

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN 1529-8094

Volume 12 Special Issue 1.10

June 30, 2011

Arts & Learning Research Journal Special Issue

Researcher and Teacher-Participant Found Poetry: Collaboration in Poetic Transcription

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Citation: Burdick, M. (2011). Researcher and teacher-participant found poetry: Collaboration in poetic transcription. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 12(SI 1.10). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v12si1/>.

Abstract

Different ways of writing and seeing can jointly provide a more multidimensional discussion of inquiry in education. This paper, which reports on findings of a qualitative study focused on action research with practicing teachers, describes and analyzes the ways poetic transcription of interview texts by both researcher and participant can provide a more collaborative analysis of interview data, resulting in a multifaceted reflection of teacher practice. Two teacher-participants, after being interviewed, created found poetry from their individual interview transcripts. The researcher did the same. Each set of found poems were then compared and synthesized to better distill metaphor, theme and narrative positioning from the original interview data.

Introduction

Both qualitative researchers and theorists in composition have done substantial work describing the connection between written form and meaning (Bishop, 1999; Elbow, 1991, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Friedrich, Malarky, et al., 2005; Gulla, 2003; Murray, 1978; Richardson, 2003). As written form changes, meaning subtly shifts. Following this understanding, teachers would be well advised to write in varying genres to more thoroughly reflect upon and understand their practice, and qualitative researchers might discover the potentials of using arts-based methods in the form of varying genres to better understand and analyze their research data. Different ways of writing and seeing can jointly provide a more multidimensional discussion of inquiry in education. This paper, which reports on findings of a qualitative study focused on action research with practicing teachers, will discuss the ways poetic transcription of interview texts by both researcher and participant can provide a more collaborative analysis of interview data, resulting in a multifaceted reflection of teacher practice.

The method explored in this paper resonates with Eliot Eisner's 1981 article, published in *Educational Researcher*, which described the differences between scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research. In this article, Eisner states that artistic forms are "closer to a hermeneutic activity than a technical one" (p.8). This paper, which poetically analyzes interview transcripts regarding the experiences of teachers, delves into spiraling issues of interpretation: interpreting the transcripts of interviews, interpreting experience depicted in those interviews, and interpreting observations as a participant-observer in this group. The layered relationships of meaning and interpretation demand a more hermeneutic inquiry. A technical one may in fact only uncover one layer of this spiral. Eisner further states, "Artistically oriented research acknowledges what already exists and instead of presenting a façade of objectivity, exploits the potential of selectivity and emphasis to say what needs saying as the investigator sees it" (p.8).

Complicating Eisner's discussion, this paper attempts to create a more collaborative approach to qualitative interviewing. Kakali Bhattacharya used found poetry to represent her research participants, and suggested her primary reason for doing so was in response to the many deconstructive arguments regarding how participants are represented and voiced through "academic filters" (Bhattacharya, 2008). Other qualitative researchers rejecting positivist approaches to interviewing have also created new models (Ellis & Berger, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Rubin & Rubin 2005; Scheurich, 1997) that focus on conversation and collaboration. This study also rejects many of the positivist assumptions and power delineations of researcher and participant, and looks to complicate both the creation and the analysis of interview transcript data.

Found poetry is a particular form that can be especially helpful to researchers as a way to re-see a static data-driven text. Monica Prendergast describes found poetry as “the imaginative appropriation and reconstruction of already existing texts” (2006). A found poem is created by selecting words and phrases from an original text, then re-arranging these words to create a poem that represents the meaning of the original text anew.

The following three questions guided the study:

1. How do teacher research participants reframe their interview transcripts through found poetry?
2. How do researchers’ and participants’ found poetry compare thematically, stylistically, and representationally?
3. How can tandem found poetry be useful for teachers and researchers to collaboratively analyze and represent information in static research texts (interview transcripts, observational notes, etc.)?

