



“FOLLOW THROUGH” : POETIC REPRESENTATION OF ACTION PLANNING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract: During an historic semester of student led protests for social justice, the University College of Education (pseudonym) facilitated an action planning session for diversity, inclusion, and social justice. This paper is guided by the question, how can data gathered from an action planning meeting on diversity, inclusion, and social justice be a/r/tographically (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004) represented to support self-awareness and transformative learning experiences? The four co-authors engaged in poetic representation (Ward, 2011) and describe how the data analysis and poem construction yielded opportunities for critical reflection in pursuit of educational equity. This work calls for continued dialogue, action, and emotional commitment to address issues of marginalization in education. The potential of arts-based research to help mediate transformative and lifelong learning regarding diversity and inclusion are discussed.

Keywords: social justice, found poetry, arts-based research, higher education, campus climate

Colleges of Education have a unique responsibility to help prepare future educators, policy makers, and professional staff, to develop the necessary knowledge and skills that foster support for diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Specifically, facilitating opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to develop self-awareness as well as greater understanding of the ways in which systems of oppression continue to shape the educational system are particularly important within our ever-diversifying nation. Such experiences not only prepare future teachers for designing their classrooms in a way that promotes justice and equity, but also lead to increased understanding of the complex institutional landscape of higher education, where, in fact, College of Education faculty and staff remain after undergraduate and graduate students move on to employment (Halualani, Haiker, & Lancaster, 2010). Further, such experiences can provide opportunities to build a sense of connectedness within institutions, which we believe is essential in moving toward social justice and inclusion.

While educational inequality is not new, in recent decades, the rise of colorblindness and the myth of life in a post-racial society has sustained a belief that issues of inequality or injustice are part of a distant past (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Yet, as recent history has proven, neither narrative adequately presents the current state of race relations in the United States. As a result, college and university campuses have been home to a reemergence of acts of justice-oriented protest in recent years, calling for reform on behalf of students of color and other students representing marginalized communities (Wong & Green, 2016). The complexity of recent campus protests point to the need for increasingly strategic and emotionally intelligent leaders who recognize the value in engaging with diverse stakeholders to address a variety of intersectional issues on college campuses (i.e., racial discrimination, sexual assault/violence against women, women's health, LGBTQI+ rights). This sort of engagement with diverse people, information, and ideas requires that we open ourselves to new ways of understanding what holds communities and systems together, so we can reconnect and rebuild.

“The complexity of recent campus protests point to the need for increasingly strategic and emotionally intelligent leaders who recognize the value in engaging with diverse stakeholders to address a variety of intersectional issues on college campuses...”

In this paper, we examine the response to student-led protests at one institution of higher education, University College (a pseudonym), during the fall 2015 semester. The

purpose of this paper is to explain the value in using poetic representation to connect researchers and audiences to the emotional content contained in data. The co-authors started this project when traditional qualitative methods of data analysis from an action planning session for diversity, inclusion, and social justice fell short of representing and evoking emotion. The co-authors later sought out poetry as a way to support their critical reflection and find alternative ways to represent the complexity in the data and their experience. The action planning meeting was facilitated by the University College's College of Education (COE) on November 9, 2015. The University gained widespread media attention in fall of 2015 because of ongoing protests for racial justice and inclusion resulting in administrative resignations. The resignation of the University System President and University Chancellor, coincidentally occurred on the day of the COE action planning meeting for social justice that followed a student's hunger strike and a semester of student-led protests in response to perceived administration apathy to several recent racial discrimination events.

Background at University College

This paper is guided by the question, *how can data gathered from an action planning session on diversity, inclusion, and social justice be a/r/tographically* (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004) *represented to support self-awareness and transformative learning experiences?* Specifically, we focus on the learning experiences of the four co-authors in the study who held different roles (i.e., graduate student and professional research staff) in the COE who volunteered to analyze the action planning data and found and created this poetry in the process. Following the initial use of found poetry, the co-authors were again inspired to construct poems to help as they continued to emotionally engage in and process their work in social justice in the COE. We argue here that the process of constructing poetry can help researchers and practitioners process and critically reflect while engaged in the inherently political and emotional work of education for social justice. In addition, the use of poetic representation can assist in helping audiences gain entry into the complexity of these issues.

