

**“I HATE Poetry!”  
Understanding Through Unlearning: A Poetic Inquiry**

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**Abstract**

*Engaging the methodology of poetic inquiry, this paper explores both the teaching and learning of poetry. Through a combination of interpretation and reflection, the reader embarks on a journey from the author’s childhood experiences with poetry to the experiences of her students in an ELA class. Pinar’s method of currere provides a lens to explore the ideas of understanding through unlearning. Weaving original, found, and fusion poetry into a conversation with relevant literature, the author hopes to inspire other teachers to approach poetry in their lives and their classrooms with a sense of wonder and curiosity.*

Through my understanding of Pinar’s (1994) method of currere, I endeavour to interpret my understanding of the hate my students feel towards poetry and my own reaction to it. By exploring a specific educational experience in my classroom and working through the four steps outlined by Pinar (2004): “the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetical” (p. 35). Through this method, I aim to engage in a “complicated conversation” (p. 37) with myself as I work to understand my own historicity with poetry and reflect on how my students might come to new understandings of themselves about and through poetry.

Using a combination of my own original poetry, found poetry, and fusion poetry, I explore how the process of unlearning might contribute to understanding. According to Green et al. (2021), “a found poem is created from existing literature through taking words and phrases and rearranging them to form a new composition” (p. 2). Fusion poetry is also utilized when the poems stretch and move past the source text. As Green et al. noted, the idea of fusion is a nod to Gadamer and the “fusion of horizons which points to perception and coming to an understanding but also how one is changed by one’s engagement with something previously alien” (p. 2). Poetry and poetic language have allowed me to capture and illuminate key moments, feelings, and images throughout the interpretive process.

**Hating Poetry**

“I HATE poetry!” Brendan’s voice pushed through the chatter as I walked to the front of the class to begin the lesson, a classic poem already projected on the board.

Where once I might have rolled my eyes in exaggeration and exasperation, shaken my head, and replied, “Deal with it!” my graduate studies had me working “to cultivate an interpretive ear [and] approach the world with generosity” (T. Skuce, personal communication, February 15, 2022). Instead, I paused and approached his statement with curiosity, “You HATE poetry, Brendan? Really? All poetry? Why? What is it about a poem that makes you hate it?”

“Because it’s terrible and I don’t get it,” he said. I looked around the room and saw heads nodding in agreement.

While this answer did not surprise me, my response to the class did: “Let’s dig into that a bit. Why do so many of us in the room hate poetry?” And I began to collect their ideas on the whiteboard (T. Polasek, personal narrative, February 2022).

## Understanding Curriculum as a Verb

### *Currere*

Curriculum is not just  
the what of teaching and learning,  
but a form of experience;  
not only a noun but also a Verb,  
The focus changes to Experiences and to Questions:  
What is it like to be a teacher  
and to teach?  
What do subjects and their content mean  
for students?  
What does learning look like  
in everyday experiences?  
How should we respond to changing contexts  
of life  
diversity  
gender  
culture  
language?

(found poem inspired by Skuce, 2022, p. 2)

### **My Poetic Past**

“As the past becomes, the present is revealed.”  
(Pinar, 1994, p. 22).

*For Mrs. Gellner (my Grade 2 teacher)*

I was your favourite student that year  
And (that is to say)  
You made me feel extra-special.

The gift of a notebook (the spark)  
The encouragement and interest you showed in my poetry.

You saw beauty  
In my words and taught me to write, (even though)  
I do not recall a single lesson.

It was you,  
It was the notebook,  
It became me.

Betty Gellner passed away several years ago, but her gift of the love of writing poetry lives on. I wish to honour her memory by offering this gift to my students. Embracing the method of *currere* allowed me to sit with my past through a process of regression. I grew up in a household that valued reading and poetry. In the poem below, I explore my early years and the influences that shaped my love of poetry:

## *Simple Playthings*

Rhyme, rhythm, word play shaped my early years,  
filled my ears before I could read a Word,  
They were my playthings, toys  
Shel Silverstien with his silly, simplicity  
drawing me in, my imagination opened  
I gobbled up the "Alligator Pie" and "Garbage Delight" Dennis Lee served, helping after helping  
fed my wonder and curiosity  
My father around the campfire mining from his memory "The Cremation of Sam McGee"  
The power of the Midnight Sun still shining after all those years  
The power of a poem to capture, captivate, encapsulate  
a feeling, a crowd, a heart

Reflecting on my past reveals the overwhelmingly positive influences I have experienced with, through, and about poetry. Our world shapes us, and by examining our own understandings we may begin to glimpse how this insight offers new perspectives in our interactions with others (Green, 2021). What experiences have led my students to their dislike of poetry?

