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Poetry in Higher Education: An Investigation into its Potential
for Fostering Student Engagement

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Abstract

Student engagement in higher education is a widely discussed, and at times widely defined topic. Interpreting student engagement to be the extent to which students feel as though they belong to the University community, this study investigates how poetry collectives might be used to foster such engagement. An action research case study of such a collective, Poetry in Practice, is used to demonstrate how this might work in practice. In this study detailed field notes and semi-structured interviews with some of the participating students were used to investigate its relative effectiveness. Poetry in Practice was run over two terms with a small group of students from Manchester Metropolitan University. The students met on a regular basis, and were encouraged to read, write and share poetry. Some of the findings of this study were that the students attended these sessions mainly for intrinsic motivation, that they found them to be a place of refuge, and that the group dynamics changed once an extrinsic motivation was introduced. The outcomes of this study suggest that such an approach could be successful in building a community to which students feel as though they belong, but care must be taken to ensure that there is a consistency in the epistemological standings of such a community, and that the role of the more knowledgeable other is not underestimated.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the result of many months of study, practice, analysis and reflection. It is something that I am extremely proud of, and which has ultimately helped to shape and develop my own learning and teaching practices. It has also enabled me to further consider the role that poetry plays in both my professional and personal lives. None of this would have been possible without the superb tutelage of my supervisors, Professor Mark Langan and Dr Charles Neame, both of whom I am greatly indebted to. Their great encouragement, academic integrity, and personal kindness have helped to shape my research into the dissertation that you are now reading.


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Finally, I would like to thank my family and my wife (by the time of reading) for all of their support, and for providing me with enough poetry to last a lifetime.

Statement of Ownership

I certify

1. that this Dissertation/Project is my own account, based upon work actually carried out by me and that all sources of material, not resulting from my own investigation, including observational information, have been clearly indicated.
2. that no part of the work incorporated in the Dissertation/Project is a quotation from published or unpublished sources, except where it has been clearly acknowledged as such, and that any specific direction or advice received is also properly acknowledged.



Signed.....

SAM ILLINGWORTH

1. Introduction

This introduction presents the context of the issue that is to be discussed in the remainder of the dissertation. It also defines some key terms and sets out the main aims of the study. The structure of this dissertation is such that there is no chapter devoted entirely to a literature review, but rather key texts are referenced and discussed throughout.

Student engagement in the context of higher education is defined by Astin (1984, pp. 297) as:

“The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience.”

Nowadays, however, rather than being focussed on the academic experience in its entirety, the word engagement appears to be more concerned with the energies that students invest in activities that are important to academic success (see e.g. Kuh, 2009, Junco et al., 2011). Despite this apparent shift in focus, a number of recent studies have found disengagement at university to be linked to many things outside of purely academic situations; for example social class, peer pressure, etc. (see e.g. James et al., 2010, Dean and Jolly, 2012, Baron and Corbin, 2012, Kahu, 2013). Given these disparities in perception, it is not surprising that there are many definitions of the term ‘student engagement’ in the literature (see Trowler, 2010). For the purposes of this study a single definition is used, chosen to reflect the university experience as a whole, rather than just a consideration of academic

accomplishment, and inspired by the work done by Read et al. (2003) in their discussion of student belonging at a post-1992 university:

“The degree to which students feel as though they belong to the University community.”

There are many examples of using activities within the formal learning environment to improve student engagement in an academic context. For example, authors such as Zhao and Kuh (2004) examine the benefits that establishing strong learning communities can have on student academic performance. Meanwhile Addison et al. (2009) examine how ‘clickers’ can be used by students to improve student engagement within a classroom setting (in this instance a biochemistry class). Similarly, Malandrino et al. (2014) investigate how quizzes can be used to improve student participation within the classroom, but all of these studies are focussed on student engagement within the classroom. My argument, as well as that of others such as James et al. (2010) and Baron and Corbin (2012), is that the University community extends well beyond the walls of the classroom and that more needs to be done to investigate student engagement in these environments.

Summerlee (2010) talks about the use of community engagement and citizenship to foster student engagement *outside* of the classroom, concluding that in order to do this successfully there is a need to broaden the current approach to university education. This approach is in line with the work by Kahu (2013), and is sympathetic to the definition of student engagement that has been adopted for this study. The key to fostering this sense of belonging would then seem to be in the careful selection, and implementation, of suitable

activities to encourage community engagement and citizenship. Ideally such an approach would allow students to feel a part of the wider University community.

Poetry has the potential to build communities and provide shelter for people who otherwise feel isolated. For example, Robinson (2004) talks about how she was able to use poetry as a method of spiritual and mental healing in her role as a community nurse working in palliative care. Likewise, Furman et al. (2004) investigated how poetry can be used in community practice, exploring how it can be used to foster community development and positive change. Other community engagement projects that utilize poetry include the Talking Wellness projects (Chung et al., 2006), which are designed to develop social capital and enhance community engagement in the African-American community, encouraging participants to reduce the stigma around depression by talking about it. As well as film and photography they also use poetry to develop a collaborative relationship within the communities and beyond them.

Poetry has also been used to promote social justice (see e.g. Cohen and Mullender, 2006, Foster, 2012), with poetry groups helping participants to address issues of disengagement and helplessness in positive and actionable methods. Furthermore, poetry has been used to help explore issues of belonging, for example in the work done by Maeve (2000), who used poetry to help female prisoners confront memories of early childhood sexual and physical violence, thereby helping them to understand their own victimization. Holmes and Gregory (1998) also used poetry to help nurses connect with and explore their personal and professional histories. Within the context of higher education, there are examples of poetry being used to cope with stress and anxiety (Mohammadian et al., 2011), as well as instances

of poetry being used to improve presentational technique (Hoger, 2012) and to explore teacher-student relationships (Issitt and Issitt, 2010). However, to date there has been scant research done into the use of poetry within higher education to address student disengagement. The aim of this study is thus to address this gap in the literature, by posing the following research question:

How can poetry groups be used to foster a sense of belonging amongst university students?

Chapter 2 outlines the research paradigm that has been adopted for this study, in order to address these research question, and gives a detailed account of the rationale for the remaining structure of this dissertation.

2. Constructing a Research Paradigm

Before describing the methodology that was used in this study, it is first necessary to consider how this methodology was selected. Therefore, it is conducive to briefly discuss the concept of epistemology, and its relevance to the understanding of this research. This chapter outlines in detail how an appropriate research paradigm for this study was decided upon.

Epistemology can be thought of as the different methodologies that are involved in determining that truth (i.e. the study of knowledge). In other words, it can be thought of as the method by which reality is captured (Carson et al., 2001), and the keystone on which all theoretical perspectives and methodologies adopted in a study must be built. Crotty (1998) outlines a useful framework for constructing a research paradigm from an assumed epistemological standpoint, as illustrated in Figure 1, which has been adapted for this study.

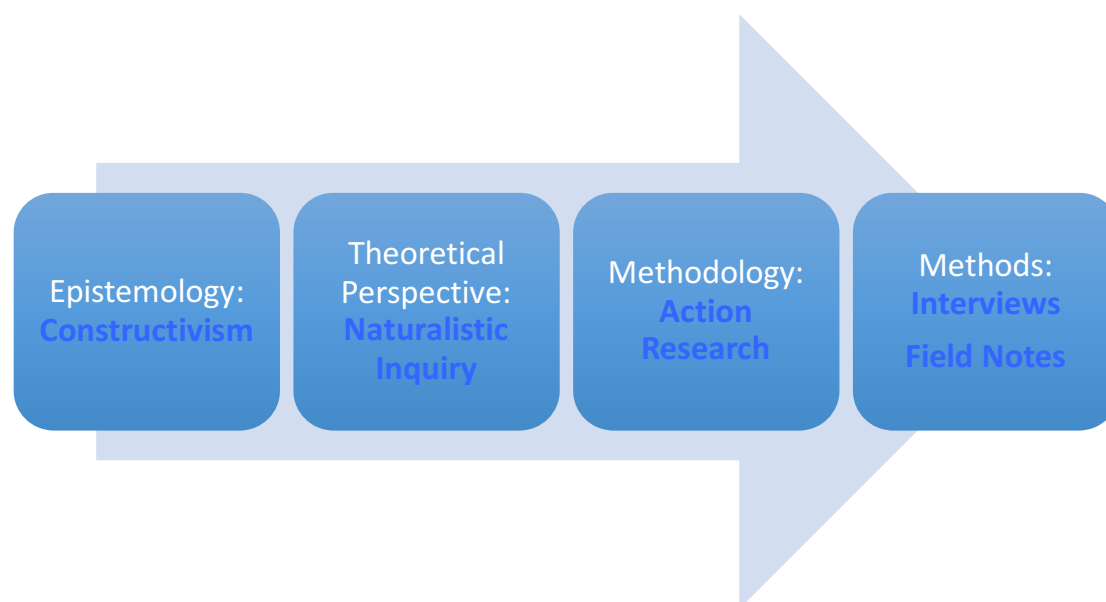


Figure 1: the intended research paradigm for this study. The words in white are the different elements outlined by Crotty (1998), and the words in blue are the approaches that were adopted at each of these steps for this study.

