

Can Concrete Poems Fly? Setting Data Free in a Performance of Visual Enactment

Qualitative Inquiry
2021, Vol. 27(1) 129–135
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1077800419884976
journals.sagepub.com/home/qix



Adrian Schoone¹ 

Abstract

In researching the tutors working in alternative education centers in New Zealand, I sought ways to bring voice to their lived experiences through, initially, creating found poetry from interview transcripts. The poems helped bring their vital voices to the page. Even so, I found the emotion of tutors' lived experiences buckled under the pressure of their compression into lines of poetry. Thus, I set the found words free to form nonlinear configurations in two and three dimensions. In the tradition of concrete poetry noted by Khlebnikov, I "loosed the shackles of syntax . . . to attach meaning to words according to their graphic and phonic characteristics." In this article, I present concrete poetry deriving from my poetic inquiry and reflect on the value concrete poetry provides arts-based researchers.

Keywords

alternative education, concrete poetry, poetic inquiry, tutors

Introduction

Every year approximately 3,500 secondary school students become disenfranchised from formal education in New Zealand due to multiple suspensions, exclusions, and truancy. The Ministry of Education directs these students to attend alternative education programs (Education Review Office, 2011). In 2001, after teaching in a primary school for almost 6 years, I left the comfortable confines of my primary classroom to begin working with tutors in alternative education community centers. My new role entailed assisting tutors with the academic program. Over the course of working with tutors, I became increasingly interested in tutor pedagogy. Despite these tutors having no formal teaching qualifications and being derided by some as merely "well meaning" (Langley, 2009, p. 6), tutors were successful with engaging many of these young people into learning again (Brooking, Gardiner, & Calvert, 2009). Bereft of the tutor voice in education research, I eventually completed doctoral studies exploring the lived experiences of eight alternative tutors (Schoone, 2015). In this article, I focus on one surprising and generative happening within my poetic inquiry methodology: the emergence of concrete poetry.

concrete feels hea-

vy

lift-

ing

unpoetic

impervious

un-beautiful

not like a rose

Poetic Inquiry

My experimentation with concrete poetry in research fits within the wider narrative of poetic inquiry. Poetic inquiry encompasses a broad range of poetic means to gather and/or analyze and/or present research findings (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009; Sameshima, Fidyk, James, & Leggo, 2017; Thomas, Cole, & Stewart, 2012; Yallop, Wiebe, & Faulkner, 2014). Poetic inquiry has been especially effective in bringing to the page marginalized voices (Schwartzman, 2002), the ones who speak in "non science voices" (Clarke, Febbraro, Hatzipantelis, & Nelson, 2005, p. 915). Many of these poetic inquiries, like my own, were created through found poetry methods whereby the voices of the research participants recorded from interviews were rendered into verse (Glesne, 1997; Richardson, 1992). These research studies mirror the literary forebears of the found poetry craft, for example, Charles Reznikoff, who created found poems from legal records of immigrants, Black people, and the urban and rural poor dating between 1885 and 1915 (Reznikoff, 2015).

¹Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Corresponding Author:

Adrian Schoone, Auckland University of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand.
Email: adrian.schoone@aut.ac.nz

In my own study of a marginalized workforce, I crafted found poems only using tutors' words and phrases I recorded from research interviews, observations of tutors working each day in their center and from a performative workshop I held with the tutors (see Schoone, 2017). Given that these tutors were not qualified teachers, their language bereft of education jargon. Through the course of my experience and research with tutors, I became attuned to the rhythm, tone, metaphor, and humor of tutors' everyday discourse and sought to re/present their evocative speech on the page. The following found poem I created from one tutor's transcript is verbatim of what he said to me in his recorded interview:

you're their educator
 you're their driver
 you're their shoulder to cry on
 you're their emotional punching bag
 the list goes on
 (Schoone, 2015, p. 163)