### **Distill and Be Still in the Present**

Honouring my position as a teacher and the privileged place I hold in the classroom amongst students I am reminded that "teaching is a matter of continual beginnings" (Levinson, 1997, p. 439). If we approach each year, each semester, each class, and each moment as a new beginning, we might glimpse the potential of becoming. Travelling alongside my students as we work to uncover their dislike of poetry I am constantly reminded to stay open and curious to avoid freezing the future that lies ahead. Moving through currere to the progressive allows the "usually buried visions of what is not yet present to manifest" (Pinar, 1994, p. 25). I explore this through the following poem:

#### *A Gift*

As I hold the present in my lap  
And begin to get curious about what might be inside,  
I give it a little shake.

What does it sound like?  
What does the weight of it suggest?  
What did I ask for?

I run my fingers over the wrapping.  
The paper, the ribbon, the tape.  
I savour the possibilities that exist before  
I know better.

Is this mindfulness?  
Thoughtfulness?

I rip,  
I tear.

How do I make sense of this paradox of both treasuring and destroying? This savouring and devouring? My love of poetry and my demolition of the potential love students might inherit? The possibilities that exist when poetry is lived or foreclosed when poetry is “schooled”? Through professional learning, I have learned new methods of approaching poetry that should entice and entrance my students, but I often find myself reverting to more traditional analytical methods of teaching poetry. There appears to be something more at play that I cannot quite put my finger on.

*I know better...*

But I often  
Find myself  
Standing  
At the  
Front of the room with a  
classic poem  
projected on the board.  
I proceed to  
“torture a confession out of it”

(quotation from Collins, 1996, p. 58)

### **Digging Into Their Dislike**

Greig and Hughes (2009) explored the complicated relationship between boys, masculinity, and poetry. They interrogated and troubled “the historical legacy of hegemonic masculinity and homophobia that continues to underlie anxieties about boys and poetry (p. 102). Excluding and shunning poetry is the manly thing to do. Boys and men should be engaged in active not passive pursuits. Teachers support and uphold traditional masculine definitions for boys through their poetry selections or even avoid teaching poetry on the basis that boys do not like it. Often when they do teach it, the selections they make – featuring themes of action, sports, and violence – work to further reinforce traditional definitions of masculinity and further limiting the preferred reading of boys. In addition, leaving poetry out of documents and publications aimed at boys reinforces the cultural assumption “that boys do not read poetry” (p. 99). Poetry collections designed to appeal to boys weaponize poetry and take aim at those who would seek to expand the traditional definition of masculinity.

Levinson (1997) noted that “education forecloses possibilities when educators teach about the past in ways that immobilize our understandings of the present and discourage students from exploring possibilities about a different future” (p. 442). Instead of opening worlds for boys, teachers may be constructing barriers; bolting boys to narrow narratives of what it means to be a man. Too often these narrow definitions of masculinity acquired during childhood and adolescence persist. Phelan (2010) cautioned that too strong a hold on identity can be just as paralyzing as a crisis in identity. There appears to be a lot at stake for boys. How might teachers use poetry to invite and support boys' interrogation of their own historicity?

## Poetry as the Remedy

“To live poetically is to live in language.”  
(Leggo, 2005, p. 178)

### *The Vastness*

The reading and writing of poetry in school matters. Why?  
First, poetry is richer linguistically, holds promise  
for exciting students about language.

By reading and writing poetry,  
we expose our students to  
the vastness of language, nuance, and subtlety.

More importantly, the reading or writing of poetry has expressive  
and personally explorative power, which can profoundly alter the student:  
one faces oneself.