In the fall of 2015, college campuses, including University College, were rife with student-led calls for attention to the experiences of marginalized students, particularly the experiences of students of color. As students of color persisted in voicing their frustration with white supremacy on college campuses, little substantive or institutional change occurred on our campus. Tensions mounted between students and administrators, as students grew tired of having to relive racial trauma when being asked to publicly recount their experiences to provide "evidence" that racism existed. Student protests insisted that the University, as well as its divisions, colleges, and schools, address the lack of formal action against racism, and other forms of oppression, both individually and collectively. Following the nationally-publicized hunger-strike of a graduate student of color at University College,

followed by public support by the University's football team, protests resulted in the resignation of leading campus administrators as well as a reexamination of equity / inclusion policies and practice within individual divisions, schools, and colleges.

Issues of oppression have a long historical connection to educational inequity and there is persistent pressure for leaders to act to move institutions of higher education toward inclusivity (Hartocollis & Bidgood, 2015; Hurtado, 1992). Across the research literature on improving campus racial climates, findings indicate that essential to the implementation of meaningful equity-oriented reform is the persistent involvement of stakeholders in the decision and implementation process (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Radloff & Evans, 2003). However, when issues related to campus climate are raised through student-protest, instead of focusing on the concerns raised by students and their supporters, college and university administrators often seek to minimize the public relations fallout of the events (Hartocollis, 2016; Nguyen & Dragga, 2016). While over time, this too occurred within the ranks at University College (McKinley, 2017), in the immediate aftermath of the student-protests, the COE took a different approach.

Under the leadership of the Interim Dean, the COE sought to listen to and affirm the calls of student protestors, in pursuit of informed, justice-oriented change. Through the creation of action planning sessions, COE stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, staff, community members, and administrators) were invited to share their experiences, thoughts, and suggestions for making the COE a more equitable place for all students, particularly students of color. Action planning sessions are a form of stakeholder engagement that can not only provide opportunities for communities to share their experiences and opinions, but also a way for leadership to concede authority to the voices of students, staff, and faculty to gather evidence to inform organizational priorities and policies.

Methods

In this study, poetic representation was used as a way to support critical reflection for the team of artists/researchers/teachers (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004). Mezirow (1998) explains the role of critical reflection to support transformative adult learning. Critical reflection provides an opportunity to take a meta-level view of an issue to confront the limitations of existing structures/models to meet the prevailing demands. Critical reflection and reflexivity are often prescribed to enable teacher learning and researcher self-awareness to understand potential biases and progress toward social justice in education. From a transformative learning perspective, this critical reflection provides an opportunity to reform and deconstruct a current model to generate novel ways of addressing persistent challenges. In this case, we aimed to experiment with Irwin & De Cosson's (2004) a/r/ tographical work by integrating our roles as artists, researchers, and teachers. More

specifically, we came to the practice of poetic representation as a way for making sense of our own experiences and the experiences of the stakeholders in the COE action planning session, while also seeking alternative ways to represent findings from the session and engage a broader audience of learners and practitioners of arts-based social justice research in higher education (Leavy, 2009). For this reason, we include examples of poetic representation as well as statements from each author to explain how the process of creating this poetry helped them further engage with the data and *follow through* to support diversity and inclusion efforts in higher education.