Style wise, many of the poems I created suited the justification to the left-hand margin. However, the words and phrases in other poems seemed to buckle from the pressure of their linear demarcations. I needed to set those words free. For example, later in the interview from the same tutor that the previous poem derived from, he remarked that social work was opposed to teaching. He felt he could not fulfill the demands of either role despite having to traverse both professional fields. These were his words, "Social work opposed to teaching, I don't mind it, it would be hard to do both at the same time." In an embodied response to the visual images his statement evoked I allowed the words and letters migrate across the page. As Bollobás (1986) writes, "The poet's job is not to master or control language (and force it into linear progression), but to participate in this performance where spatial configurations are born" (p. 285). This concrete poem was the result:

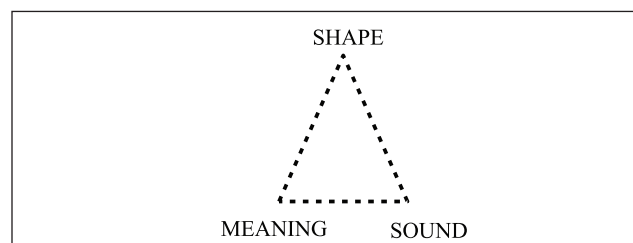
s		t
o		e
c		a
i		c
a		h
l		
	opposed to	
w		i
o		n
r		g
k		

teaching, i don't mind it
 it would be hard to do both at the same time

In this poem, the use of space accentuated the binary in the tutor's mind, "social work opposed to teaching." The empty space in between acted as a type of "no man's land" between the competing disciplines. While tutors' work reflects both teaching and social work practices, their particular expertise invisibly rests in that in-between space that was nameless. In creating this opposition, it was difficult for the tutor to see himself other than a teacher of sorts. Overall, I was surprised at how shaping the poem opened up new ways of exploring the tutor's insights.

Concrete Poetry

Sometimes referred to as visual poetry, McHughes (1977) defines concrete poetry as "the constitution of meaning through the extraordinary exploitation of poetic principles with a temporal base (such as rhythm, sound, and line length) in the added dimension of space" (p. 169). As a literary form, concrete poetry emerged post-WW2, experimented by Eugene Gomringer and Décio Pignatari, to "free the poet from the line as his basic structural unit" (Solt, 1970, p. 422). Khlebnikov (cited in Cobbing & Mayer, 1978, p. 16) remarks, "We have loosed the shackles of syntax . . . we have begun to attach meaning to words according to their graphic and phonic characteristics" (p. 16). This results in giving equal intensity to shape, meaning and sound as Cobbing and Mayer (1978, p. 27) represent below.



The shape, meaning, and sound of the poem combines to perform an aesthetic experience. In the previous poem *Social work*, shape became an equal component with sound and meaning. The shape of the poem influences the overall meaning and how the poem sounds. For example, reading/viewing "social work" and "teaching" in their vertical lines slows the reading/viewing down. Although the poem is bare of grammatical conventions that we find in prose, "In some manner the spatial elements of the poem must do the work of traditional syntax . . ." (Draper, 1971, p. 334).

Concrete poetry in social sciences research is scarce, yet emerging. Some recent examples include Meyer's (2017) use of concrete poetry to explore the experiences of eight single mothers of children and young adults with mental illness. The data derived from interviewing participants were represented by visual metaphors. Meyer (2017) notes, "I offer concrete research poetry as a novel creative analytic practice that problematizes the false dichotomy of science and art" (p. 34). Lahman, Teman, and Richard's (2019)

autoethnographic study regarding their experiences dealing with the institutional review board (IRB) was re/presented through a range of concrete poems. The research team commented the approach “allowed us to consider and express our experiences with IRB in new ways” (p. 212). Further to my study with tutors, I crafted concrete poetry as an ekphrastic review of a research article (Schoone, 2019). In the two next sections, I provide further examples of my use of concrete poetry from my poetic inquiry. I make a distinction between mimetic visual poems and poems to perceive.

