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If 'poetry is more a threshold than a path' then what might students redress to help with crossing over?

Abstract:

'Poetry is more a threshold than a path...'

—Seamus Heaney

Poetry may be perceived by writing practitioners as an ideal medium for documenting and reflecting on human experience and emotions. The opportunity to write poetry for academic credit within tertiary creative writing programs can prove an attractive choice for students. Because writing poems can be (mis) conceived as an easy task, some undergraduate students may commence these practice-based courses with limiting perceptions, restrictive knowledge and naïve expectations. In such instances, students will inevitably enter a learning stage during which they wrestle with unfamiliar concepts or challenging processes, finding themselves in a state of liminality before they cross a new threshold of understanding and practice.

This paper references Elizabeth Ellsworth's concept of 'stuck places' as its starting point, and reflects on what students might need to unlearn, or be emptied of, in order to progress as a poetry practitioner. An experience of stuckness can inhibit a student's capacity to advance to a point where they can successfully compose an effective poem, rather than simply express an intention to write about a poetic theme or idea. We posit that the writing teacher plays a crucial role in identifying what perceptions or (mis) conceptions first need to be redressed because excessive periods of stuckness

can lead to a reduction in student confidence and writer's block. As well as approaching the challenge of teaching poetry writing from the perspective of what lecturers can do to assist learning processes, this paper also considers what students might usefully unlearn.

Biographical notes:

Judith Beveridge is a lecturer in poetry writing at The University of Sydney. She is the author of six books of poetry. Her most recent collection is *Devadatta's Poems*, published by Giramondo Publishing in 2014. In 2014, the US publisher George Braziller, brought out a selection of her poems *Hook and Eye* specifically for the US market. Judith has been the recipient of numerous literary awards, and in 2005 she was awarded the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal for excellence in literature. In 2014 she was awarded the Christopher Brennan Prize for a sustained and distinguished contribution to Australian poetry. She is currently involved in several research projects relating to poetry practice, and is the poetry editor of *Meanjin*.

Dr David Musgrave is a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Newcastle and the author of the novel, *Glissando: a Melodrama* which was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Award for Fiction and the UTS Glenda Adams Award for New Writing. His latest collection of poetry is *Concrete Tuesday*, Island Press 2011. He runs the publishing company Puncher and Wattmann and has won numerous awards for his poetry. David is currently researching contemporary Australian poetry, and has published work on modern Australian novelists such as Patrick White, David Ireland and Norman Lindsay. He has also published on Samuel Beckett. A particular area of David's research focus is the grotesque in art and literature as well as satire, specifically Menippean satire.

Dr Carolyn Rickett is a senior lecturer in Communication and creative arts practitioner at Avondale College of Higher Education. She is co-ordinator for *The New Leaves* writing project, an initiative for people who have experienced or are experiencing the trauma of a life-threatening illness. Together with Judith Beveridge, she is co-editor of *The New Leaves Poetry Anthology*. Other

poetry anthologies she has co-edited with Judith include: *Wording the World*, *Here not there* and *A Way of Happening*, and her poetry has been published in several anthologies and journals. In 2011 she received an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning. Carolyn's current research projects include: autobiographical writing as a therapeutic intervention, cancer narratives, trauma studies, poetry praxis and journalism ethics. She is currently working on a narrative nonfiction text of travel stories.

Associate Professor Maria Northcote is an experienced higher education researcher and teacher. She teaches curriculum studies to pre-service teachers, supervises postgraduate students and assists staff in their development of online teaching skills at Avondale College of Higher Education in NSW, Australia. Her research interests include teacher education, academic staff development, threshold concepts, online learning and teaching, and assessment in higher education. She was recently appointed a Fellow of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) in recognition of her service to teaching and learning in higher education. Maria has received teaching and research awards from Edith Cowan University, the University of Newcastle (NSW) and the Western Australian Institute for Educational Research (WAIER).

Professor Anthony Williams is currently the Vice President (Academic & Research) of Avondale College. In this role he is providing leadership in Learning and Teaching, Research and Scholarship. Most recently he has held the position of the Head of School of Architecture and Built Environment at the University of Newcastle, holding that position for over six years. He has extensive experience in project management in the domain of professional education. He is a winner of multiple University Teaching Awards as well as a National Award for Teaching Excellence. He has worked extensively in curriculum design and implementation both at program and course levels, and is highly regarded in this area having worked as a curriculum consultant nationally and internationally. His research area is in Design Cognition with

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Keywords: Poetry writing, threshold concepts, undergraduate students, unlearning, 'stuck places'

The road to be travelled

If Seamus Heaney's observation that 'poetry is more a threshold than a path' aligns with the lived experience of those who teach or study the art of writing poetry, then there is an ongoing pedagogical discussion to be had about the way students acquire skills and achieve competency in writing poetry in a tertiary learning context.

