are born to have nothing, to have it pour through our hands.

Conclusion
Macbeth (2001, page 35) explains positionality in the research endeavour as the “examination of place, biography, self and other to understand how they shape the analytic exercise”. In terms of the baggage we bring to the doctoral programme, a reflexive approach asks us to think about where our understandings come from: the gaze on self and others that we bring to the decisions we make about our practice (Cousin 2013). And now this must include practice in the guise of doctoral candidature. The potential of poetic inquiry as a way of knowing through poetic language and devices, and as an expression of affective experience, is increasingly celebrated, and the scope of its application is wide (see Prendergast 2009 for a comprehensive account). Thus, students are encouraged to revisit their poems throughout the module, to rework them, and go on to create poems de novo as part of their personal epistemological project. For those considering an initial foray into poetic inquiry, found poetry is a good starting point. Similarly, poetic thinking in the module functions pedagogically to help students find an ‘epistolary voice’ to enliven and hone their reflexive writing; “...one that does not assert or announce but explores and engages” (Guenette and Marshall 2009, page 86). At the same time, it opens up the possibilities of performance through fragmentation as well as conventional narration as a means to communicate their research within and beyond their respective communities of practice.

References


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Salter J (1975) *Light Years*, cited in Strawson
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