Theoretical Perspectives

Found poetry has been used in numerous ways in qualitative research, both to formally present research process and findings, and through its use as another form of methodology and re-visioning a research text. Found poems have re-presented a literature review (Prendergast, 2006), interview transcripts (Bhattacharya, 2008; Cahnmann, 2003; Glesne, 1997) and observational field notes (Kusserow, 2008; Piirto, 2002). Described as “interim research texts,” researchers have used found poetry as a text that comes between the field texts and the final research reporting (Clandinin, et al., 2006). Several researchers caution that writing good poetry is different from using “poetic methods” or in Glesne’s term, “poetic transcriptions,” because poetry requires a thorough understanding and in some views, training in this particular art form (Cahnmann, 2003; Piirto, 2002).

However, the use of poetic methods is a way to use the insight, compression and symbols of this genre in ways that allow a new understanding of a research text (Cahnmann, 2003; Glesne, 1997; Piirto, 2002). This makes found poetry a particularly helpful way to re-see an interview transcript. Glesne (1997) uses poetic transcription (found poems from participant’s interview transcript) to re-present 10 hours of interview transcripts with one participant. Bhattacharya (2008) combines words from the transcripts of several participants’ interviews to synthesize and distill the experiences of Indian women attending American graduate school. Each researcher has described a careful process of working through interview transcriptions, and coding the texts in a way that collects themes and condenses meaning to

then re-examine or re-present the interview in a found poem. Their work informs this study which moves a step further, inviting teacher-researcher-participants to create their own poetic transcription, and then comparing the results to the researcher's poems.

Poetry as a form is not only a different way of writing, it is a different way of presenting and viewing the world: metaphorically, symbolically and in a condensed form. These effects allow a stronger impressionistic meaning for the reader or listener. Usually in poetry, hefty ideas are represented through relatively few words (Baumgaertner, 1990; Cohen, 2009; Richardson, 2003). Seurich (1997) problematizes the interview process by describing how language is contextually grounded and how interview relationships are inherently power-relationships in which the interviewer has the opportunity to colonize the participant's voice and language through the questions asked and through the process of data analysis. Comparing transcription to photography, Mishler (2003) also points out how formatting and structural changes of transcriptions can subtly change the meaning and focus of these texts, and one's transcript should reflect one's theoretical stance. In these ways, interviewers must not only acknowledge, but also design their textual representation since this stance influences the interview process from start to finish. By including the participant in much of the process, the hope is to minimize some of these complications. Including found poetry in the transcription analysis encourages a condensed and metaphorical representation of text.

Inquiry Methods

The two participants discussed in this paper are classroom teachers and colleagues in an action research group. Observations were conducted over nine months during seven 90-minute action research meetings. The two teachers participated in 20-minute interviews regarding their experiences with action research. I used the following five prompts to elicit information from the participants during the interviews. My hope was to use fairly open-ended questions and prompts in order to allow participants to tell stories, provide description, and move the interview into places in which they were particularly interested.

1. Why did you decide to participate in an action research group?
2. Can you tell me the story of an action research project? It could be one you are working on now, or it could be one in the past.
3. How would you describe your action research group?
4. How do you think our group affected your research project?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add or share?

The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and then transcripts were e-mailed to each participant. Each participant was invited to read through the transcripts and make any revisions she felt were necessary to represent her experience appropriately. These revisions could be the addition or deletion of text. Participant A added several pages of text, which did alter the focus of the transcript to some extent. She also used various fonts and colors in her revisions, making the text her own visually and in meaning. Participant B did not choose to make revisions to her transcript. Following the transcript revision, the participants and researcher created found poems from the transcript. These poems were written and exchanged. Finally, the researcher read through and analyzed the poem pairs, to find similarities and differences in content, figurative language, word choice, style and point of view. Later, two informal interviews allowed participants' analysis of the poems and reflection on the process. Participants also wrote formal reflections on the process. Field notes were taken throughout.

