**Poetic Transcription with a Twist:**

**An approach to reflective practice through connection, collaboration and community**

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**Abstract**

Learning from experience is integral to professional development, with the processes by which it is expected and enabled varying depending on context and discipline. There is general consensus that it does not just happen. Rather learning from experience is a deliberate act. In higher education, much attention is given to reflective practice and the use of reflective models designed for individuals to use. However, even with a high level of commitment, an individual’s re-view of their own practice is likely to be limited because it is a sole endeavour with inevitably constrained perspective. This paper features an alternative, innovative approach identified as *poetic transcription with a twist* which situates reflective practice in a group context. As such, it enables learning for the individual and for the group members. The paper offers an example drawn from work with a group of early career academics which illustrates both the approach and the potential of poetic *transcription with a twist* to facilitate development with and beyond the immediate participants in the learning experience. It presents *poetic transcription with a twist* to the community of academic developers for consideration in their own practice, understanding that the nature and purpose of the role is complex and contested.

**Key words**

Professional development, reflective practice, social learning, academic developers

**Reflective Practice**

The subject of reflective practice is much discussed in the academic literature, (see for example, Kinsella, 2010; Clegg, Tan, & Saeidi, 2002; and Johns and Freshwater, 1999). Not surprisingly, definitions abound. In essence, reflection enables engagement in the process of continuous learning and professional development (Schon, 1987). It pays attention to the everyday (Bolton, 2009) and the values and knowledge that inform what we do. There is general consensus that experience of itself does not result in learning, rather reflection is a deliberate act requiring planning (Loughran, 2002). Put differently, it is an active, persistent and considered process (Dewey, 1933) requiring the practitioner to become aware of and to challenge that which is taken for granted (Mezirow, 1990). Schon (1987) distinguishes between reflection **in** action, contemporaneous with practice, and reflection **on** action, following on afterwards. For the purposes of this paper, attention centres on reflection **on** action, which is essentially first evaluative and then proactive in its intention.

The imperative to be reflective has resulted in a proliferation of models, each designed to structure thinking, learning and development (Moon, 1996). Just as teaching in different disciplines is associated with signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005), it is likely that some reflective models align more readily with particular disciplines, than others. It is also suggested that it is because of reflective models that reflection has become a solitary practice in that they offer a structure which a person can use in isolation, resulting in what might be described as self-dialogue. No matter the commitment of the individual to learn from their experience and to develop, perspectives on what happened and what might be learned from it are likely constrained by the person’s own world view. And so despite their appeal, because of the structure they afford (Ashby, 2006), reflective models are not panaceas. They are simply tools in the hands of human beings and may assist in the process of reflective practice to greater or lesser extents. To unpack this thinking a little further, constructivist perspectives are overviewed.

**Constructivist Perspectives and Reflective Practice**

Constructivism is a philosophical position which draws on the thinking of a number of influential theorists, including Dewey and Piaget, both of whom argued the importance of experience in sense-making and learning. It embraces a family of perspectives which vary in their emphasis (Paavola, Lipponen, & Hakkarainen, 2004). For Piaget, experience leads to either assimilation or accommodation (McLeod, 2009). In assimilation, the individual incorporates new experiences into old understandings, so as to merge them. In accommodation the individual’s viewpoint is challenged to such a degree that a reframing of their world is necessary. Piaget draws attention to the experience of disequilibrium and discomfort associated with accommodation (McLeod, 2009). It follows then that individuals will assimilate whenever they can, to avoid the disquiet, perhaps even distress of seeing something differently. Returning to reflective practice, if assimilation is, understandably, the preferred process, consciously or subconsciously, because it is less disruptive to the status quo, then alternative ways of understanding and challenging experience may be left unexplored, so limiting the opportunity to learn, with a consequent reduction in the potential to enhance practice.

