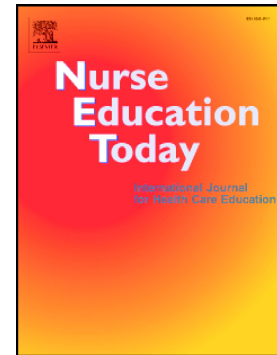# Accepted Manuscript

'Poetry in motion' a place in the classroom: Using poetry to develop writing confidence and reflective skills

Camille Cronin, Caroline Hawthorne

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TITLE PAGE

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ABSTRACT

Background: Non-traditional students entering nursing programmes at university often experience difficulties with the academic literacy requirements of their courses, in particular academic and reflective writing. Levels of student anxiety may also be affected by other issues including the pressures of managing work, family and study commitments.
Objectives: To explore how classroom-based poetry writing activities might support students in developing their skills as student-writers and reflective practitioners.
Design: A qualitative approach was employed to explore emergent themes in students' poems and students' reactions to creative writing teaching strategies.
Setting: A university based in the South East of England.
Participants: A cohort of 25 students undertaking a Health Science Foundation Degree.
Methods: Data collected from student poems were analysed thematically using the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006).
Results: Students found the experience of writing poetry challenging at first, but ultimately rewarding. Compared with writing more formal academic reflections, many students valued the opportunity to express their emotions and experiences more freely. Analysis of the student poems also revealed a rich bank of data relating to key professional themes and students' lived experiences.
Conclusions: Poetry writing helps students to develop writing craft and reflective skills. It encourages students to articulate often complex emotions associated with their professional worlds, thereby providing invaluable insights into the everyday lives of healthcare workers. This paper should provide others working in nursing education with a deeper understanding of possible benefits of incorporating poetry writing into the curriculum.

Keywords:
Poetry
Writing strategy
Reflection
Nursing curricula
Academic support

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INTRODUCTION

The pressure to conform to academic conventions on entering Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can be daunting, and some students face considerable challenges engaging with the literary process. Most students experience a degree of anxiety when beginning to write at University, but some are fearful of the actual process of writing. This paper focuses on non-traditional students who tend to be mature and who may have left education early to start families, to support a relative through illness, or simply due to negative educational experiences (Tummons, Orr and Atkins, 2013). Often managing competing interests of work and family (Rose, Rose, Farrington and Page, 2008) these students may experience particular anxiety when required to bridge gaps in their academic literacy in a 'highly-accelerated way' (Whiteside and Wrigley, 2015, p.107). They may also be the first in their family to go to University (Roberts, 2011), coping with the financial burden of study, as well as the transition into a culture of Higher Education.

Consequently, approaches to supporting the development of student-writers in HEIs have had to change. Exploring 'the gaps' between student and lecturer expectations in academic writing, Lea and Street (1998, p.159) found that subject lecturers often struggled to support students with their writing, because of pressures to cover course content within limited time frames. The authors in this paper are experienced practitioners in the areas of Health and Social Care and teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and have recognised the importance of working together to address gaps in student academic literacy. In a previous paper on a collaborative approach to embedding academic literacy, Hawthorne and Cronin (in press) adapted the Sloane and Porter (2010) CEM (Contextualisation, Embedding, and Mapping) pedagogical model to support a cohort of Health Care Support Workers (HCSWs). It was evident that by embedding and contextualising language materials within communities of practice, levels of academic literacy (and confidence) amongst the group could be increased.

As well as employing more conventional strategies to develop academic literacy, such as examining essay structure and academic style, a poetry writing sessions was used to help students overcome their fears of writing, and to support their development as reflective practitioners. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to add to the conversation on using poetry as a writing strategy, and to explore the possible benefits of such an intervention for both language and subject development. Through observations on teaching practice and retrospective analysis of a poetry writing activity, it considers innovative ways of developing student-writers and of supporting the widening participation agenda within healthcare education.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Poetry is expressive, tells a story and when read out loud may also have rhythm (Wellek and Warren 1956). Frequently employing imagery, tone and rhyme, it has long been associated with musical qualities (Butler-Kisber, 2002). Historically poems have provided the basis for storytelling and the development of language over time (Tannen, 2007). Poetry has a place in the curriculum because it can be taught as part of reading,

writing, and language, which fits easily into different topics to foster curiosity and creative thinking.

