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Exploring the Power of Poetry for Fostering Critical Reflection: Adult Poetry Readers and Self-Reflexivity

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Abstract: *This paper summarizes the results of a study of 22 self-identified poetry readers. The project was designed to discover the reasons why adults read poetry, how the love of poetry was inspired, and what they learn from poetry. Through qualitative data analyses, findings indicate that through multiple reading strategies and reflective personal engagement with the prose, our participants construct changed and enhanced personal meaning in their lives. Implications on how poetry and embodied, emotional, and spiritual knowing can be effective learning resources for critical adult educators are provided.*

Background & Purpose

In 2002, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) called for the US Census Bureau to conduct a national survey focused on the literary reading of American adults. A central question on the survey asked if respondents had read any novels, short stories, poetry or plays in the previous twelve months, and if so, the number. Analyses suggested that participation in literary arts through reading is declining across all groups surveyed (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004). In particular, less than half of the respondents reported reading literature of any kind, compared to 59% who reported reading literature in a similar survey in 1982. The decline was steepest for younger adults (ages 18-34) whose literary reading rate decreased to only 43% in 2002.

A decline in a variety of reading practices across adult age groups is a call to action to the field of adult education. Certainly, engagement in the literary arts can affect readers in powerful ways. Paulo Freire, in his work with adult literacy and social action against oppression in Brazil, argues that not only is literacy required to participate in a democratic society, but it is a crucial tool with which to critically examine social and political structures in order to bring about equitable change (1993). Likewise, Jones (1985) argues that through reading poetry, “we can feel the political realities of our existence and reclaim the opportunity to make the choices demanded of us by our lives” (p. 16). Indeed for many adult students, their lived experiences have been influenced by political realities that have limited their choices, encumbered their possibilities, and hampered their progress. Learning to read and love poetry is a powerful way to facilitate literacy skills acquisition, lifelong learning participation, foster adult identity development, and to increase political, social, and global consciousness.

Those who love poetry know the evocative cognitive and affective experiences this art form can arouse. The purpose of this research, therefore, was to discover how self-professed adult poetry readers came to love poetry, why they love poetry, the strategies they use to read poetry, and in what ways poetry affects their lives today. We hoped to glean insight from their experiences that could influence future adult education instructional practices. We highlight the intersection between critical adult and poetry education research, describe our data gathering and analysis procedures, and discuss the findings. We then make a case for the need for critical educators to add these experiences to their curricular cache.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

We begin our discussion by embedding the reading of poetry into the broader context of adult literary reading. Dana Gioia, Chairman of the NEA, argues that literary reading holds value for society as a whole:

Reading is obviously related to the literacy of a nation, which in turn is related to the quality of life of its citizens. If literacy is the baseline for participation in social life, then reading—and reading of literary works in particular—is essential to a sound and healthy understanding of, and participation in, a democratic society (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004, p. 1).

Individuals turn to novels, short stories and poetry for a variety of reasons. They read for pleasure, for escape through vicarious experiences, and for insights into themselves and the human experience. Kinsella (2007) emphasizes, literary arts can “foster moral exploration and awareness about social and relational issues” (p. 41). She also argues that such reading offers adults “new ways of seeing, grasping new meanings, changes in consciousness, transformative dimensions, and praxis” (pp. 41-42).

Poetry, in specific, requires the use of many literacy skills. Barrell (1988) contends, “A poem employs all the resources of language—imagery and other figurative devices, ambiguity, the pattern of sound by rhythm, rhyme, alliterations and so on—in such a way as makes them signifiers of [an] experience” (p. 1). Poetry also demands metaphorical reflection, which is based upon inferential thinking and critical analysis and is central to understanding our experiences in today’s complex society (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In addition, Lawrence (2008, pp. 41-42) asserts that poetry allows for the “letting go of technical rationality [that] frees us to make space for sensory imagery in a world dominated by cognitive processes.” Attending to the many ways of knowing provides for a deeper learning experience by helping adults make meaning of their everyday lives (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) and sometimes even leading to life-altering, critical self-reflexivity and transformational learning (Chapman, 2005).

However, research has shown that the benefits of reading poetry expand beyond just the individual. Newman (2006) argues that poetry and metaphor can be utilized to promote activism, facilitate insight, and teach students to “critically examine what has been published on [a] question and establish where existing knowledge can be corrected or enhanced” (p. 189). Poetry helps us to see and experience life through different perspectives, which is an essential component of participating in an active, multicultural democracy.

Accordingly, Brookfield’s (2005) notion of “critical pragmatism” frames the study. In this paradigm, pragmatism is “the flexible pursuit of beautiful consequences” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 16). Like Cornel West (1999, p. 151), we “understand pragmatism as a political form of cultural criticism and locate politics in the everyday experience of ordinary people.” As critical educators, through this lens we recognize the social and political injustices inherent in the U.S. educational system and seek ways through adult education to defy the hegemony of an inequitable system that supports the status quo. We believe critical literacy and the recognition of hegemony are essential for effective citizenship in a democratic society. As critical educators, it is our responsibility to address this very practical reality in meaningful ways.

