

## Poetic Inquiry and its Lyrical Potential for Research

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### Abstract

Including both discursive and lyrical inquiry as complementary sides of research and education, educational poetics is a way of re-imagining education that creates greater critical awareness of and ethical responsibility for our learning processes and inspires learners to employ their human potential for imagination and critical thinking to revise and remake "common sense."

*Keywords:* education; educational poetics; pedagogy; poetic inquiry; the lyrical



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Although social scientists and educational researchers have long used poetry in their research, poetry has increasingly gained importance over the last four decades. A flourishing community of poetic inquirers has formed since the First International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry in 2007, organized by educational researchers and poets Monica Prendergast and Carl Leggo. As a member of this thriving community, I have presented my formulation of poetic inquiry in my PhD dissertation *Poetic Inquiry: A Responsive Methodology in Research and Education* (Shidmehr, 2014) supervised by Dr. Leggo. My educational background in philosophy and theatre led me to theorize poetic inquiry as a dramatic play, similar to those of ancient Greece that included a chorus that performed in response to the main action. This conception of inquiry reconnects Western thought to a time before Plato had banished poets from the sites of inquiry and education.

In this article, I emphasize the lyric qualities of poetry and explore the epistemic and aesthetic potentialities of lyricism for research. I will demonstrate how the lyrical-performative side of poetry works in research by portraying research as a theatre of inquiry that includes the researcher as the actor, the research community as the audience, and the researcher-as-poet as the chorus. I will also review the history of Western philosophy to show how and why the lyrical was dropped from the process of inquiry after Plato, and why we should re-include it in social and educational research. For this, I draw on the works of poets and philosophers such as Zwicky (1992, 1995, 2003) and Neilsen Glenn (2002, 2008, 2010, 2012), who have written extensively on the importance of the lyrical in knowing and education.

The reason why I conceptualize poetic inquiry as a dramatic play is because the lyrical quality of poetry and the potentialities it offers to research must be considered as important as its narrative structure and the possibilities narrative creates in research. These two sides create what Faulkner (2009) calls the aesthetic/epistemic dialectic of poetry-laden research. According to Leggo (2012), the lyrical or responsive part of the inquiry embodied in the simile of the chorus helps researchers to behave “attentively in the moment” (p. xiii). Further, Leggo (2012) points out, it helps the researcher, “to understand the past in terms of stories (they tell in the poems), just as [they] seek to understand the future in [those] stories” (p. xiii). By investing lyrical responsiveness in their stories, the researcher-poets give attentive significance to their presentation of those stories as research. They endow their inquiry with “renewed attentiveness” that gives the act of inquiry an ethical dimension. Gitlin and Peck (2005) think that poetry plays a similar role in their conceptualization of “educational poetics.” Poetry, they suggest, can give inquiry an ethical capacity because poetry “allows [inquiry] to move beyond static forms of knowledge that primarily reinforce commonsense and an ‘is’ orientation” (Gitlin & Peck, 2005, p. 37). In my view, this capacity lies in the lyrical responsiveness of poetry, which enables one to connect the “is” with the “ought” in one’s research. The “ought” here is an ethical ought, and by adding it to the epistemological process of knowledge-making in social and educational inquiry, the researcher adds what Gitlin and Peck (2005) call “critical dreaming” (p. 26).

Critical dreaming, a sort of foreseeing, is the “potential to see anew, to look through and beyond the past in thinking about acting on the future” (Gitlin & Peck, 2005, p. 26). Critical dreaming facilitates research because it enables us to “to act on the world in...response-able thus responsible ways” (Gitlin & Peck, 2005, p. 38). Critical dreaming is the potential that the lyrical part of poetry can induce in research. Therefore, because of its lyrical side, poetry opens

representation into its potentiality and offers representational activity an opportunity to be more than mere narrative-making activity. In other words, lyrical responsiveness is a potential that integrates the representational forms of inquiry. Faulkner (2009) draws the same idea from Faulkner's (2009) explanation of lyric inquiry as a form of inquiry "with the goal of creating relationship between that of the knower and known embodies by ethical engagement" (p. 17). Faulkner (2009) concludes:

