



A Poetic Approach to Researching Silence in Organisations

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I dream of a house, a low house with high
Windows, three worn steps, smooth and green
A pure secret house, as in an old print,
That only lives in me, where sometime I return,
(To sit down and forget the grey day and the rain)
(Andre Lafon)

Introduction

This chapter was inspired by a research project that explored how individuals perceive their organisational experiences. In order to uncover those silent encounters and stories that are otherwise left untold we turned to Grisoni and Collins' (2012) work on poem houses. Poem houses have the potential to uncover stories and emotional responses to workplace encounters that may not be captured by traditional qualitative research methods,

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such as interviews, focus groups and participant observation (Grisoni and Collins 2012: 18). Poem houses create opportunities for different forms of engagement and interpretation, provoking both intellectual and emotive responses. In this chapter, we share our insights into the issues, practices and processes involved in using poem houses as a method of research.

Research into sensitive and difficult topics is becoming a prevalent part of organisation studies. As such, we are expecting participants to share their experiences that might otherwise be difficult to relive or proscribed from the organisational discourse. Organisational silence, then, has become an emergent area of enquiry (Vakola and Bouradas 2005; Donaghey et al. 2011). Employee silence refers to situations in which employees intentionally or unintentionally (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008) withhold information that might be useful (Milliken and Morrison 2003). Within organisations, people often have to make decisions about whether to speak up or remain silent—whether to share or withhold their ideas, opinions and concerns. Vokola and Bouradas (2005) explain how a climate of silence can manifest itself between managers and employees, and in conflicts between employees. Their findings suggest that it is senior leadership attitudes towards silence and a lack of communication opportunities that undermine employee voice. As Milliken et al. (2003: 1462) note “employees often do not feel comfortable speaking to their bosses about organisational problems or issues that concern them as they are afraid of the consequences of speaking up including the possibility that nothing will change”.

So how might the poetic voice help unearth some of these silent issues? Donaghey et al. (2011) offer a dialectical interpretation of employee silence that challenges the idea that organisational silence is a “communicative choice” of individual employees. Instead, they ask for more research that explores why employees may be reluctant to “break the silence”. Engaging with alternative methods, is we argue, a useful way to support silent employees to speak out.

The Poetic Voice of the Organisation

“Poems, surrounded by space and weighted by silence, break through the noise to present an essence” (Leavy 2009: 63). Poems can help individuals to express their emotional experiences and inner voice (Richardson 1997). Within and through poetry and poetic practice individuals develop a sense of being, to comprehend and respond to their lived reality of ideas, feelings, perceptions and experiences. It is where they can share and exchange intimate and personal stories. As Faulkner (2005) argues, poetry engages and evokes emotions, promotes human connection and understanding, and is often politically charged. She goes on to say that poetry is used when prose is insufficient for an individual to communicate their message. This suggests that many researchers use poetic representation as a means of evoking emotional responses in readers and listeners in an effort to produce some shared experience. Poetry offers a mode of engagement for the imagination to play, and where the senses meet the external world—a place of a conscious aesthetic state of existence to express the inexpressible—to utter the unspoken. It is a place of aesthetic playfulness, where the silence of our inner conscious feelings can be broken.

Islam and Zyphur (2006: 44) in their exploration of Robert Frost’s poetics of work, note how Frost’s poetry addresses the unspoken and silent existential expression and significance of work for people in their organisational environments. They advocate “that the exploration of poetry gives theoretical and epistemic insights to organisational life” (Islam and Zyphur 2006: 534). As Rich (1995: 84) notes, “Every poem breaks the silence that had to be overcome”. These sentiments are echoed by Leggo (2008: 167) who observes that “As a poet I grow more and more enamored with the echoes of wonder, mystery and silence that I hear when I attend to the words and world all around me”.

Silence and voice are also important for Hiley (2006). At the heart of her work she reveals the links between managers developing their reflective practice and the emergence of poetic expression in their writing. Hiley describes how she ran a university programme helping business leaders, managers, professionals and consultants develop their abilities to lead and manage change projects. Hiley reflects over the twelve years of the programme and identifies a link between reflective practice and the emergence

of poetry, where poetic expression for many, emerged on the margins of what can be said in words. Hiley (2006) posits the notion of “the great silencing of the voices of the poetic”, where “every single participant has a wonderful ‘voice’ with which to speak of their thoughts, feelings personal and professional practice and the change initiative itself” (Hiley 2006: 566).