Constructivism is an epistemology that is strongly connected with experiential learning, assuming that meaning emerges from our engagement with the realities of the world as we perceive them to be, and is therefore actively constructed by the learner (Gijbels et al., 2006). Constructivism also proposes that learning does not take place in isolation, and that knowledge is socially constructed (Brockbank and McGill, 2007); this is thus a very appropriate epistemology to adopt, as the students will be explicitly involved in making sense of the world through their involvement in poetry groups. A constructivist, rather than a constructionist approach has been adopted. Constructionism tends to focus more on the objects that are created during the social interactions (Papert and Harel, 1991), whilst constructivism focuses on the learning that takes place because of these interactions. As this study is concerned with the students' engagement rather than the quality of any poetry that they might create, an epistemology based on constructivism rather than constructionism is an appropriate strategy to adopt.

A naturalistic inquiry is one that rather than attempting to generalize, instead develops a body of knowledge that describes an individual case (Gray, 2013). This concept is central to the whole ethos of this study, as it is hypothesized that part of the reason why some students do not feel a sense of belonging to a university is that they are not treated as individuals, and instead are expected to combat feelings of disengagement using one-size-

fits-all solutions. During the research process any information that is gained as a result of this study is tempered by the knowledge that it is only specific to this group of students at this particular time. Whilst general lessons and examples of best practices may be learned in the process, the underlying approach of the entire study will be to not generalize. It is also important to remember that naturalistic inquiry is research that focuses on how people behave when absorbed in genuine life experiences (Botan et al., 2000), and this must be taken into account in the design of the methodology.

Action research is a practitioner-based research that is a systematic inquiry into one's own practices (Mills, 2000), and which focuses specifically on the distinctive features of the population with whom some action must be taken (Mertler, 2013). Practitioners normally adopt this strategy of inquiry by identifying a problem in the course of their work, and investigating it so that they can propose changes to improve an existing situation (Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah, 2014). There are a number of different variants of the action research methodology, ranging from the 'look-think-act-repeat' spiral discussed by Stringer (2007) to the more detailed flow charts of Adamson (2008) and Riel (2010). The action research process can, in general terms, be summarized by the cycle shown in Figure 2. This process involves: identifying an issue and conducting a research plan (planning), collecting and analysing data (acting), formulating an action plan (developing) and reflecting on the process (reflecting), before beginning the cycle again.

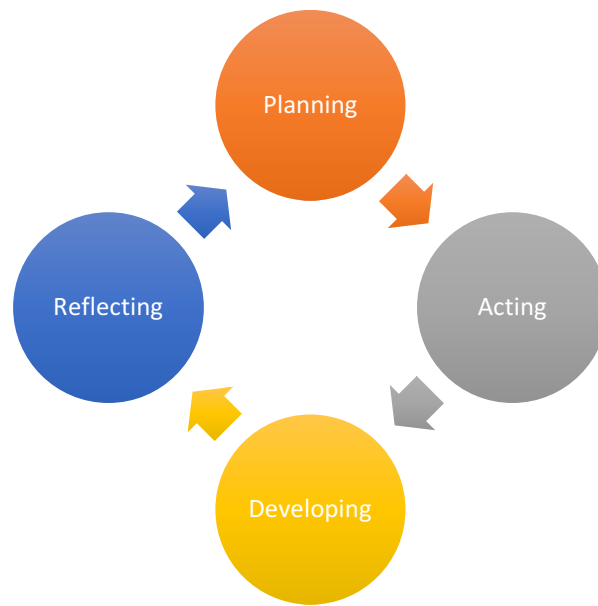


Figure 2: the action research cycle used in this study.

An action research methodology was adopted for this study, because it was believed to be the most appropriate methodology in terms of complementing a constructivist epistemology and a theoretical perspective that is a naturalistic inquiry. By requiring the students to actively engage with the issues of disengagement and belonging they are able to construct knowledge, and as such, grow and learn together (Sagor, 1992), which is the very essence of a constructivist epistemology. Similarly, the goals of an action research methodology are to solve specific problems and gain local understanding (Allwright and Bailey, 1991), which align with the theoretical perspective of naturalistic inquiry that generalisability is not an aim of the study. Furthermore, as participation is a key feature of any action research methodology, it was felt that this was the most suitable methodology to adopt in terms of granting ownership to the participating students. It was posited that this ownership would give the students the best possible opportunities of building communities to which they felt as though they belonged and played an active role in.

In terms of the methods that are available to use with an action research methodology, the main action research medium is the case study (Gray, 2013). Within this method, it is possible to adopt either a highly structured or more unstructured approach to address an identified issue. In the work that is presented here, the latter approach was adopted. The reason for this was because it was felt that a highly structured approach was impractical. Such an approach would have involved studying two different groups, one of which would receive the 'intervention' of participating in a poetry group, and one of which would not. It would thus be impractical because this methodology would be susceptible to the 'Hawthorne Effect', in which the students receiving the intervention might modify their behaviours in response to either an awareness of being observed, or a sense of heightened importance by being a part of the poetry workshops (see e.g. McCarney et al., 2007). A way to potentially counter these effects would be to present the control group with another (non poetry-based) intervention. However, it is simply not possible to 'test' and 'measure' individuals' relativistic perceptions of experiential phenomena, hence the rationale for an unstructured case study method. An unstructured approach was also adopted because it aligned most closely with the research question, presenting the greatest flexibility to investigate what sense of belonging might arise from the proposed poetry groups, and how this could be further encouraged.

Given that a more unstructured and qualitative approach to the research design was adopted, it was decided that a selection of interviews with a number of participants at the mid-way point of the process would be used, along with detailed field notes. Both of these would then be used to help inform the action research cycle(s) during the project.

The remainder of this dissertation is written and structured according to the action research cycle given in Figure 2, in which the 'planning', 'acting', 'developing', and 'reflecting' steps are discussed in detail for the project as a whole. Whilst this replaces more traditional dissertation sub-headings such as 'methodology', 'discussions', and 'conclusions', I believe that this approach is much more in keeping with the research paradigm discussed above, and that it also allows the reader to follow the process in a far more logical manner. That is not to say that methodologies, analyses and conclusions are not presented and discussed, but rather that they are simply realigned according to this new structure.

3. Planning

In this chapter I describe the process of the first stage of the action research cycle: planning. In doing so I present a discussion of other action research that has used poetry in a scholarly fashion, and discuss how these previous studies shaped and influenced my own research design.

The use of poetry in higher educational action research projects is not a new one, and given the discussion in Chapter 1 of how poetry has been used to promote and discuss social justice, this is to be expected. Threlfall (2013) investigated the extent to which poetry might be used to stimulate reflective learning in higher education. He found that poetry was able to assist learners in the reflection making process, and that in writing and reflecting on their poems, the learners were able to re-orientate and in some instances even consolidate prior learning. Whilst this approach is concerned with the type of classroom-based engagement that this study is purposefully trying to move away from, some of the findings were useful at the planning stage. For example, there was no emphasis placed on the 'beauty' of the poetry; it was the process rather than the product that was important, which is very much in line with the constructivist (rather than constructionist) approach adopted in this study. Similarly, Threlfall (2013) also found that several of the students (n=16) had a desire for more creative outlets, which they did not feel were always apparent in their Foundation Degree in Sports Coaching. This would suggest that despite the initial misgivings of Threlfall (2013) that there was a capacity for students to participate in such activities. However, from this study alone it was unclear whether or not there would be such a demand for the poetry groups that I was planning, which would be extra-curricular in nature.

Barrett (2011) adopted a different approach to Threlfall (2013) in the use of poetry in a higher educational action research study. Rather than having the students as the focus point of the study, he used an action research approach to continuously improve his own academic practice, specifically in relation to Problem-Based Learning (PBL). In Barrett's (2011) study, the author was a module coordinator for a staff development module in PBL, in which university lecturers acted as his students. (Barrett, 2011, pp. 5) states that this action research process:

“Involved systematically improving my education development practice, creatively developing my philosophy of PBL through developing new illuminative concepts and growing in my identity as a poet.”

As such, this approach was very much about how Barrett (2011) was able to both make sense of the world around him (constructivism) and also to create something that was of use to his professional development as a poet, the quality of which he placed a value judgment on (constructionism). This paper was very important in the planning stage of my own action research, as it reaffirmed to me the importance in adopting a strictly constructivist epistemology, in which the students would not be judged on the quality, or indeed the quantity of the poetry that they produced. Likewise, it was decided at this point that any poetry that I wrote would not form part of the field notes or future reflections. Barrett (2011) also uses the poetry generated by the students in these sessions as both data and as an interpretive device, as well as utilising it as a reflective medium. However, this is an approach that I decided not to adopt, as I was concerned that asking students to *always*

show me what they had written might result in a weakening of their belief of ownership, and with it their sense of belonging.

Outside of higher education, Hopkinson (2015) used poetry to investigate the reflective capabilities of nurses in an action research co-inquiry. As with Barrett (2011), she used the poems that the nurses created as data, observing how they allowed the nurses to display emotion and empathy in relation to their practice, which in turn allowed them to have deep conversations that might not otherwise have been possible. At the planning stage of my own action research strategy it was not the poems themselves that interested me, but rather the nature of the co-inquiry, and the potential that this had to allow students to discuss topics that they might otherwise have considered taboo. Hopkinson (2015) found that the creative co-inquiry of sharing poems allowed for the potential of knowledge generation, and with it personal, relational, and organisational learning and change. Whilst I planned to adopt a slightly different approach, in which I would not use the students' poems as data (for the reasons outlined above), I found the results of the Hopkinson (2015) study to be reaffirming. If co-enquiry via the medium of sharing poetry could bring about relational change, then could it also bring about a change in the relationship between the student and the University community, and their sense of belonging to it?