Hooks (1989, p. 111) argues that educators should “work to link personal narratives with knowledge of how we must act politically to change and transform the world.” Learning to read and learn through poetry may be a path towards linking knowledge which is both personal and

political. The “beautiful consequences” of informed, reflective social action resulting from literacy and literary reading may represent one constructive way to transform the world.

Research Design

We chose a qualitative design for this investigation and employed a semi-structured interview methodology. The participants were 22 adult, self-identified lovers of poetry. Among colleagues, social acquaintances, and university students, we sought individuals who identified themselves as lovers of poetry and who expressed a willingness to be interviewed. Ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-60s, participants included seven Language Arts professionals, five classroom teachers, one principal, five non-educator professionals, and four preservice teachers. Five participants were male and 17 were female.

The interview protocol was focused around these central questions:

- *How did you learn to love poetry?:* What experiences led to your love of poetry? How did your school experiences impact your love of poetry?
- *Why do you love poetry?:* What do you love about poetry? When do you turn to poetry? What types of poetry do you read?
- *How do you engage with poetry now?:* How do you read poetry? How does reading poetry compare to reading other genres? How does it affect you?

We provided the protocol to the participants two weeks prior to the individual interviews, which were audio-taped and transcribed. Data analysis then occurred in multiple phases (Patton, 1990). All transcriptions were read individually by the researcher team who made margin notations. Then, using constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the team compared notations for each area of interest to identify recurring patterns across the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Finally, for each area of focus, we provided a detailed description of patterns found across the data.

Findings

Analysis revealed the love of poetry to be a learned endeavor. Three overarching themes structure our findings.

Learning to Love Poetry is Socially Influenced through Formal and Informal Educational Experiences

Almost all participants identified one or more individuals who inspired their love for poetry in formal and informal settings. Nine remembered an influential teacher; one recalled her fifth grade teacher: “Her spirit is still very much a part of my essence and my being.” Others offered stories about interactions with friends and parents. One participant suggested it was her father who inspired her love of poetry: “I can still remember my father reading Bobby Burns to us. Because our family’s heritage is Welsh, he could actually read in the right brogue, and it was so beautiful.” Additionally, six interviewees identified a friend as influential; one said, “My friend loved poetry, and he was the one that turned me on to it.”

In these interpersonal encounters, our participants learned to value poetry through the interaction of the oral presentation. Half said they learned to love poetry by listening to poems being read aloud by an effective reader. One recalled,

I remember the *Highwayman* and how she [my mother] read it with such passion. I remember just staring at those pictures by the hour and being struck by the great love of the woman in the poem. That was over 40 years ago, but I can still feel it.

Another participant remembered her teacher reading orally: “Mrs. Morrison in high school would read *The Raven*....A rather homely looking woman, but when she read, you’d think you were listening to a queen.”

Social interaction through poetry reading also included writing one’s own poetry and sharing it with eager and engaged teachers and friends, memorizing and “performing” poetry, and analyzing poems for their underlying social meanings. The interactions between people and poetry became opportunities to engage with the prose in meaningful and exciting ways – ways in which adults do not always have the opportunity with other literary forms.

Learning to Love Poetry as an Embodied, Emotional, and Spiritual Engagement

The data indicate our participants have developed impassioned relationships with poetry. They related stories of embodied, emotional, and spiritual experiences they have when engaging in the reading. Seven of the informants cited visual imagery. One offered, “I love the images that are evoked as I’m thinking about [the poem].” Nine suggested the sounds, rhythm, and rhymes poetry offers are specifically appealing to them. One suggested, “I can go back and sort of savor...the language... it’s like a song,” and another said, “I read it out loud because the words are so powerful. I like to hear them reverberate off the walls.” Sixteen of the participants identified the “richness of the language” used, and their descriptions were metaphorical in *gastronomic* comparisons: “If it’s good poetry, they choose their words with such care that ...they feel good in your mouth.” One even described poetry as a good sauce: “I think poetry condenses. Like when you make a sauce and you boil it down...boiling down to the essence, not just stirring.”

In explaining why they loved poetry, 19 participants discussed the expressive and emotional impact of a good poem. One interviewee suggested, “You can just cram all your emotions, feelings into a few words and get your point across—it’s condensed,” while another offered, “I love the fact that poetry reaches into everybody’s heart.”

Reading poetry is a personal affair, as well. Twelve participants spoke of poetry as a refuge, as an interior pleasure or a personal escape, and eight participants referred to the inspiration and spiritual uplifting they felt while reading poetry. Poetry helped these participants understand their own emotions when circumstances left them feeling a need for comfort. It became clear that the genre’s emotion-laden images and symbolic language guided them through “the psychic dilemmas that are often associated with the movement and the journey of self” (Dirkx, 2006, p. 20) that are instrumental in critical reflection and transformational learning.