Cooper and Burrell (1988) have drawn upon Foucault’s work of discursive formation within the context of organisational silence in order to create new perspectives and to show how individuals are “suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz 1973: 5). It is argued that discursive formations can intensify the conditioning of the silent employee based on the power aspect of the discourse itself. When speaking, or writing, takes place in certain contexts, this can have an effect in terms of whether an employee remains silent or voices their opinions and concerns. Discourse is the product of the dominant power interests in organisations. These interests can perpetuate themselves based upon the ideology that is represented through them. However, it is only more recently, according to Edwards et al. (2009) that organisational silence has begun to attract the attention of several organisational scholars (see, for example, Pinder and Harlos 2001; Van Dyne et al. 2003; Detert and Edmondson 2006; Edwards and Gardner 2007; Milliken et al. 2003; and Premeaux and Bedian 2003). Whilst these studies foreground the fundamental decisions that people make in the workplace to express their ideas and concerns, or whether it is possible to even do so, they do not advance approaches and methods as to how individuals can break the status quo of organisational silence in order to challenge the dominant discourse.

Poetry and Business

Poetry has been used as a way to help those who work in organisational settings to explore and tell their stories through consciousness-raising accounts, enabling individuals to make sense of their situations (Armitage 2014). Poetry does not rely upon the strictures and formal structures of conventional literary work and storytelling. Instead, they allow metaphors and memories to be explored so that individuals might come to terms with

their situated reality. Poetry provides a mode for individuals to confront complex environments by reducing their complexity into understandable approaches. It helps to facilitate a sense of empathy and understanding of the world, to develop the self. In creating a space for individuals to express the unsayable, poetry offers an alternative voice to the dominant organisational discourse (Armitage 2014). As David and McIntosh (2005: 84) note “Poetry is too important to be left to poets. It would be much better if it belonged to everyone, producers and consumers alike. In work and in business, poetry could be a powerful tool for deepening reason and logic through the use of emotion and imagination”.

Clare Morgan (2010), in her book *What Poetry Brings to Business*, explores the deep but unexpected connections between business and poetry. Morgan (2010) demonstrates how the creative energy, emotional power and the communicative complexity of poetry relate directly to the practical need for innovation and problem solving that confronts managers. She shows how poetry might unpack complexity and flexibility of thinking, to better understand the thoughts and feelings of others. She argues this not only aids the creative process but it can help facilitate the entrepreneurial culture of an organisation by developing imaginative solutions, and help better understand chaotic environments (Darmer and Grisoni 2011). Poetry, as an aesthetic conscious state of existence, provides a mode of engagement for the imagination to play where the senses meet the external world. It allows aesthetic playfulness where the silence of our inner conscious feelings can be broken.

Poets see things through sensuous experience, providing them a sense of freedom to express the inexpressible and to utter the unspoken founded from experiences encapsulated within the boundaries of organisational structures, rules and regulations (see, for example, David and McIntosh 2005). Leavy (2009: 63) reminds that poems are “Sensory scenes created with skilfully placed words and purposeful pauses; poems push feelings to the forefront capturing heightened moments of social reality as if under a magnifying glass”. It has the ability to provide insights through metaphor and linguistic negotiation. As a literary text, poetry presents an individual’s experiences through the self-referential use of language that creates new understandings (Hanauer 2010; Leggo 2008).

Whilst poem houses are a recent arrival within management development and leadership programmes (Grisoni and Collins 2012), their legacy can be found in assemblage. Assemblage is an artistic form or medium that consists of three-dimensional elements projecting out of or from a substrate. Whilst similar to collage, which is a two-dimensional medium, it is part of the visual arts that uses “found objects” to create the final artefact. The use of assemblages can be traced back to the Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin’s “counter-reliefs” in the second decade of the twentieth century. The use of assemblages has more recently been adopted by organisations and practitioners alike as an Arts Based Intervention (ABI) to explore the “inner workings” of organisational life. To explore the feelings and emotions of those who occupy these spaces, expressing them as they do through a visual poetic narrative. For example, Grisoni and Collins (2012) use poem houses as a form of leadership inquiry, which bring together poetry and assemblage, by means of a layered collage, juxtaposed with words and images.