Based on the literature that I have discussed both above and in the preceding chapters, I decided that a poetry group in which students could read, write and share poetry would be the most effective in terms of answering my research question (how can poetry groups be used to foster a sense of belonging amongst university students?). The study that is presented here, however, is less concerned with the poetry itself, and more with what is

constructed as a result of writing and sharing poetry, hence why a constructivist rather than a constructionist epistemology has been adopted. As an initial scoping exercise, I conducted a small (six participants), anonymized and informal online survey amongst some recent Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) graduates to ask what their opinions were in relation to engagement. This was an opportunistic sample of students, and no personal data was collected. The purpose of this survey was simply to see if there would be any potential interest in a poetry group amongst students. Some of the responses that I received, when I asked the graduates what they understood by the word 'engagement', included the following:

- Engaging outside of academia (e.g. volunteering)
- Involvement
- Participating in various activities provided by the University
- The amount of time spent engaging with your own intellectual development

Even given the small sample size of the survey, it was interesting to note that whilst there were slightly different definitions of what engagement meant to each of the students, none of them were focused on grades, but rather centred on a sense of involvement.

Amongst the students that I surveyed, there was clearly an alignment to the definition of engagement that was outlined in Chapter 1, i.e. the degree to which students feel as though they belong to the University community. However, even if poetry could be used as an effective methodology to improve student belonging, would there be a capacity for it? I asked the same sample of students if any of them would have been interested in a collective

poetry group. All of them responded positively, commenting that it would make people “more creative and determined,” that “writing is a really good way to explore ideas, emotions, and techniques not necessarily related to one's area of study,” and that “being in a social group is somewhat life affirming!”

At this stage of the planning it seemed highly likely that there would at least be some interest in a collective poetry group, and that were such a group to be made available as a voluntary activity during the academic year it would potentially be of benefit to some students. In order to try and encourage students from all disciplines, I wanted to move away from an approach that would require a background in English literature in terms of poetic analysis, as it was the collaborative construction of knowledge and the potentially accompanying sense of belonging which was important, and not the perceived quality of any poetry that was produced. It also seemed important to avoid any competitive element in which the quality of the composed poetry would be judged. Likewise, I did not want to exclude any students who did not want to write poetry, but who instead wanted to examine and share some of their favourite pieces.

A collective poetry group, in which poetry could be read, discussed and written by students from any discipline across the University, in order to improve a student's sense of belonging was thus planned. Chapter 4 considers the design and implementation of such a group.

4. Acting

In this chapter I describe the process of the second stage of the action research cycle: acting. In doing so I present a discussion of how the poetry group was set up, and also introduce the field notes that were taken by myself whilst the group was active. These field notes are woven into this dissertation as a way of reporting on the case study of the poetry group.

It was decided that the first poetry sessions would be run every other Wednesday afternoon, and that they would be hosted in the Special Collections of MMU, located within the University's library. The location was chosen because it was on campus, and thus readily accessible, but was also chosen because it represented a peaceful and calm environment (with views over a nearby park). The importance of this location, and the role that it played in the sessions will be discussed in later chapters. Also, despite being housed in the University library, it was most likely not associated with any specific formal learning environment, as would have been the case if a more traditional seminar room or lecture theatre had been used instead. The sessions were run on a Wednesday afternoon so as to avoid timetable clashes (for the most part MMU still enforces a lesson-free Wednesday afternoon as part of its curriculum), although this did mean that the activity was likely to preclude people who spent their Wednesday afternoons doing sport or other activities. Fortnightly, one-hour sessions were selected because it was felt that this would not feel like an over commitment to the students. Whilst these were the initial conditions under which the group was planned, it was assumed that this could change following the demands of the students. A name of 'Poetry in Practice (PiP)' was chosen for these sessions, and whilst the

use of the word “poetry” might have discouraged some people from attending, I felt that it was important for the name to reflect the general content of the sessions in an open and honest manner. It was also expected that the membership of the group would be reasonably fluid, given other commitments that might come up in the students’ academic and professional lives, and also the hope that some of the students may invite other people to join the group.

In order to advertise the group, it was promoted by myself and a number of other colleagues across the University using social media, mailing lists, flyers, and short pitches in lectures and seminars. The activity was also run in conjunction with MMU Futures (<http://www.mmu.ac.uk/students/futures/>), an awards scheme aimed at supporting MMU students in the development of their skills through an extensive programme of workshops, short courses, activities, events and volunteering. Students who sign up to the MMU Futures Award can gain ‘points’ by attending these events, which they can then use to work towards different levels of recognition in the form of awards. The MMU Futures scheme is an effective way of advertising events to a large database of students, but doing so meant that some of the students who attended PiP might have been extrinsically motivated to do so, and it was important to be mindful of this fact.

The first session was held on Wednesday 30th September 2015 at 14:00, and I had planned a very structured session (see Appendix 2), which aimed to introduce the students to reading, analysing and writing poetry in a single one-hour sitting. It is worth noting that a large part of the data that was collected for this case study comes from the field notes that I took during and after every session. In the remainder of this dissertation I will use these field

notes to support any claims or highlight any of the research findings. I adopted a more colloquial approach in my field notes, which is a deliberate contrast to the more academic style of this dissertation as a whole, and which should thus allow for an easier differentiation between the two voices.

According to my field notes for that first session (all names are changed):

“There was a very good turn out this week, with 13 students turning up from a range of disciplines... There was a real mix of people, with some of the students having an academic interest in poetry (e.g. English students Katie and Judith), some students having a personal interest in poetry (e.g. Kerry and Rebecca) and some students there for Futures points or because they were intrigued (e.g. Miles) or wanted to find out more about poetry.”

I was very encouraged by this large mix of students, and talking to them it was apparent that none of them had attended for any extrinsic motivation other than the two of them who were also attending as part of the MMU Futures programme, and that they were there to either find out more about poetry, or else discuss the fact that they loved poetry. The session started as follows:

“We began by introducing ourselves to the rest of the group, and then I read out some examples of poems about higher education. No one volunteered to read one out loud themselves, but that was ok. In hindsight I could have maybe left them longer to take this opportunity up, but I was conscious of nervous silence.”

Despite my best efforts to remove all traces of a formalized learning environment, in this first session I really felt that the students still perceived me as a ‘teacher,’ which was probably not helped by the overly prescriptive ‘lesson plan’ that I had laid out, and which I was trying to follow. Regarding the poetry that was selected for reading and discussion:

“Some of the poems were quite difficult (e.g. ‘Cloistered’ by Seamus Heaney), whereas others were very playful (e.g. ‘At the California Institute of Technology’ by Richard Brautigan), and it was certainly the more playful ones that the students seemed to get the most out of. Indeed, Jessica remarked that she hadn’t thought this could be poetry, and I think she was pleasantly surprised that it could.”

The students worked in twos or threes to discuss the poetry with one another, and whilst some of the conversations were a little slow to get going, all of the students eventually became reasonably engaged with the texts. I was able to observe this as I went round the different groups talking to them about their thoughts on the poetry that was being shared.

Regarding the writing that took place in this session:

“We then had a go at writing list poems about ‘What University is to me’ and everyone got involved, with two of the students sharing what in hindsight were actually quite intimate experiences. I read one of my own, and we all applauded each other’s efforts, which were quite good, although the quality of the poem is not really the point in this instance.”

This last point further reinforces the epistemological position of constructivism rather than constructionism that has been adopted by this study (see Chapter 2). At the end of the session, I talked to the students about some upcoming poetry events that I either knew about or was involved in organising, including a forthcoming event that I was running for Fun Palaces (a series of creative events that promote interdisciplinarity between the arts and sciences: <http://funpalaces.co.uk/>), and which involved an evening of poetry and astronomy at the Godlee Observatory in Manchester. These were my notes regarding this discussion and the subsequent event itself:

“We finished with me talking about some upcoming Poetry events, and Jeremiah asked me to set up a FB group for the PiP and I checked that I was ok to email everyone reminders and to copy them in. I suggested that in the next session we deal with haikus and that was seen as being a good idea in general.

Following on from PiP, some of the students agreed to meet up and come to Fun Palaces on 3rd October, which was great. Genevieve came with a friend and Helen and Jessica arranged to come together.”

The demand for the students to create an online digital community via Facebook (FB in the field notes) seems to indicate that a group such as this could help students to find their sense of belonging within a university setting. As noted by Madge et al. (2009, pp. 141), Facebook is often used by students as a form of ‘social glue’ to help them to better settle into student life, but only to a limited amount, i.e. “face-to-face interrelationships and interactions remain important.” Similarly, the fact that the students agreed to meet up

outside of the allotted session times, and the conversations that resulted from this, were also early indicators that PiP would potentially be beneficial to the students in terms of their engagement with and belonging to a university community.

At this stage I reflected on my field notes and realized that the PiP sessions did not require the kind of structured lesson plans that I had adopted for this first session; thus began the process of developing the sessions based on the opinions and reactions of the students. Whilst this process of development was not based on the poetry that had been created by the students, it stemmed from the conversations that they had with me and with each other, stimulated by the poetry that they shared with one another in these sessions. In this sense, the development of my own teaching style brought about by the analysis of my data (field notes) is reminiscent of that expressed by Barrett (2011) in the analysis of his own data (poems). Chapter 5 considers how the PiP group developed, as a consequence of my own development and that of the students, both as individuals and as a group.

