

The Collaborative Poetics Network: A Pilot Study Exploring the Potential of Collaborative, Arts-based Research

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings from a pilot study, conducted as part of a wider network activity to realise the potential of Collaborative Poetics (CP). CP is a participatory arts-based research method, informed by the combined expertise of artists and academics, and by co-researchers' lived experiences. The method has generated widespread interest, inspiring scholars from multiple disciplines, arts practitioners, representatives from local government/third sector groups, and business professionals.

We describe the activities of a core CP network, who met to develop methodological resources in a series of action-oriented, collaborative workshops, which sought to embody CP principles and practice. Two activities are shared. These were workshopped by individuals from wide-ranging academic and artistic backgrounds, with a view to considering both a personal, reflexive response, and the wider application and development of CP methods. Insights from these workshops are used to explore effective collaborative working across wide-ranging fields and sectors, to examine interactivity issues with the activities, and to highlight possibilities for further refinement and development, with a view to exploring the transferability of these resources into new business, education and community contexts.

Keywords: Collaborative poetics, participatory, arts-based research

Introduction and Context

Collaborative Poetics (CP) was founded in 2016 in a National Centre for Research Methods-funded pilot at McGill University. In this pilot, spoken word artists worked as a 'research collective,' using poetry to enrich understandings of discrimination (Johnson et al, 2017, 2018). The research collective developed CP as an innovative and transformative arts-based research (ABR) method, which draws on expertise from artists and academics to facilitate participatory research. Co-researchers use CP to explore and illuminate real-world social problems, in ways which are creative, theoretically and methodologically robust, innovative, and accessible.

CP has generated widespread interest, inspiring scholars from the arts, humanities, social science and business, as well as arts practitioners, and representatives from local government, third sector groups, and business professionals. Over 100 such individuals across the UK, Australia and North America now form a loose CP network. A core group within this began meeting recently to discuss possibilities for maintaining and extending the CP network and method. As one of their first actions, the group submitted a successful bid to the University of Brighton to host an inaugural CP conference, [The Carnival of Invention](#), in June 2018.

In this paper we describe the activities of this core network in a series of action-oriented, collaborative workshops, aimed at developing methodological resources for CP in an environment which embodies the principles and practice of this approach. These resources (mixed media, explanatory resources and training materials about CP) respond to a demand from the wider network for materials which enable the application of CP by individuals from both academic and non-academic backgrounds, working with a range of problems and communities, with a view to:

- increasing co-researchers' wellbeing, self-esteem, self-expression and personal development

- enhancing knowledge sharing, and,
- offering an innovative teaching tool

This paper shares insights from two workshop activities, as a means of exploring effective collaborative working across wide-ranging fields and sectors, examining interactivity issues with the resources, and highlighting possibilities for measuring impact. This is an important addition to the limited literature exploring best practice in ABR, which is particularly lacking with regard to participatory approaches. We conclude by considering our next steps for refinement, development and external piloting of these resources.

Theoretical Review

In ABR, the expressive qualities of art forms are used as tools for data collection, analysis and/or dissemination (Barone & Eisner, 2011). This offers a productive cross-fertilisation between social scientific theory, research methods and artistic knowledge/methods (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014). ABR has the potential to disrupt explanatory frameworks, presenting new perspectives on social and subject problems, and new understandings of what research is (Jones, 2012). CP thus offers a collaborative, participatory method, informed by artists' expertise in writing and performance, and co-researchers' expertise in their own lived experiences.

CP responds to calls to produce more deep, holistic narratives, which centre-ground the voices, emotions and lived experiences of researchers and participants (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and to take seriously the competences of artists when carrying out ABR (e.g. Jones, 2012). The method also draws on participatory approaches, in which participants are treated as equal status co-researchers, and on critical, community psychology frameworks, which emphasise the embedded, embodied, political and socially constructed nature of social research.

CP brings together diverse bodies of literature, including:

- 1) ABR methods including poetic inquiry, autoethnography and performative social science, which produces innovative, accessible texts that seek to transform knowledge and knowledge dissemination, enabling an exploration of narratives which are emotional, fluid, multiple, and often unspoken or liminal (Galvin & Prendergast, 2016).
- 2) Participatory approaches, framed by critical community psychology, feminism, and critical race/queer theories, which seek to empower and give voice to participants, and create meaningful social change (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Kagan et al, 2011).
- 3) Research on arts interventions in health and education, which demonstrate that the arts can be used with marginalised and disadvantaged groups to improve wellbeing (e.g. Allan & Killick, 2000; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2014; Gregory, 2015).