As Grisoni and Collins (2012) note the creation of poem houses led to new insights into organisational experiences but also the process of making artefacts led to deep learning and a more holistic way of engaging with leadership and management issues. Poem houses offer a way of engaging with lived experience which, whilst similar to pictures and collages their three-dimensionality provides a more nuanced mode of representation, as can be seen in the examples detailed later in the chapter. Using poem houses thus brings poetry and art into dynamic combination in the process of their creation, prompting new ways to engage participants in breaking their silence. What follows are examples drawn from workshops that we have conducted for public and private sector managers. Within these workshops we explored with participants what work means in their organisations.

Poem Houses as a Method of Enquiry

Poem houses can be likened to a narradrama intervention that borrows from psychology, sociology, anthropology, experimental theatre and other forms of expressive arts to help a person become aware of internalised narratives (Dunne 2006). Here the construction of a storied landscape

provides the participant with the opportunity to produce narratives that explore their situatedness and to offer possibilities for change. As Dunne (2006: 26) notes poem houses exemplify “the inter-relationships among the arts and the ability of one art form to expand and enhance another” by working with the written word or with an image created from found objects. It can be a method of opening spaces for participants to experience deeper insight (Dunne 2006: 27). As such, the production of a poem house is the process of layering and juxtaposing images, objects and text. By assembling found objects and poetry into a box, a reflective space is created. Grisoni and Collins (2012: 35) note that “intermediality exists” in the assemblage of this art form. Here a coexistence and arrangement of mixed media in a single artefact evolves into a new art form. It is a way of understanding the relations between two media, for example, writing and images and the transgression of boundaries between them. This can open up spaces to question meaning and facilitate processes of reflection and sense-making.

Poem houses also intersect narrative research methods to represent new forms of story for meaning making. The three-dimensional assembly of objects and words can be likened to small black box theatre. It creates a space in which to explore relationships, time and place (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). In other words, a poem house begs the questions of its creator: What is my reality enclosed in this assemblage? What meaning can I encounter from the inside and outside of the poem house—my history, environment and time? The poem house, therefore, invites its creator to come to terms with and understand their personal experience which is at the foundation of narrative research. Such stories can be experienced and viewed in a poetic landscape through metaphor and symbolic imagery (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Dewey 1934). Poem houses therefore offer participants new perspectives, allowing them to project feeling onto an object.

Poem Houses: A How-to Guide

Here we will explain how we have used poem houses with a variety of participants from public and private sectors organisations. Drawing on a

method of self-enquiry, often referred to as the “self-box” technique, used in art therapy projects (Waller 1993) participants were invited to create their own poem house to explore how they perceived their organisational reality.

Context

The use of the poem house method needs to be carried out within a “culture of safety” and collaboration where individuals can exchange stories, experiences and perspectives within the safety of “culture circles” or what are sometimes termed as dialogue groups (Armitage 2014). Those conducting dialogue groups do not actually lead, but rather “interprets the communication of the group and the social matrix, remaining in the background as much as possible and helping the group take responsibility for itself” (Waller 1993: 43). However, those leading dialogue groups need to be what Waller (1993) terms the interpersonal leader, being a “facilitator of interpersonal transactions and as a fellow traveller in the journey of life; taking an increasingly background role, he attends to the language, both verbal and physical, that is used in the group and its meaning” (Waller 1993: 43). Zander and Zander (2002: 174) call these “environments for possibility” where “we come to trust that these places are dedicated to the notion that no one will be made wrong, people will not be talked about behind their backs, and there will be no division between us and them”.

Process

Participants were introduced to the task. They were asked to address the following question: How do you perceive your organisation? They were then presented with an array of art-based materials, for example, coloured tissue paper, paints, coloured crayons, coloured card and paper and a selection of boxes, some of which could be unfolded in order to allow their insides to be “decorated” as they saw fit. Participants are provided with a cardboard cube template that can be assembled into a box, or ready-made boxes. This allows the inside surfaces of the poem house to be

decorated with material, painted, written on, and cut to insert openings, such as windows and doors.

They were given two hours to use art materials to describe and portray their organisation. They were also asked to write a 200–300-word poem to connect their assemblage to words. Figure 1 offers some useful guidelines for participants, especially those new to poetry who might be daunted by the prospect of writing a poem.

The only intervention made by the researchers was to periodically ask each of them what they were constructing or writing, and to take photographs of the process in action. The task was concluded though a group feedback session where participants discussed their artworks in an open and supportive culture.