This project started with handwritten “placemat” data from the COE action planning session. A key feature of this action planning session was round table discussions of twelve questions about issues of diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Participants in the planning session recorded anonymous responses to these questions on “placemats” and these anonymous written responses from over 240 students, staff, and faculty participants were transcribed and coded. These transcripts served as the primary data sources and were used in accordance with campus Institutional Review Board approval. At the time of the action planning event, the authors of this paper were three staff members and one graduate student in the COE. We offered to draw upon our prior experience in qualitative data analysis to examine the responses of event attendees as a way to engage with the COE and promote social justice for students, faculty, and staff. Our examination of the transcribed responses involved thematic coding that was shared with COE administrators and faculty as they moved forward with strategic planning related to diversity, inclusion, and equity. However, as we engaged with the responses from event attendees, we were faced with a bevy of emotions (e.g., encouragement, frustration, surprise, determination, uncertainty, despair, hope) that we knew were missing from the traditional qualitative methodologies and outputs. In an attempt to process and represent the emotionality of the experience, we turned to the practice of poetic representation.

This paper focuses on the generative value found in the process of analyzing strategic planning data using poetic representation (Ward, 2011). Following the lead of Meyer (2017), we were encouraged to take a leap as researchers to “transform data into art” and help find distilled representations of stakeholder voices while engaging in the work of making progress toward social justice in a higher education setting. The found poems (Prendergast, 2006) were constructed by the co-authors using the transcribed responses from the action planning session to represent knowledge and make meaning of the ongoing practice of educational equity through an alternative lens for interpreting this data. In some cases, the poems were constructed only using words that were “found” in the transcripts. Other times, the poems are presented more as in dialogue with the author. Each author was free to choose which style or approach best fit the tone of their pieces.

Each author constructed numerous poems, only a selection of which were shared within the research team. More than a year after the strategic planning session, however, the co-authors revisited their poems and had the sense that given the always-changing political, economic, and cultural contexts the data from the stakeholders and the climate on the campus and workplace had shifted. We were inspired again to craft poetry to both represent and process these changes, this time drawing more on our own experiences and memories. A selection of the poems created out of the analysis of action planning data are presented below, followed by an author statement describing their own process for constructing the poems, interpreting action planning data, and/or supporting personal/professional learning. Each of the authors selected a second poem that includes more of their personal experiences engaging in critical reflection regarding the work of social justice in higher education.

Follow Through – Chris

Follow through ⁴²

Silence is not helpful. ⁴⁵

It would help to bother to ask the question,

“What do you need to feel valued?”¹⁸

If someone tells you they are feeling something

And tells you they need something

Don't ask and then forget,

Follow through ⁴²

Figure 1: Follow Through. Found poem constructed by Chris using the responses to the question, “What actions are needed for you to feel included and valued in the College of Education?” The subscript number corresponds to the numerical coding from the transcripts. Different numbers correspond to different individuals.

Chris's author statement. At the close of the action planning session, the Dean asked participants to write on a notecard what they were going to do differently. Because I am a bi-racial (Asian and White) male, it is often easier for me to let the voices of oppressed and marginalized groups fade into the background of my work as a researcher on educational and classroom assessment. Because of my privilege, it is easier to be silent. That night, I

pledged to authentically listen to the voices and experiences of students, staff, and faculty at my own institution and then figure out how to strategically speak up, because I know that this “*silence is not helpful.*” This poem and project was my way to speak up using the voices and perspectives of stakeholders in the college.

More than 18 months after this event, I went back to a recording of the homecoming demonstration, listened to the student protestors and crafted this second poem. The student protestors in tears – arms linked – and in front of a red convertible holding the University President, during a homecoming parade. Along the chain, Black students were sharing their experiences of racial violence and discrimination. They were telling us they needed something – the former University President was silent. This action planning data analysis and the poetic products are evidence of my pledge to study not merely what students know, but what learners need to feel valued.

Engage

Privilege is watching YouTube and

Trying to piece it all together.

Did you just blame us for systematic oppression?

Privilege is seeing the tents from a window

During a project management

Training in the business school.

In small groups, discuss why it's important

to consider stakeholder perspectives?