Furthermore, CP confronts several limitations within these fields, namely: i) addressing the power imbalance present in much ABR (Johnson et al, 2017, 2018); ii) infusing research with an explicitly political, community-oriented agenda (after Kagan et al, 2011); iii) broadening the ethnographic lens to illuminate multiple subjectivities (and inter-subjectivities) (after Chang et al, 2013); and, iv) acknowledging the expertise required to produce high quality creative pieces (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Jones, 2012).

As noted in Johnson et al (2017, 2018), CP as a practice provides a fresh approach to real-life problems by:

- Opening up multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary areas of enquiry
- Pioneering developments in ABR and participatory research
- Producing knowledge which impacts a wide range of service users, citizens and contexts

The Collaborative Poetics Network: Resource Development Workshops

The primary objective of the study is to produce and pilot resources which enable the translation of CP principles into practice. Accordingly, a core group of eleven CP network members have been meeting to develop, pilot and discuss concrete methodological resources. The group's members represent scholars from multiple academic disciplines (including Psychology, Performance Studies, Creative Writing, Social Policy, Education, and Occupational Therapy), as well as arts practitioners, and colleagues from local government/third sector organisations and business.

The group have met several times over the past six months to share insights and expertise. In one such meeting, which was audio recorded for later analysis, we participated in and discussed draft CP activities, using our experiences as a jumping off point from which to put ourselves in the shoes of others, considering possible wider reactions, uptake and outcomes. In the following sections, we share two of the activities piloted, and then present an analysis of the reflective discussion which followed.

1. *Playing with Nine Words*

In this activity we worked through a four-phase process led by Occupational Psychologist and applied researcher, Margaret Chapman-Clarke. Chapman-Clarke has used the Nine Words method previously with advanced coaches and Human Resources professionals, exploring employee engagement, mindfulness and wellbeing (e.g. Chapman-Clarke, 2015a, b). The first phase of the activity involved the group being taken through a short mindfulness exercise, which Chapman-Clarke described as "calming the mind and clearing the space".¹ During this, we were encouraged to focus on, and become more aware of ourselves, physically and emotionally. The intention was to encourage participants to leave behind any distracting thoughts, grounding their attention and concentration in the present, as a means of facilitating the creative and reflective process.

In the second phase we were guided through a reflexive writing exercise on 'what poetry is,' involving the following steps:

- 1) Take the first word that comes to mind and write in silence for three minutes, not letting the pen stop.
- 2) Read over what you have written and highlight three words.
- 3) Take one of those words and write for three minutes on that.
- 4) Repeat steps 2 and 3 two more times, so that you have nine words.
- 5) Write those nine words as a list, with each word on a separate line.
- 6) Use this list to create a poem with the title 'Poetry Is...', using the nine words however you like in the poem.

In the third phase, we were encouraged to think reflexively about our personal responses to the previous phases and to what we had written. Finally, in phase four there was a gentle invitation to group members to share their poem by reading it aloud, which several members did. Examples of two of these poems are shared below:

Poetry is a moment,
quietly focused to show, not tell,
a time and purpose,
a change triggered by the difference.
It may not be enough on its own,

¹ Unless otherwise stated, quotations in this paper are taken from the workshop in which the activities considered were trialed and discussed.

but I feel fulfilled,
sharing with you.

~ Sandie Woods

Poetry is the last thing I read at night,
the essence of a thing or feeling,
a rant, a rave, an expression of self,
a creative contemplation
to locate oneself within.

~ Katherine Wimpenny

2. *Experimenting with Visual Arts*

In the second activity, Polly Blake, an independent multidisciplinary artist, encouraged our experimentation with visual arts. Blake began with a short lead-in activity using ink blots, inspired by Victor Hugo's artistic reclamation of Rorschach techniques (Turner, 2011). For this, the group was given one sheet of A3 paper each, with one inkpot and pipette placed between several people.