To contemplate, reflect on themselves as gendered subjects,  
examine the gender regimes they know  
are problematic (fusion poem inspired by Greig & Hughes, 2009, p. 92)

Poetry offers students a wealth of possibilities: the possibility to be heard and understood, but also the “paradoxical desire not to be understood” (Jardine & Batycky, 2004, p. 5). There is a magical quality that poets seek in their writing; this subtle mystery ensures the poem cannot be immediately and fully consumed. Poetry can offer us this. It can be simple and complex. It can be superficial and deep. It can be “the place left vacant for who is to come” (p. 6).

Poetry also invites the reader to come back and re-explore a terrain they once visited. In this way, each reader may have the chance to experience the poem, hear it speak to them, and then see the poem anew, to see it in a new season, to have a new line reach out and touch their heart in a profound way. The possibility exists for the reader to leave the poem a different person.

While educators might work to transform and emancipate students through a diverse palette of human relationships that help build community and care for the other (Greig & Hughes, 2009), it remains for the student to participate. There is no one method, no one best practice that will suit all students. The students in our classrooms show up each day and they make a choice to engage in learning or to refuse. As teachers and curriculum theorists, we can point to conditions and practices that have led to or might lead to authentic learning, but the work will always necessarily be participatory. For Aoki (2000), teaching “should be much more about the provocation to think than any communication of knowledge” (p. 367). In this way, teachers “need to be precisely what we hope our students will be: curious, knowledgeable, adventurous, well read, questioning, creative, and daring in their intellectual ventures” (Jardine et al., 2008, p. xxii).

## Analysis

“Interpretation must make more visible what is lived through directly.”  
(Pinar, 1994, p. 26).

In the poem below, I endeavour to interpret the works of Aoki (2000), Jardine (1992), and Porter and Robinson (2011) through the keyword *entangle*. This making visible might be accomplished for the reader in a multiplicity of understandings, as it was for me when I created it. Mimicking the distinct style of Emily Dickinson and her adherence to specific rhythm and meter, I hope to reveal the truth by circuitous means. As she so keenly observed, “Success in Circuit lies” (Dickinson, 1998, p. 494).

### *Entangled*

The Questions we ask can Lead us  
To Truth. We are Open  
To invite Risk, we Lose ourselves—  
Find possibilities.

Follow Strings of Transformation,  
Witness how “language twists  
Upon itself.” We are Entangled  
In knots; new ideas.

Teaching cannot be reduced through  
Simplified translation;  
Cannot be Communicated  
Conveniently with ease.

Fantasy is wrapped in her cloak  
Of clarity. Search where  
The only way is in; puzzling.  
When Truth blinds, we can see.

(quoted portion from Aoki, 2000, p. 359)

## Unlearning

Unlearning is “an iterative process with learning” (McLeod et al., 2020, p. 183). It is a reflective process of identifying our conceptions of the world and making conscious the unquestioned aspects. It involves a dismantling and reinvention of our understanding and identities. When we deconstruct and disrupt the norms of our environment, we have the chance to transform.

While much of the research on unlearning comes from the thinking and behavioural spheres, there is now more talk about the emotional dimension of unlearning. For example, the unpacking of white privilege is a rich topic currently explored through unlearning. In addition, the entire concept of decolonizing involves unlearning deeply embedded concepts and practices in classroom and institutions. This forces not just a critical lens, it requires an embedding and enacting of Indigenous knowledges.

For Jardine and colleagues, (2008) “it is necessary to interpretive work [to show] how new examples enrich, transform, and correct what one thought was fully understood and meaningful” (p. xii). Peeling back the layers of our education (and miseducation) opens potential for new understandings.

## Understanding

“Understanding and interpretation are not acts of an individual conscious mind but enactments, performances, or a kind of praxis.”  
(Schwandt, 1999, p. 455).

For Schwandt (1999), “when we model understanding on learning, we think of the task of understanding as conversation, as the expression in language of what is understood” (p. 456). Hosting a conversation in this way, where we seek to understand others, we find ourselves in between what is known and what is strange. This requires a sense of “awakeness” in the in-between living for these experiences to generate meaning. Being open to experience, engaging in dialogue, risking confusion about the other and ourselves are all at play in this space.