Understandability: Can the reader grasp the essence as to what is going on? Can those writing poetry convey their message in a clear and (hopefully) concise manner?

Believability: How credible is the poem? What do we learn about the writer's situational experiences? Is it something we can empathise and sympathise with? Are these based on real life experiences? Are the poets autobiographical and biographical accounts based in a lived experience of working cultures?

Situational knowledge: Is there a hidden truth contained within the poem? What does it say about work environments' values? Do the poems reveal credible accounts of work place relationships? Do they reveal the optimistic or pessimistic undertones of organisations work?

Engagement: Can the poet convey a sense of engagement with their created verse — language, rhythm, and imaginability?

Fig. 1 Guidelines for Participants

Ethics

The ethical issues of using the poem house method are fundamentally not so different from other types of research. However, it is important to be sensitive to the multiplicity of considerations here including protecting anonymity of participants, protecting organisational confidentiality, ensuring that participants do not psychologically “self-harm” when producing and relaying back the stories contained in the production of their poem house. Whilst we have used group sharing of individuals’ perceptions of their organisations, we also respect those who do not want to take part in these sessions.

As is the case for more traditional forms of qualitative inquiry we commence the workshops in which the poem house method will be employed by giving out Participant Consent Forms, and Participant Information Sheets. These specifically offer all participants the opportunity to opt-out even before the workshop commences, or indeed at any time during the poem house production process.

We are conscious that, as facilitators, we must be aware of participants opening up inner thoughts—putting emotional baggage out in the open is not a comfortable experience for some participants. They may be the victims of their perceived and lived experience of their organisation, and this may be a difficult issue to share with others. These eventualities need to be tackled even before they arise, and the use of a pre-workshop meeting can head off many, if not all, of these problematic situations; it enables those who are unsure to ask any questions and get a better sense of what they will be asked to undertake.

Analysis and Findings

This can prompt several questions for the participatory dialogic process to consider, for example:

- Do the poems draw attention to common practice of organisational life?

- Can a poem help shed light upon emotional issues in organisations and how might we resolve these?
- Are there any common themes contained within the poems and if there are contradictions how can be explained these?
- To what extent do the poems address or contradict conventional theories or organisational culture or leadership?
- Does a poem tell us about the current climate of organisational life and how we might be able to address unfairness, ethical dilemmas, or suggest good practice?

Whilst we have given an insight into the use of poems houses as means of organisational inquiry, we argue their use as a research method is equally applicable. As we noted earlier in the introduction, we used poem houses for a research project we were both involved in to investigate how individuals feel and experience their lived reality. What we found was that the poem house method helped to uncover silent encounters and stories. As such poem houses can work on more than one level. As an inquiry data collection method, it can stimulate questions for further debate, as in the case of those individuals described in the vignettes. This being a dynamic process of coming to know and understand the world—a stance that is essential to the way knowledge is created. Inquiry is based on the understanding of people working and conversing together as they pose and solve problems, make and test discoveries. It provides a means of creating conceptual and theoretical frameworks to answer research questions. Furthermore, poem houses encapsulate the “movement” from research inquiry to research method in a Freirean dialogue in which data can be analysed and interpreted vocally using “standard” qualitative data coding and thematic development techniques. This approach facilitates a sensitivity to meaning, context and relations that would otherwise have remained hidden and silent in complex organisational ecologies.

Consequently, we argue that the poem house method, embedded in a Freirean participatory approach to research offers not just an insight into individual meaning making but also into the collective. Participants in the poem house method became part of a community of peers sharing their experiences with one another. When using the poem house method, we

saw the potential for them contributing to organisational community—the sharing of data being articulated directly towards a common issue/set of issues in the public display of poem houses. Furthermore, it also facilitates deeper insights than perhaps traditional qualitative research methods can offer—the creative dimension going beyond rational ways of knowing as a means to help articulate concerns and experiences. In the post-making phase, the poem house method has enabled participants to engage in a peer review process—both in the research environment, and in their places of work. This enables participants, by being challenged by others, to gain a more insightful perspective of their organisational reality. However, the use of the poem house method does not end after the initial stage of the research process; it continues to prove of benefit when participants themselves gather data using this method. In other words, their research participants explore their organisations and share their (common) organisation experiences with each other, thus generating data for organisational researchers, such as those we have described in this chapter.

