

Caged (Educational) birds: a hybrid metaphorical enquiry (0322)

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The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

(‘Caged Bird’, Maya Angelou, 1983, <http://poemhunter.com/poem/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings/>)

Introduction

This paper addresses the use of metaphor as a means to ‘educational enquiry’ (Cleaver et al, 2014). Other papers in this symposium focus on images and the creative arts and their impact on pedagogy. Here, we look at how literary texts enable learners to consider their own practice from other perspectives. From the outset, we acknowledge that by framing teaching and learning in a poetic context we are setting off from the relative certainty of our own epistemological ground. As scholars from the Arts and Humanities trained in the theoretical approach to literary fiction, we begin this proposal with poetic analysis as we share our own fluency in that language and our belief in the power of literature to translate learners’ experiences of learning and teaching into a meaningful dialogue with their practice.

We can interpret the ‘caged bird’ in the opening lines in different ways. As the discipline of higher education itself: a metaphor for an emerging discipline closed within a system that – depending on where you are – threatens to imprison it in the bars of quality assurance and quantitative systems of measuring success. We can also read the ‘caged bird’ as our learners, trapped between the bars of their own disciplinary ways of thinking and knowing and unable or unwilling to reach across those bars to a more open way of thinking. It is our role to release them from their cages, for however fleetingly a time, and to engage them in a dialogue about their own learning and teaching practice. Eschewing the either/or we embrace the ambiguity of both/and drawing upon both interpretations for this paper – the caged bird is our own learning and teaching, and our use of poetry as creative pedagogy is our own tune singing for freedom from disciplinary constraints.

Methodologies or methodological cage(s)

Tight has suggested that higher education is not a ‘fully fledged discipline’ but instead is a ‘multidisciplinary field’ (2013). However, this is not accompanied by a ‘methodological pluralism’, in which new genres of research flourish. The Social Sciences have staked their claim. Wells *et al.* found that educational research was dominated by quantitative analyses of survey data, which employed intermediate and advanced statistical techniques beyond the skills of most doctoral level professionals

working in the field of higher education research (2015). All incomers do not find this virgin territory to be hospitable. Its indigenous methodologies can be thorny to those who do not understand how to handle them with care, and modes of inquiry seem forbidding (Weller 2011). This paper argues that ways of knowing and being are still being contested. This is where creative practice comes in, because creative practice is open to interpretation it foregrounds this ongoing negotiation, pushing each individual into dialogue with themselves – which is at the heart of reflective practice.

Fieldwork or Singing for freedom

Lakoff and Johnson suggest that metaphor is a way that humans ascribe meaning to their activities (2003). Metaphors therefore have been employed in HE research, as mechanisms by which researchers (and practitioners) can unearth taken-for-granted assumptions. However, we would argue that our own metaphors too rarely offer the road less travelled, and instead replicate well-trodden pathways of cliched and lazy cultural references. Teachers are performers who entertain, spoon-feeders who push and shove knowledge, gardeners who tend and nurture. They don't necessarily invite complex thinking or consideration of the messiness or ambiguity of practice. In our study, we sought to push beyond this and encourage our participants to explore the metaphors that did not belong to them. We examine how metaphor can become a way of inhabiting unfamiliar territory in order to see if it opens up new perspectives. Working on the assumption that creativity is inspired by the existence of constraints (ref), we gave our learners 'found poems' and asked them to make metaphorical meaning in relation to their educational practices through structured analysis of the poem. We will outline how poetry is open enough to create and interpret meaning but offers a structure that offers a scaffold or a 'way in' (and 'out') of reflexive criticality.

Implications or listening to birdsong

This paper will discuss the data from the work with 'found poems' and consider the relevance of this hybrid metaphorical enquiry to both our learners and to ourselves as enquirers. Through these pedagogical reflections, we harness the ambiguity that lies at the heart of our creative practice and 'sing for freedom'.

References

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