This process is being labeled "tandem found poetry" because two found poems are created separately but at roughly the same time, from the same text, by the interviewer and the participant. Therefore the poems are unified, yet unique, originating from the same text, but created through separate perspectives and writing styles. This tandem found poetry illustrates the researcher's subjectivity/bias by making her poetic interpretation only one piece of the analysis, and gives equal validity to the participant's own poetic self-representation. It not only allows for comparison, it unselfconsciously acknowledges both the connections and the disconnection between the researcher and researched representations. This demonstrates the multiple perspectives held within any research, and also deconstructs the positivist hierarchical assumptions of researcher and researched.

Evidence and Data

The poems were analyzed and coded in pairs focusing on content, figurative language, word choice, style and point of view. Literary analysis was the main mode of examination, and a close reading of literary devices—metaphor, repetition, rhythm, pattern, style and word choice—was performed to better compare and contrast form and meaning in the poems. Direct and lucid connections could be made between the interview transcripts and the found poems when observed as connected data sources, yet the poems in themselves allowed a more metaphorical and nuanced interpretation of meaning that wasn't easily apparent in the transcripts alone.

After the literary analysis of the poems, informal interviews and written reflections by participants were used as further sources of data regarding the meaning and form of each poem set as well as the efficacy of this experience for teacher-participants.

Participant A used a different font for some words when she revised the transcript; I assumed the font difference was to show emphasis for certain words. As I read through and circled phrases, I was aware of this emphasis and her intention that these words were important to her; however, I did not focus my selection only on those words, nor did I leave them out intentionally because of the font/emphasis. Participant B did not request any revisions be made to the interview transcript.

Comparing Poetry – Participant A

Participant A went through several drafts of her poem before settling on one for analysis. Once again, she took this process very seriously, and was conscious about how she was textually representing herself. She said in an e-mail that she was getting “alliteration-ed out” – meaning, she judged that she used too much alliteration in the first draft of her poem, so in her final draft she took out some of this alliteration. As she worked through three separate drafts of her poem, sending me a copy of each one, I refrained from comment, as I didn’t want my response to affect her revisions one way or the other. When I read her final draft, I was immediately struck by the craft and the careful arrangement of words. There was a very careful selection of words from the transcript and a conscious specificity to the ordering of words and lines and stanzas on the page. Following are Participant A’s and my own found poems based upon the interview:

Researcher’s Poem

Heart . . . Inquiry . . . Action

Committed trust, inquiry, sharing
I felt a connection
I felt you are open
Diversity, change, inquiry sharing
New ways of seeing
As another’s sounding board
Springboard
Audience
Because I trusted you
Support one another
Challenge one another
As educators and as people.

Shaping my questions in
This linear process of
Qualitative and quantitative

Strategies
Working
Pertinent
Not a one size fits all anything
Growth
Learning
Inquiry
I walked away and
Just wanted to carry on
I wanted to mirror
I keep finding challenges
But that's my story.

Information accessing activities
What are the risks involved?
If the thinking by teachers ends there?
The need ends too
Energy level drops
Not getting fed
This influences the process
Unless I'm invited in
So that's different
Revision is virtually shot. Gone.
I'm not finishing?
I'm not doing a good job?
I see from the outside when the
Real challenge is
To get to the heart
In my world
That's my next story.

Participant A's Poem

A New Way of Seeing...
Choice...
Approached with authenticity
Empowered by diversity

Trust...

Built by dialog

Clarified with feedback

Motivation...

Grounded by challenge

Defined by growth

Inquiry...

Shaped by observations,

Impacted by interactions

Reflection...

Affirmed by progress

Committed to action

Revision...

Captured through sharing

Purposed by audience

Presentation...

Modeled by format

Polished with edits

Ownership...