Presentation of Findings

By “exhibiting” their poem houses, individuals can make their “installations” accessible to non-academic audiences by communicating their “voice” in organisational language that makes sense to them and their colleagues (see, for example, Mitchell et al. 2011; Foster 2012; Keleman and Hamilton 2015; Coemans and Hannes 2017). Organisational communities can often be alienated from knowledge production because of the specialised academic language used by researchers (Diver 2014)—poem houses regain a “knowable narrative” through the spoken—dialogue groups, and the written word—the poem, through the medium of assemblage. Dialogue and the poetic form can allow wider organisational conversations by connecting emotions that may be lying dormant (Lawrence 2008).

Whilst the impact and resonance of the poem houses is best experienced in person to appreciate the multi-modality and three-dimensionality, the benefit of the process is in the meaning making and experience sharing. In many ways, this can be communicated effectively through text and images

(as we have done in this chapter). With the growth of arts-based and visual methods, many journal publications are now sympathetic to the need to reproduce images as part of their publication strategy. More recently, we have also seen some journals producing podcasts of publications. This oral presentation offers real opportunities for poetic methods of research as they allow the research, or indeed, participants to recite their poetry in person.

Vignette 8.1: The Treasure Chest

The Treasure Chest (Fig. 2) was created by a participant who worked in the public sector, and wanted to explore how government funding had impacted their work environment. They wanted to explore what they termed a “golden age” of the organisation and to compare this with their contemporary situation, saying that:



Fig. 2 Treasure Chest

My (black painted) box is painted like a treasure chest. The treasure inside contains golden tissue paper, hidden right at the bottom, is representative of the “golden age” of our organisation and the charity sector when we were better funded, and the organisational culture and staff morale were healthier. The glitter and silver balls inside are our staff and service users. The silver foil escaping out the sides is our staff who are leaving since we have changed their conditions, cut salaries and restructures, and our service users whose quality of support is decreasing. Both due to funding cuts. The treasure chest (our organisation) is on fire, inevitably due to recent changes, we have tried to plug the gaps in the organisation (holes in the treasure chest) with money, but there isn’t enough. The man in blue is representative of our government who is standing away from our organisation with his back to us.

Inside the box the following poem was inscribed:

This organisation once a treasure chest,
 Was top of the league – one of the best,
 Now gone are those days of better funding,
 All the staff are up and running,
 Our treasure chest – once a place of glitter and silver,
 Is the victim of cuts – but can we deliver,
 The longing of days of a healthier culture,
 Replaced by the circling government vulture.

(Participant A)

Vignette 8.2: Loss of Vision

Another poem house, created by a participant who worked in a small medium enterprise, in the private sector, depicted a set of “swirly circles” on its top (Fig. 3). They stated that this represented chaos, disruption and a loss of vision by the organisation. The inside contained yellow paper sticks that signified that the organisation was ‘a can of worms’ once you dug beneath its outer layers.

The outside of the house (four sides and bottom) was covered in a poem that read as follows:

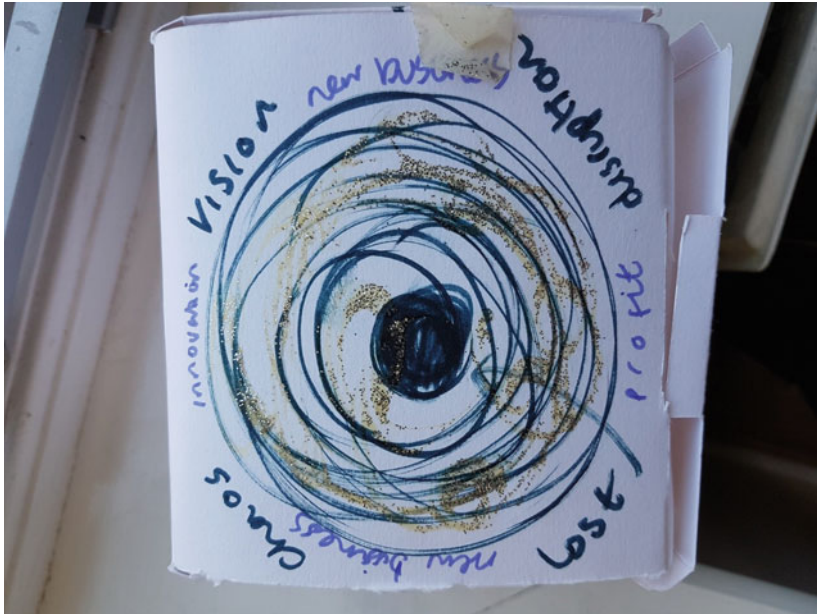


Fig. 3 Loss of Vision

The wise old owl has a rainbow view,
 In his glitter ball world, he knows what to do,
 Let's pass it on down to my next in line,
 He'll pass on my vision and it will be fine.