Listen to the woman [filming](#)

Listen to the woman with a megaphone

Educate them

Don't engage--don't engage

Read the t-shirts

1839 was built on my B(L)ACK

Don't even engage, don't even engage
Stay strong y'all
Do not engage
Do not engage
Don't engage, what the fuck are you talking about?
Don't give them conviction over your body
You film me, I'm filming you
Out of the road
Out of the road

I feel like I should be there
I handed the woman a twenty-dollar bill
She was reading her twitter feed
I left about a dozen hand warmers

It wasn't enough
Engage
The president and chancellor resigned
It wasn't enough
A new president was elected
Engage

Figure 2: Engage. This poem was created by Chris more than 18 months after the action planning meeting. It includes reference to a public YouTube video (hyperlinked in the text) and the voices heard in the video.

We Can All Be Curious – Andrea

we can all be curious

the teacher isn't the one that knows everything –
we can learn from our students too!

listen and learn
both formal and informal

adapt our spaces to make them more welcoming
create opportunities to share
create community where open discussion is greatly encouraged
set expectations that we can all be curious

reach out to students
Smile,
knowing who the students are
valuing them as individuals and not part of a group,
but part of a unified culture
everyone has something to share
something that makes them unique

develop relationships
acknowledge then,
say hello

Figure 3: we can all be curious. Found poem created by Andrea using responses to the question, "How can we construct a welcoming climate for students who have diverse identities, beliefs, or backgrounds?"

Andrea's author statement. As a graduate student and aspiring teacher educator at the time of this study, and as a queer, White woman, the question, *How can we construct a welcoming climate for students who have diverse identities, beliefs, or backgrounds?*, resonated with me deeply. The creation of a welcoming classroom climate is essential for teaching and learning. I know this as both a student who searched for inclusivity as well as an instructor that seeks to model it for my students, future educators. If students, faculty, and staff do not encounter a climate that is welcoming and inclusive, it is difficult to truly engage in authentic and transformational learning. Examining the participant responses to this question evoked several memories and questions within myself. *Am I doing enough? Do I listen and learn? Do I create a space that is welcoming for diverse students? How do I know? Do I encourage students to listen and learn from each other? Do I encourage reflection, critical thought, and personal/professional growth? Do I encourage students to push through their discomfort and think critically about their role as educators?* My responses to these questions vary, though I must admit I continue to view myself and my work as “in progress.” The participants of the action planning meeting were calling on COE officials to ask these same questions of themselves and their institution.

I titled this poem “we can all be curious” because curiosity is the root of exploration, knowledge development, and critical thinking—the heart of engaged learning and teaching. Students want to know that they can be curious and able to explore, learn, question, challenge, and grow in educative spaces. However, curiosity is not always encouraged or valued in traditional educative settings—especially with increasing attention to the standardization of both teacher education and K-12 classroom instruction. Responses to this question presented a desire for COE officials and professors to recognize and validate the existence of multiple truth(s), knowledge(s), and lived experience(s). From curiosity, often comes acknowledgement, understanding, empathy, and justice. There is no universal experience on a college campus. We must be willing to hear, listen, and respond to the concerns of students, particularly those most marginalized.

To turn a blind eye to the ways in which educational systems reinforce inequity would be the simple path forward. The most significant takeaway from this process, for me, is the necessity to remain cognizant that the easy or quick path is not acceptable. To forget about the responses of event attendees and their demands for a more equitable educational environment would be a disservice to their contributions to the strategic planning meeting. This work, my work, is a personal and professional investment and embodiment. My second poem, “Remember our Shared Humanity,” draws from the responses of event attendees and serves as a reminder that although the work is difficult and time consuming, it is necessary. Text featured in quotes, including the title, comes directly from the responses of attendees at the COE strategic planning meeting.

“Remember Our Shared Humanity”

We must “trust in one another that we have pursued this field for many shared reasons”

It’s not about “being the voice for others—but enhancing marginalized voices”

And be willing to “share truth” and “fill in the gaps where we’ve been lied to”

We must “take the blinders off and watch with a critical eye”

“Be observant and act—Do something”

This requires “more effort” and for us “to take it seriously with more than words”

It’s about “not being afraid to make people uncomfortable; challenge their thinking”

We must “acknowledge what we don’t know”

“Acknowledge privilege and historical experiences that shape our current” perspectives

“Be open, recognize it is okay to be wrong—that’s how we learn!”

