The Pedagogy of the Found Poem: Making the Implicit Explicit

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Abstract
This paper describes the pedagogical use of the found poem—a poem created by using phrases from a series of readings—and the experience and reflections of two students and the instructor who were involved in a course where the found poem was used. The paper begins by setting the course context; a course entitled the Foundations in Capacity Development and Extension. This is followed by the two students’ reflections on constructing the poem, the process they engaged in its construction, and its benefits. Following this section the instructor discusses briefly the origin of using the idea of the found poem as a pedagogical activity, and offers his reflections on its use in his class. This is followed by the conclusions that identify the found poem, as used in this course, as a two stage exercise: an intuitive exercise followed by an analytical exercise that leads to making the implicit explicit.

Introduction
In this paper, we will explore and reflect on the pedagogy of the found poem—a poem constructed by borrowing wording and phrasing from a series of readings—and how found poems have been used in a graduate level course entitled Foundations of Capacity Development and Extension. While the focus here is on the use of the found poem in the above-mentioned course, we believe that the found poem is a learning tool that could be used successfully in any course that emphasizes practitioner development that is founded upon a values-based practice. We begin by providing an overview of the context, followed by the reflections of students and the course instructor. This is then followed by the conclusions.

Setting the Context: Foundations in Capacity Development and Extension
Lauzon (2013) has described Capacity Development as a participatory process that has the goal of facilitating social and environmental change and transformation. As a result, Capacity Development Practitioners seek to facilitate and support individual and collective change to promote responsible wellbeing whereby individuals and collectives strive to be the architects of their own existence; to live a life of their own design. At the heart of capacity development is people changing by making choices and developing capacities based upon what they believe is in their best interests. Thus, the practitioner of Capacity Development is there to facilitate and support peoples’ development and choices. While the practitioner has many participatory techniques and tools to draw upon, it is their person that is the main source of “system intervention”. Techniques and tools are only as good as the person using them. Given this, it is imperative, as Kaplan (2002) makes clear, that the practitioner not only have knowledge of capacity

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development processes and tools, but they have knowledge of themselves. As Lauzon (2003) notes, we do not check our biographies at the door, but our biographies influence our behaviour, how we interact with and relate to others, and the learning space we will collectively create.

Educating Capacity Development Practitioners is challenging. Kaplan (2002) describes practitioners as artists of the invisible: they facilitate social processes and hence what they facilitate is often unseen and intangible; it can’t be held or seen, hence it is invisible. They are artists in that there is no prescribed formula or plan. Rather, their work as practitioners is a reflection of who they are as individuals, and how they respond to what emerges through their interaction with others. The educational challenge is to help aspiring practitioners to integrate this technical body of knowledge—processes and tools—into their own meaning-frameworks that are reflective of their values and experiences. It is this integration of the “professional” with the “personal” that provides the foundations of their practice (Lauzon, 2003).

One pedagogical activity that I have used to try and accomplish this pedagogical goal is the found poem. I first came across this idea when reading a book of essays inspired by the writing of Parker Palmer (Intrator, 2005). In this book Margret Wheatley pays tribute to Palmer by creating a found poem based upon his book *The Active Life* (Palmer, 1990). Her poem struck me as being both personal and professional. This inspired me to try using the found poem in my class. When I first started using the poem, students simply created the poem and that was the end of the assignment. However, after using it for a number of years, I asked students to not only write the poem, but to then also reflect on their poem and write an analysis of what their poem meant to them. This, from my perspective, seemed to deepen their learning, helping them make that which was implicit within the poem, explicit and provide a foundation on which to build their practice.

**Classroom Voices**

In this section two graduate students enrolled in the MSc in Capacity Development and Extension—Bakhtawar and Katrin—reflect on their process of completing this exercise and what it meant to them. This is followed by Al’s reflection as course instructor.