For Green et al. (2021), understanding is predicated by interpretation and is necessarily tied with language. For Nelson (2000), understanding “is the enactment of intentionality in an environment” (p. 154). I am pulled to the notion proposed by Code in Schwandt (1999) that the quest for a right way is related to a person’s orientation to the world and the value they place in understanding. I am driven by the desire to understand more fully, to uncover a new insight or illumination, and that keeps me perpetually pursuing a better understanding.

*Understanding: Stand in the midst of*

Unlearning

I tense in tension and seek comfort in the  
Comfortable.

Will I shift from bracing

For uncertainty

To embracing it?

For Phelan (2010), because there exists in teaching and in living a sense of riskiness and imperfection, we shift the question onto ourselves and how we might hold ourselves open to possible awakenings to strike us. Poetry might hold this magical quality to reveal “the Truth’s superb surprise” (Dickinson, 1998).

## Poetry for Teachers: A Way to New Understandings

“Human beings are really human be(com)ings constituted in the play of language.”  
(Leggo, 2005, p. 178)

In the same way that teaching and living are complex and littered with risk and uncertainty, so too is language. As Aoki (2000) observed, “clarity cannot escape difficulty” (p. 362). Life is complicated and poetry can both capture and reveal this. For Leggo (2005), “language is the creative medium by which we construct meaning collaboratively” (p. 178). And it is through language that we experience the world (Risser, 2019). In this sharing, the world expands; As we venture out, we may find ourselves (past, present, and future) changed upon our return.

### *Bringing the wor(l)d closer*

The universe of language lives its life:  
Conversation.

When we want to understand, we are caught up  
in the Language of Conversation,  
Participatory engagement with the other:

A shared life:

An infinity of possibility opens:

Allowing space for play and ambiguity.

The poetic word brings the world, and thereby the other,

Closer. (fusion poem inspired by Risser, 2019, p. 2; Green et al., 2021, p. 5)

Exciting work is being done in the field of arts-based research as poet researchers explore the possibilities of poetic inquiry. In a research study conducted by Prendergast and colleagues (2009), haiku was used to represent data collected. The form allows small moments of our lives to shine and reflect on how these memorable experiences are lived through thought and emotion rather than in a straight line. The fleeting nature, constrained form, and ambiguity of understanding add to the richness of the poem. The purpose “is to cause some potential reverberation within the individual reader as they engage with these renderings in the light of their own interests and experiences” (p. 311). We can use language to understand the experiences of our lives in fresh and dynamic ways (Leggo, 2005).

Sometimes the extract is not an erasure,  
But an expansion.

It is not a cut, but a culmination.

Not a gash, but a growth. (Gorman, 2021, p. 37)

### **Synthesis**

“I am placed together.”  
(Pinar, 1994, p. 27)

In the final phase of Pinar’s (2004) method of *currere*, synthesis pulls together the self to create one whole – thinking, feeling, acting, being. The intention is an “intensified engagement with daily life” (p. 37). In a similar way, using language creatively can offer readers and writers a chance to dwell in this space. For Olthouse and Sauder (2016), “synthesis, or creativity in writing, does not replace the development of content understanding, it reinforces it” (p. 192). Writing is about experiencing the world, seeing and interpreting the ideas and impressions surrounding us.



### *The model of a life*

The teacher fires the hearts and the imaginations  
of teachers and parents and students,  
not with platitudes and shopworn homilies that nobody believes,  
but with the model of a life committed to  
learning  
teaching  
risk taking  
experimentation  
journeying  
growing.

Being a teacher is a way of life,  
the living out of a vocation or calling,  
a way of dwelling in the world.

The teacher is a visionary whose feet are firm  
and steady in the soil (even mud) of real lived experience  
with all the constraints imposed by  
time  
money  
differences of opinion  
while at the same time dreaming  
new possibilities (found poem inspired by Leggo, 2005, p. 191)

### **An Ending by Way of a Beginning**

How might my process of unlearning lead to new understandings and possibilities for me as a teacher and curriculum theorist? How might this venture through currere open possibilities for a transformation in my practice? Might this new thoughtfulness create space for an appreciation (or even love!) of poetry in my students? I am reminded again of the potential for a multiplicity of understandings through education.

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