Some proponents of constructivism place weight on the individual, their experience and their learning. However as Ashwin, et al, (2015) remind us, there are more social and collaborative interpretations within the constructivist spectrum. Not dissimilarly, Atherton (2013) suggests a distinction between cognitive and social constructivism wherein the latter emphasises the role of social encounters in developing meanings and understandings for the individual. Re-focusing on reflective practice, there is a view that it can only be fully effective if someone other than the individual whose experience it was, engages in the process so as to guide, question and support introspection and learning, a process suggestive of Vygotsky’s ‘more experienced other’ (Daniels, 2005). Less clear from the literature is the extent to which reflective practice in the context of higher education is encouraged within a social, collaborative framing, or is more of a solitary endeavour. Anecdotal evidence suggests the latter. If so, the limitations for the individual are as outlined previously; this is not to say that they will not learn, just that the learning will be limited in its impact because it did not involve others in the process. It is a shortcoming which leads on to contemplating communities of learning.

**Communities of Learning**

Proponents of community-based learning argue that learning happens when people participate together actively in shared endeavours; as such, they challenge the privileging of individual meaning-making and development (Rogoff, 1994). The difference between individual and community-based learning is further explored by Paavola, et al (2004) who draw on Sfard’s (1998) proposition that they are two ways to consider the ‘genesis of new knowledge’, acquisition and participation. They explain the former as reflecting a belief in the primacy of the individual mind and its acquisition of knowledge, whilst the latter emphasises the process of participation in a community of learners. It is a differentiation not dissimilar to Piaget’s concepts of assimilation and accommodation.

Considerable attention has been paid to one particular interpretation of participatory community-situated learning, triggered by the seminal work of Wenger (1997). As a result the construct of communities of practice has embedded in the lexicon of higher education, too uncritically Roberts (2006) argues, with Warhurst (2006) advocating the need for its systematic study and Kirkup (2002, p.189) cautioning that 'the pastoral myth of community' is mere rhetoric.

Kirkup (2002) is not alone in questioning the construct (Warhurst, 2006). Arthur (2016), for example, cites ‘shifting’ language (Churchman, 2005) and ‘conceptual slippage’ (Tummons, 2012). Whilst perhaps too vague from the outset (Warhurst, 2006) and insufficiently challenged from the perspective of systematic study, the idea of learning and knowing as processes situated within a community of active participants holds appeal. This may be because it connects directly with the need to belong, or as Warhurst, (2006) describes, to be part of something; in other words, not alone. And yet, as previously suggested, it would seem that reflective practice, either accidently, or by design, is a sole endeavour which does not tend to situate in a community. As such, the possibility of being ‘forced’ to go to the edges of dis-comfort wherein disequilibrium might open the door to new perspectives might be avoided, or just not recognised.

**Introducing *Poetic Transcription with a Twist***

*Poetic transcription with a twist* is an approach devised by Smart (2014), and employed by Smart & Loads (2016) who report its serendipitous origins in Smart’s practice. It derives from the context of research, with Smart and Loads (2016) citing Burdick (2011) and Glesne (1997) as proponents of ‘found poetry’ and ‘poetic transcription’ respectively. It is noted here for clarity that other terms are also in use to describe the practice. For simplicity, this paper stays with the term poetic transcription, recognising the richness of the literature and the value of the technique in representing participants’ voices in the context of research. The work of Leavy (2010) and Prendergast (2009) are amongst a number who provide insight into its possibilities in this setting.

Before moving to describe *poetic transcription with a twist* as an approach, it is important to identify a critical point identified by Smart and Loads (2016) which concerns the power dynamic at play in the use of poetic transcription where the researcher is, in effect, the poet, representing what was shared with them by the research participants. In contrast, hence the twist, *poetic transcription with a twist* situates the practice of creating poetic forms in the medium of the group. It works with one individual’s written account drawn from their practice at a time and invites all of the group, including the person whose story of experience it is, and the facilitator(s) to use it to create poetic forms. As Smart & Loads (2016) explain, there is a set of ‘rules’ for the process of *poetic transcription with a twist* which draw from the literature as it concerns poetic transcription. They were designed to create a sense of safety for participants as they encounter a different approach to reflective practice in a group context. The rules are reproduced here from Smart & Loads (2016) to familiarise the reader.