5. Developing

In this chapter I describe the process of the third stage of the action research cycle: developing. In doing so I present a discussion of how PiP developed over time, as a result of collaboration and co-enquiry.

The development of the PiP sessions was mainly incremental and was done in consultation with the students, as per the action research design described in Chapter 2, and based on a consideration of what had occurred in previous sessions. At the end of the first term (September to December 2015) there was a much larger shift in the structure of the sessions, which will be discussed later in this chapter, alongside some semi-structured interviews that were conducted with a selection of the students at the end of the first term.

At the second PiP session there were eight participants, including another academic who had come along to observe. As I noted at the time:

“Despite there being a member of staff there, who I presumed knew Jessica as they said hello to each other, there was not a change in the group dynamic, and indeed it was useful having someone that I knew I could ‘pick on’ to respond to something or read something out, although I only ended up asking Natasha to do this once, as there were volunteers for the other times.”

Of the seven students at this second session, only three of them had attended the first session, and I worried that the overly prescriptive nature of the first session had prevented some of the students from returning. However, of all the students that attended the first session only two of them never returned. Table 1 shows the pattern of attendance according to student and session number.

	Term 1							Term 2								
Session	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Student 1	■			■												
Student 2	■	■														
Student 3	■	■	■							■	■				■	
Student 4	■															
Student 5	■			■		■	■								■	
Student 6	■		■					■								
Student 7	■		■							■						
Student 8	■					■	■	■				■				
Student 9	■			■	■	■	■	■						■		
Student 10	■	■														
Student 11	■															
Student 12	■		■													

Student 13	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Student 14		■																
Student 15		■		■	■		■		■			■						
Student 16		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				
Student 17		■			■													
Student 18			■															
Student 19			■															
Student 20										■								

Table 1: chart of MMU student attendance throughout PiP, in each of the two terms. A grey square indicates that the student was present at that particular session.

As discussed in Chapter 4, it was expected that the membership of PiP would be fairly fluid, and as demonstrated by Table 1, this was certainly the case for the first term, with 20 different students attending seven sessions, and an average of seven students participating each time. As I noted in my field notes after the second session:

“I think that the student attendance will be very transient, and that is absolutely ok. I would just like the students to see this as a safe refuge for them, where they can learn about, read and write poetry and make meaningful connections, if they so wish.”

In the second session I had prepared a number of haikus for the students to read and discuss:

“After an introduction to haikus, which was probably overlong, I split the group into pairs and asked them to deconstruct some haikus and then comment on their meanings. At the end I asked the students if they had any suggestions for the next session, but no one was forthcoming and so I asked if I should just come up with something and they said yes. But then Diana asked if she could bring some of her favourite poems in and I said that was a great idea, and that everyone should bring a couple in.”

For the third session I thus prepared nothing, and went into it only hoping that the students would bring in their selected poems. Thankfully they did (although if they had not then I had a number of poems that we could read and share together, meaning that collaborative co-enquiry could still take place):

“I was REALLY happy with how today’s session went. Everybody brought a poem(s) with them.”

The session was simply run as a poem sharing exercise, with every student reading their poem and discussing why they liked it, followed by a discussion involving the other students in terms of what they also liked about the poem, and what they thought it was about. I also made a conscious effort to remind the students that they were not being assessed on their analysis of the poetry they shared:

“At the beginning I made it clear that in my opinion there was no one interpretation of a poem, and that they had different meanings for everyone, all of which were equally valid.”

This was a message that was repeated throughout the sessions, and as a result the students seemed to find it much easier to open up and discuss what they felt about the poems that they were listening to and sharing:

“I also saw them each making notes, and asking for poem titles to be repeated, and the reason why I think this week worked particularly well was because there was no ‘forced’ activity. Also, perhaps it is too much to expect students to read, critique, write and share poetry all in a one-hour session! As such for the next session I have challenged all of the students to go and find a new poem that they want to share with the rest of the group, and I am really excited to find out what they come back with!”

As a result of the less formalized structure, there were far more natural conversations between the students, many of which were unprompted by me. However, I still noted the following:

“Sometimes I think that the students look to me a little bit for clarification / acceptance, but they are definitely opening up to each other more, with conversations starting and continuing without my initiation.”

The format of the sessions thus naturally evolved into an environment in which poems were selected and shared by the students. In the fourth session, which happened to be on the 11th November, the following incident happened:

“Katie’s poem (‘Suicide in the Trenches’ by Siegfried Sassoon) was beautiful and sparked a conversation between all of the students about the nature of war and how poetry captured its essence. This was especially pertinent on Remembrance Day, which is why Katie had chosen that poem in particular. I then followed this with the Michael Rosen poem ‘People Run’, which again elected a strong reaction from everyone, and I think that it even made Kerry cry slightly. The students had a long discussion about race and refugees, and the use of the word refugee and the use of language and even though I could tell that some of them had some very different opinions they were all very respectful of one another. I occasionally tried to steer the conversation back towards poetry when I thought it was becoming a little uncomfortable, but in hindsight this was probably a mistake, and I should have encouraged the students to explore these issues more.”

This session was a key pivot point for a number of reasons. First of all, it was the first session where I really realized that in order for PiP to be the effective medium for student engagement that I had envisaged it to be, then it was necessary for me to not insist on poetry being the main focus. Secondly, the format of the sessions seemed to now be a lot more natural and conducive:

“All of the students seem to have got a lot out of today’s session, and discussing it afterwards with Kerry, she said that it was very well paced. I think that the format that we now have is much better, and is genuinely collaborative, whereas in the first couple of sessions it was a bit more forced, and consisted of me running through a series of tasks for them to complete. I no longer put together a time plan for the sessions, and this seems to work much better. The students seem to get more involved, and it feels less like work and more like a discussion, which is what I was aiming for in the first instance.”

Thirdly, there was a throw away comment that would go on to have a significant impact on the development of PiP, as will be discussed later in this chapter:

“Helen said ‘We don’t get anything at the end of this do we?’, and after prompting her, and discussing with the rest of the group it became apparent that they would like a collection of poetry produced, maybe their own? I have thus challenged all of them to write a new poem / bring an old poem that they have written to next week’s session, but that they don’t have to read it and they all seemed very keen.”

From this discussion, the students were thus encouraged to start to bring in their own poems, and to then read and share them with the rest of the group. In the next session the students willingly shared their poetry with the rest of the group, including James:

“People spoke very encouragingly about them [James’s poems], and David and Dom both noted how they reminded them of Felix Dennis, which I think James was very

happy about. James also talked about how he had written songs, and played guitar but that now he also wrote poetry and was at a stage where he felt as though he could and wanted to share.”

This demonstrates how the reading, analysis and writing of poems had started to happen naturally. And that by allowing it to happen naturally, the students had begun to create a community in which they could feel safe and willing to share their poems with other people:

“Robbie read a poem that he had written in the summer about losing his dad (who died in the summer), and revealed that we were the first people that he had shared it with. I think that everyone felt very touched by this, and it was an incredibly brave thing of Robbie to do. There then followed a long discussion about how poetry can be used to help deal with emotions, especially for guys, for whom sharing emotions can sometimes be difficult... It was quite an intimate conversation between everyone and I was a little surprised that people were willing to speak so candidly. I think that the group is really starting to develop a strong bond amongst themselves. Overall this was a very engaging and intimate session, and I felt very privileged to have been a part of it. There is never any awkwardness between the students when they discuss quite intimate feelings and thoughts, and I think that this is something that I could learn a lot from.”

The action research process had allowed the students to determine the direction of PiP, resulting in the development of a constructivist mindset, in which these conversations and the co-learning that occurred as a result, began to take precedence over the poetry itself.

The sessions now often began with very heartfelt conversations about the students' personal and academic lives, and there was a real sense that a community was developing and being built upon.

In the final session of the first term we held the meeting in the Reading Room of the John Rylands Library in central Manchester. The library had been mentioned in a previous session, and many of the students wanted to visit or return there, and so we decided to do so. As with the 11th November session discussed above, this was a very pivotal meeting in terms of the development of PiP. The sessions now had a format in which the students were invited to bring along a poem that they had "written, found or borrowed," sometimes based around a theme, and these poems were then read and discussed by the rest of the group. I was initially hesitant of the new surroundings:

"At first I thought that the change of environment might cause people to be different, as we were in a very public place, but if anything the opposite was true as there were some very deep discussions had, which reflected on childhood memories, hopes, dreams, anxiety, depression and suicide. When Brian shared his poem about suicide this seemed to spark a bit of an outpouring, and everyone discussed the importance of sharing these thoughts and feelings. I reiterated how important it was to realize that you are not alone and that writing can help."

The incident with Brian once again made me consider my role within the group. After all, whilst I very much felt like a member of the community, it was also true that I was an academic member of staff with a responsibility with regard to student welfare. This incident

had quite a profound effect on me, and prompted me to contact a number of mental health charities and organisations to see what was being done to address some of the issues that Brian had talked about. As a result, the actions that arose from these conversations was reminiscent of the organisational change that can result from these co-enquiries, as discussed by Hopkinson (2015). A large part of the sessions was now dedicated to talking through issues that the students had at university and in their personal lives, sparked either through the discussion of their poetry, or through the general discussions that tended to happen at the beginning of the sessions. In this first session at the John Ryland's Library the following was also decided:

“The group decided to meet again from the first week of term and in the John Rylands library and EVERY week, which was very encouraging.”