**Bakhtawar’s Reflections**

In my experience with education, very few assignments have held the power to transform the way I see myself and the world. The found poem exercise served as one such opportunity for me: it helped me chart my learning in development to date and helped weave my learning into a meaningful personal narrative. In addition, it helped me personalize everything I read in the Foundations of Capacity Development course that Al taught in my first semester as a graduate student in the Capacity Development and Extension program. In the course we were required to read many beautifully written articles, from which we were expected to pick a handful of ideas that resonated with us.

While only one poem was required, I actually ended up writing a series of three poems for this assignment. The first, entitled *A Magic Wand*, provided a platform upon which I made
sense of my undergraduate degree. I expressed the frustration I felt with the discourse of
development in the use of short, choppy buzz words that were decontextualized, loaded
terms. In retrospect, the poem gave life to the contradictions in development theory and
practice and charted the landscape of development theory for me. I understood that
development was not a “magic wand” but that there was something hopeful about its
existence as a field of practice. The second poem, entitled *Agents of Change*, provided an
opportunity for me to synthesize my learning in the course. For the first time, I started to
think of development as change. The course helped give credence to my intuitive respect
for context. The final poem, *A Better Way Forward*, was particularly important to me
because in it I felt like I was writing down the advice of sages. In it, I preserved the pieces of
wisdom that seasoned practitioners shared in their articles. It became a personal call to
action for me and a recipe for self-care. I wrote it as a reminder for me not to forget the
importance of self-awareness, reflection, and learning as I embark on my journey as a
development practitioner. The assignment, overall, was meaningful to me because it
allowed me space to reflect on my experience with development and helped weave the
course readings into a personal narrative and perhaps even a creed. I will now address my
process.

As I went through the readings, I had the found poem in mind. In light of experiences, I
flagged words, sentences, or strings of sentences that resonated with me in that moment
and attached a note about their perceived importance. As the due date for the assignment
approached, I had 20 pages of notes ready for the task of writing the poem. This was
overwhelming at first but as I went through my notes the themes of past, present, and
future emerged: I found that my selections described my past experiences, detailed my
present sentiments, or gave new insight into how I wanted to be in the future. As such, I
decided to write three poems instead of one.

When narrowing down my selection of memorable quotes, I had the reflection piece in
mind. At no point in the process did I think of the poems as standalone pieces; I expected
them to only make sense in conjunction with the reflection piece.

During this process I had to overcome both anxiety and vulnerability. The anxiety stemmed
from feeling like I was being asked to plunge into the unknown. I wasn’t sure if my poems
would be good enough. The vulnerability was born out of the realization that I was handing
in something very personal to a professor to be graded. I grasped the assignment as an
opportunity to deeply reflect on my experience and being asked to submit it was akin to
being asked to submit my journal; a window into my soul. Thankfully, the respect and
comfort I experienced in the classroom served to ease my nerves. We had engaged in
reflective exercises, individually and collectively, within the classroom throughout the
semester. As such, a shared safe space was created that helped mitigate my anxiety and the
sense of vulnerability I experienced.

As I now look back, these poems became much more than an assignment for me. In essence,
the poem became the culmination and synthesis of my learning, academically and
personally. I didn’t have to neglect any part of me in its completion. It blurred the strictly
reinforced lines between my academic self and reflective self. In addition, it challenged
deep-seated assumptions about academia: during my undergraduate years, rote learning,
as opposed to deep learning, was encouraged. I didn’t have enough time to reflect on my individual courses or how they fit together; time was a scarce resource. This assignment signified a shift in my perspective from undergraduate to graduate studies. It showed me that reflection is an important and essential part of learning. It helped to create meaning in light of my experiences and capture the depth of my learning. In addition, the poem continues to serve as a reminder of the shift in my perspective as a graduate student.