“We cannot be silent”

We must practice “grace—trust—patience”

We must “remember our shared humanity”

Figure 4: “Remember Our Shared Humanity”

Found poem created by the Andrea

A “Light” – Crystal

A “Light”

Resistance

Don't push the resistance away. 23

Learning is all about resistance []

to a degree. 5

Inclusion-We Must Include those that resist in our decisions and progress

Listen- We must listen to the reasons that those are resisting. 12

Have the difficult conversations

Nothing significant ever happened w/o resistance 13

Struggle

De-stigmatize Protest. 26

This is tough.

I personally have been struggling []. 14

Educate Yourself. [] Find your stand. [] Educate the world 15

Coming out clearly

and loudly

That COE will push forward and that

Changes will be made. Practicing creative insubordination. 17

A “light”

discussion – decision 37

Understand people have to want change.

Aggression and confrontation solve nothing 20

Be a “light” for that person who is resisting
 change / improvements ²¹
 Conquer fear with empathy and compassion. ²⁰
 If we don’t do something who will? ²

Figure 5: A Light. Found poem created by Crystal using responses to the question, “How should we respond to resistance to making the improvements identified tonight?” The subscript number corresponds to the numerical coding from the transcripts. Different numbers correspond to different individuals.

Crystal’s author statement. Is there power in having a voice? As a child I learned the answer to this question would always somehow be tied to an artful negotiation between voice and audience—for in some cases, voice requires human connection. Voice requires ears, minds, and hearts to receive it when there is a desire to affect change outside oneself. However, being connected with an audience opens us to certain vulnerabilities. We can always choose to sing alone. As a longtime advocate for inclusion and dialogue, I began reviewing the outpouring of responses from the Dean’s strategic planning session and I understood that data reported through charts and anecdotes will not be enough. I kept being reminded of the philosophical problem about the tree falling in a forest. If no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

It does not make a sound without eardrums to translate the sound waves. However, the tree has still fallen! Are we able to *feel* its impact on the ground? Why not? We must awaken our senses and learn to hear in new ways by engaging people, ideas and information that allows us the vulnerability to feel if we want to create more inclusive spaces in academe. The process of creating poetry from the words of others forced connectedness. I saw beauty in the contradiction between sadness, struggle, and a hope in change because they are all within me. The process was emotionally charged, which I believe will be a critical component to work we have ahead in building new alliances and forms of community. We lower our guards to the sensuality in poetry. We hold different expectations. We allow our hearts to be broken and for beliefs in something larger than ourselves to regenerate. Make no mistake, the tree has fallen. Yet, as my poem, “Us and Them,” tries to capture, there are many we work with, live with, and care for who do not hear, sense, or believe anything has happened. Or, that the tree has fallen because it was not strong enough to deserve life. We must find a way to keep our lights burning. How do we continue to engage, and make ourselves vulnerable in a push toward transformative dialogue? How can we find the joy and

growth in discovering new modes of human connection and sensation together, to more completely invest in building the rich communities we imagine?

Us and Them

Can I talk to you a sec
about something
It's been a week since it
all happened
What are them kids trying to do to
Us?
What are they bitchin' about?
The words annihilate
my body
I watch through a thick tunnel—a hurricane storm
Swelling above my body
Destroying through inundation
those who do not evacuate
Yet I am present. I know.
This storm is passion
Please close the door. Sit down.
Let's talk.

Figure 6: Us and Them. Poem created by Crystal recalling an interaction she had with a colleague one week after the university president resigned.

Reset Resistance – JoAnna

Reset

Meet people where they are

Listen

Engage

Perseverance

Accountability

All have inherent biases

Expected

Don't push away

Stay strong

Reset

Resistance

Resistance from a place of love

Figure 7: Reset. Found poem created by JoAnna using responses to the question, “How should we respond to resistance to making the improvements identified tonight?”