Disseminated with purpose

Celebrated by transformation

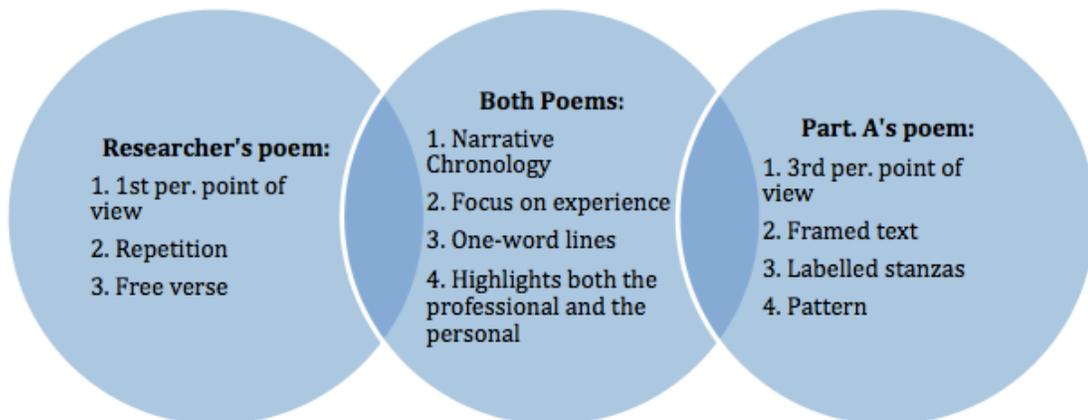
A New Way of Being...

My poem began with a description of more personal experience in the first stanza, using words like *trust*, *support*, and *connection*. The phrase *Challenge one another/as educators and as people*, also portrayed how Participant A placed value on personal relationships within her interview. In the second stanza, the focus is more on the research process, and more academic words are used: *learning*, *inquiry*, *strategies*, *linear process*. Finally, the last stanza of my poem includes many questions, portraying a hopefulness that this process will continue.

Participant A's poem is very patterned. There is a repetitive framing device wherein the entire poem is sandwiched between *A new way of seeing* and *A new way of being*. Within this frame, the eight stanzas portray a linear process of moving from seeing to being. These stanzas, too,

are patterned and repetitive as each opens with a single noun followed by ellipses, and then two lines, made up of three word dependent clauses. The inference here is that the dependent clauses become complete ideas when connected with the stanza's introductory word, as in "Choice is empowered by diversity." To go from *seeing* to *being*, there is a process moving through the action research that combines personal activities, such as: *trust, reflection, ownership, impacted by interaction* with more academic and professional activities such as: *revision, presentation, disseminated with purpose*.

In my poem, I used first person point of view (I, me, my) for the speaker's voice mainly because I wanted to keep it authentic to Participant A and the way she sounded in the interview transcript. She spoke a lot in first person within the interview, and made her discussion of the action research group quite reliant on her own personal experiences and feelings. It is interesting that Participant A chose to write her poem in third person, with some abstracted speaker presenting the process in a seemingly more universal way. I will comment more on point of view in these found poems later.



The similarities and differences in our poems are fascinating. As you can see in fig. 1, we both presented the experience of action research in a chronological way, and in a narrative way – we both showed this experience as a sort of story and a process. The two poems focused more on the experiences than the results. We both used extreme brevity in places, using one-word lines to focus our ideas. And finally, we both portrayed the duality of personal and professional experience while working in an action research group. The differences in our poems—point of view, and the pattern, repetition, framing—are all devices that certainly have an effect on one's reading, but these differences seem to be more stylistic, while there were definite similarities in content and meaning. It seems Participant A and I essentially were able

to pull similar meanings out of the interview text, although we presented them in our own individual styles.

Though I worked very hard to keep Participant A's voice within my found poem, there was one phrase I felt was necessary to include, "I am finished," mainly because she said it in such a strong voice during the interview. However, when I wrote this line on the page, in my poem, it felt too negative, and out of the context of our interview, it did not portray the strength and positive outlook Participant A usually shows. So, I put a question mark at the end of that line, softening it a bit. Participant A noticed my seemingly insignificant change, and after reading my poem, and comparing it to hers, Participant A e-mailed a response to me, stating:

I noticed punctuation added too. A question mark. And while partly ashamed of using that phrase, "I am finished," the "?" added at the end of the line helped me to save face. Thank God for punctuation! A simple placement of a particular mark, changed the expression, the momentum of thought, and shaped the entire message of new beginnings. Possibilities. Desires. An inward, outward shift allowing inquiry to rescue heart and open actions.