<u>Poems in the healthcare curriculum</u>

Healthcare is traditionally a science-based subject and is dominated by an evidenced-based approach. The potential benefits of creative writing in healthcare education have been well documented in the humanities. Foster (2007) is one of the earliest studies which examined the experiences of a cohort of specialty registrars who used poetry-based sessions as a part of their studies. The registrars identified personal and professional benefits of discussing poems, and their impact on patient care. The sessions were positively evaluated and appeared to offer a way of developing emotional competence. Foster (2007) suggests further research is needed to explore the potential of teaching methodologies that utilise arts-based material in medicine or general practice education.

Poems drawing on nurse-patient experiences, such as 'The Nurse's Pockets' by Cortney Davis (2003), have often been used in reflective teaching sessions. Hahessy (2016) suggests that the language of poetry helps to communicate nursing knowledge and experience, creating a relationship of mutual respect between the educator and learners. Poetry has also been used to support reflective practice in social work, exploring professional and ethical tensions in practice. For example, Gold (2012) shows how poetic accounts and scholarly reflections provide practitioners and educators with a useful way to explore the ethical complexity and ambiguity of everyday practice. In healthcare research, Hopkinson (2015) uses poetry to reflect nurses' experiences and produces powerful reflexive conversations about practice which reveal suppressed emotions and empathy. She argues that practice-based poems have a legitimate place in healthcare action research, and are of value to other practice-orientated professions.

Healy and Smyth (2017) provide educationalists with the opportunity to value poetry in the classroom, and offer some practical tips on its use. Through poetry, they examine nursing students' attitudes towards older people, with a focus on vital care skills in the clinical setting. Chan (2017) uses poetry as one component of exploring artistry in teaching activities for student nurses. She identifies several transferable skills gained by students including: cooperation; creativity; stress management; improved long-term memory; and professional knowledge. Brodhead (2017) considers ways in which creative strategies can be used in healthcare environment to develop critical thinking and clinical reasoning skills. She evaluates the impact, on student development, of a number of humanities-based strategies, including analysis of poetry, paintings, and short stories. Lewis (2018) similarly explores how Haiku poetry writing sessions encouraged a group of pathophysiology students to develop their critical thinking skills.

The teaching of personal development skills helps to develop students' sense of personal reality. Self-awareness, self-discovery, and self-actualization are required elements of reflection (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985). Through poetry, a healthcare worker can develop these skills by reflecting on their own roles and on the experiences of their patient's (Greene, 1991). By connecting with personal-professional experiences in this

way, students may be able to develop less literal ways of understanding or 'knowing'nursing. (Bruce and Tschanz, 2013). It was with this in mind, that poetry was employed as a stimulus for a writing activity with a group of Health Science students.

THE POETRY WRITING SESSION

The students in question were beginning a Foundation degree in Health Science to become qualified Assistant Practitioners, with the longer term goal of progressing into nursing. This writing session was scheduled in the first few weeks of the programme with the aim of developing reflective skills, and building students' confidence about their writing abilities. The session, entitled 'Poetry in Motion' was introduced by the lecturer who explained that students would be invited to listen to a poetry recital and to study a photograph. The poem concerned the rehabilitation of a young man and the photograph portrayed the moving scene of an empty intensive treatment unit, following the death of a young patient. After discussing the poem and the photograph, students were invited to write their own poem about 'communication in the workplace'. This topic was chosen because it represented a key theme in the students' first year course work and assessment. They were allowed 45 minutes to complete the task, and were instructed to write their poem in any way they chose. As students were writing, the lecturer and academic skills tutor monitored the activity, and provided individual support where required.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF STUDENT POEMS

Once completed, the 25 poems produced by the students provided an unexpected wealth of data, prompting a wider exploration of potential uses of poetry in teaching. After obtaining ethical approval and appropriate consent from the students, a number of poems (Appendix 1) were examined in detail. This section will briefly outline the way in which poems were analysed, before identifying some of the common themes they contained.

The aim of the analysis was to examine the language used by the students, and also to capture the richness and complexity of emergent personal and professional themes. Consequently, Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytical framework was used to facilitate both a flexible and iterative approach. After reading and re-reading all of the poems several times, rough notes were made in the margins to identify key themes. These notes were then tabulated to begin coding some of the themes. A colour coding cross-referencing system was then introduced (Table 1), to highlight particular themes leading to a further distillation of the data (Table 2) in which the occurrence of ideas was documented. To protect the identities of the writers, all names were removed, and poems were allocated a number.