Katrin’s Reflections
The found poem and reflection exercise that was assigned in the Foundations of Capacity Development & Extension course served as an opportunity for me to engage in creative self-expression, synthesize the rich, and sometime heavy course material, and provided me an opportunity to deepen my learning. The field and study of capacity development is interdisciplinary and ambiguous, so writing a found poem about it allowed me to hone in on themes that resonated with me, and develop them further in a creative way, thereby bringing meaning to the course material.

Engaging in this exercise required me to look deeper at the journal articles assigned in class, and become present to the material by choosing certain phrases and words that resonated with me. Then, I would weave the threads of these phrases together to create a poem - a tapestry of self-expression in the context capacity development. Furthermore, I was then asked to write an accompanying reflective piece that captures the meaning of my poem. This created an opportunity for deep learning to occur, and the poem provided the “skeleton” or structure, while the reflective piece is the “flesh” that gives the structure form.

When receiving direction from Al about the found poem and reflection exercise, many students were initially surprised and slightly confused. This activity was far from any opportunity we had ever experienced in our studies. For me, completing this exercise induced a sense of vulnerability and anxiety, and tapping into some deep insecurities of I can’t do this or will I be good enough?

What encouraged me to move from this headspace, to a deeper heart space where I could get creative, was the environment in the classroom. Throughout the semester, our instructor intentionally created a warm, open and safe backdrop. This context was established through relationship building by sharing our experiences, hearing each other’s stories, deeply listening to one another, and engaging in reflection. Because this context had been established so early on in the course, moving outside of my comfort zone, my vulnerability and anxiety was somewhat reduced. And once I really understood the exercise and felt safe to fully express myself, it seemed like the opportunities for the poem were endless and excitement set in. Being a creative individual by nature, it was deeply refreshing to give voice to a part of my being that previously had little, if any, place in an academic context.

Although I generally find comfort in planning many aspects of my life, I was surprised with my own spontaneity when creating the found poem. Rather than flagging key phrases of the literature that spoke to me as I read them throughout the semester, I decided to meditate. First, I tried not to think at all, and just to get present. Then, I invited myself to become present to the course material and my learnings thus far. I found that certain themes and readings came to mind. After jotting these ideas down on a piece of scrap paper, I searched articles where I could find these ideas and themes. After capturing my desired phrases from the literature, I was able to
start arranging the idioms into a poem that brought personal meaning to course material.

The writing process seemed to flow from there, and it was not until I began creating the reflective piece that accompanied my poem, that I realized the importance of reflection. The poem itself was challenging and rewarding, but the reflective piece was where the deepest learnings occurred for me. I found that, at times, I would not even recognize a certain thought I was describing. I later realized that some of my deepest opinions, attitudes, and beliefs in the field of capacity development had not yet been realized on a conscious level, and some ideas were simply sub-conscious ideas expressing themselves. It cannot be conveyed how refreshing it was to allow other aspects of my being to show up and have a voice. This exercise was holistic in nature and it allowed for the mental, emotional, and spiritual self to be expressed.

The found poem and reflection exercise resonated with me. It challenged my current assumptions of the academic system as being prescriptive, limiting, and traditional, and allowed me to view it through a new lens; that deep learning, authenticity, reflection, and creativity do have a place in academia. In fact, giving voice to other aspects of oneself in an academic context provides a richness that is lacking when only the mental self can show up. Being able to engage in this holistic activity allowed me to become intimate with course themes, and make sense of the readings in the context of my own life.

Reflecting back now, I see the importance of completing the exercise even more. When I read my own poem, a reflective piece written last year, I value it as a sort of time capsule—a glimpse into my past—who I was at that time, and where I stood in my journey as a development practitioner. I get nostalgic when I read the poem now, which has encouraged me to continue practicing this exercise.

Now, at a new point in my professional and academic journey, I feel more than ever that this exercise is needed. In any field of study, and especially in a values-based practice such as capacity development, the found poem exercise is highly valuable, and something that could be completed at every stage in the process.