Specific Strategies and Continued Engagement Allow for Critical Analysis of the Adult Readers’ Lived Experiences

Our participants engaged with poetry in specific ways to connect personally with the poem. Their metacognitive use of particular engagement strategies was often systematically organized and reflective, an approach that signifies the “beautiful dance of inductive and deductive forms of learning” (Vella, 2002, p. 14).

The participants mentioned several different reading strategies. Over half (13) read and reread the poem. During rereading, they reported attending to poetic text features, such as imagery and rhythm and also varying the pace of their reading, with one-fourth of the respondents acknowledging that they read poetry more slowly than other genres. One participant explained, “I usually read one line and then think about it and then go to the next line and think

about it...to get more out of it.” Another reread poetry backward, line-by-line, “to get into rhythm and rhyme and how it’s supposed to feel.”

Our poetry lovers (11 of 22) also indicated reading aloud helps them concentrate and think during the reading. In doing so, they specifically attend to textual features including word choice, shape, punctuation, and line breaks. One participant explained, “I read it out loud and as clear as I can to get the clear emotions from the words.” Still another shared that by reading aloud, “It’s almost like a performance, because it makes such a difference in the understanding of the poetry itself.” Others felt strongly about reading silently to focus on the meaning. These readers fully attend to the poem by using specific reading strategies. They are looking for the meaning through their own connections and are playing with the prose to discover meaning that is personal, enlightening, instructive, and “powerful.”

The respondents also focused on reflective practices for constructing meaning when reading poetry—practices used during and after reading a poem. For example, some stop throughout the reading to reflect: “I usually read one line and then think about it and then go to the next line and think about it.” Others prefer space between the reading and reflection: “If it’s really good poetry, I probably spend more time thinking about it afterwards and even during the rereading. Sometimes it opens itself up to a lot more kinds of interpretations.”

Systematic approaches to reading, thinking, and reflecting are in place for these readers. For example, one participant offered her style,

I think the first time I’m hearing it in my head. Then I’m thinking, “What is it saying?, and then, “Why did he make it say that?” “How does this work?” When I come back to the poem, it’s not nearly as conscious. I skip those steps and go for the memories of what this means.

In summary, the respondents use specific reading strategies including rereading, both reading aloud and silently, breaking poems apart, and playing with the reading pace. These strategies enable them to invoke embodied responses through reflective, meaning-making processes. Our participants intentionally engage in the process of connecting their own experiences with the poems they read.

These strategies aided our participants in continued engagement with poetry and helped them tap into poetry’s power to inspire critical analysis of their lived experiences. Several participants spoke of seeking out poetry during difficult life transitions. Reading poetry helped them “consider a life problem and seek a solution.” Another talked of turning to poetry “when I thought there was an injustice somewhere.”

Reading poetry for one of the women was described as being “like having a third person in the house,” which helped her to question and to reflect. As one participant put it, “There are more ‘aha!’ moments in reading poetry.” One respondent suggested, “[Poetry] causes you to feel euphoria, or despair, or ready to crusade for something.” Another participant described poetry as “provocative and political” which can “get people thinking and make a political statement.” He continued to explain, “[poetry makes me] think about my own feelings and my own thoughts and my own life.” He went on to claim that “Poets can be incredible activists.”

Participant use of words like *crusade*, *provocative*, *activist*, *political*, and *spiritual*, reinforce Newman’s (2006) suggestion that adult educators should use inspirational poetry as an aid to teaching activism and social justice to adult learners. As Dirx (2006) explains, when adults “take seriously the responsibility of developing a more conscious relationship with the unconscious dimensions of our being, [they] enter into a profoundly transformative, life-

changing process” (p. 19). For some participants, poetry appeared to be an avenue for exploring those unconscious dimensions.

Discussion and Implications for Adult Education

The findings hold important implications for adult learning and teaching: (1) understanding how to facilitate meaningful embodied experiences that support and encourage the reading and appreciation of poetry, (2) acknowledging alternative ways of knowing beyond the cognitive, and (3) using poetry in critical adult education for transformative learning outcomes. We argue that including poetry in general adult learning settings offers learners opportunities to consume and construct a literary genre that lends itself beautifully to desired critical outcomes, because it has a potential to evoke passions that can lead to embodied learning and perspective transformation. Poetry can spur adult readers to action and to make meaning in their lives. Data analysis revealed that the poetry readers in this study have a deep understanding of the whole person experience reading poetry can offer—the rich language, metaphorical descriptions, the embodied imagery, emotions, and spirituality of the genre. Adults need opportunities to come to understand and appreciate the craft of poetry and the rich multi-sense experience its language tenders. We argue that this full-bodied engagement with the art of poetry can be a useful tool in effectively facilitating both a love of reading as well as critical reflection in adult learning settings.

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