FINDINGS

Reflection on professional themes

All of the poems revealed something unique about each student's lived experiences (Gold, 2012); however the process of analysis also began to highlight certain recurring themes (Table 2). Fourteen of the poems (e.g. 1,2,4,5,7,9,10,11,12,16,19,20,21,24)

concerned everyday acts of kindness and compassion that occurred in the midst of an often hectic and pressurised environment. Nine captured students' positive feelings about their HCSW role (e.g. 4,8,12,13,15,17,21,23,24), while six conveyed more negative or conflicted feelings about working in a healthcare setting (e.g. 1,3,9,14,19,25). More complex themes were also woven into the students' work. For example, three poems addressed the blurred or ambiguous nature of the HCSW role (e.g. 2, 8, 17); five spoke of changes to patient identity due to illness (e.g. 4, 7, 9, 12, 16), and four discussed the themes of death and grieving (e.g. 2, 6, 17, 18). In some cases the focus of the poems was simple (e.g. one or two themes only); while in others, themes combined and overlapped in more complex ways. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse all poems in detail however; the reflective nature of the students' work will be further explored during the discussion.

INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 HERE

Poetry and writing craft

Although most participants had reported little experience of writing poetry, their finished poems contained a surprising range of literary devices. For example, table 3 shows how twelve poems structured their ideas into verses (e.g. 1, 2, 6, 17, 9, 10, 13, 14, 20, 23, 24, 16); five used rhyming techniques (e.g. 3, 4, 11, 16, 24); three featured repetitions (e.g. 1, 3, 2, 3), and three employed metaphor (e.g. 8, 25, 23) to strengthen the effect of their writing. Others (e.g. 17, 18, 22, 5 and 20) demonstrated an ability to break down or distil complex ideas into succinct and economical language. In some cases, these techniques were employed consciously, (some students were overheard discussing how they felt poems 'should rhyme' and 'should be in verses'); in other cases, the use of evocative or economical language, seemed to be more spontaneous.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Student reactions

Later in the programme, the students were asked to evaluate the poetry writing session (Figures 1-4), which provided some valuable insights into their perceptions of the lesson Nearly all students described feeling either 'worried' or 'nervous' about writing poetry at the start of the session, but the majority reported positive reactions by the end (Figure 2). In additional feedback comments, some students noted how poetry writing allowed for greater expression of personal feelings and emotions. For example, one student commented that *'you can write what you want and how you want'*. Feelings of *personal satisfaction* and *achievement* were also evident in feedback as can be seen in this student's comment: '*sense of achievement and happiness –I managed to do it'*. Another wrote: '*I returned to the poem I wrote several times and enjoyed it'*. When invited to compare writing poetry with more formal reflections 62.5% of students expressed positive comments about poetry writing, for example, one student noted 'it was easier in some way-I can't describe it'. Students also voiced some negative opinions and concerns about poetry writing. Predictably, they were anxious at the beginning, and found it difficult to get started: *'wasn't sure if my poetry skills were brilliant'*. Some were uncomfortable about their poems being read, because they might be 'too personal' or might reveal too much

emotion. Despite these concerns, feedback was generally positive and one student captured the feelings of many by saying, '*It was challenging at first, but very satisfying*'.

INSERT FIGURES 1-4 HERE

DISCUSSION

This section revisits the aims of the project and discusses the extent to which poetry writing is able to develop reflective writing skills, and increase writing confidence amongst non-traditional healthcare students.

Writing craft and confidence

As well as simply 'getting students writing', the task seemed to naturally encourage and develop elements of writing craft as well as content. Without receiving any poetry-writing instruction before the session, students included, in their poems, a number of rhetorical devices such as rhyming and metaphor. This seemed to confirm the findings of Gold, (2012), Kerr (2010) and Furman et al. (2008) who all observed the way in which poetry helped to develop students' own writing practices. Furthermore, some students demonstrated an ability to break down and distil complex ideas (Raingruber, 2004; Lewis 2018), which seems to point, more specifically to the way in which poetry writing might develop higher-level transferable academic writing techniques. What is less clear, however, is the precise way in which students can be encouraged to recognise different writing techniques, and successfully transfer them from one text type to another. This was summed up by one student who commented: 'I enjoyed writing the poem once I got going – I'm not sure it helped with my formal reflections'. In order to fully exploit the potential of poetry to develop student writing, it is perhaps necessary to employ a more 'visible pedagogy' (Hyland, 2003, p.24), in other words to examine more explicitly the features of different writing genre and how (and where) they overlap.