I love my boss he really is great,
 Passed on some things I need to relate,
 To my purpose and role,
 But I'm not sure how,
 So, I'll just chuck over the fence,
 To my deputy owl.

I'm trying my best to perform as requested,
 Without much guidance or direction provided,
 I'm probably sure there's some rules or regulations to follow,
 To increase profit and make savings,
 I think HR's knowledge I'll borrow.

Another huge project has landed our way,
We guide and highlight risk,
And wander who's in charge today,
Whose bright idea was yet another restructure,
More change and disruption,
Whose help and buy in can one department muster.

We are the minions in this master plan,
Just pushed and pulled through the visions,
Of our glitter ball man.

Vignette 8.3: Faceless

Another poem produced by a participant who worked in a large multi-national organisation, wanted to explore organisational isolation, and their poem here revealed some very (personal) feelings of organisational reality (Figs. 4 and 5). The poem here was covered in writing with comments on the outside and within.

The participant summed up their analysis of their organisation as follows:

The directors are faceless, not seen or known around the business. The company seems to change direction every year, but the problem being that the direction isn't known by the employees in the first place. We have an executive board of three, each with their own agenda not knowing fully what their role entails, so they are unable to tell the business – this has lasted one year! Then it was changed back to one country manager – but still no direction given other than to cut costs. We have no vision – short, medium or long term – we don't know – so we have to guess. The only communication is to cut costs – but can we put a price on knowledge and experience? Growth has been through acquisition – sixty-four sites across the UK – completely disseminated, no harmonisation, and no uniformity. People that have been there for years are leaving because they don't like where and what the company is doing. There is a general feeling of who will be next or who will be next. The business is completely reactive – reaching to the market rather than reading ahead – no PESTEL or SWOT – these have never been done – no business plan.

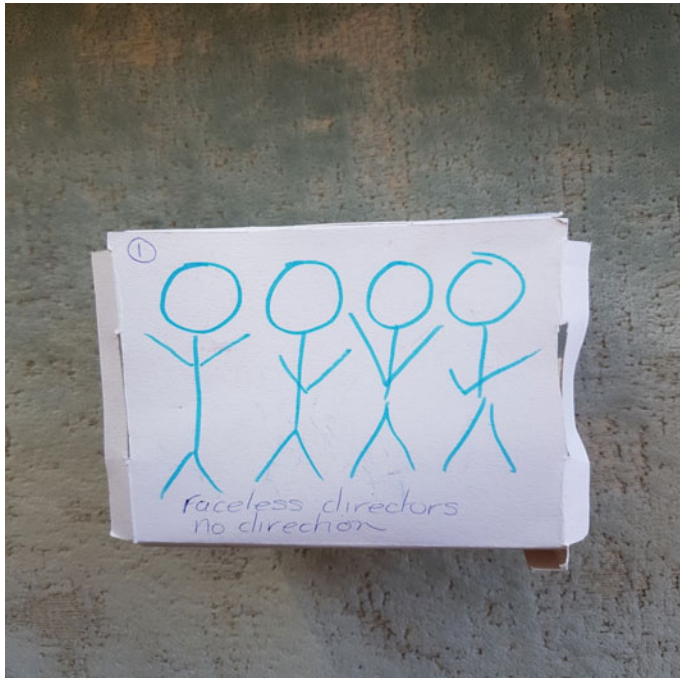


Fig. 4 Faceless (exterior)

The following short poem also captured these sentiments as follows:

Reactive – who's next
What's next,
Just faceless directors,
No direction,
No connection,
What's the vision?
Just division,
Changing faces,
Changing places,
Different agenda's,
We can't remember,
The cost:
Knowledge, experience – priceless,
The loss of people – terminal crisis.



Fig. 5 Faceless (interior)

Vignette 8.4: Values

One respondent, who worked for small medium enterprise in the private sector “bucked the trend” of negativity expressed by other participants (Fig. 6). They wanted to research the “factors of success” in promoting what they termed, a “value driven organisation”. Their interpretation was shown through a covering of their poem house in smiley faces, the word “values”, and in bright red bricks. The inside was filled with red and black tissues paper.