Therefore, poetry may be considered a "special language," a language that researchers want to access when they feel that other modes of representation will not capture what they desire to show about their work and research participants (Faulkner, 2005), when they wish to explore knowledge claims and write with more engagement and connection (Denzin, 1997; Pelia, 2005; L. Richardson, 1997a), when the researcher's story intersects or entwines with research participants' lives (Behar, 2008; Krizek, 2003), to mediate different understandings (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2007; Leggo, 2008a), and to reach more diverse audiences (L. Richardson, 2002). (p. 17)

The power of lyric poetry, in Faulkner's (2009) opinion rests in the fact that lyric poetry "represents actual experiences in such a way that the distance between self and other blurs and others experience and feel 'episodes, epiphanies, misfortunes, pleasures'" (p. 24). This is why poetry in the context of research, either as the data, the representation of data, or the analysis of data, works like a chorus of inquiry through responsiveness. Through lyrical responsiveness, the researcher-as-poet reinvents experience. Following Becker (1995), Faulkner (2009) explains that through lyrical responsiveness the researcher-poet combine "'the real and ideal, the concrete and abstract' as a way to depict simultaneity, being 'old and young at once' and 'inside and outside personal experience'" (p. 71). Responsiveness is performed through the reflexivity of the researcher-as-poet or researcher-as-the-chorus-of-inquiry.

To Leggo (2008a, 2008b) and Neilsen Glenn (2008), the lyrical responsiveness of poetry originates in the aesthetic quality of the poetry's language. Poetic language draws attention to the poetic functions of language and reminds us that "everything is constructed in language; our experiences are all epistemologically and ontologically composed and understood in words, our words and other's words" (Leggo, 2008a, p. 166). Hence, through paying attention to words, as the researcher conducts the research and creates representations, she or he addresses himself or herself in a way a chorus addresses the protagonist on the stage and asks, "How do I know what I know?" (p. 166). The question demands a response and creates responsiveness. Therefore, the lyrical-performative or aesthetic quality of poetry opens inquiry to all kinds of responses: "to process, to mystery, to fragmentations and understanding because there is much we don't know and can't possibly know and control" (Leggo, 2008a p. 168). The audience or academic research community is an important part of research imagined as a dramatic play of inquiry: "By calling upon artful ways of knowing and being in the world, [poetic inquirers as] arts-based researchers make a rather audacious challenge to the dominant, entrenched academic community and its claims to scientific ways of knowing" (Finley, 2008, p.72).

To understand the importance of including poetry as a viable arts-based way of knowing, I will now discuss why Plato ousted poetry from the sites of inquiry, and how poetry as a chorus of inquiry remained at the margins of academic research through modernity. This brief discussion helps to tease out just how indispensable the lyrical side of the poetry is for social and

educational inquiry today. Because the lyrical is the responsive dimension of inquiry, it can potentially incite accountability of our research aimed at creating representations of phenomena. By adding aesthetic intensity to inquiry, lyricism can offer the potentialities of “coherence and enactive complexity” (Zwicky, 1995).

### **The Inclusion of Poetry and Re-acknowledgement of the Lyrical in the Realm of Inquiry**

Poetic inquiry re-establishes poetry in research. Poets were expelled from serious inquiry by Plato at the beginning of the Western “re-search for Truth.” Poetic inquiry provides for a “hybrid” form of inquiry, which can also be employed in education, called by Gitlin and Peck (2005) “educational politics.” The hybrid includes a heterogeneous combination of multiple modes of inquiry including the representational and the lyrical. Poetic inquiry is thus a research methodology, a way of being-expressing-inquiring that heralds and fosters diversity, heterogeneity, and multidisciplinary in all activities that involve knowing or knowledge making. Poetic inquiry is a form of research that re-acknowledges the lyrical.

