

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Social Work Education

The International Journal

ISSN: 0261-5479 (Print) 1470-1227 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cswe20

Creative critical reflection through poetry and prose

Beth Moran

To cite this article: Beth Moran (2026) Creative critical reflection through poetry and prose, Social Work Education, 45:4, 964-970, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2024.2317869

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2317869

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 14 Mar 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1775

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 3 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cswe20

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION
2026, VOL. 45, NO. 4, 964–970
https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2317869

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Creative critical reflection through poetry and prose

Beth Moran

Faculty of Health, School of Health Professions, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

ABSTRACT

Artefacts considered in this paper include poetry and prose from my previous doctoral research with social work students; exploring how they experience, express, and manage the emotional content of practice learning. The poetry includes I-poems, where words of students are taken directly from verbatim research transcripts and reconstructed as part of my sense-making. Additionally, an auto-ethnographic response via poetry and prose creates a counterpoint and further perspective. This co-construction between my experience and that of student participants promotes authenticity via powerful messages in poetic form. In the context of performative research, these artefacts are best shared. Utilising teaching sessions within a 3-year undergraduate social work programme in the UK, as a performative medium, these research artefacts enable current social work students to explore overarching learning outcomes. Students engage with artefacts as an introduction to qualitative research. Students experience at first hand, poetry and prose as a non-traditional research medium through the methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This enables exploration of artefacts, promoting a deeper engagement with complex narratives. They discover how poetry and prose present a valuable conduit for tangible emotional engagement and connection. In addition, students develop their own creativity when reflecting on practice, to support critical reflection.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 January 2023
Accepted 7 February 2024

KEYWORDS
Creative critical reflection; poetry; I-poem; student social worker; research-informed teaching

Introduction

This article documents how research-informed poetry and prose is integral to my teaching on an undergraduate social work programme. I offer two examples illustrating how this mode of communication encourages students to appreciate innovative pedagogical research, while developing their own creative critical reflection. Cultivated from previous doctoral research exploring how student social workers experience, express and manage the emotional content of practice learning in a relational context, this reflective device applies directly to student engagement with practice placements and the complex nature of learning in often challenging circumstances.

Social work education in the UK incorporates extensive practice learning, offering valuable opportunities to develop skills, knowledge and values commensurate with the

CONTACT Beth Moran beth.moran@plymouth.ac.uk Faculty of Health, School of Health Professions, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

profession. Bellinger et al. (2016) and Standing (2011) express concerns that organizations where this vital learning takes place are inevitably influenced by a dominant neoliberal discourse. This sometimes leads to privileging defensive practice over both professional judgement and the acknowledgment and management of intense emotions (Moran, 2020). To mitigate such challenges, research-informed teaching endorses rigorous and reflective supervision, regular peer support, and emotionally intelligent practice placements, with reflection and empathy acknowledged as potential means of dealing with stress and burnout (Grant & Kinman, 2012; Rajan-Rankin, 2014). This critical message underpins teaching, of which poetry and prose forms a part.

Creative critical reflection

Students are encouraged to reflect throughout their studies in preparation for their professional role. They draw on inner resources; actively interpreting individual identities and experiences, to inform their assignments. Students develop an appreciation of their own internal discourse and how this influences practice. Learning through placements ensures that reflection and action are codependent when shaping professional identities.

It has proven of value to develop the use of creative artefacts throughout the students' learning experience, thereby providing a scaffold for developing creative critical reflection. From the outset, students are encouraged to develop reflective skills through creativity. In the first year of study, assignments encourage critical reflection, demonstrating through various approaches that personal experience and subsequent reflection holds intrinsic value.

Through research-informed teaching, students learn that autoethnography is the creative portrayal of individual experience. It not only privileges and enables engagement with personal events but also promotes the challenge of dominant discourses (Muncey, 2010). This approach actively encourages imaginative responses from students and provides a powerful contribution to critical reflective practice.

Poetry as a reflective arts-informed medium

Developments in creative social work education theory and practice, indicate how incorporating arts-informed approaches to teaching and learning promote emotional connections and the co-creation of meaning (El-Lahib et al., 2022; Wehbi et al., 2018).

Poetry is a recognisable means of offering a personal view or snapshot of significant events. It provides a familiar medium, locating past creative influences as well as contemporary communication strategies. Poetry has a fluidity and ability to traverse creative media from written to spoken word and as a lyrical counterpoint to music and artistic endeavor.

Poetry is practical, enabling the compression of thought through succinctness and economy of words. This encourages greater accessibility and engagement with the message given. Compression leads to choosing which words to include and how to present them, leading to a reflective endeavour with little room for the superfluous.

As a creative medium, poetry promotes reflective engagement with the complexities of personal narrative. As an evocative and affective method in social work, poetic inquiry discovers and explores individual meaning-making, encouraging identity formation and subsequent action (Moxley, 2013). It is welcome as a means of appreciating the lived experience of self and others. Use of image and metaphor allows for subjectivity and the relational aspect lends itself to emotional connections between those engaged in the experience, both creator and participant (Moran, 2020).