This seemed to indicate that there was a genuine desire to meet up more regularly, and to continue to build the community. At this stage in the development of the sessions, I thought that it would be conducive to carry out some semi-structured interviews with three of the core members of the group. The students gave their informed consent to being recorded, and were informed that their response would be used in a study that I was conducting on student engagement. This study received ethical clearance in accordance to MMU's ethical guidelines.

The interviews were each around 15-20 minutes in length and all started with the same question: “What does poetry mean to you?” Following this opening question, there was a general conversation with the students about PiP and their experiences of it so far. The

three students that were chosen were those that had attended most regularly throughout the term, and were thus perhaps best situated to comment on the development of PiP.

Following transcriptions of the interviews, an open coding approach was taken, in which a number of major categories were deduced from the participant's responses. These categories were then further investigated, including any potential overlaps. Following on from this initial open coding approach, the responses were re-examined in order to confirm that the major categories (and the concepts that these represented) were an accurate portrayal of the text. This methodology was carried out until descriptive saturation was reached, i.e. until there were no further codes, categories or themes found to be emerging from the analysis of the data.

Column	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Theme	Better than course	Enjoyment	Importance of Sam	Inclusive	Informal	Respect	Safe	Social Aspect	Different from my course
David	0	2	1	5	1	1	1	4	1
Helen	3	7	0	6	0	5	2	5	3
Dom	1	3	1	1	0	0	1	2	1
Totals	4	12	2	12	1	6	4	11	5

Table 2: thematic analysis of responses to semi structured interviews. The colours indicate the frequency of the responses, ranging from green (most frequent) to red (least frequent).

There are some interesting features in Table 2 that are worth taking note of. Roughly speaking, columns A, B and I refer to intrinsic motivations for coming along to the sessions, whilst columns D, E, F, G and H are in some way related to a sense of belonging and a development of community. The responses from the students indicate that PiP is an enjoyable and inclusive environment, in which they feel safe. They also think that it is something different from the rest of their academic studies, and that in some instances it is better than their course. These two responses, the first from David, and the second from Dom illustrate this point:

“I enjoy that it's open to everybody, as opposed to people having value judgments on the way it's constructed as opposed to just accepting that it is and people like it. I think it's a really nice way to get to know people in the group.

It's just a place where you can also, not just show your own work, but you can also see the works of others. It's really beautiful to see something that someone has written. Sometimes, even just the way it is written. It is so appropriate and fluent rhythm, you're just like, wow, amazed. Left out of breath. Sometimes some people give so much emotion and personal experience.”

I was also interested to probe the potential of any possible extrinsic motivation, but from the interviews, it was apparent that this was not a reason for the students attending the sessions. The following exchange with Helen, who was involved with a lot of other MMU Futures activities, illustrates this point:

Sam: "In terms of poetry in practice, for example, is the fact that you get Futures points for it relevant, or would you still come anyway?"

Helen: "To be honest, I'd still come anyway. I only saw it on the Futures thing because I saved the tab on my phone so I can always look and see what's happening."

This demonstrates how my original decision to advertise the PiP sessions through MMU Futures was justified, as it does not appear to have been a dominantly extrinsic motivator for students such as Helen who attended the sessions. No other potential extrinsic motivations were discussed or raised by the students in the remainder of the interviews.

Another key point to focus on in relation to the findings demonstrated in Table 2 is the role that I played in the sessions. Initially I had thought that my role would simply be one of a facilitator, and that eventually it would come to be less and less important. However, as can be seen from Table 2, some of the responses from the students would seem to indicate that this was not the case, with David acknowledging that:

"I kind of enjoyed the fact that you don't study English, or you're not an English lecturer, but you just enjoy poetry."

The importance of my role would play a key part in the development of the sessions, as will be discussed shortly. Before moving on from this analysis of the students' interviews, two

comments warrant a mention, from David and Helen respectively, which sum up the thoughts of the students and also reflect favourably on PiP:

“It allows you to get to know one another through the medium of poetry.”

“It is an hour when everyone listens and stops looking at their phones.”

In the second term of the PiP sessions, which ran from January 2016 to March 2016, there were two noticeable changes in the group dynamics. Firstly, the group shifted from a relatively fluid membership of about seven students to a more fixed membership of four to five students, with the same students showing up most weeks. Secondly, there were at times noticeable tensions between some of the members of the group, which on occasion I had to pacify outside of the PiP sessions.

In relation to the membership of the group, the most likely explanation for the shift towards a smaller, core group of students was because of the change in locale. The Reading Room at the John Rylands Library might seem like an ideal meeting place for a poetry group such as this one, but for students who had not been to previous sessions, it might have been quite daunting to have met so far off campus in an unfamiliar location. I also think that a weekly commitment might have been too much for some of the students, because of other personal and academic commitments.

The rising tensions between some of the students seemed to stem from the book of poetry that some members of the group wanted to create, and which I encouraged the creation of.

There were some artistic differences between some PiP members about what the book should be like, and who should organize what parts of it, and at times I think that this disagreement made some of the other students feel uncomfortable:

"[I] Might need to talk about the book, as it is clearly something that not everyone is getting on board with and there may well be a reason for this. I will arrange to meet up and discuss. Maybe I can persuade them that a blog might be a better idea?"

Eventually the idea of an informal blog was settled on, and differences between the group members were settled, but I think that this incident may have had a lasting effect on some of the other members of the group. That being said, the conversations that were still taking place between the students, especially at the beginning of the sessions, were warm and sincere. Two instances stood out in particular:

"The most memorable thing that happened today was that David had bought James a copy of book of poetry by John Clare, as he thought he wrote in a similar manner and appreciated it. James was very touched, and indeed all of us were. When James read one of the poems it was clear that it was very similar to his own style, and this was noticed by Brian, and once again this act of generosity was remarked upon. This felt very genuine and heartfelt."

This single act demonstrated a great understanding and compassion, and the group was very touched by this unselfish act. In the same session:

“Dom also spoke of how he somehow finds it hard to live up to the burden of expectation, and it is very clear from speaking to all of them that this is extremely high for our students, and that all of them face many struggles that we are simply not aware of. I think that groups like this are imperative in giving the students an outlet, and presenting them with the opportunity to share experiences and to learn from one another. It is also useful having someone who knows the system there (me) and who is able to provide the support from an ‘official’ point of view.”

This was just one of several instances in which several of the group members opened up about their own feelings of anxiety, depression, and expectation. All of the students listened to each other intently, and offered kind words of encouragement, without proffering unasked for advice.

Towards the end of the second term of PiP I was unable to attend a couple of the sessions because of other, unavoidable commitments. However, I thought that this might be a good opportunity to test the idea that the group would be self-sustaining, and that my role was not important. Unfortunately, this did not turn out to be the case, as despite me sending reminders via email and the PiP Facebook group, the numbers dwindled. In the second of these sessions there were only three students, and I asked David afterwards (who had been present) how it had gone, to which he replied:

“I think a lot of younger people look to a ‘teacher’. There was no energy.”

There were only a couple of sessions left before the Easter break, and the student numbers remained low for both of these sessions (two and one, respectively). In the last session, which was just David and me, we went to a local café, shared some poems over coffee and reflected on PiP in general.

6. Reflecting

In this chapter I describe the process of the fourth stage of the action research cycle: reflecting. In doing so I present a discussion of how PiP addressed the research question laid out in Chapter 1. This chapter also acts as the conclusion for this dissertation.

As can be seen from the previous chapters, continuous reflection characterized this study, and helped to drive the development of the PiP sessions, with reflections observed via discussions with the students, and from my field notes. I now offer a discussion of my overall reflections on the project; in these reflections I loosely adopt the model developed by Gibb's (Gibbs, 1988), which is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Gibb's model of reflection (adapted from Gibbs, 1988)

As discussed in the previous chapters, PiP ran from September 2015 to March 2016. In all, 20 different students engaged with the process, and through an action research approach, I enabled the students to develop PiP into a community to which they could belong, and in which they had a strong and discernible voice.

I was often moved by how sincere the members of PiP were in their conversations, and it was clear to me that those who engaged with the sessions on a regular basis had created a community in which they could speak freely about issues beyond poetry. Throughout the whole process I strongly feel that I listened to the student's opinions and needs, and that as a result of this the students were able to build a community that was relevant to them.

There were many highlights to PiP, but for me the two that were most pertinent were: 1) the demonstration that a collective such as this could be used to build a community; and 2) the compassion that was shown by the students to one another throughout the sessions. There were of course several issues with the process, not least the issues that arose regarding the creation (or not) of a book of poetry. Another less successful element of PiP was the Facebook group, which was rarely utilized by the students, and which was mainly used by myself to post details of the forthcoming sessions and other poetry activities that might be of interest to the students. In addition to this, outside of the Fun Palaces excursion discussed in Chapter 4, to the best of my knowledge the students didn't meet up outside of the PiP sessions. My final field notes from the last PiP session summarise some of these issues:

“At this stage, my final reflections are that this project was a success in terms of the fact that these type of poetry sessions can be used to improve a student’s sense of belonging, and can be used as a session to discuss ideas and difficulties and to share useful information about student life. However, the role of the facilitator (i.e. me) is not to be underestimated, and neither is the location. John Rylands was very grand, but probably represented too much of an ‘otherness’ for new students and was also probably easier to ‘not bother’ coming to compared to if it had been on campus. Also there are issues regarding the feasibility of getting there for students that live far away etc. So overall, a very useful project, and one that I have learnt a lot in, not least how I should not be overly modest of my own role, as such an attitude can potentially lessen the benefits to students / participants.”