From our own teaching experience and institutional contexts there is no homogenous profile for an undergraduate student likely to be drawn to academic courses where writing poetry is a feature. However, Joseph Ditta's comments, though representative of Creative Writing generally, provides a helpful insight into what we too have experienced when students elect poetry writing for a practice-based class:

Two types of students take my Creative Writing classes; the one type consist of aspiring writers, the other of those preparing to be high school English teachers. There is a third, but they are not numerous. These last are mainly the curious, who take the class out of some vague notion of the need for personal cultivation. (Ditta 2010: 68)

What is evident from Ditta's summation is that some students primarily see poetry writing classes as an academic activity to support and further their perceived vocational calling; or for those preparing for future educative roles learning to produce, not just critique, poetry will add to credibility in their teaching domain; and then there are those for whom poetry writing advances a personal development goal to nurture and extend the creative self outside of any vocational or professional ambition. Despite these varying motivations for taking practice-based poetry classes, it is not uncommon for undergraduate students taking such classes to confront challenges in achieving a tangible outcome of writing poetry of a high quality.

The process of learning how to write poetry, or as Dan Disney describes '... poetry as knowing-into-language' (Disney 2014: 2), can be restricted by a student's (mis) conceptions about the nature of poetry, the function of language/communication, and the techniques required to create an artistic artefact. In order to rise above literary banality a student needs a strong working knowledge of fundamental elements of form and craft. Ideas about what a poem is and the process involved in writing poetry

can sometimes hinder a student's propensity to appreciate the complexity of composition. The misleading ease of a succinctly written poem can add to the mix of (mis) conceptions that potential poetry writers may carry with them as they embark on their first writing task.

While there are excellent teachers and practitioners of poetry contributing to school English programs, we have found a number of undergraduate students are shadowed by a negative high school experience where poetry in that context may signify nothing more than the tortured remains of an HSC critique on Keats' oeuvre born out of rote learning. For some students there have been few formal classroom opportunities, if any, provided for developing the requisite skills of writing poetry of their own. And if students in their senior high school years have been afforded the rare occasion to create poems rather than only critiquing the work of poets from the canon, Myhill and Wilson suggest that some students are taught 'a schooled version of creative language use, one which is divorced from the model of creativity as theorised by writers and creative writing practitioners alike' (Myhill and Wilson 2013: 101). This pedagogical juxtaposition can set up potential clashes between the preconceptions held by novice poets and how poetry practice is often taught and facilitated by experienced practitioners within the academe. If overlooked, students who remain stuck in thinking about poetry from the perspective of a 'schooled version of creative language use', as described by Myhill and Wilson (2013:101), may be impeded in their development as poets.

Too much luggage

Within the realm of writing genres, poetry may require students to put aside and unlearn some of the conventional rules of writing (Wilson 2009). Consequently, learning how to write poetry can, to some extent, involve unlearning. In our earlier research (Rickett, Beveridge, Northcote, Williams and Musgrave 2014), this notion of 'emptying' previous ideas about poetry practice has been identified as a threshold concept (Meyer and Land 2003, 2005).ⁱ

As students of poetry attain deeper understandings of what it means to be a poet and what a poem represents, they can be seen as stepping their way through a series of thresholds. As well as transforming their previous (mis) conceptions through a

process of unlearning, novice poets also typically come to (re) conceptualise the messy, iterative, creative process of writing poetry in which the writer's language skills and aesthetic sense are continually being honed. This is a process in which creativity, technical skills and an understanding of poetic craft are inextricably intertwined. To enter this space, students may need to let go of the idea that writing poetry is a quick process, and see creative production as a more complex task.

