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Languaging the inbetween: poetic explorations of meaning-making

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Background

Coherence

*What is tenuous lets meaning through.
The moon burns through the porous urban night.
I like the stillness of the sleeping houses;
they all make sense.
In the morning, I feel resistant.
This intense new sky imagines me somewhere else, or in a painting,
always stopping to look, not having to move on.
Leaves edged with frost so perfectly specific: one statement at a time.
The outsides and insides of things
may not recognise each other,
but it seems as if at last we might be certain.*

This poem, which reflects on the processes of coming to know, is one of over seventy on the theme of meaning-making written by the author of this paper. The paper is a poetic exploration of the author's emerging understanding of the nature of inquiry and of the intersections between her poet/researcher/educator selves. The practice of making poetry from all of these perspectives aligns the author with researcher/poet/educators such as Butler-Kisber (2005) and Leggo (2005) and their investigations of the ways in which poetry and research inform and sustain each other. The paper presents twenty poems on the theme of meaning-making, interspersed with a narrative which reflects on the ways in which the poems open up the spaces of inquiry.

Research Questions

Focus of Inquiry

Doorways

*I think the door slid open
the day the mulberries first bloomed.
There is an art to noticing
when meaning first breaks free.
Confluence is unreadable
when boundaries are blurred:
some storms are far too lavish
to distinguish wind from rain.*

The focus of this paper is on the ways in which poetry makes spaces for "noticing/when meaning first breaks free." The paper also explores the capacities of the poet for using language creatively to capture insights and for managing the uncertainty involved in meaning-making, building on the poet Keats's concept of "Negative Capability" (2009, 492).

Methods

Mapping the literature

Richardson's notion (2000) that the process of writing offers the potential to enhance and inform qualitative inquiry is a theme in the literature developed by researcher/poets such as Saunders (2003), who explores the relationship between research writing and creative writing. Other writers advocate engagement in poetry to support the research process; Cahnmann (2003) makes broad claims for poetry, suggesting that it might illuminate all aspects of research, from data collection to write-up.

There is a growing body of literature about making poetry and developing new poetic genres in the course of research (Ellis and Bochner, 2003 and Lahman et al., 2010). As opposed to poems using the researcher's own words, there is also a category referred to as "found poetry", made by identifying and rearranging words and phrases from research data (Cannon Poindexter, 2002, Butler-Kisber, 2005). The poems which form the fabric of this paper, focused as they are on meaning-making, fall into the category of original works rather than reconstructions of others' words, with the creation of a new genre, research textpoems.

Frame

Theoretical frame

Underpinning this paper is the conceptualisation of meaning-making as process which occurs in a liminal space between bounded fields of knowledge. Liminality in this context is understood as a place of "not knowing", and in the anthropological sense of a transitional space. This paper builds on Savin-Baden's model (2008) of transitional learning spaces which learners enter to engage with the often difficult and disjunctive process of making meaning and mastering new knowledge. This paper explores the capacity of poetry to occupy these liminal spaces and engage with possibility.

Creativity

Silent reflections

on liminalities;

meaning is wordless

This poem, like others in the paper, builds on Faulkner's notion (2007) that poetry offers a "special language" which allows the poet to represent facets of meaning-making which might otherwise be difficult to express.

Research findings

Findings and contribution

Intuition

Intuition is a cave

Too resonant for refuge;

The tiger must emerge.

Illumination

Slanting light of early morning,

softly on the grass,

sliding down the sides of trees,

configuring the path.

Illumination temporary,

a moment that must pass.

The first poem is an example of the author's development of the Japanese haiku form into a "resonant container" for new meanings which emerge from inquiry. These poems capture aspects of the complex processes involved in meaning-making, as well as the potential for inquiry to generate new ways of understanding liminality and coming to know. Poetry has the capacity to create spaces in learning and inquiry for intuition to emerge, to capture illumination, and to make effective connections between the inquiring self and the subject of the inquiry.

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