Research-informed teaching and learning

My previous doctoral research provides teaching artefacts for current students illuminating the lived experience of former students through their emotional engagement with practice placements. It includes both data poems and autoethnographic poems. This innovative dual aspect enables me to capture and share the voices of students alongside my own. Doing so leads to co-construction of meaning and the development of a reflective relationship between student participants and myself. The research poems incorporate the language of student participants to encourage an emotional connection and response, forming the basis for further reflection.

As well as poems based on data collection and autoethnography, my thesis includes I-poems; influenced by a feminist methodology and a fundamental component of the Listening Guide, the premise of which is developing a trusting relationship through active listening. I-poems involve engaging with research interview transcripts and identifying 'I' phrases to forefront participants' sense of self. All other phrases are omitted, and nothing added. They discover experiences through transcribed embodied voices, 'bringing the inner world out into the open' (Gilligan, 2015, p. 69). The result is a powerful testimony, capturing the essence of the particular.

Locating personal narratives as creative critical reflection through research

The first example I wish to share of poetic research artefacts incorporated into social work teaching, takes place in the second-year research module. Students are exposed to various research methodologies via teaching sessions facilitated by lecturers sharing experiences of their own research. Students respond positively to this real-world research, focussed on social work. I discuss my doctoral research, providing a counterpoint to quantitative research, shared by colleagues. This encourages a realization of how qualitative research provides opportunities for deeper exploration of the lived experience of research participants. We explore interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), initiated by Smith (1996), who actively encourages innovation within this methodology. Incorporating autoethnography, poetry and prose in my research exemplifies this. Further, the performative aspect of my work, actively shared with students, reveals a further innovative methodological development, and means of implementing the third hermeneutic of IPA (Moran, 2020; Smith et al., 2009).

The research is concerned with the lived experience of student social workers, so is immediately relatable and offers a conduit for shared learning with peers, albeit students from previous years. Having received positive feedback, I am continually reviewing and developing my planning and delivery of how to engage students within this session.

I begin by outlining the aim of my research, in exploring how social work students experience, express and manage the content of practice learning in a relational context. Initially, I do not share the artefacts or performative aspect of the research, as I am interested to encourage students' exploration of their own practice, without my influence. Students are immersed in their 70-day placements, therefore bringing their own lived experiences to consider. To encourage creative critical reflection, students work in pairs and alternate as narrator and listener. The narrator talks for 5 minutes about their individual experiences of placement from a personal perspective, rather than considering a contextual or organizational narrative. I provide a brief example using sentences beginning with 'I'. The listener asks occasional questions to assist development of the personal narrative, thereby rehearsing research interviewing skills, as well as peer support. The narrator records this learning event on their phone for subsequent creative critical reflection.

Once students have taken this opportunity to engage with their own personal narrative of practice learning to date, I provide further explanation of my research methodology including use of poetry and autoethnography. Doing so following their narrative exercise, ensures we do not preempt the next step of the process and gives credence to their voices as a co-created learning strategy. Having explained the research methods, I read examples of artefacts from my research, including this I-poem:

Julie's I-poem - overwhelmed

I was doing social work assessments initially.

I was thrown in, but that was good.

I didn't even know what 'direct work' meant at the start [laughs].

I got nothing from study group this year. I hadn't seen anybody for a long time and I was feeling really overwhelmed.

I didn't want to get out of bed and in to placement in the mornings . . . overwhelmed.

I just wanted to shut myself away from the world . . . overwhelmed.

I realized that maybe I did need support.

I was just feeling really . . . I don't know, out of my depth . . . I was getting no support.

I'd just decided to put my head down and just finish.

I just kept getting told that I didn't have confidence in what I was doing. It's because no-one's listening to what I'm doing, no-one's watching what I'm doing.

I still have nightmares that I've made wrong decisions. [laughs but wipes tears from eyes].

This evocative poem allows for exploration of research as a conduit for professional development. It engages students in an authentic and powerful personal narrative, which is real and pertinent to their own situations. To acknowledge the influence of research data poems on their own developing sense of self, students are encouraged to use individual reflective time to listen to their own-recorded narratives and create personal

I-poems from the data produced. This innovation creates new knowledge to inform my own continuing research and leads to co-creation of critical reflection and mutual construction of learning. The teaching engages with the concept of dialogical education where educators and learners are considered as 'equally knowing subjects' (Freire, 1972, p. 31).

Parsons (2020) and Scott et al. (2023) note how I-poems present a powerful, impactful space to privilege the voice of the respondent. When spoken or listened to, this powerful medium intensifies, giving voice to the emotional context of their practice experience. Encouraging students to create and perform their own I-poems captures this powerful and poignant reciprocal learning opportunity. Use of poetry enables peers to imagine themselves in the situation, thereby promoting empathy and mutual experiential learning through expressing a sense of self (Koelsch, 2015).

Emotive reflective spaces in the curriculum

The second example takes place in the students' final year, before their 100-day placements begin. Already familiar with artefacts from the perspective of how these manifest in research, this session promotes further discovery to reflect on the challenges of practice learning. The content of the poetry and prose assumes greater significance than the research process and is critiqued as authentic experiential learning.