Furthermore, as Vygotsky (1978) purports in his theories of social constructivism, the role of creative play can act as a forerunner for thinking creatively and mastering language. For the novice poet, this means that the act of playing with words and a willingness to get somewhat lost within a creative space are almost rudimentary to learning how to write poetry. The transformative processes of entering and emerging from each conceptual threshold gateway is not always smooth as novice poets grapple with the concept of writing about ideas and finding the words to shape their poems. Jason Crawford crystallises this central tenet of writing poetry as 'Not ideas about the thing but the thing itself. This is the burden of my work in teaching poetry' (Crawford 2011: 8). As they develop their writing skills and confront struggles such as the challenge described by Crawford, students new to poetry writing may experience periods of 'stuckness' where they find it difficult to progress through to the next stage of writing. Using Ellsworth's (1997) term of 'stuck places' as its basis, the term 'stuckness' has been used to describe such stages of learning. When reaching this point, before they fully master a relevant threshold concept or process (Meyer and Land 2003, 2005), learners typically enter a period of transformation as they work their way towards a new depth of learning. In poetry writing, this stuckness can inhibit a fledgling poet's ability to progress towards a point where they are able to craft words into a poem, beyond an intention just to write about a theme or idea.

To advance from one level of learning to another, students sometimes need to disassociate themselves, unlearn or forget earlier learning. However, experiencing excessive periods of stuckness can lead to reductions in confidence (Kiley and Wisker 2009) and be counterproductive to progressing towards higher levels of learning. In poetry writing, being stuck between conceptual or skills-based thresholds, sometimes described as a state of liminality in which 'certain students undergo a transformational or even creative experience' (Meyer and Land 2005: 380), novice writers may wrestle

with unfamiliar concepts or perplexing processes. This mid-threshold experience has been likened to Festinger's (1956) theory of cognitive dissonance, Perkins' troublesome knowledge (Perkins 2006) and Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. Rather than labeling these experiences simply as 'writer's block', this paper attempts to explore the processes that students' experience of unlearning and stuckness to further understand their stages of development and to determine how experienced mentors can scaffold inexperienced poets through these stages.

Based on our own classroom contexts, we have found the presence of an established and experienced poetry practitioner can enable writers to push forward through to the next threshold of their development as poets. This collaborative learning moment is similar to a cognitive apprenticeship (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989; Collins, Brown and Holum, 1991) in which experienced learners serve to make the tacit processes of learning more transparent to the novice.

(Un) packing/ (Re) packing

Despite the prevalence of poetry in our culture, a perception nevertheless remains that poetry is the preserve of a knowing elite and not considered to be as relevant as fiction. An example of this is Jennifer Byrne's *Tuesday Bookclub* program on ABC TV, which does not feature poetry at all. It is not uncommon for teachers of poetry at university to acknowledge that students initially struggle with studying poetry. These initial struggles with the concept of poetry and the processes of creating poetry can result in students becoming stuck in a learning place that is thwarted by limiting and limited understandings of the how poetry is produced; that the act of writing poetry is somehow beyond them and not for them. As Jeffrey Wainwright states:

Much more than with fiction or drama, students tend to suspect there be mysteries, if not monsters here. In one cloud is the anxiety that there is only a certain, intuitive cast of mind that will 'get it'. Another fears poetry is fraught with bewildering technicalities. Also, in a quick-paced culture, many find it hard to read slowly, to pause and re-read. (xvii)

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the materials needed to make a poem – words themselves – are freely available to anyone who wants to do so, and it is this

very familiarity with the material of poetry which often leads to the bafflement Wainwright describes: it is assumed that there must be some kind of arcane clue to understanding poetry because it is produced from language, something with which all students have familiarity. Without unlearning such a misapprehension about poetry's perceived mysteries, then students will not be able to transform their relationship with language and begin to experiment freely.

Most students are able to overcome these challenges when guided by a capable teacher. Like any art form, poetry has a 'language' specific to itself, and understanding this 'language' consists in being able to read poetry in ways that everyday language usually cannot be: understanding ambiguity, polysemy, connotation, tone as well as rhetorical figures. Ideally, it is the recognition of these complexities that enables a student to appreciate that poetry is an ideal medium for depicting and evoking human feelings that are often complex in themselves.

Travelling too light

While some undergraduate students may experience bafflement, and subsequently stuckness in naive understandings of poetry practice, we have found that there are some who assume writing poetry will prove an easy task as it simply involves the placement and lineation of selected words on a page so they *look* different to prose. One of the deficits to address early on can be an undergraduate student's lack of linguistic experience. There are some students who need to unlearn or surrender the belief that their current store of language resources and techniques will be enough to compose a powerful poem. The very act of unlearning this may enable them to progress their work. For a student to move their writing forward, they will need to develop an understanding a more sophisticated understanding of craft. As Ditta posits: 'Craft forces them out of their usage habits, and writing becomes more deliberate and disciplined than they are used to' (Ditta 2010: 68).