Al’s Reflections
When I first started contemplating using this exercise in class I intuited that it had the potential to foster deep learning, particularly the type of deep learning that I was hoping to accomplish in this graduate class. At the time I thought about using this particular activity I did a google search on the found poem and found nothing in terms of a pedagogical activity, and little on the idea itself (although the search did turn-up a number of found poems completed by others).

One of the first things I noticed with the class when I introduced the activity was the nervous giggles in concert with the occasional derisive snickering (particularly since this is one of the first graduate classes our students take). And Bakhtawar and Katrin’s identification of feelings of vulnerability and anxiety, given my experience, is common. Students are very nervous and apprehensive about an assignment that does not conform to the norms of the essay nor have any specific structure. I need to create as safe an environment as possible and this means integrating reflection into the course on an ongoing basis, and it also means and helping and supporting the learners to co-create a safe environment characterized by mutual respect, support and reciprocity. It also means that I need to encourage learners to “trust the process”. This is very much initially
an intuitive exercise and learners need to be willing to let go of control and let emerge that which seeks expression (McNiff, 1998). Thus this exercise helps learners to tap into their creativity, something that the academic environment does not always encourage unless you are enrolled in the creative arts.

One of my surprises is what I can only call the power of the learner’s writing; I am often incredibly moved by the writing that the learners produce. In many ways, I am being privileged to experience their authentic voice, and often they too seem to experience that authentic voice for the first time in an academic setting. And furthermore, it is my hope that their voice will permeate the rest of their academic work and certainly that has often been the case of those students I go on to work with as either their thesis adviser or committee member; not always but often.

Perhaps one of the most important observations I have made over the years is the depth of their learning. Katrin talked about the importance of the reflective piece in terms of deepening her learning. Certainly my experience is that the depth of learning did deepen in significant ways after I introduced this added reflective piece. Much of this is making the implicit explicit, and in making the implicit explicit it makes the knowledge they are constructing—for they are actively constructing knowledge—much more useful for their practice.

This exercise also challenges students, and often assumptions they make, and in this sense it helps them clarify their worldview. As capacity development practitioners their very being is the instrument of change. If they are to be effective in their practice then they need to have self-knowledge and understand how they view the world. This journey Kaplan (2002) describes as becoming, a journey toward the realization of one’s self.

Finally, despite the initial anxiety and feelings of vulnerability expressed by both Bakhtawar and Katrin, and my observations of that also, most learners experience the exercise as challenging but fun. It helps them, and in some cases forces them outside the proverbial box, and in getting outside the box they learn (I hope) that much more is possible than we usually think.

**Conclusions**

This exercise assists learners in three ways which are important to them as practitioners of capacity development. First, it provides them an opportunity to create. And in creating they draw upon the vast personal resources that are available to them, as both Bakhtawar and Katrin note The create perspective of this exercise allows them to engage their creativity and to draw on their intuition to understand and gain insights. Through the juxtaposition of various words and phrases from the readings, it helps them deepen their understanding of the process of capacity development by highlighting what is important to them. Second, it helps learners integrate the technical knowledge covered in the course work into a body of knowledge that can then be used in their practice. They also integrate that technical knowledge into their own meaning frameworks which will serve as the foundation of their practice; it helps integrate the professional with the personal. Furthermore, I believe the learning is achieved mostly through the reflective process they engage in after they have completed the poem.
Reflecting on their poem and writing out what it means helps make the implicit explicit. Third, the exercise also helps learners clarify both their understanding of the world and the values they hold. This is imperative to be an effective practitioner for the practitioner is, in many ways, the intervention. They must understand who they are and what they stand for before they can serve others.

In concluding, while this article is framed within the context of capacity development, we believe it has application in any field of study that leads to becoming a practitioner, for in many ways all practitioners are artists of the invisible. We close by leaving you with the final stanza of Bakhtawar’s poem *Agents of Change*:

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\text{Unlearning, Freeing} \\
\text{becoming} \\
\text{what we already are} \\
\text{agents of change}
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**References**