Which also tied in well with the last line of your second section and the last line of the entire poem. Those two lines highlight that I have much more to say in "my story" and "my next story." Stories with plots that thicken with how I choose to see what is, and resolve with how I reframe my thoughts. Leaving room for me to craft my own happy ending in any situation, because I've learned how "to be."

I was pleased and also a bit surprised by this passionate response she had to my minute punctuation change. So here, my intuition of who Participant A is, and how she should be portrayed affected the way I used her interview words in poetry, and while the question mark re-presented her voice in a way subtly different from the original interview text, it was still true to who she is and how she sees her work. Her response to that change clarifies that the question mark is a better portrayal of how she envisions herself and how she is comfortable representing herself in writing.

Comparing Poetry – Participant B

While participant A worked through multiple revisions in her transcript and her poem, Participant B did not ask for revisions to the transcript before working through our poetry, and she sent me only one draft of her poem. If she did work through revisions, I did not see them. She e-mailed me the final draft of her poem after sending an e-mail asking if it was OK that she included "a few" words that were not in the transcript. I replied that was fine, and based

that decision on a past writing workshop where I was instructed that found poetry could have a few non-found words as long as the majority text came directly from the original text.

Certainly, Participant B's choice to add words that were not found in her original transcript was a choice I felt she could make for herself, but one I would have felt uncomfortable making. As the researcher, I didn't want to veer from the actual text for my poem's language, as I felt that would somehow make my poem less authentic, or might layer my voice and my intentions to cover or dilute her voice in the poem. I am happy with the results of both poems, and can see how Participant B's additional words (which I have underlined) add to the metaphor that is central to her poem.

Researcher's Poem

Figuring Seeds

Once upon a time
There was a teacher
A teacher who said
"I'm planting seeds"
Seeds of love
Seeds of better choices
Seeds of surviving

Trying to figure out
What seeds don't plant?
Seeds of a felony
Seeds of a miscarriage
Seeds of terrible failure

Once upon a time
There was a teacher
A teacher who saw
Several students come back
Come out on the other side
In a precarious pendulum
Trying to make sense of it all.

Actually trying to figure out
What seeds don't plant?
Seeds of test scores
Seeds of objective feedback

Seeds of data

Can you really measure
How many seeds sprout?
A story not ending
Not an actual ending

A giving up . . .
Once upon a time
There was a teacher who
Figured and
Planted seeds.