Poetry and reflective practice

Student poems clearly demonstrated skills in self-reflection (Healy and Smyth, 2017) and an ability to engage with difficult questions (Gold, 2012). This could be seen in the complex personal and professional themes that emerged in the poems (Table 2) and in the students' natural tendency to explore the 'swampy lowlands' (Schon, 1995) of their profession. In that sense, the 'indirection' or freedom of the poetic form (Shapiro and Stein, 2005, p.279) seemed to encourage students to engage with less tangible aspects of their roles. In our students' poems, the themes of compassion and kindness; job satisfaction; identity; death and grieving, and the blurring of professional roles reflect current literature and contemporary professional themes. Moments of extreme pain and tenderness are conveyed through the students' own words, for example in poem 2 where the writer charts her professional relationship with a patient who passes away after a long illness: '*we hear the news, he is at peace, I am his griever'* (poem 2). Themes of confusion and disorientation are also explored in poems 4, 7 and 12, highlighting the distress of patients who have lost, or who are losing their memories: *'she shouts for her mum who is no longer there'* (poem 4). The opening sentences of poem 9 allude to the challenges of caring for patients who experience violent mood swings and whose former identities are slipping away. The poetry

writing session clearly provided students with 'a space for meaning making and self-reflection' (Wiseman, 2011, p.73) that enhanced and developed their own reflective skills (Hahessy, 2016). When asked to compare their experiences of writing poetry with more formal academic reflections, most students (Figure 4) reported that they preferred the medium of poetry because it was 'more personal'. This seems to highlight a need within students to express and process their own unique lived experiences (Holmes and Gregory, 1998), but also raises the question (on a more practical level) of how students can successfully transfer insights gained from poetry writing in to more conventional academic reflections.

<u>Student reactions</u>

Like the participants in similar earlier studies (e.g. Threlfal 2013, Coleman and Willis, 2015 and Wright, 2006) our students were anxious about writing poetry before the task (Figure 1); however the majority reported positive feelings about the experience after the session. 'Getting started' seemed to be a concern for some of the group, and this raised interesting pedagogical questions about the way poetry is used within taught programmes. While too much direction might inhibit freedom of expression, too little might also leave students feeling anxious and unsupported. Striking the correct balance may depend on a number of factors including, levels of writing confidence within the class, and the extent to which poetry reading and writing is linked to assessment. These students were new to university and many had verbalised concerns about their own writing skills, and therefore some of their documented anxieties (Figure 1) before this poetry writing sessions may also reflect wider issues concerning transition into HE. Feedback from students will be used to fine tune future poetry writing sessions by adopting a more scaffolded approach before and during the task (Foster, 2007) in the hope that some of the pre-task concerns might be addressed.

<u>CONCLUSION</u>

This piece of work has given the authors the opportunity to evaluate and review their practice in terms of academic support and teaching in the classroom. Concern about writing is not uncommon amongst university students; however non-traditional students may experience unusually high levels of anxiety when encountering HE academic writing conventions for the first time. From the authors' perspective, early interventions which encourage students to develop their skills are imperative; poetry writing is one such intervention.

Due to the nature of healthcare curricula and the integral use of reflection, students have to rapidly learn to develop reflective skills at university. Poetry provides a useful format for students to reflect and write about themselves, their patients, their practice and workplace. The possibility to write freely offers vocational students from diverse backgrounds another means of making sense of their lived experiences. The complexity and depth of reflection visible in some of the poems produced by the students revealed the power of poetry in encouraging deeper level thinking about practice. From a writing craft perspective, this study supports the findings of earlier research, and recognises the potential of poetry writing to develop transferable academic writing skills. Students

demonstrated a natural interest in language and form when writing their own poems. They were eager to clarify 'the rules' of poetry and naturally engaged in discussion with other students and the tutors about the common rhetorical features of poetry. The inherent value of writing poetry for language, and professional development seems clear. However, as mentioned earlier, the challenge is one of demonstrating its transferable value to student writers. They have to quickly master a number of different genres (e.g. conventional essay, reflective account) when they arrive at university, and therefore the relevance and transferability of writing techniques needs to be made explicit. As a result of this study we will continue to use poetry writing as a valuable strategy, but we will adapt approaches in order to reduce anxiety about the task itself. We will also employ more 'visible pedagogies' (Hyland, 2003) to raise student awareness about genre and writing skills, thereby enabling them to transfer relevant writing techniques from one text type to another. In practical terms, this will involve the creation of a pre-poetry writing workshop in which we identify the different features of genre and highlight how writing techniques might be adapted to suit different text types. It is evident from this project that poetry writing can be used to support the development of reflective practitioners and student writers, thereby representing an effective teaching strategy for healthcare educators.

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TITLE PAGE

Figure 1
Students' knowledge of poetry writing before the session.

Figure 2
Students' feelings before poetry writing session.

Figure 3
Students' feelings after the poetry writing session.