**Table 1: The Rules for *Poetic Transcription with a Twist***

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| --- |
| Working with the critical incident provided, you will be asked to work individually, so no talking/ sharing … this comes later.  **Step 1:** Read the critical incident.  **Step 2:** Re-read the critical incident, underlining key words/ phrases.  **Step 3:** From the text of the critical incident, construct a poem, no rhyming required.  Don’t forget to give the poem a title.  **Note:**   * You can remove words to create your poem, but can’t add them. * You must not alter the order of the words as they present in the critical incident. * Think about how you use punctuation within your poem.   **Step 4:** Using a flip chart sheet, present your poem ready for sharing.  **Step 5:** Each of you will then read out the poem you’ve created. We won’t discuss any of the poems as we progress through.  **Step 6:** Discussion will focus on the experience of poetic transcription, for the group and for the author of the critical incident.  **Time in total for Steps 1 – 4:** 20 minutes |

*Poetic transcription with a twist* has been used by Smart (2014) and Smart & Loads (2016) at academic induction events, with fellow academic developers, with students and at conference workshops, both in the UK and internationally. It has formed the focus for two research studies designed by Smart and Loads to better understand participants’ and their own experiences of the approach. This paper now centres on one of these studies which involved working with a group of early career academics[[1]](#footnote-1). Ethical approval was secured for the study which took place over a period of seven months. Featured here is one of the accounts[[2]](#footnote-2) shared by one of the participants, together with five of the seven poetic forms created by the group members. The aim is to provide insight into *poetic transcription with a twist* as an approach which has the potential to enable reflection and learning in a group context, so as to support the development of the individual and the group, thereby overcoming acknowledged shortcomings of solitary reflective practice. In so doing, it illustrates the capacity of the approach to challenge taken-for-granted aspects of knowledge and practice initiating change beyond the individual who lived the experience. Therefore, it holds promise in respect of Dreyfus, Dreyfus, & Zadeh's (1987) urging to conceptualise reflective practice as a means to re-think wider issues, much in the same way as Reed et al. (2010) invite through the perspective of social learning. But first, the account provided by Natalie[[3]](#footnote-3), one of the early career academics.

A second year student who is part of my personal development tutor group has brought joy to my role as lecturer and personal development tutor (pdt) and has reminded me why I love supporting students.  Phillip passed his first year at University despite being depicted as a class clown by colleagues who commented on his immaturity, lack of focus and poor attendance. Phillip declined to engage in one to one pdt sessions and would rarely respond to e-mails from me and other members of the team.  Phillip also attended class infrequently and attended only 2 out of 6 reflective group sessions where the pdt group would share their experiences in practice and reflect on their thoughts and feelings as well as consider how their practice could be improved in the future.  At the time I felt this was a real disadvantage for Phillip because the one to one pdt time and the reflective group work seemed to be the only way I might be able to connect with him.  Phillip was young, he appeared to be immature and he had not connected in a meaningful way with any of my colleagues or his student peers.  I liked Phillip and so did the practice staff he had encountered on placement.  However, I was naturally concerned about Phillip at the same time. My intuition told me that chasing Phillip would do no good as he was likely to view me as a nagging mother figure and this could inhibit our capacity to build a mature, trusting, supportive and professional relationship in the future.