Fig. 6 Values

Family run company,
 With lots of money,
 Helps out staff,
 Work is a laugh,
 As the company is expanding,
 The work is quite demanding,
 The owners know you by name,
 The company has market fame,
 Most people don't like change,
 They think it's quite strange,
 Overall, it's not bad,
 Even though sometimes it makes you mad.

Vignette 8.5: A Lack of Care

Figure 7 was created by a participant who worked for a private small medium enterprise in the health sector who wanted to explore what they called a dysfunctional culture of collaboration and a lack of care.



Fig. 7 A Lack of Care

The outside of the box demonstrates the vision/values and the employer branding the organisation wants to promote – those of compassion, collaboration, and being a caring organisation. However, the reality is quite different – there is a lack of care. The box is packed with tissue paper to demonstrate chaos. The colours (orange and yellow) are bright to show stress level and pressure. Inside the box the (painted) lines show confusion. The pound signs demonstrate cost focus and pressure to reduce resources. There are a few yellow stars (on the underside of the lid) to demonstrate a number of staff are making a positive impact. The pictures of the monkeys (which were on one the side of the poem house) demonstrate some employed may be perceived to be out of their depth and have been appointed to the wrong roles within the organisation

The bosses say we value collaboration,
We are caring and full of compassion,
So, where have these flown amid the chaos,
Time and deadline pressure from my boss,
Some are trying to make an impact,
But the reality is different and that is a fact,
We are led by those who are just plain incompetent,
No compassion or care to be seen anywhere –
The need for profit - the company are hell bent.

Challenges and Limitations to Be Aware of

As a form of participatory action research, we would argue tapping into the latent potential of employees can readily affect organisational initiatives more effectively as common issues are thrown squarely into the limelight. This form of research we suggest can help assess approaches that might contribute towards the reviewing of relationships with the organisation. We argue that arts-based research methods can facilitate a safe space for individuals to dialogue with others, for example, verbalising issues that may be difficult to broach (Coemans and Hannes 2017). In many ways the use of the Freirean participatory action research approach blurs the boundary between an individual self-learning experience, and the wider community of practitioners in which they work i.e. it is learning as research and research as learning. When handling data generated in the form of a poem, we are not advocating any “special techniques” for data analysis.

Another aspect that we have experienced in the post-making phase is the issue of trust. Whilst getting organisational buy-in to undertake poem houses as an investigatory method, is challenging, it is the outcomes from the “doing poem houses” process that can be problematic. As we have noted, sharing and dialogue are central to our approach and this requires trust. It means, because poems houses are a public artefact, participants must be reassured that any feedback and critique is to be taken in the spirit of organisational learning and is part of an informed research process. As Schiuma (2008: 245) notes “in order to guarantee the production of positive benefits for the organisation, artists and business people have to

shape a mutual trustful relationship”. This is a necessary condition to overcome employee diffidence and scepticism.

In our experience, participants embrace the opportunity to express often suppressed views through visually and poetic means. It has allowed individuals to express their inner creativity. This liberating pedagogy of self-discovery is at the heart of Paulo Freire’s dialogical process and the individual’s realisation of their lived reality as they attain a state of critical consciousness of their in-the-world experience (Freire 1970, 1972, 1974). However, for some, poem houses can be daunting. When confronting the reluctant participant, it has to be emphasised that producing a poem house is not about doing “good art”, nor is it a competition with other colleagues to produce “good art”. Rather, it is concerned with the meaning for the individual in the creation of the poem house itself. Common issues and problems we have encountered are typically: “I am not artistic”; “I never have ever liked art—I don’t understand it”; “I don’t have a clue how I should begin to connect stuff going on in my workplace and producing a poem house”. In response to these objections, we have suggested the following topics/themes to participants that might help to breakdown the task at hand and to offer some potential sites of focus:

The work space: Work spaces can be territorial, oppressive, precious, individualistic, personal and beautiful. What about the physical size, smells, how light reflects across it or perhaps the “fixtures and fittings” that exist there. How do you interact with your work space? Is there beauty in your work space?

Vision and values: Do you have an organisational vision or value statement? What are the points it tries to get across to those who work in the organisation? Does it ring true in practice, or is it a fantasy? If you have access to your vision or mission statement can you re-write this a poem? If you don’t have access to it can you write your organisation’s vision or values statement as you perceive it being practised in everyday organisational life?