Poetic inquiry challenges the disregard Plato had for the lyrical side of inquiry. Plato thought that poetry, because of its lyrical qualities, was a hindrance for the true knowledge-making activity, which he called *epistēmē*, which involves construction of correct names, *orthotēs onomatōn*, for contemplated Forms of things (Levin, 2001, p. 13). For Plato, true epistemological activity has the status of *technē*, a status that poetry lacks because poetry does not yield “correctness in assignment” of names to things (Levin, 2001, p. 84). Plato rejects pre-Socratic philosophers, especially the sophists, for the same reason even though he shares “a common literary heritage” with them (Levin, 2001, p. 46). This heritage is the lyrical heritage presented by poets. Plato sees the lyrical as a challenge to knowledge-making because he is afraid that the lyrical qualities of inquiry can awaken the activity of episteme, which Plato believes to be based on customs, laws, and conventions, its aporetic dimension, and eventually transform *technē* to something else, to a false representation of “Form” (Plato, 1997, p. 89). By bringing poetry back into research, restoring its importance, and re-acknowledging the lyrical side of inquiry, the researcher-poet reconnects present methods of research to their pre-Socratic, lyrical roots. Plato’s dismissal of poets from creating *epistēmē* marks the banishment of the lyrical side of discourse from philosophy that pre-Socratic thought welcomed. This separation, as Zwicky (1995) indicates, “seeks to establish the hegemony of the logico-mathematical intellect” (p. 76). Further, Zwicky (1995) writes, “Unlike Plato, they [pre-Socratics] were not in business to reorder and convince” (p. 71).

Most importantly, according to Zwicky (1995), pre-Socratic philosophizing is mainly verbal with a lyrical form or lyrical coherence. As Zwicky (1995) notes,

[lyrical resonance] is a function of the attunement of various distinct components. It thus requires an open structure with distinct elements or distinct axes of experience which stand in a non-linear relation to one another. Being drawn apart, it is brought together with itself. (p. 77)

That is why the philosophy of the pre-Socratics “may assume lyric form when thought whose eros is clarity is driven by profound intuitions of coherence” (Zwicky, 1995, p. 77).

An understanding of what attunement and coherence mean to a lyrical form of inquiry hinges on an understanding of Zwicky’s (1995) notion of lyric thinking and of what the lyrical

quality of poetry can offer research. In Zwicky's formulation of lyric, resonance is the main feature of the lyrical side of poetry. Neilsen Glenn (2010) describes resonance within poetry in the following way:

Resonance. We can look to Japanese haiku masters for images of flower petals thrumming in the wake of a bell's ringing. We can think of the Hindu god, Indra, and the bejeweled net, each intersection marked by a jewel that reflects all other jewels in an infinite relational resonance that marks, according to Hindu belief, our connections to each other and the world. (p. 6)

While representational thinking works with association of words based on meaning, lyrical thinking presented in poetry "moves by association of images. It has been described as an attempt to make the space "around" actual sounds, words, or lines resonant. As an evocation of presence, lyric is an attempt to comprehend the whole in a single gesture" (Zwicky, 1992, p. 73). Lyrical thinking is a form of intuition in which the inquirer consciously gains access to feelings and images "found in pre-verbal children, and in the wordless energies of each person's unconscious" (Lee, 2010, p. 19). Through this access, the inquirer becomes able to organize experience "independent of language" (p. 20). Such organization, according to Zwicky (1992), has the qualities of coherence and integrity. As Lee (2010) explains,

The kind of coherence Zwicky [is] taking as her paradigm of meaning [is] fundamentally a-linguistic, then. It [has] more in common with auditory harmonics, spatial pattern, and gestural flow than with the structure of logically consistent verbal statements, as dissected in analytic philosophy. (p. 21)

In analytical thinking, the inquirer proceeds by two main actions: breaking wholes into parts and adding parts to form wholes. In lyric thinking, however, the inquirer "perceives particulars in such a way that their resonant unity is grasped in an instant of recognition. We don't deduce meaning sequentially; we *get* it, as our mental set clicks into phase with its overall shape" (Lee, 2010, p. 21). We should note that, "while the catalyst for [this] recognition may be words, both the recognition and the coherence remain extra-verbal," thus non-representational (p. 22). In lyric inquiry "we often experience meaning as a form of resonance. Things *mean* when they're attuned as an ensemble" (Lee, 2010, p. 21).