Phillip failed two out of three modules in trimester one of second year.  Like the other students in my pdt group with fails, I sent an e-mail inviting Phillip to meet and discuss what had happened as well as to make a collaborative plan for the resubmissions.  Phillip was the only student not to reply.  A week later I was in class and Phillip stopped me to say that he needed to see me because he had ‘made a mess of his work last term’.  I was both surprised and delighted that Phillip had approached me, recognised that there was an issue to be resolved and requested my advice and assistance.  We met for a one to one discussion and Phillip opened by saying,’ I’ve made a right mess of this and I really need to turn it around’.  We spoke more and Phillip disclosed that he had consciously decided to ‘take it easy’ in trimester one, that he thought that ‘aiming for 40% would be ok’ and that he had been writing his assessments whilst ‘watching tv with his brother and sister’.  Phillip’s honesty was refreshing for me to hear, I respected him for being so candid and I felt hopeful that we could aim for a collective goal whereby in his own words he would ‘up his game and prove that he could do really well’.  Phillip stated that he would ‘aim for distinctions to prove that he wasn’t stupid’.  I shared with Phillip that I knew he wasn’t stupid and that if he could harness the discipline and determination he elicited to compete as a boxer and a triathlete and use this to complete his coursework, he would do just fine.  I added that more than anything, I wanted to see him proudly stride across the stage at graduation to receive his parchment and that I would support him as much as I could but that he had to give me the opportunity to do so.  He asked if I would be there on graduation day and I said of course, I’ll be cheering you on!   I’m a great supporter of the underdog and I was excited by the notion that after being judged by my colleagues, Phillip would indeed turn things around and successfully complete his course.  I know that he will make a great nurse.

Phillip and I worked together to devise a plan for his resubmissions and the first task would be for him to contact the appropriate team members to arrange meetings to receive verbal feedback and support.   I saw him a couple of weeks later in class and he smiled widely and said ‘I don’t watch tv any more, I’m just in my room all the time doing my work, reading as much as I can’.   I smiled widely back and told him this was better than what I hoped he might say.  Little did Phillip know how much his enthusiasm affected me.  During the same week I was approached by a colleague who asked me what I had ‘done’ to Phillip.  I had of course done nothing to Phillip but Phillip had done a lot, not only had he attended the meetings to discuss his resubmissions but he had arrived with well-considered plans and an eagerness to succeed.  Since then colleagues have commented on how engaged Phillip has become in class, he has befriended some really nice peers who are equally engaged in their work, he has opted to attend both focus groups I have asked students to attend and he has been a delight to have in the reflective group sessions.  Phillip has also submitted drafts for the resubmissions he plans to submit this trimester.  In the focus groups Phillip said he was there because he wanted to support me because I had supported him and again, he’ll never truly know how his candid statements affect me.   Interestingly, Phillip said he had attended the first reflective group of the year because he wanted to make up for all the times he had not attended in the past.  As a group we were able to feedback to Phillip that we were delighted he was there not only because it was a good learning experience for him but also because he brought so much value to the group discussion.  Although Phillip smiled shyly at this public appreciation of his input, I know that he was affected and maybe just as much as he has affected me.

**Joy and Affection**

Joy to my role-first year clown,  
declined sessions, emails, members of team.  
Concerned about Phillip.  
Phillip failed.  
An email to discuss resubmissions.  
Phillip stopped me.  
-I want to turn it around.  
-On graduation day I’ll be cheering you.

Worked together a plan.  
Phillip had done a lot.  
We were delighted-he brought value.

He has affected me.

**I Did Nothing:**

I love supporting students.  
Class clown; immaturity, lack of focus, poor attendance…  
Declined to engage – a real disadvantage

I might be able to connect with him.  
I was naturally concerned, chasing – me as a nagging mother!

Philip failed.  
He needed me.  
I was surprised, delighted.  
“I’ve made a mess of this. I need to turn it around.”  
Honesty.  
I felt hopeful; I respected him.  
He would up his game… Prove that he wasn’t stupid.

I knew he wasn’t

I wanted to see him, proudly, at graduation  
I would support him!  
I’ll be cheering you on!

His enthusiasm affected me  
I had, of course, done nothing.  
Philip had done a lot.