Within this sense-making, students consider further I-poems as well as poems and prose demonstrating my response as researcher. This opportunity exemplifies boundary spanning through shared experiential learning. It acknowledges the historical influence of practice learning for the profession through the previous experiences of peers. Here is an example of an autoethnographic poem, forming the basis for creative critical reflection:

Fxxx (x7) = EL (emotional labour) + change

Hot tears burn my cheeks
Lonely trips to lonelier people.
A team divided, devoid of care
Hardened by society's stare.

He says it once then over and over
Each time louder than the last.
Paper-thin walls share his ire
My head spins with righteous fire of
Indignation. Stop! No!
Childlike, bullying supervisor.
I'm old enough to be your mother.
Won't let you do this to another.

My practice teacher listens calmly,
Makes the changes—active agent.
For now at least I have been spared.
A problem halved is one that's shared.

Exploring the vagaries of practice learning and acknowledging the complexity of such, gives permission for students' active engagement with support networks to mitigate concerns. Owning the challenges I faced and recognizing resolutions through support networks, provides a tangible example of reassurance.

Further developments

Koelsch (2015) notes how Gilligan's Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015) is concerned with giving voice to unheard and/or marginalized groups through awe-inspiring I-poems. Typically, social work students fit within this population (Moran, 2020), so what better way of engaging with the lived experience of these often-unheard voices than through their own performance.

I plan to invite students not only to produce I-poems for themselves but to share these with peers. This will encourage engagement with the performative aspect of artefacts while promoting shared learning through reflective spaces. Using research to cross boundaries between my own and students' experiences both past and present, provides a strong sense of connection and appreciation of the longevity of profession experience. As such, I will create a repository to encourage students and those in a supporting role to offer their creative critical reflections as a future resource.

Conclusion

Exploring learning experiences via poetry encourages students to consider how they might respond to similar circumstances. This opens conversations around the importance of peer support; actively engaging with supervision; and developing positive working relationships with practice educators. Sharing poetry and prose to consider how I managed challenging practice learning events and their resolution, identifies a commonality. This helps minimize barriers between teacher and learner and promotes a sense of shared learning, leading to tangible connections with the emotional needs of educators and practitioners (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Introducing previous student's voices via I-poems adds a further layer to this sense-making. Offering students innovative opportunities to develop their own artefacts brings this unique research strategy to the fore, as they become architects of their own research-informed reflective practice. This combination of voices brought into the present through poetic artefacts demonstrates how students are not confronting challenges alone and their perceived concerns are legitimate, manageable, and resolvable.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Bellinger, A., Ford, D., & Moran, B. (2016). 'Cultivating discretion: social work education in practice and the academy'. In A. Bellinger & D. Ford (Eds.), *Practice placement in social work: Innovative approaches for effective teaching and learning*. Bristol: Policy Press.

El-Lahib, Y., Wehbi, S., Zakharova, G., Perreault-Laird, J., & Khan, M. (2022). Tearing down the 'box': Students' perspectives on activating arts-informed methods in social work classrooms. *Social Work Education*, *41*(4), 485–496. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1851360

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Hamondsworth.

Furman, R. (2004). Using poetry and narrative as qualitative data: Exploring a father's cancer through poetry. *Families, Systems, & Health*, *22*(2), 162–170. https://doi.org/10.1037/1091-7527.22.2.162

Gilligan, C. (2015). The listening guide method of psychological inquiry. *Qualitative Psychology*, *2*(1), 69–77. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000023

Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2012). Enhancing well-being in social work students: Building resilience for the next generation. *Social Work Education*, *31*(5), 605–621. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2011.590931

Koelsch, L. (2015). I Poems: Evoking Self. *Qualitative Psychology*, *2*(1), 96–107. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000021

Moran, B. (2020). *Social work students managing emotions: An interpretative phenomenological analysis utilising poetry and prose as an autoethnographic turn*. https://doi.org/10.24382/835

Moxley, D. (2013). Incorporating art-making into the Cultural Practice of Social Work. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, *22*(3–4), 235–255. https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2013.843136

Muncey, T. (2010). *Creating autoethnographies*. SAGE.

Parsons, J. (2020) *Finishing time, i-poems and 'the pains of release' into the community after punishment*. available at: https://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/16639

Rajan-Rankin, S. (2014). Self-identity, embodiment and the development of emotional resilience. *British Journal of Social Work*, *44*(8), 2426–2442. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct083

Scott, S., McGowan, V., Bradley, A., & Visram, S. (2023). 'How I'm feeling today, I probably won't be feeling tomorrow'. Using I-Poems to explore young people's changing emotions during the covid-19 pandemic - A qualitative, longitudinal study. *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health*, *3*, 100239.

Smith, J. A. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology and Health*, *11*(2), 261–271. https://doi.org/10.1080/08870449608400256

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, methods and research*. SAGE.

Wehbi, S., El-Lahib, Y., Perreault-Laird, J., & Zakharova, G. (2018). Oasis in a concrete jungle: Arts-informed methods in social work classrooms. *Social Work Education*, *37*(5), 617–632. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2018.1450372