Mimetic Visual Poems

My concrete found poetry began as “mimetic visual poems” (Perloff, 2014, p. 290). That is, the shape of the poem is immanent to its meaning (Bollobás, 1986). The typographical shaping of the words on the page almost insists its meaning upon the reader. Then again, is the form of the poem an attempt to bring us to the tangible and felt world of the original experience? In each of the following three poems, shape ushers the performance of meaning.

Morning talk

family time they are late lock the door Asif	
are you all good? anyone have any concerns you want to raise?	
no miss	mark?
no miss	no miss
nope	you okay Sione?
yeah	you are quiet this morning
we're tired	oh
is there tag today?	no next week
it was our way to get you here today	you need to do press-ups sir
jokes	sir!
shall we unlock the door?	no, who would like to pray?
thank you for this glorious day and bless us all	

it's quite a cool story

it's quite a cool story:

middle-class little white girl walking into AE (it's quite hilarious)

science degree under your belt	cracks me up
(hats off!)	students didn't click with me as quickly
i like winning students over	i'm going to keep loving/caring for you
whether you hate me or not, being abusive	every student's different, aye
(how can we frame that?)	throwing stuff back at me
i'm going to keep loving you	(i don't judge)
i reminded him of a teacher who hated on him	
i feel like i've turned the corner with the students	

he sits next to you one day
 doesn't usually talk to you
 one-on-one conversations
 during morning tea
 plays a game with you
 breakthrough

The disappearing roll

visit 1.

1. *Ropata*

he doesn't want to be here

2. *Neil*

3. *Emily*

4. *Faye*

5. *Ruth*

6. *Jane*

7. *Tamati*

8. *Mataroa*

who pops up from another AE programme

visit 2.

1. *Ropata*

2. *Neil*

3. *Emily*

she came up with all the most randomness excuses

i didn't buy

4.

5. *Ruth*

6.

7. *Tamati*

8. *Mataroa*

hustling money

visit 3.

1.

2. *Neil*

3. *Emily*

4.

5. *Ruth*

6.

7. *Tamati*

he turned 16 and stopped coming

8.

sick of low numbers

Poems to Be Perceived

Creating mimetic visual poems, inviting shape to equally contribute to the poem's expression was extended in my study though problematizing the relationship between shape and meaning. What if the shape of the poem does not directly relate to an expected meaning? For example, what if the shape of the poem *Morning talk* was presented as a square shape? Perloff (2014) recounted that in literary concrete poetry a number of poets, such as Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Augusto de Campos, moved beyond mimetic representations and "devoted themselves to dismantling and reconstructing words and phrases so as to empathize their palpable, tactile qualities as well as their paragrammatic and ideogrammic potential" (p. 290). In mimetic visual poems, shape sets the words and phrases free from conventional syntax. With poems to be perceived, shape is freed once again to perform according to the aesthetic impulse of the poet-artist. In terms of meaning, these poems challenge the narrative constructs that we come to expect from poems, that is, that a poem is something we can follow from the beginning to the end. With such poems there is no end to reading, "reading becomes ambiguous. Time becomes arbitrary or absent. A reading could take a fraction or a second or forever" (Davidson, 2004, p. 102). The poem is not easily voiced, yet the poem as a whole performs a lyrical gesture.