This last sentence nicely summaries the constant balance to be sought between leading and letting the students lead. In developing these reflections, the two issues that I want to discuss further are first: the conflict that arose out of the desire by some of the students to develop a book of their poetry, and second: my role in PiP.

On first reflection, I thought that the reason that the book caused aggravation was that it introduced an extrinsic motivation to the sessions, which as noted by Van Lier (2014) can act to undermine any existing intrinsic incentives. Furthermore, as discussed by Deci et al. (1999), if the external reward is stopped the effort and performance levels often drop to lower-than-original levels, i.e. learners can become reliant on the extrinsic motivator. Deci and Porac (1978) also showed that external rewards are perceived by some people to be a form of control, which might also explain why some of the students were less enthusiastic

about the book of poetry. However, whilst the introduction of an extrinsic motivator was perhaps partly to blame, I think that the main reason why the book caused issues was that it contrasted with the constructivist epistemological perspective that had until this point underpinned the PiP sessions. The manufacture of a book of poetry is rooted in a constructionist mindset, and its creation places focus on the poetry that is being created, rather than the community that is built as a result of sharing those poems. The construction of the book, or the need to do so, created a focus on working, rather than the therapeutic, individual benefit that the experience was otherwise providing. In other words, it would appear that under these circumstances, the collaboration become an obligation rather than a benefit. By telling the students that some of their poems would be published, this might also suggest that the quality of their poems would be judged, either prior to publication, during the selection process, or else afterwards, when they would receive some form of critical review by the reader(s). Understandably, I think that some of the students may have been hesitant for their poetry to be judged in this way, and for some of them I imagine that the deeply personal nature of their poems was something that they were, understandably, not willing to share with anyone from outside the PiP community. In hindsight I should have made it clearer that the sessions were not about any poetry that was created, but the conversations that arose from them being shared within the group. Students who wanted to share their poetry could then have been encouraged to do so individually, e.g. via a blog, but on the proviso that this was something that was in addition to PiP, rather than as an integral part of it.

Whilst the issues discussed above potentially contributed to the petering out of PiP, I believe that it was the miscalculation of my own role in these sessions that was ultimately

the most significant. As discussed by Blake and Illingworth (2015), there are many benefits to facilitators freeing themselves from the traditional role of the “expert”, and to instead concentrate on acting as knowledge builders with the rest of the group. However, from my experiences of PiP, it is evident that the facilitator’s role in collective poetry groups such as this require a slightly more involved strategy, and that they are needed to help to mediate the different thoughts and opinions within the group, in addition to organising the logistics of the sessions. Perhaps this is still not going far enough though. Throughout PiP I found it increasingly difficult to recognize my own importance, partly out of modesty, and partly out of a willingness for the group to sustain itself beyond my involvement. However, I now know that having a ‘leader’ to whom the different members of the group could turn to was perhaps central to the success of the PiP project. This finding is in agreement with what Vygotsky (1980) terms the ‘More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)’, i.e. that the social learning and development of the participants is extended by the support of someone who has a better understanding or higher initial ability level than the learner, which in this case was me. Whilst Vygotsky (1980) was talking about the development of children, the role of the MKO is still relevant here, as for many of the participants this is a topic that was new to them. For those students who did have a grounding in poetry, the approach of PiP still represented something that was new to them, meaning that they too could benefit from the presence of an MKO.

Whilst the MKO outlined by Vygotsky (1980) is most often assumed to be a teacher, it need not only be constrained to education, as imams, elders, aunties, etc. can all play this role when needed. Likewise, an MKO does not need to have an ‘official’ or ‘formal’ status, meaning that in regards to PiP, some of the students could assume this role, helping to

further extend the zone of proximal development for the other participants. Because of this, for future iterations of PiP I think it would be more conducive to assign a 'leader' for each of the different sessions, who was then responsible for deciding on the content and organising the logistics of that particular meeting. Giving the students this responsibility would, I think, help to further imprint upon them the importance of their own roles in the sessions, and would better prepare them for the instances when an academic member of staff was unable to join them. Such an approach might also encourage the students to develop a greater ownership of any Facebook group, and further inspire them to interact with this community outside of the regular sessions. To begin with, the role of a peer MKO would best be filled by those students who had more of a grounding in poetry, for example those students who were studying it at university, or who had experience of reading and writing poetry regularly in their spare time. Overtime, other peers could also contribute to this role. However, it would be necessary to ensure that the peers who were able to lead were willing and ready to do so, and were not just taking on the role because it was a 'responsibility' that needed to be filled. Furthermore, I think that an academic member of staff is still a necessity (where possible), not only as an additional MKO, but also to provide useful and tangible information, for example when the students have specific questions relating to university protocol.

As outlined in Chapter 2, whilst the underlying approach of this study was not to generalize, general lessons and examples of best practices have still been learnt in the process. I argue, then, that student poetry collectives such as PiP have a great potential to improve the degree to which students feel as though they belong to the University community. However, future iterations should aim to incorporate the findings of this study, namely that the role of

the facilitator should not be underestimated, and that it should be made clear from the outset what the purpose of the group is. By reiterating that it is the construction of a community that comes from the sharing of poetry, rather than the poetry itself, and by fully acknowledging the importance of the MKO, future versions of PiP can be designed to be even more effective.

Taking into consideration the above discussions, and returning to Figure 2, the following steps represent the planning stage of the action research cycle, as the whole process begins its next iteration:

1. Aim to discuss the nature of the sessions in the first few meetings. Care must be taken that this is not overly prescriptive, but it may be beneficial to talk to the students about the difference between a constructivist and constructionist approach, and their own preferences, articulated in terms which they can readily understand.
2. Ensure that my role is more clearly defined. Whilst I am not necessarily there to teach, I am more than a passive facilitator, and should ensure that I am there for every session, or make suitable arrangements when that is not possible.
3. Discuss the role of MKO and 'session leader' with the group, and outline that this involves picking a topic, reminding participants etc. See if this is a good idea, and if there are any other duties that should be assumed.
4. Ask the participants if a Facebook group is the most effective way to maintain a community outside of the regular sessions, or if other social media sites, or meeting up at regular physical events, is preferable.

5. Prepare a regular digest of events (i.e. poetry slams, literature events, etc.) that participants can attend and meet up at outside of the PiP sessions, taking into account the participants' preferences and other commitments.
6. Stick with one location, which ideally should be on campus. Given that the purpose of this group was to promote student engagement with the University community, the Special Collections location has the advantage of being a physical part of the University campus, so in hindsight may be a better permanent base.

These steps all need to be discussed with the next intake of participants, in order for the sessions to be beneficial for them, and to help them to establish a community to which they have ownership.

In conclusion, this study set out to answer the following research question:

How can poetry groups be used to foster a sense of belonging amongst university students?

Focussing on a sense of belonging that extended outside of the classroom, and instead centred on the extent to which students felt as though they belonged to the University community, a collaborative poetry group was established. The students who regularly attended this group showed it to be an effective medium in which to discuss personal and professional issues, via the co-enquiry of sharing poetry. In turn this helped to establish a community to which the participants felt as though they wanted to, and could, belong. Adopting an action research strategy enabled the group to develop according to the needs

of the students, and also meant that what was learnt from this first cycle can now be implemented in the second cycle; for whilst poetry groups can be used to foster this sense of belonging there are a number of actions that must be considered in order for the students to gain the maximum benefit. Learning from the first iteration of PiP, a number of considerations were presented, of which the two most significant to be taken into account for the planning and action stages of the second iteration are: the role of the MKO; and a clearer explanation and discussion with the participants of the constructivist nature of the sessions.

Despite the small number of students involved in PiP (n=20), the outcomes of this study have shown that this approach can be very effective in helping students to feel as though they belong to the University community. I also argue that, whilst poetry was the central topic of conversation for each of the sessions, applying the same methodology discussed here, but using a different creative focus, would yield similar results. What is important is the framework that has been discussed, which allows students to engage with one another in a safe and supportive environment. As discussed above, a lot of the conversations that arose in these sessions were not related to poetry, but were instead concerned with the students' well-being, and their ability to cope with the University environment. Given the naturalistic inquiry of this study, further work would be needed to confirm that this approach would work in a non-poetry environment, but provided that due care and attention was given to the needs of the students, and each phase of the action research cycle was considered, it is reasonable to propose that it would be effective. In Chapter 1, I defined the notion of student engagement in this study to be "the degree to which students feel as though they belong to the University community." After the first iteration of PiP I

believe that this is still a suitable definition to adopt, as the findings presented here indicate that building these communities is at the very core of what it means for the students to engage with the University, and vice versa.

To finish with, I considered writing a poem as a reflective response to PiP, in a similar manner to Barrett (2011), but then decided against it, as to do so would have been to neglect the reflections that were made in response to the epistemological standings of this study. That is, it is not my ability to construct a poem based on my reflections that is important, but rather the fact that through poetry I was able to make those reflections in the first instance. Instead, and in light of the comments made above regarding the persona of the MKO, it is appropriate to conclude with a quote from Dom, which I think is a fine comment on how initiatives such as PiP can be used to create a community that students feel a part of, and to which they want to belong:

“These experiences and memories and words is what I cherish. I love listening to other people’s stuff. I also like sharing my own story so we can all express ourselves. I think there is beauty to that.”

