

## **Creative Activism and Resistance in Higher Education Through Collective Poetic Inquiry**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

Poetic inquiry (poetry as research) is becoming increasingly popular in higher education, but it is still uncommon in some fields and primarily utilised in small-scale, individual projects. Mapping published inquiries can aid in developing poetic higher education research as a genre, increasing its accessibility and integration into the research discourse and practice. This study asked, “How does collective poetic inquiry in higher education facilitate creative activism and resistance?” Ten co-authored poetic inquiries from 2008 to 2024 represented a variety of locations, higher education fields, perspectives, issues, and contextual distinctions. The study’s analytical design used a lantern poem to illuminate collective poetic inquiry’s methodological and educational value for higher education activism and resistance. The five facets of space, movement, entanglement, ambiguity, and flow show why and how collective poetic inquiry can generate creative activism and resistance against marginalising, repressive, discriminatory policies, practices, and situations.

### **Full paper**

#### **Research Context, Focus, and Purpose**

Poetic inquiry engages researchers, participants, and audiences on cerebral, emotional, and sensory levels using poetry as research (Leggo, 2008; Pithouse-Morgan & van Rooyen, 2024; Prendergast, 2009). We are South African scholars who have spent over a decade developing “collective poetic inquiry” as a higher education research genre for social justice and transformation. Composing, performing, and analysing poetry with others in a supportive environment can foster imagination, self-awareness, compassion, and social consciousness. By inviting and valuing diverse viewpoints that engage imaginatively and interdependently, an ethos of polyvocality underpins our poetic explorations (Bakhtin, 1984; Koro-Ljungberg & Knight, 2019; Sparkes, 1991). The many suppressed, marginalised, and muffled voices of South Africa—plagued by a legacy of colonialism and apartheid—make polyvocality vital to us. Global justice, we believe, also requires polyvocality.

Although poetic inquiry is becoming more prevalent in higher education research, it is still underutilised and most often employed in small-scale, individual studies. There is a clear need to consolidate and analyse published poetry inquiries to increase their accessibility and inclusion into higher education research discourse and pedagogy.

This study explored, “How does collective poetic inquiry in higher education facilitate creative activism and resistance?” Ten co-authored poetic inquiries published between 2008 and 2024 were the source material (Table 1), representing different geographical locations, higher education fields, perspectives, topics, and contextual distinctions.



## **Research Methodology**

A lantern poem we composed during a recent study of our use of collective poetic inquiry for social justice and transformation in higher education was the analytic tool in our creative analytical design (Richardson, 2000). Japanese lantern poetry paints a vivid picture with five lines following the syllable pattern 1-2-3-4-1.

## **A Poetic Analysis of the Ten Studies**

Each lantern facet (Figure 1) comprises a foundational concept illuminating collective poetic inquiry’s methodological and educative significance for creative activism and resistance in higher education research.



### ***Space.***

Space, both literal and metaphorical, is essential for creative activism and resistance. Also, by looking at the spaces between poems and words, the poetic inquiries show what can be discovered by valuing pauses, gaps, and silences as sites of significance and insight.

### ***Moving.***

Moving captures the fluidity of poetic understanding. Moving in poetic inquiry involves integrating emotions, sensory experiences, and intellectual insights while transitioning between creative conceptions, qualities, devices, and resources. Moving in higher education research is vital for developing new insights and ways of knowing and acting, stretching academic and pedagogic parameters.

### ***Entangled.***

The collection of poetic inquiries shows a complex intertwining of experiences, viewpoints, and individuals, where varied approaches, notions, and purposes enrich and open understanding. Poetry connects seemingly unrelated ideas and experiences, revealing new insights and surprising conclusions. Entangled knowledge helps to resist and act creatively and critically in and for higher education.

### ***Ambiguous.***

Poetic ambiguity invites complexity and nuance in responding to pressing social, cultural, and political questions. Valuing ambiguity can promote reflexive thinking and plural perspectives to counter normative and restrictive beliefs and practices in higher education.

### ***Flow.***

Poetic understanding develops many fluid lines of sight across forms and media. Fluidity promotes intellectual, ethical, and emotional growth and adaptation in creative interaction. Such flow energises higher education research to build multifaceted understandings and responses.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

The five interconnected facets of *space*, *movement*, *entanglement*, *ambiguity*, and *flow* show why and how collective poetic inquiry matters to us and others in different contexts who are committed to social justice and transformation. Poetic inquiry can reveal, evaluate, and articulate higher education values, critiques, and experiences in ways that more commonly used research methods and texts may not. Poetry illuminates the emotional, cultural, and political elements of belonging to and being excluded from higher education. The ten poetic inquiries demonstrate how imaginative, expressive research design and performance foster complex understandings, activism, and productive resistance in varied higher education settings. These studies also show how poetic knowing expands academic knowledge and knower limitations. Researchers in various higher education contexts can use collective poetic inquiry to see what, how, and why they position themselves as they do and what they can do differently to negotiate and creatively resist marginalising, suppressing, and discriminating policies, practices, and environments.

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