The presentation: Have you given a presentation in your organisation—maybe to your peers, management, or visitors? Could you write a poem

as a PowerPoint presentation of a meeting that you have presented or attended? Can you re-write one of your slides as a poem?

Organisational power: This is often determined by positional authority; the higher in the hierarchy the more power and authority people have. What are the reporting structures? Is a bureaucracy or a collegium? How does information flow in the organisation: top down or in all directions? Write a poem about the hierarchy of our organisation or one you have experienced.

Organisational culture: Can you define yours? Can you “feel” it? Do you live it? Do you reject it? How do you respond to it? Has it changed over time—for better or worse? What organisational cultural obstacles have you encountered in your organisation?

The working day: What motivates you to go to work? Money? Camaraderie? Friendship? Because you just love your job? Do you feel engaged? Do you feel alienated? Is there beauty in your work? Write a poem that expresses your working day/life.

Giving a speech: This can be daunting. If you have given a speech what did you feel? Excited? Trepidatious? Nauseated? Exhilarated? Nervous? Laid back? Write a speech that tells of how you felt and coped with the occasion. If you have given a speech do you have the text you wrote and read from? If you have, could you re-write this in poetic form? Do you have a favourite speech given by a business leader, or a political or cultural leader? Could you re-write this as a poem?

Organisational crisis: Organisations often face and go through crisis. Have you experienced crisis in your organisation or one that you have worked for? How did you cope? How did you and/or your colleagues feel? What caused it? How did the organisation respond to it? Who took the flack?

The dream job: Have you ever had a dream job—perhaps one you dreamt of as a child? How did it turn out? Did it live up to your expectations? If it did in what way? If it did not what went wrong? What was good? What was bad?

Organisational conflict: Dealing with organisational conflict can be an unwanted distraction. It can take place out of sight behind the closed doors of the boardroom, but its consequences invariably impact those who work within the organisation. It can take place more visibly in “the office” and the consequences of those involved and caught up in these conflicts can live long in the corporate memory. Have you been party to organisational conflict? Were you the victim? The instigator? Bystander? How was it relived? Was it resolved? What caused it? What emotions were expressed in the conflict: fear? Anger?

Being let go: Have you ever lost your job? How did you feel? React? Fight back? What did you learn about yourself? Did it affect your personal relationships and friendships? How did it affect your identity? Has the experience effected how you view work—do you work to live or do you live to work?

The digital age: Technology and social media is now part of our working lives. How has it affected how your workplace runs? Do you use social media or twitter in the workplace? Is it for the good or the bad? If you have access to your organisation’s Facebook or twitter account, can you create a poem to describe or re-write the messages posted or re-tweeted? Can you do the same for e-mails?

Retirement: This was once seen as the “finishing line” for a career or job. Today retirement does not necessarily mean the end of working life. The changing economic situation and demographic trends mean that many will have to work longer. How do you feel about this? Has a colleague actually retired; were you happy, sad, envious, or relieved? Can you imagine a time in the future when you might retire? How do you feel about this? Do you see this as a day of dread or one of opportunity?

Reflections

Using assemblage helps give confidence to “non-poets” to explore feelings via the poetic art form. The use of poem houses also gave us, as researchers,

the opportunity to explore the boundaries beyond the traditional norms of qualitative social research—for example, the use of participatory dialogue groups to unpack what might be mundane aspects of organisational life. For us, poetry as an arts-based method of research offers a re-making of the social and political. As Lather and St. Pierre (2013: 635) note post-qualitative research is about “imagining and accomplishing an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently”.

The production of new knowledge using poem houses, whilst like all qualitative research is an emergent process, is not guided by the dictates of prescribed methods. Rather, it is a creative endeavour fuelled by and guided by self-expression through the hapticity of making, interpretation and the sharing of experience through dialogue. As Pelias (2004) advocates, the use of dialogues, short stories and poems can be used to capture the human experience—they can give us insights that stay in our memories and part of a collective unconsciousness. By using assemblage alongside poetry, we unearth hidden truths and underlying stories that matter to an individual through a creative process. The writing element of a poem house can be daunting to “non-poets”, however we emphasise that (and advocate) poetry is for everyone not those who are, or are regarded as poetically gifted.

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