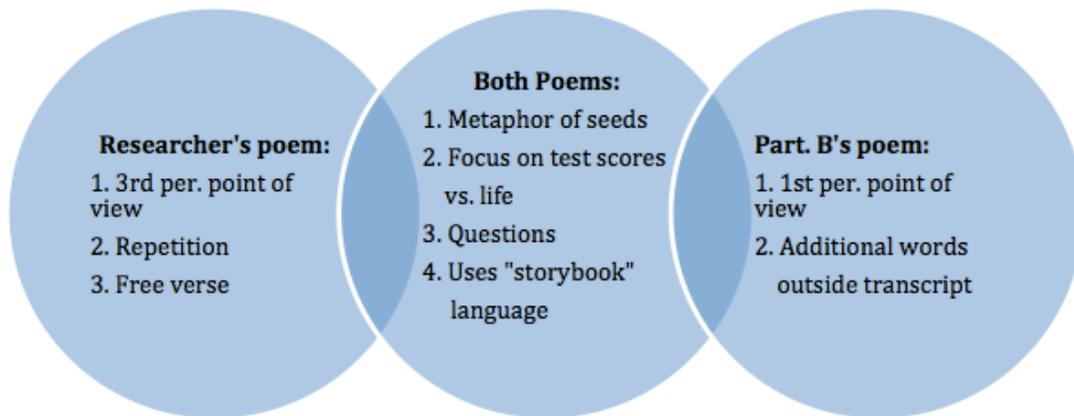
Participant B's Poem

Burpee Research

Active research asks
Questions
Am I effective?
How do I know?
Did it change a life that I was here?
Each student, each teacher
 A different story.
Once upon a time inside
 A teacher
A good little girl wanted to matter
To plant seeds in the students' lives.
What seeds to plant?
Seeds of test scores?
Seeds of college
Seeds of avoiding gangs and drugs and teen pregnancy
Can we really measure seeds sprouting in
 Fertile soil unfolding soft petals
 Into the waiting sun?
What is
The effect
Of me?

Participant B wrote her poem in first person, and begins the poem with the idea of questioning, then actually asking very pointed questions: *Am I effective?/How do I know?/Did it change a life that I was here?* She then moves into the storybook language of *Once upon a time* and *A good little girl*. She portrays the metaphor of planting and growing seeds in her students' lives, using beautiful natural imagery, *Fertile soil unfolding soft petals/Into the waiting sun?* Finally, she ends with one last question, framing the metaphor and storybook language with inquiry. Also within her poem, Participant B describes the idea of multiple stories, or stories within stories, which is an interesting addition to the storybook language of *once upon a time*. She says, *Each student, each teacher/A different story*, and then moves into the storybook language. She uses the metaphor of seeds to contrast what is valued in her school, *Seeds of test scores?/Seeds of college*, and shows the various and sometimes conflicting priorities in a teacher's work.

I too focused upon the metaphor of growing seeds as it seemed a vivid symbol that came out of the interview transcript. I used the metaphor of seeds and growth to portray Participant B's inquiry into what she was nurturing in her students and her conflicting feelings between what the school and district told her to nurture (higher test scores) versus what she felt she must nurture (character, responsibility, a love for learning). I also reflected her fear that there are other influences over which she has no control, such as gangs and poverty. So these ideas were all used in a patterned poem portraying various influences as various seeds. At one point in the interview, when I asked Participant B to tell me the story of one of her research projects, she said "Once upon a time there was a teacher . . ." and I picked up on that phrase and used it at the beginning of my poem. Because Participant B used this third person point of view when talking about her own experiences, I suppose I felt comfortable using third person in this poem, whereas that would have felt invalid if I had used it in Participant A's poem. I repeated the phrase "Once upon a time there was a teacher" throughout the poem, adding a storybook tone to the poem. I also used the words *figure* and *figuring* to describe the research that Participant B did. That word was used frequently in the transcript, and seemed to fit better than the words *inquiry* or *research*.



It is not surprising that we both chose to focus on the metaphor of planting seeds since that metaphor came across so prominently in the interview transcript. I can see how Participant B's added words were selected and included to help her create a stronger metaphor. I on the other hand used repetition to try to create that same metaphor. We also both depended on the storybook language that was a small part of the interview, but somehow seemed to lighten, or add irony to the very serious and at times even sinister ideas that were brought out in the interview. We both included questions, and the conflicting values within teachers' work. The differences in our poems were once again more stylistic or based on format and organization. While Participant B used first person point of view and used outside words to extend her metaphor, I used third person point of view and used repetition to create the metaphor. We both pulled similar content from the interview to use in our poetry – we used the metaphor of seeds, we illustrated the conflict of looking at test scores versus students' personal needs, and we brought out the idea of questioning and inquiry as central to Participant B's experience in action research.