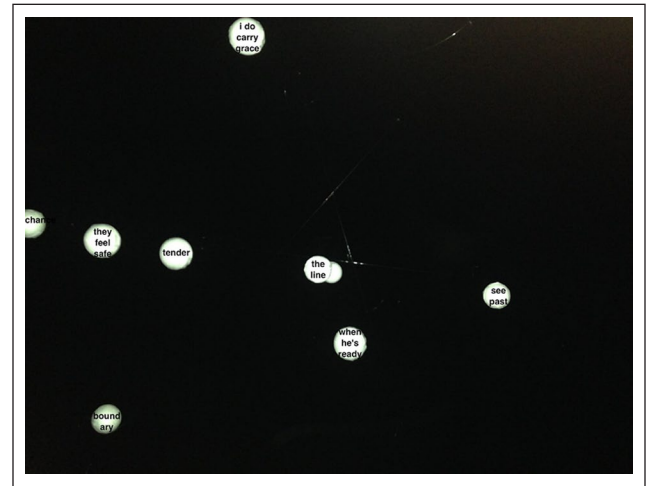
In my own work, I created a series of concrete poems in which the shape did not correspond directly to the poem's implicit meaning. Drawing from all eight of my research participant interview transcripts and my observational notes, I gleaned words and phrases which I eventually grouped into themes. A selection of these words and phrases were represented as stars creating a constellation. Therefore, the tutors' individual words and phrases were decontextualized from the interview transcript, to perform in concert with selections of words and phrases of their colleagues to help bring to the reader/viewer's eye insights into the inter-subjective lived experiences of their tutor work. In total, I created 21 constellation poems (Schoone, 2015). Each theme was a constellation. Leaving the words and phrases unconnected through space, the reader is invited to imagine the linkages and create their own constellations. Gomringer (1968) suggests,

with each constellation something new comes into the world. Each constellation is a reality in itself & not a poem about the same thing.

the constellation is a challenge, it is also an invitation. (p. 5)

The following three constellations are representations of alternative education tutor lived experiences as pedagogues. These poems are perceived, as much as read.

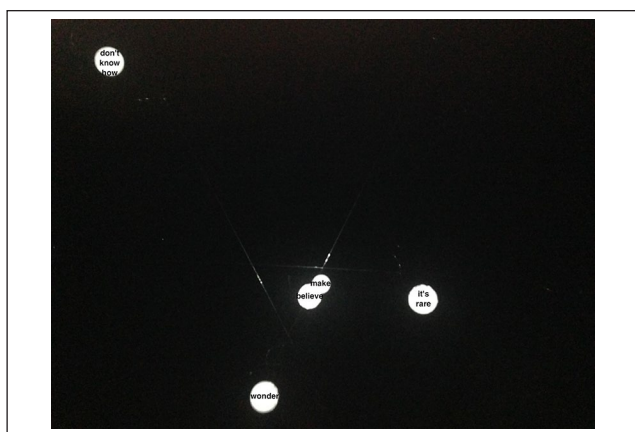
Essences of grace



Essences of epiphany



Essences of mystery



Can Concrete Poetry Take Flight?

Concrete poetry creates space where data performs its meaning on the page. In my research study with alternative education tutors in New Zealand, this enabled me to foster knowing-about tutors in different ways. The concrete poems potentially invite a wider audience, particularly those outside of the academic establishment. For example, I have witnessed tutors' engagement and curiosities when I have presented the constellation poems at alternative education training events. The constellations became a talking point. The poems were "a happening" (Rosenblatt, 1980, p. 386) and "an object of response" (Rosenblatt, 1986, p. 125). Therefore, the poet/researcher sets up the performance space, or the field of play, relinquishing ultimate control of the final performative outcome. The poem's meaning is co-created in the transaction between the poem and the reader/viewers. The concrete poem in research does not exist to capture what the researcher found, but to set that data free to generate new suggestions, wonderings, and questions in a performance of visual enactment.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Adrian Schoone  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7110-5016>

References

Bollobás, E. (1986). Poetry of visual enactment: The concrete poem. *Word & Image*, 2, 279-285. doi:10.1080/02666286.1986.10435350