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Appendix 1: approved dissertation proposal

Introduction

This report outlines a research proposal for my Master of Arts in Academic Practice. As well as describing a clear rationale for the research and the proposed methodology, it also frames the work in relation to my own development as an academic practitioner, and provides an indication of the timescales that will be involved in the project. A completed ethics checklist and an annotated bibliography are also included.

Rationale

Astin defined engagement as ‘the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience’ (Astin 1984, p. 297).

The seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education were proposed by Chickering and Gamson (1987), and can be summarised as:

1. Encourage student-faculty connection
2. Encourage cooperation among students
3. Encourage active learning
4. Give prompt feedback
5. Emphasize time on task
6. Communicate high expectations

7. Respect diversity

All of these principles can be considered to be related to student engagement, and indeed Kuh (2009) reported that universities can directly influence engagement by using these seven principles in programme design, thereby increasing the chances that students will achieve their desired outcomes. However, one of the potential issues with these seven principles for good practice is that they are concerned almost entirely with success in a graded academic context. This is despite the fact that recent studies have found disengagement at university to be linked to many things outside of purely academic situations, for example social class, peer pressure etc. (see e.g. Dean and Jolly, 2012).

Astin (1984, pp. 297) defined student engagement in higher education as:

“The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience.”

However, rather than being focussed on the academic experience in its entirety, the word engagement now appears to be more concerned with the energies that students invest in activities that are important to academic success (see e.g. Kuh, 2009, Junco et al., 2011); but is this what the students think? As a compliment to the secondary sources used in the research for this proposal, I also conducted a small anonymized survey (six participants) amongst some recent Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) graduates to ask what their opinions were in relation to engagement. Here are some of the responses that I received, when I asked the graduates what they understood by the word ‘engagement’:

- Engaging outside of academia (e.g. volunteering)
- Involvement
- Participating in various activities provided by the University
- The amount of time spent engaging with your own intellectual development

Even given the small sample size of the survey, what was interesting was that whilst there were slightly different definitions of what engagement meant to each of the students, none of them were focussed on grades, but rather centred on a sense of involvement. As a University, we must therefore ask ourselves, are we doing everything possible to ensure that students are being made to feel as though they have a role in University life, and that they truly belong there?

There are many examples of using activities within the formal learning environment to improve student engagement (see e.g. Zhao and Kuh, 2004, Addison et al., 2009, Malandrino et al., 2014). However, Summerlee (2010) talks about the use of community engagement and citizenship to foster student engagement *outside* of the classroom, and concludes that there is a need to broaden the current approach, in line with Astin's definition of student engagement. What about poetry? Is this a possible vehicle with which to foster student and community engagement?

There are examples of poetry being used in higher education to cope with stress and anxiety (Mohammadian et al., 2011), as well as examples of poetry being used to improve presentational technique (Hoger, 2012), and to explore teacher-student relationships (Issitt

and Issitt, 2010). Could it be therefore, that poetry could be used to address disengagement amongst some students in higher education? Could a collaborative poetry group be a way for students to engage with one another in a different environment, thereby encouraging them to feel more involved in University life?

In order to determine if there was any potential interest in a collective poetry group, I asked the same sample of students that I had quizzed regarding engagement if any of them would have been interested in such an activity. All of them responded positively, commenting that it would make people “more creative and determined,” that “writing is a really good way to explore ideas, emotions, and techniques not necessarily related to one's area of study,” and that “being in a social group is somewhat life affirming!”

Based on the primary research that I have conducted in terms of a scoping exercise, as well as the scarcity of previous research on this topic, I believe that there is a strong case to be made regarding the need for an investigation into the use of collaborative poetry groups as a way of fostering student engagement and belonging amongst university students.

Aim and Objectives

Given the variety of definitions relating to student engagement (see Trowler, 2010), it is important to clearly outline it in context, and for the purposes of this study I will take it to mean:

“The degree to which students feel as though they belong to the University community.”

The aim of this study is therefore to investigate the extent to which collaborative poetry workshops can be used to foster a sense of belonging amongst students from MMU. The objectives of this study are summarized by the following preliminary research questions:

1. To what extent is there an interest for students to read and write poetry in a community-driven programme?
2. Can reading and writing poetry in collaborative sessions lead to an improvement in the student's sense of belonging to the University community?
3. Are there any other positive benefits relating to engagement that these poetry workshops might have?

Methodology

Crotty (1998) describes a useful methodology for outlining a research paradigm, as illustrated in Figure A1, which I have adapted for this study.

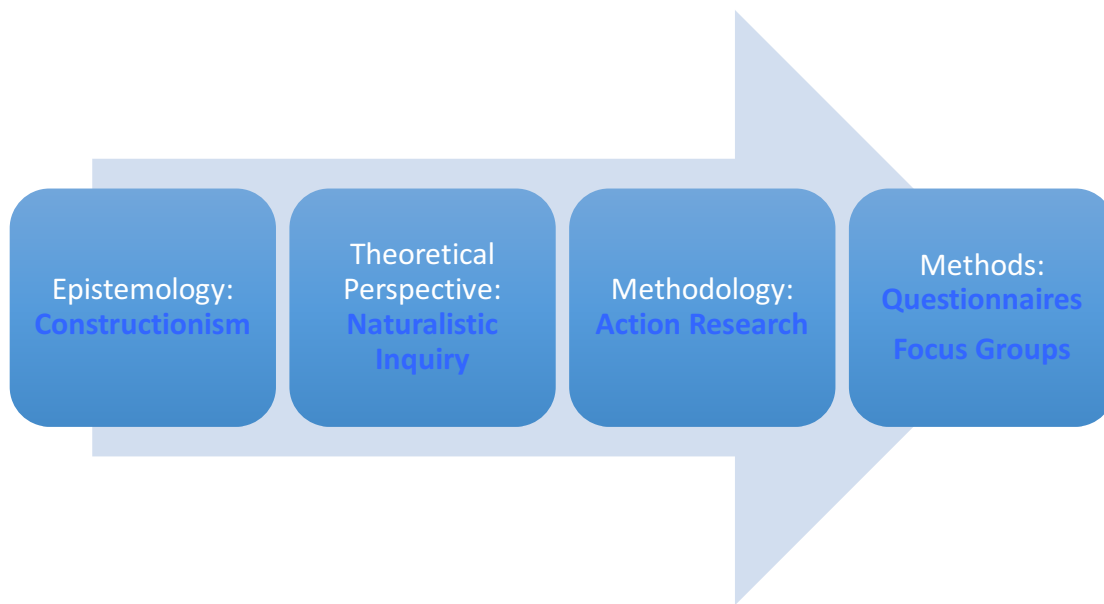


Figure A1: the intended research paradigm for this study (adapted from Crotty, 1998)

Constructionism is connected with experiential learning, assuming that meaning emerges from our engagement with the realities of the world. Given the nature of this proposal, which is concerned with the use of collaborative writing groups, this is an appropriate epistemology to adopt. Not only will the students themselves be creating new experiences and connections, but also the way in which they respond to the issues of engagement and belonging will depend very much on their interaction with the group and their surroundings.

A naturalistic inquiry means that rather than aiming to generalize, any inquiry will develop a body of knowledge that describes individual cases. This concept is central to the whole ethos of the proposal, as I believe that part of the reason why some students do not feel a sense of belonging to the University is that they are not treated as individuals, and instead are expected to combat feelings of disengagement using one-size-fits-all solutions. During the research process, it is important that the students are treated as individuals, and that any information that is gained as a result of this study is tempered by the knowledge that it

is only specific to that group of students at that particular time. Whilst some examples of best practices may be learned in the process, the underlying approach of the entire study will be to not generalize.

Action research is a practitioner-based research that adopts a systematic inquiry into one's own practices (Mills, 2000), and which focuses specifically on the distinctive features of the population with whom some action must be taken (Mertler, 2013). Practitioners normally adopt this strategy of inquiry by identifying a problem in the course of their work and investigate it so that they can propose changes to improve an existing situation (Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah, 2014).

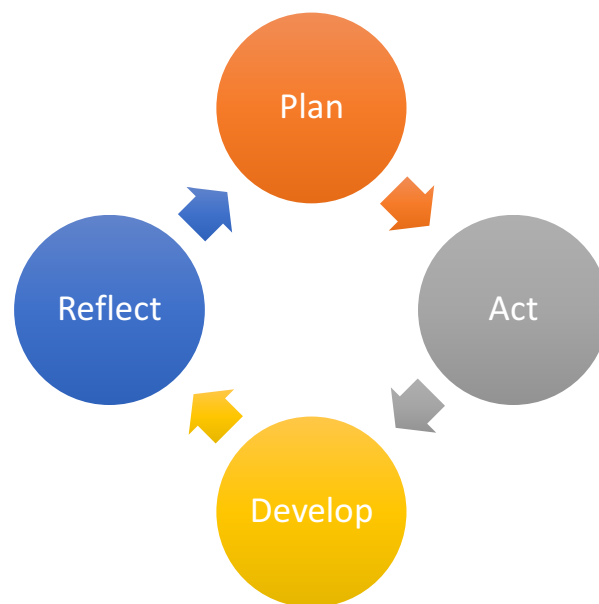


Figure A2: action research cycle

There are a number of different variants of the action research methodology, ranging from the 'look-think-act-repeat' spiral discussed by Stringer (2007) to the more detailed flow charts of Adamson (2008) and Riel (2010). However, the action research process can in

general be summarized by the cycle shown in Figure A2. This process involves: identifying an issue and conducting a research plan (Plan); collecting and analysing data (Act); formulating an action plan (Develop); and reflecting on the process (Reflect), before beginning the cycle again.