Conclusions

When comparing the analysis between participants' and researcher's poems, there were striking similarities in the choice and use of metaphor, word choice and narrative positioning. Pertinent images, metaphors and content were common across each set of tandem poems. Specifically, the following examples portray connections found between pairs of researcher and participant poems:

- *Common Metaphors and Themes:* One pair of poems centered on the exact same metaphor of gardening to describe the participant's experience. This metaphor was

- extended in each poem (by researcher and participant) using symbols of seeds, dormancy and growth to portray the participant's inquiry process. This created a unique and collaborative interpretation of experience.
- *Similar Word Choice*: One pair of poems used storybook language to represent the experience of the teacher, even though this sort of phrasing was not used throughout the interview. This tonal quality present in both poems portrayed a disconnection between the reality and fantasy of expectations in the participant's practice. Another set of poems used mainly process words to portray a chronology of inquiry, expressing that the participant's experience was dynamic and linear.
 - *Related Narrative Positioning*: Another set used questions, and the stance of questioner, to portray the transcribed experience, though the actual transcript was not unusually filled with questions. This use of interrogatory over imperative sentences portrayed a tone of uncertainty and flux.

The main differences in poems were superficial, and depended upon each writer's own structural decisions regarding how the words were organized on the page, and how lines, words and stanzas were presented. This seems to suggest that there is a usefulness in this process, as it allows a researcher and participant to collaborate in the distillation of meaning pulled from an interview text. The found poems allowed participants and researcher to collaborate in analysis of the transcript, resulting in an examination of the interviewed experience through commonalities in metaphor, significant word choice and narrative positioning. This allowed for a more synthesized and collaborative analysis, using several texts (the original transcript, researcher's poem, participant's poem) to identify noteworthy themes and content.

Following the process of creating the poems, and my analysis of them, participants and researcher met in person to share the final poems and discuss them. Participant A and I had an in-person conversation about the two poems as well as the process, and she also sent me an e-mail in which she clarified her feelings about the process:

The interview transcript shocked me. I saw fragmented sentences and thoughts trailing from one idea to another. I didn't like what I saw on paper. Text of a yesterday, reflecting me on a new day . . . There is a discrepancy between what I sincerely feel and what I allow myself to say about my experience. There is "me" and there is a way I wish for my interviewer to perceive me. Not just in this interview, but in the very act of any interview . . . Rereading my transcript forced me to be brutally honest with myself about what I'm seeing as my experience. Professionally and personally I am intertwined. The process of looking at my

work is looking at who I am when placed in different environments, under different constraints, some of which are out of my control.

Participant B sent me an e-mail after having read my poem saying, “Both of our poems hit on the metaphor of the teacher's actions like planting seeds and being unable to really know what makes some seeds sprout and not others. I liked how your poem picked up the once upon a time theme, too. I was surprised at how much our poems matched the interview.” She also said she was going to try to do something with found poetry with her students next year. I believe both participants found the research project profitable through the reflection and sharing of their experiences.

This was a very small-scale study, and as some scholars in poetic transcription have pointed out, more material and data collected through the interview process can provide a richer metaphoric portrayal of the data (Pendergast, 2006; Richardson, 2003). Participant B, for example, touched on the metaphor of sowing seeds within her interview transcript, but this metaphor was not fully developed within the transcript itself, so she was compelled to add language that would better develop the metaphor within her poem. Perhaps with a longer interview, and additional material from which to draw, the metaphor would have extended more organically, allowing Participant B to work within a richer array of language. At the same time, I believe this study can show how even a smaller-scaled interview can successfully use this method of analysis. There were still important comparisons to be made, and meanings to be portrayed between poems drawn from a more limited data set.

This process is unique in providing another technique of viewing and analyzing qualitative data. The methodology essentially provides four ways of looking at participant data, through the original interview transcript, through the researcher's creation of a found poem, through the participant's found poem, and finally by analyzing the two found poems side by side. It allowed a deeper and multi-faceted view of what was said in the interview, what was seen in observations, by valuing a different form of writing. Further, it encouraged and provided opportunity for teacher-participant self-reflection and deeper collaboration of data collection and analysis between teacher-participant and researcher.

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