JoAnna’s author statement. There occurred at the University, in the fall 2015 a volcano of voices crying for change. Those voices must not just become history; they have to become part of us, and part of the next generation. The traditional historian perspective is important, but sometimes facts and data become catalyzers unto themselves and we lose the humans living the history. I wanted the emotions, the feelings, the spirit, and the pleas to be remembered.

Many saw the protestors as revolutionaries who must be controlled, the media sensationalized the anger and the reason for the protest was being marginalized. As I read stakeholder thoughts on the need for change, I was committed to not letting this happen. I wanted to put these comments together in such a way as to create a memorable medium

emphasizing the beauty that can come from protest. I wanted to provoke understanding of the legitimate cries and overshadow the negative images. I wanted to help lay bare the absurdity of prejudice and its role in exclusion. Poetry has the potential to do this; to capture the heart behind actions.

The process was to listen to the writings, imagine the faces, see the pain, see the hope and let the words form the way. Merge the bitter and pleading voices and create a gentle voice to lead to a new improved environment. As the voices began to evolve into a beautiful sound, I felt good. I wanted to share and I want to blend the aesthetic challenges with technology to reach more.

Rationalization is a powerful action blocker. We as individuals, as groups, as institutions and as government use rationalization, and in so doing distort our vision. Some of us see a bridge about to crumble and say it is nothing, no problem and continue on. Some will see the bridge and say, "That does not look good, but it is not my problem," and continue on. Some will say, "It is a problem, but I can't do anything," and continue on. The bridge collapses and all say, "Someone should have done something!" Unfortunately, these quotidian reactions distort our view and reality. I want all people to take ownership of society's problems. I hope for inward reflection, intent listening, and analysis, resulting in solutions and ultimately, purposeful action.

As I read stakeholder thoughts on the need for change, I could not just continue on. I was committed. I wanted the emotions, the feelings, the spirit, and the pleas to be remembered. For the last poem, "I AM," I listened to the words, heard the spirit, felt the pain, imagined the faces, shared the hope, and let the words form the way. I merged the hurt and pleading voices, and tried to create a gentle voice that might lead to a new improved environment. As the voices began to evolve into a beautiful sound, I felt good. It was a good recording, not just the words, but also the spirit. I wanted the spirit of the protest heard and remembered. The traditional historian perspective is important, but sometimes facts and data become cold and we lose the perspective of the individuals living the history. I wanted to provoke understanding of the legitimate cries and overshadow the negative images. I wanted to help lay bare the absurdity of prejudice and its role in exclusion.

I AM

See Me

You talk, I listen

Hear Me

I listen, you talk

Listen

I listen, I listen

See Me

I Am, I talk

Hear Me

I talk, I Am

Listen

I Am, I Am

See Me

Figure 8: I am. Poem created by JoAnna. This poem was written when she first started transcribing data for the first phase of data analysis.

Closing Thoughts

A consistent theme in the research detailing efforts at promoting equity within colleges and universities is a lack of follow through on the part of administrators or leaders (Halualani, Haiker, & Lancaster, 2010). Human connectivity and emotion are provocative agents for action, or “following through.” Through the creation and presentation of found poems generated from participant voices, the authors intend to not only continue the dialogue at the University, but also encourage the field to lean into the emotionality of this process and work toward improving the experiences for students who most often feel unheard, unvalued, and unwanted. Approaches like poetic representation and intentional action planning sessions

are ways to open spaces to hear and feel while negotiating individual and institutional landscapes in pursuit of equity.

In this manuscript, we emphasize not only the potential of poetic representation to make the issue of diversity and inclusion in higher education more accessible, but also emphasize how the process of developing these poems could help learners and researchers engage in and develop competencies. For us, the process of constructing poetry serves as one of many steps as we attempt to “follow through” in our different roles and trajectories.

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