### **The Continuance of the Absence of Poetry in Research Through Modern Times: An Advocacy for the Return of the Lyric by Arts-based Researchers**

This Aristotelian-Cartesian-Kantian methodology of analysis has dominated academic research until a few decades ago. Technocratic culture, entrenched in academia since modernity, has further narrowed the scope of "true" rational activity to one that is instrumental and serves a financial interest. As a result, "[w]hat we have left of European philosophy before Aristotle is, on the whole, lyric" which has been for the most part disregarded in the dominant traditions of academic research (Zwicky, 1995, p. 76). Additionally, the conception of good, valid scientific research is rooted in a romantic attitude,

characterized fundamentally by the claim that there is an absolute distinction between an activity it calls "Art" and another it calls "Science", and that this distinction carries normative weight. (Whether it's "Art" that's flaky (and "Science" that's true), or "Science" that's pernicious (and "Art" that's sublime) is irrelevant). (p. 74)

Romantics took for granted that poetry is an irrational activity. That is why they did not question “the institutionalization of the intellect in a way that excludes the possibility of its taking lyric form” (Zwicky, 1995, p. 78). In the same gesture, they did not call “into question the institutionalization of poetry as an activity that excludes the possibility of conceptual content” (Zwicky, 1995, p. 79).

Neither Enlightenment scholars of education who established public and mass education, nor the moderns nor the technocrats of our time have invited the lyrical dismissed by Plato back to the realm of inquiry. Romantics also had their reasons for extending the disregard of the chorus: poetry was irrational, which to them was a value. As Sanger (2010) writes, “the logico-analytic school of middle-European and Anglo-American philosophical school of thinking...was prime orthodoxy throughout the twentieth century and...still actively and aggressively survives” (Sanger, 2010, p. 10).

However, critics of modernist epistemology, including poststructuralists and critical theorists, have prepared the scene to include the chorus in the dramatic play of inquiry. They have done so by showing their concern not only with “what there is to know” but also with “what they [poets] know they almost know, what they have yet to know, and what it is likely they will never know” (Sanger, 2010, p. 8). The lyrical quality of poetry addresses this concern because it goes beyond knowing and representing what there is to know and draws attention to the mystery and ineffability of things. Lyric also draws attention to the perishability of what there is in the world. As Zwicky (1992, as cited in Sanger, 2010) describes, “The gift of lyric is to see the whole in the particular; and in so doing, to bring the preciousness, which is the losability, of the world, into clear focus” (p. 302). That is why “lyric is lithe, ...poignant, and musical” (p. 15).

Besides preparing us for lyric inquiry in academic research, postmodern and critical thinkers have also prepared us for “educational poetics”—for bringing poetry into the process of knowledge-making within education (Gitlin & Peck, 2005). As Zwicky (1995) points out, the practice of inquiry through representation, argumentation, and analysis has predominantly been at the pinnacle of epistemological activity and at the center of our education until recently. As a result, poets and arts-based researchers have a major role in bringing the lyrical back into the process of inquiry, not only through academia but also through schools and other places of education. As a poetic inquirer, I also champion the return of the lyrical as a chorus of inquiry into the theatre of academic research and education.

### **A Poetic Conclusion**

As an example of my use of poetry in my research, I would like to end this paper with one of poems from my poetic inquiry on the process of immigrants’ identity formation in Canada.

#### **Illiteracy: A Poem by Nilofar Shidmerh**

For Robert Dziekanski to die  
 on the day of his landing in Vancouver  
 enough if he couldn’t speak it—  
 or read and write the tongue  
 that now animates  
 my mouth unconsciously.

What caught my eye  
were his legs, soundlessly  
quivering on the white floor.  
Mine still quiver too,  
even today fifteen years  
after the day I'd landed,  
every time my listeners hear  
only muteness  
on my accented lips.

The three police officers could not read  
the hands he half-raised  
before stepping back from the pointed guns  
that spoke in the same tongue  
as they did.

Even the electric current which passed  
through his body spoke  
in the same unbending words.

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