**Supporting Students**

class clown, immaturity, lack of focus, poor attendance, disadvantage  
I liked Phillip  
failed, no reply, mess  
Phillip approached me  
advice, assistance, honesty, refreshing  
Phillip wasn’t stupid  
discipline, detemination, proud  
Phillip smiled widely  
eagerness, engaged, delight, value  
Phillip affected me.

**An Ode to Philip**

Part joy and love  
Despite his immaturity  
Thoughts and feelings improved  
I felt I might be able to connect  
I liked Philip  
Time… Intuition… Capacity  
The future?

Inviting to discuss, a collaborative plan  
Reply!!  
A week later he needed me, I was delighted  
There was an issue and we met  
One to One  
We spoke and disclosed, decided to take it easy  
His honesty was refreshing for me

I respected him and felt hopeful  
We could aim, he would prove  
I shared with Philip, he elicited this  
I wanted to see him and support him  
He had to give me the opportunity  
He asked- I was excited

He smiled widely and I smiled widely back

**All about Phillip**

joy love  
Phillip.  
Phillip Phillip  
chasing Phillip.  
Phillip failed  
Phillip Phillip Phillip Phillip.  
Phillip’s honesty  
Phillip Phillip  
I’m a great supporter of the underdog  
Phillip  
I know that he will make a great nurse.  
Phillip  
Little did Phillip know how much his enthusiasm affected me.  
Phillip. Phillip Phillip  
he’ll never truly know how his candid statements affect me,  
Phillip Phillip Phillip  
I know that he was affected and maybe just as much as he has affected me.

**What, So What, What Now?**

Using Driscoll's (2000) reflective model and beginning with the ‘what?’, each participant in the workshop, including the two facilitators connected with Natalie’s account. It was experienced as a heartening tale with which we could identify. The positivity of Natalie’s account echoes in the poetic forms created. There is little about the difficulties and frustrations of working with Phillip, part of the reality discussed further after each poetic form had been read aloud, including Natalie’s. The emotional engagement with Natalie’s story resonates and confirms Leavy’s (2009, p.63 cited in Byrne, 2013) view that poetry ‘breaks through the noise’ so as to ‘push feelings to the fore-front capturing heightened moments of social reality as if under a magnifying glass’. Whilst there are some similarities in the five poetic forms, there are differences too. As Glesne (1997) suggests would happen, each participant captured the essence as they saw it, removing a substantial number of words to leave behind what seemed to matter to them. In so doing, the collective creation was, as Ward (2011, p.354) describes, ‘a multifaceted, crystallized perspective’. Citing Richardson (2000), Ward (2011, p.354) borrows the ‘metaphor of a prism’, speaking of it being ‘multidimensional and multidirectional with many faces and angles that reflect and refract light depending on our angle of repose or lens’. Yet each poetic form was unique, a distillation drawing words from the original to create something new, whilst taking care to maintain the chronology so as not to distort the story told.

The ‘what’ also concerns the process of *poetic transcription with a twist* and its three phases – the writing in silence, connecting with the text for 20 minutes, followed by the reading aloud of each poetic form, each participant sharing in turn their interpretation and then the free-flow discussion to follow. As was the case with Natalie’s account and every other time *poetic transcription with a twist* has been used, the open dialogue phase of the process did not result in “story hijacking” described by McDrury and Alterio (2002, cited in Haigh, 2005) as when a story told provokes listeners to share their own, in effect stealing the limelight. Rather participants stayed with Natalie’s story and the poetic forms created, talking about roles, relationships, emotions, including the love of working with students, patience, trust and the timing of interventions. And it is here that the ‘so what’ component of Driscoll’s (2000) reflective model comes to the fore.