Figure 4
Students' attitudes to poetry writing versus more formal academic-style reflections.

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TABLES

Table 1

Extract from thematic analysis.

No.	Brief description of poem	Emergent themes as identified by CH/CC	Impact of poem on CH/CC
1	The writer conveys a sense of frustration that being 'busy' interferes with 'caring for individuals'	Kindness/compassion/frustration	
2	The writer highlights complex multi-dimensional roles of HCAs through one patient's journey towards the end of life. Blurring of professional/personal roles- carer/friend/comforter/griever	Kindness compassion/ multi-dimensional role of HCA/grieving/death/ blurring of identities	Powerful and moving 'reflection' on journey towards end of life / Daily role / Death in the acute setting
3	The writer considers different aspects of communication/emotion/team work 'Working together gets the job done'	Communication/emotion/frustration	Team working, communication and getting the job done on long shifts
4	The writer describes how she comforts a lady with dementia by bringing her some music she likes. She explains how she loves her job when she can ease someone's pain	Dementia/music/ compassion/job satisfaction	The daily reality of dementia on the ward / Simple and powerful

Table 2

Frequency of themes in student poems.

Emergent themes	Poem number
Everyday acts of kindness and compassion	1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 19, 20, 21, 24
Positive feelings about HCSW role	4, 8, 12, 13, 15, 17, 21, 23, 24
Negative feelings about HCSW role	1, 3, 9, 14, 19, 25
Blurred or ambiguous nature of the HCSW role	2, 8, 17
Loss / change of identity due to illness	4, 7, 9, 12, 16
Death and grieving	2, 6, 17, 18

Table 3

Occurrence of poetic devices.

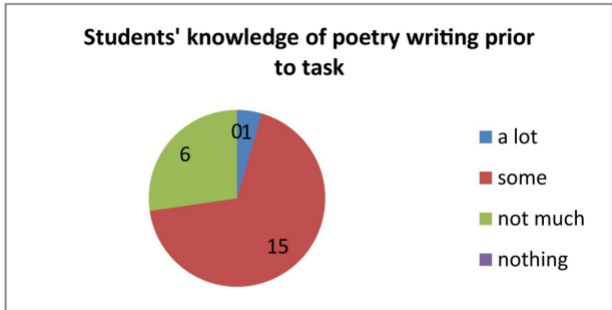| 'Writing craft': Use of poetic devices	Poem number
Rhyme	3, 11, 24, 4, 16
Repetition	23, 3, 1
Metaphor	8, 25, 23
Economy of language	17, 18, 22, 5, 20
Structure (verses)	2, 17, 14, 10, 6, 23, 13, 1, 20, 24, 9, 16

Students' knowledge of poetry writing before the session.

Figure 1

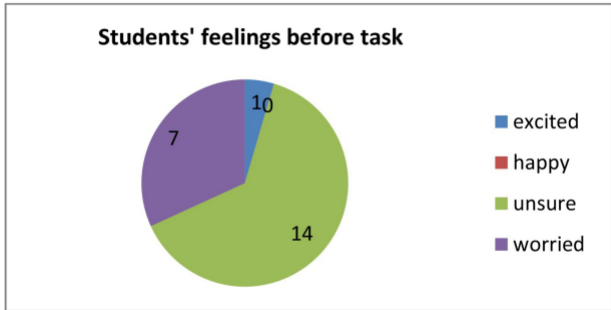Students' feelings before poetry writing session.

Students' feelings before task

10	
7	
14	

■ excited
■ happy
■ unsure
■ worried

Figure 2

Students' feelings after the poetry writing session.

Students' feelings after task

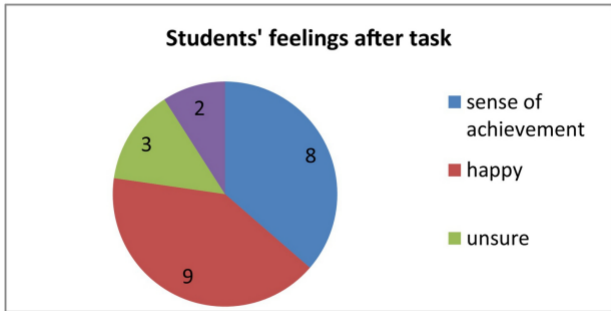- sense of achievement: 8
- happy: 9
- unsure: 3
- (purple): 2

Figure 3

Students' attitudes to poetry writing versus more formal academic-style reflections.

Students's attitudes to poetry writing vs. formal reflections

- positive — 10
- negative — 3
- mixed — 3

Figure 4