The task was simple in design:

1. Fold the paper in half and then open it up again to create a clean fold.
2. Put a few drops of ink on the paper wherever you wish.
3. Fold the paper over and press gently down on it.
4. Open it up, and behold your ink blot design!

The images were subsequently shared spontaneously amongst group members, provoking much discussion around both these and the activity more generally.

Following this we took part in the creation of an '*Exquisite Corpse*,' based on surrealist parlour games (see Gooding, 1995). We divided ourselves into two groups of four people. Each group were provided with one piece of A3 paper and several different coloured pens. The paper was folded down its length to create four equal folds, as in a concertina. One person in the group was asked to draw on a portion of the paper, then fold it over, with just the very bottom of their drawing showing, for the next person to add to. This person then drew from the visible lines of the previous image. This process was repeated until all the portions of the paper were used. The paper was then opened up to reveal our '*Exquisite Corpse*' and the resulting images shared around the group.



CP working group members experimenting with visual art
(Taken by Helen Johnson, December 2017)

Discussion: Learning About and Through Collaborative Working

The CP workshop activities demonstrated how practical knowledge and experience of activities and methods allows us to develop new insights and new kinds of knowledge. Playing out activities in practice reveals where things might need to be articulated differently, as well as where the guidance provided is sufficient. For example, in *Playing with Nine Words*, we discovered that it was important to make it clear at the outset whether or not participants might be asked to share the pieces they create. Conversely, we talked about the need to sometimes minimise the amount of contextual/procedural information provided at the start of an activity, in order to facilitate an emergent process. Doing the activities ourselves thus helped us to understand and anticipate what participants might experience, including the challenges they might face and uncertainties they might have. Further, working with a diverse group (in terms of life experience, demographics and professional expertise) meant that we were able to avoid (or at least limit) the trap of obscuring the wide variability of potential experiences and understandings with the mask of a single individual.

Trying out ideas and activities in practice also revealed unexpected outcomes. For example, in a further activity not described here, we used a writing prompt to ‘think about a time when you were really happy.’ This was intended as a closing-down activity, akin to the ‘cool down’ questions that researchers use at the end of (particularly sensitive) interviews, to help ensure participants feel at ease (e.g Hermanowicz, 2002). In practice, however, it brought up challenging and difficult emotions for several participants, as they dealt with experiences of loss and regret. Sharing this response allowed us to anticipate a wider range of outcomes and experiences, and emphasises the importance of being prepared for the unexpected in collaborative ABR.

We were able to experience the emotional elements of CP in depth. One participant talked about her surprise at how vulnerable the activities made her feel. Similarly, we became keenly aware of how our own fears around artistic skill can limit us. As one artist in our group remarked, “The problem is judgement... Judgement of other people and judgement in ourselves. The voices in our heads...” She spoke about how this concern with being judged can interfere with the fun elements

of activities, and hamper our willingness to participate in activities or share our creations. We discovered that this sense of constant ‘judgement’ plays a role for both novice and more experienced artists, and is something to continually challenge in both ourselves and others. One technique to counter these feelings was to trust and value the process, resisting our desire to reduce the activities to the final artistic product alone.

Ink Blots certainly worked well as an icebreaker, and offered great potential as a ‘gear changer’ to facilitate the shift between different parts of a session. Indeed, Blake noted that she has used this activity in this way within her regular art classes, with a teenage student who has dyspraxia and anxiety, and is very self-critical about producing art. Blake now uses this activity regularly with him, finding that:

“...it gets rid of the inhibitions. It gets rid of the blank space and [brings] the realization that the accident is okay and the imperfection is okay, and actually it doesn’t matter, and if you don’t like it you can throw it away.”

As a collective of members collaborating across academic (social sciences, business, arts and humanities), arts (poetry, visual art) and practice (life and executive coaching), our group brings together different insights and understandings from diverse fields, for example, a (dyslexic) visual artist noted that she felt more comfortable with images and words, commenting how, *Playing with Nine Words* had, “sent me into heart palpitations,” and that for her, the pressure to write something down quickly conflicted with the mindfulness basis of the task which preceded it.