- Brooking, K., Gardiner, B., & Calvert, S. (2009). *Background of students in alternative education: Interviews with a selected 2008 cohort*. Retrieved from <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/background-students-alternative-education-interviews-selected-2008-cohort>
- Butler-Kisber, L. (2010). *Qualitative inquiry: Thematic, narrative and arts-informed perspectives*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Clarke, J., Febraro, A., Hatzipantelis, M., & Nelson, G. (2005). Poetry and prose: Telling the stories of formerly homeless mentally ill people. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11, 913-932. doi:10.1177/1077800405278772
- Cobbing, B., & Mayer, P. (1978). *Concerning concrete poetry*. London, England: Writers Forum.
- Davidson, I. (2004). Visual poetry as performance. *Performance Research*, 9, 99-107.
- Draper, R. (1971). Concrete poetry. *New Literary History*, 2, 329-340.
- Education Review Office. (2011). *Alternative education: Schools and providers*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.
- Glesne, C. (1997). That rare feeling: Re-presenting research through poetic transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, 202-222. doi:10.1177/107780049700300204
- Gomringer, E. (1968). *The book of hours and constellations*. New York, NY: Something Else Press.
- Lahman, M. K. E., Teman, E. D., & Richard, V. M. (2019). IRB as poetry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25, 200-214. doi:10.1177/1077800417744580
- Langley, J. (2009). Submissions from the youth justice independent advisory group: Alternative education. *Court in the Act: A Regular Newsletter for the Entire Youth Justice Community*, 42, 6-7.
- McHughes, J. (1977). The poesis of space: Prosodic structures in concrete poetry. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 63, 168-179. doi:10.1080/00335637709383377
- Meyer, M. (2017). Concrete research poetry: A visual representation of metaphor. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2, 32-57. doi:10.18432/R2KS6F
- Perloff, M. (2014). The palpable word: The one hundred sonnets. In P. Vergne & Y. Raymond (Eds.), *Carl Andre: Sculpture as place, 1958-2010* (pp. 289-297). New York, NY: Dia Art Foundation.
- Prendergast, M., Leggo, C., & Sameshima, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Reznikoff, C. (2015). *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915)*. Lincoln, NE: David R. Godine.
- Richardson, L. (1992). The consequences of poetic representation: Writing the other, rewriting the self. In C. Ellis & M. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 125-137). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1980). What facts does this poem teach you? *Language Arts*, 57, 386-394.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1986). The aesthetic transaction. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 20, 122-128. doi:10.2307/3332615
- Sameshima, P., Fidyk, A., James, K., & Leggo, C. (Eds.). (2017). *Poetic inquiry: Enchantment of place*. Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press.
- Schoone, A. (2015). *Constellations of alternative education tutor essences: A phenomenological poetic inquiry* (Unpublished

- PhD thesis, University of Auckland, New Zealand). Retrieved from <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/27374>
- Schoone, A. (2017). The making of Maximus: A poetic and performative experience that keeps creating. In L. Butler-Kisber, J. Yallop, M. Stewart, & S. Wiebe (Eds.), *Poetic inquiries of reflection and renewal* (pp. 203-213). Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Canada: MacIntyre Purcell Publishing Inc.
- Schoone, A. (2019). An Ekphrastic review of Ilona Pappene Demecs and Evonne Miller's "Woven narratives: A craft encounter with tapestry weaving in a residential ages care facility." *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 4, 429-432. doi:10.18432/ari29457
- Schwartzman, R. (2002). Poeticizing scholarship. *American Communication Journal*, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol6/iss1/special/schwartzman.htm>
- Solt, M. (1970). Concrete poetry. *Books Abroad*, 44, 421-425. doi:10.2307/40124559
- Thomas, S., Cole, A., & Stewart, S. (Eds.). (2012). *The art of poetic inquiry*. Big Tancook Island, Nova Scotia, Canada: Backalong Books.
- Yallop, J., Wiebe, S., & Faulkner, S. (2014). Poetic inquiry in/for/as (editorial for special issue on the practices of poetic inquiry). *In Education*, 20(2), 1-11.

Author Biography

Adrian Schoone lectures in inclusive education, alternatives in education, and the arts at the School of Education in Auckland University of Technology (AUT), Auckland, New Zealand. In 2015, he completed New Zealand's first poetic inquiry-based PhD in education.