I have already identified that there is an issue in terms of student disengagement, and have proposed a potential solution based on primary and secondary evidence. The next stage is to work with the students and to collect and analyse their thoughts during the poetry workshops, and then to use these to formulate an action plan, with the students, of how the workshops might be better used to improve their sense of belonging. At this stage we will reflect together on the process so far, and use this to develop future iterations of the cycle.

In order to collect and analyse the thoughts of the students in relation to the poetry workshops and their effect on student engagement, I aim to use two separate methods: a pre- and post-intervention questionnaire; and a series of focus groups. The focus groups will be a chance for the students to help to shape the direction of the writing groups, and also to reflect on the effectiveness of the activities to date. In total there will be four focus groups of 1-hour duration conducted throughout the study, including one at the end of the project.

The questionnaires will relate to engagement, and will be filled out both pre- and post-intervention, in a similar manner to Mohammadian et al. (2011). Normally, in order for this to be a fair and empirical study, there would also be a control group. However, this methodology is susceptible to the Hawthorne Effect, in which the people participating in the study might modify their behaviours in response to either an awareness of being observed,

or a sense of heightened importance by being part of the poetry workshops (see e.g. McCarney et al., 2007). One way to potentially counter this effect would be to present the control group with another (non poetry-based) intervention. However, this is beyond both the scope of this proposal, and the resources that are available to me, and so instead the participants of the poetry workshops will be asked to fill in pre- and-post intervention questionnaires, which rather than being compared to a control group will then be used to support the more in-depth focus groups.

The questionnaire that is being used is an adapted version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), as used by Junco et al. (2011). This survey has been chosen because it is an extremely reputable questionnaire, with a proven heritage in research projects. Permission has also been sought and granted by Idaho University, who own and maintain the survey. The results of the pre-intervention questionnaire will also be used to help determine the questions to be used in the initial focus group. Future focus group questions will in turn be determined by earlier focus groups, and by comments and opinions raised during the poetry workshops. The qualitative analysis software NVivo will be used to analyse the data, with an open approach to coding into major thematic categories initially being adopted, before an axial coding strategy is used to further analyse the information.

The reason for the combination of questionnaires and focus groups is because it is believed to be the most effective way of answering the preliminary research questions, whilst also supporting the research paradigm. The focus groups will be made up of volunteers from the workshops, and will allow for reflection on recent actions and developments, as well as being a forum for discussing future plans. The milestone and activities for this project are

expressed in a Gantt chart, shown in Figure A3. An ethics checklist for this study has also been completed.

There is no funding or resources required for this study, and the room has already been allocated, with the group initially meeting on a fortnightly basis in the Special Collections section of MMU’s library, starting from the 30th September 2015. The initial aim for the poetry workshops is that they occur once a fortnight throughout the academic year, with breaks for the vacation periods and possibly over exam time. Initially the poetry workshops will also be open to members of academic staff, but as with the timetabling of the activities this is something that may change during the action research process.

Milestones & Activities	Months									
	Sep 2015	O	N	D	Jan 2016	F	M	A	M	J
Advertise workshops	■	■								
Pre-intervention questionnaire	■	■								
Poetry workshops	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		
Focus groups		■		■		■		■		
Post-intervention questionnaire								■		
Transcribe and analyse focus groups			■		■		■		■	
Write-up work								■	■	■

Figure A3: Gantt chart for project milestones

My Practice

As well as being an important piece of research in its own right, this research proposal also aids my development as an academic practitioner. One of my current themes, as a research-active academic in science communication, is to investigate the extent to which poetry can be used to communicate complex thought processes in an accessible and effective manner. As such, learning how the use of poetry workshops can potentially impact on student engagement is of great benefit to my current and future research, both pedagogic and otherwise. In addition to this, I hope that by the end of the study we will have found an effective way in which to potentially improve student belonging, with the caveat that there will be no one-size-fits-all solution. I aim to adopt into my teaching practices (and modify where appropriate) some of the techniques that this study finds to be effective, thereby not only helping my development as an academic practitioner, but also contributing towards improving student engagement.

Potential Risks

There are two major potential risks and issues that must be addressed and dealt with in relation to this project. Firstly, there is the risk that no students will sign up for these workshops. In order to mitigate this, I have prepared a set of flyers, which I plan to hand out during Induction week, and at MMU's other various welcome events (e.g. Welcome Sunday). I have also started a social media campaign, and have the backing of the Pro-Vice Chancellor for students, the Students Union, and a number of different colleagues from

across the University, who will be advertising this activity to the students in the build-up to the start of term and beyond. The activity is also being run as an MMU Futures activity, which means that students can attend in order to work towards CPD points. Given the naturalistic inquiry approach that has been adopted by this research, the regular attendance of even a couple of students would be sufficient for the purposes of the study.

Secondly, there is a worry that the poetry workshops will tend to attract only those students that have previous experience in reading and writing poetry. In order to combat this, the workshops have been advertised across all of the different faculties of the University, and have been billed as being welcome to all. If it turns out that all of the attending students are from one particular degree or discipline, then I will encourage them to bring along a friend or colleague from another area.

Conclusion

This research proposal describes a piece of action research, which aims to investigate the extent to which collaborative poetry workshops can be used as an intervention to improve a student's sense of belonging to the University community. It has outlined that there is an underlying theoretical perspective of naturalistic enquiry, in which the students are not just the subjects, but rather the instigators of change. This research aims to provide one possible example of best practice in relation to student engagement. And if the proposed intervention is successful, then it will ultimately have contributed towards improving the collective sense of citizenship across the university.

Annotated Bibliography

Dean, K. L. and Jolly, J. P. (2012) 'Student identity, disengagement, and learning.' *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 11(2) pp. 228-243.

Building on from the work of Chickering and others, this study looks at the issue of student disengagement from outside of a purely academic lens. It looks at how the student identity is formed from socio-economic situations outside of the classroom, and is a useful reference in terms of recognising that tackling student disengagement requires a multi-faceted approach.

Issitt, J. and Issitt, M. (2010) 'Learning about the world of the student: Writing poetry for teacher-student understanding.' *Education 3-13*, 38(1) pp. 101-109.

This study looks at the effect that writing poetry has in terms of teacher and student understanding. In the study, students and tutors write poetry together, and during this collaborative process it is found that a greater understanding and empathy develops between the two groups. Their findings will be used to inform the potential for involving members of academic staff in the poetry workshops.

Junco, R., Heiberger, G. and Loken, E. (2011) 'The effect of Twitter on college student engagement and grades.' *Journal of computer assisted learning*, 27(2) pp. 119-132.

This study uses the NSSE questionnaire to assess the effect that using Twitter in teaching has on the engagement of students in higher education. Their outcomes will be used for guidance regarding the construction, delivery and analysis of the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires.

Mohammadian, Y., Shahidi, S., Mahaki, B., Mohammadi, A. Z., Baghban, A. A. and Zayeri, F. (2011) 'Evaluating the use of poetry to reduce signs of depression, anxiety and stress in Iranian female students.' *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 38(1), 2//, pp. 59-63.

This study investigates the use of poetry in higher education in order to tackle depression and anxiety. It will be used for guidance regarding the initial design and delivery of the poetry workshops.

Additional References

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Appendix 2: structure of first poetry in practice session

Time	Topic	Notes
14:00	Introduction	Sam will begin by welcoming everyone to the group, and explaining its purpose in terms of student engagement, and that it is a group that should be led by the participants.
14:05	Appointments	Everybody will be given one minute to make 3 appointments: 9 am, 12 pm and 3 pm. When '9 am' is shouted everybody meets their 9 am appointment, they then have 1 minute to find out the name of the person, their hometown, their course and year of study, and what they hope to gain from attending these sessions. This is repeated for '12 pm' and then '3 pm'.
14:10	Discussion	Working in groups of 4-5, the participants will be asked to discuss what it is that they like/dislike about poetry and which poets they have heard of / admire / would like to find more about.
14:20	Readings	Selections of poems that focus on university and university life have been chosen. Sam will read one of these out loud, and will ask for volunteers to do the same. Failing that, everyone will have the opportunity to read the poems in quiet reflection, followed by a discussion of the poetry if it feels natural.

14:35	Writing Lists	An introduction to the List Poem by Sam. Sam reads an example of a list poem. Everyone is given 10 minutes to write a poem about University Life
14:45	Reading Lists	A couple of volunteers are asked to read their poetry. If no one wants to read it out loud, then swap poems with a neighbour, if they are happy to do so.
14:50	Reflections	Everybody is asked to find their 3 pm appointment. Then on a post-it note everyone is asked to write down one thing that they have found out about in today's session, and one question that they have. They will then ask their appointment to try and answer that question.
14:55	Next session	Sam will ask if there is anything else that the students would like to cover. He will also distribute the pre-intervention questionnaires, and will ask for volunteers to make up a steering group for the sessions. Proposal for next session: Everyone bring one poem that they love. We can practice writing haikus and Haikais.