Amongst others Sutherland & Taylor (2011, p. 183) recognise the role of the early career academic (ECA) to be ‘ill-defined and under-researched’, and that the development of ‘identity, agency and a sense of community’ can be problematic. If agreed, it is possible to argue that a range of mechanisms might have their place in enabling ECAs to find their feet (Smart & Loads, 2016). Mentorship, for one, may have its place (see, for example, McDermid, Peters, Daly, & Jackson, 2016) and peer mentoring as described by Kensington-miller & Zealand (2014) might be useful too. What poetic transcription with a twist offers into the mix of opportunities affording connection, collaboration and community is a process which creates silence and space to reflect alone on the words of another, to then give back using poetic form, before exploring as a collective the different interpretations discerned within the original narrative shared. The experience for authors of accounts has been variously described, but has included words such as validating, challenging, supportive and helpful. And for the group as a whole, this was most powerfully represented in Smart & Loads (2016, p.6) where the impact of “coming together”, “to listen to what really matters”, to create and be open” was described in poetic form. It is here that the practice of *poetic transcription with a twist* begins to align with Reed et al's (2010) thinking on social learning and its process which they argue must include three elements:

Figure 1: The Process of Social Learning (Reed et al., 2010)

Reflecting on *poetic transcription with a twist,* the first two elements (a and b, above) are part of the approach, the question is whether change, or at least the possibility of it extends more widely into, in this instance, the community of early career academics, or further still into the University itself. Whilst there are no guarantees, the fact that Natalie’s account and its different representations in poetic form resulted in a conversation about relationships with students had the potential to effect change for each individual and the networks with which they connect, and could in those places spark new conversations, so influencing thinking and practice. But in the pressured world of the academic milieu, opportunities can be lost, not intentionally, but just because other priorities take precedence. Consequently, the ‘so what’ emerging from *poetic transcription with a twist* may be as constrained as the learning which derives from solitary reflective practice. If so, then there would be no ‘what now’? This may be so, but as this paper draws to its conclusion, the role of the academic developer is introduced.

Described by Baume and Popovic (2016) as being scholarly, principled, pragmatic, supporting and effecting leadership, the role of the academic developer is contested and complex (Kinash & Wood, 2011), its place and purpose debated (Billot, 2010), with perceptions as to its function wide-ranging (Debowski, 2014). Amongst others, Budge & Clarke (2012) urge the community of academic developers to embrace creativity in their practice, but they are not talking about creativity in the sense you might expect given this paper’s art-based leaning. Rather they implore ‘attention to relationships, to engagement and persistence, to exploration and risk-taking, to problem-solving, to intuition, reflection and envisaging’ (Budge & Clarke, 2012, p. 59). I interpret this to mean that all possibilities are open in seeking to effect change. This might include embracing *poetic transcription with a twist*, because it presents as an option with which academic developers feel comfortable. Equally, it directs focus to the third component of Reed et al’s (2010) conceptualisation of social learning and the need to maximise the impact of change from the local into the broader community. Protecting confidentiality and ensuring anonymity, I have taken my learning from Natalie’s story of experience, our poetic forms and the discussion into the classroom to shape the curriculum. And I have brought them here to engender wider debate. It is a start.

**Conclusion**

Evidence to date supports the conjecture that *poetic transcription with a twist* facilitates connection, collaboration and community in learning and development, for the individuals and the group engaging with the approach. As such it can effect change in what they think, do and feel. It has the potential to influence more widely, but may need arbiters, such as academic developers, to realise this possibility. The fact that, to date, its use has consistently enabled the emotional dimension of everyday experience to be captured in poetic form is also valuable of itself, so too its ability to bring about empathy with others’ experiences, allowing individuals to move beyond their own preoccupations of their own private worlds. Insights gained may lead towards the reconsideration of settled certainties, and may be the first step in enacting social change in the context of higher education. If so, then *poetic transcription with a twist*, an approach which facilitates reflective practice in a group context, may be an important addition to the academic developer toolkit.

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1. See Smart and Loads (2016) for further detail about the study. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The account has been anonymised. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Name changed to protect anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)