Examples such as these led us to outline other practical considerations for the development of CP resources. Thus, we discussed the importance of providing inclusive guidance, with options such as drawing instead of writing a response to a task. More broadly, we discovered that task constraints can sometimes feel limiting and disempowering, and learned therefore the importance of giving participants permission to deviate from the rules. In concrete terms, this indicates a need to include detailed guidance in the resource packs as to how to set up a particular project or activity. This could cover: the purpose of the task, permission to allow rules to be broken, and how the pieces created might be used/shared, as well as issues related to safeguarding, such as what measures to put in place if people become distressed.

Through this collaboration, we developed not only individual activities, but also our thinking about the resource packs’ content, format, mission and application, and about CP more generally. One key discussion in this respect focused on the issue of how the resource packs could enable individuals to cross the threshold from being (or considering themselves to be) non-artists to becoming more confident creators of artistic works. This movement might be made on an individual level (through the development of individual skills, knowledge or identity) or at the level of a piece of work (and in feeling able to share it with others).

We discussed three ways forward. For each, it is important to have clear guidance (in the pack), and to appoint a facilitator who can discuss and support these considerations:

- 1) Developing a resource pack that can be applied by artists, academics and community practitioners both independently and in collaboration. This might mean targeting certain activities to particular practitioner groups, or developing activities that could be carried out prior to working with established artists.
- 2) Presenting resources in a form which allows participants to follow a process, enabling them to build their confidence and skills over time, as they share more of their own work.
- 3) Producing guidance notes which emphasise that the process is often as (or more) important than the final artistic product. This can be supported by challenging accepted wisdom around what makes ‘good’ art, and who has the authority to decide this, in order to facilitate creativity and empowerment.

Through our activities and discussion, we have therefore been able to: refine, reframe and redevelop existing activities; draw up concrete actions for the production of CP resources; learn about collaborative working; and understand what it means to be, and support, CP co-researchers. We have also begun to reimagine the CP method, redrawing its boundaries, aims, audiences and application. For example, we have moved towards a much broader definition of 'poetics' from that with which we began; one which incorporates not just creative writing and poetry, but also visual and other art forms. This represents a more expansive and flexible approach towards CP as a method and is testament to the wide-ranging skills, knowledge and expertise which the core network have brought to this project.

Challenges and Next Steps

While these activities were an overwhelmingly positive experience for group members, there were, of course, also challenges and limitations which we encountered in our work together. One of these was the perennial issue of time constraints. Carrying out several activities in one workshop, alongside discussions of other group business, meant we did not always have the time we would have liked to allow space for reflection and sharing. Related to this was the problem of enabling a creative and reflexive mindset. This was not always an easy task, particularly in the relatively sterile space of a university campus.

However, where a project allows space for participants to work together over several days, weeks or months, we would expect such constraints to be less pressing. Furthermore, while the working group were considering the development of activities and resources in a rather abstract manner, a CP research collective, is brought together to work on a particular issue or field of experience. In this context, it is easier to clarify the purpose and direction of a given activity and to become immersed in the work at hand. Indeed, it is this shared focus which connects a group, binding them together as co-researchers.

The process of developing, testing and discussing these resource packs has already proven to be an enormously productive and illuminating one. What is evident is the enthusiasm amongst members to develop deep-rooted, sustainable and productive working alliances, which enable an exciting cross-fertilisation of ideas, the sharing of expertise, mutual learning, and a peer network for critique, review, development and dissemination of participatory ABR.

The future development of the CP method and network looks very positive. In the short term, we will be hosting our inaugural conference, the [Carnival of Invention](#), in June 2018. This event is aimed at: academics and doctoral students from multiple disciplines; arts practitioners; and members of community/third sector organisations. It is an opportunity for these groups to share ideas, resources, experiences, and ways of working, in participatory and arts-based research/interventions, with a particular focus on social change and social justice.

This conference also marks the beginning of a period of sustained work on resource development, made possible by funding from the Independent Social Research Foundation. This will include further collaborative workshops within the network, as well as external pilots with diverse communities, including executive coaches and families living with substance misuse. Given how rich and inspirational our experiences of working together have been to date, we look forward to this next period of our network's development.

We conclude with a final poem created during our work together. This represents the first author's response to Chapman-Clarke's *Nine Words* activity, and it captures, for us, something of the power, productivity and vulnerability inspired by, not just poetry, but CP more generally...

Poetry is a frayed dance
laced through our minds,
everything that was suspect,

burnt beautiful,
a sometime mother,
waking to nighttime cries.

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