Lecturers involved in poetry writing classes are fully aware that some students can resist a theoretical and technical approach as they believe focusing on these elements will inhibit their creativity. One of the lecturer's key roles might involve closing a student's cognitive gap by validating and privileging the importance of a writer's working knowledge of craft. Once a student has eschewed the unhelpful notion that

‘the formal properties of poetry like metrical regularity, repeating stanzas, figurative language with its identifying phrasal structure (like the heroic or the zeugma), rhyme, rhythm, with all their subtle interactions and nuances are in some way ‘artificial’ (Ditta 2010: 71), there is often then another limiting concomitant belief for them to unpack/unlearn which relates to their privileging of the personal above the literary. There is regularly a cherished view that if their voice is somehow ‘authentic’, ‘sincere’ and ‘genuine’ this will automatically equate with the construction of an effective poem. It can be a difficult and delicate task to help a student move beyond a sentimental confessional style to one governed by a more precise and objective use of language. There is no doubt that ‘The autobiographical surge in literary studies places increasing value on self-representation as a strategic means of reclaiming voice, identity and agency’ (Joseph and Rickett: 2010). However, this impulse often restricts the work of undergraduate students who are still navigating the purposes and differences between acts of writing that might be regarded as therapeutic that do not always meet the aesthetic criteria against which an academic assessment task is mapped.

Nancy Kuhl, a prolific poet and poetry curator at Yale University, elucidates: ‘The idea that writing is primarily a means of self-expression, as opposed to a craft or a creative discipline, has been widely held by members of my classes and for a variety of reasons, it has created challenges for me as a teacher’ (Kuhl 2005: 3). The challenges she articulates go to the core of students becoming more skilled in framing poetry writing in academic contexts as an artistic discipline rather than a mode of therapeutic expression. In considering what is useful for expanding students’ work beyond the insular Judith Beveridge offers this observation:

The best way to learn any skill is to be associated with someone who has acquired those skills, who has understood on a deep experiential level, the difficulties and challenges of their art form. What students often need most is encouragement and confidence in their creative abilities. They need to understand that poetry is an art form — like music, sculpture, painting, dance, and even many sports — that can be learned and is not necessarily a product of genius or innate talent. (Rickett et al 2014)

Students progress pedagogically when they begin to embrace the possibility that poetry writing does not inherently rely on ‘the post-Romantic, static notion of ‘tapping into’ stores of genius ...’ (Curtis 2009: 115). And, students come to understand that, like any other skill, poetry writing might require them to serve an apprenticeship. As Neil McGaw points out, ‘This sense of ‘apprenticeship,’ of learning the craft, has been a defining characteristic of the proliferation of university writing programs’ (McCaw 2011: 27). But this apprenticeship needs to come with some caveats because as Curtis notes, ‘Creative writing will not lend itself to systemization or to blasé compositional step-by-steps. Systems curb experiments in teaching; in the evolution of the discipline. They tame the possibility of learning through failure and risk’ (Curtis 2009: 110). As identified earlier in this paper, we see risk, experimentation and failure throughout writing processes as essential components in crossing new thresholds.

Thus, an apprentice poet’s task can be a daunting one without a mentor. A new poet needs to forge a voice and a relationship to language that will have that voice stand out. Again, Beveridge offers this insight based on her own development as a poet and teacher:

Poetry must always be a serious showdown between the word and the poet. The poet must come to terms with the difficulty of circumscribing a position within the dark maw of words. There are many ways to have a relationship with language - through form, rhythm, deportment of sentence, structure, line, image, diction, cadence, tone - but if a student has not written or read a great deal, then they will not possess the depths of linguistic resources needed to make a good poem. Ideas or inspirations are of little use if the groundwork in language and technique is ill-prepared.

Thus, the process that leads students towards developing threshold concepts about poetry writing needs to incorporate a recognition, and a practice, of the technical foundations and competencies upon which effective poetry rely.

Reading material for the trip

As referenced earlier in this paper, one of the limiting factors of students wishing to undertake poetry writing can be the absence of close reading practices. A number of students assume because they are taking a *writing* class this will then not require an intimate engagement with wider *reading*. Michael Lockett's metaphor beautifully describes the essential synergy between the two:

Close reading is akin to watching fine architecture grow from a blueprint to a final brick. It allows us to walk within a literary structure and ponder the brilliance of the creation intimately and holistically. This process enables and exploration of nuance and detail and their relations with functionality: from the surface textures, like choices of diction, or to the structures large and interwoven connective aspects, stairwells or metaphors, that take us from one level to the next, literally or figuratively. (Lockett 2010: 399)

And in more pragmatic terms Paul Dawson expresses the foundational platform those of us teaching in practice-based Creative Writing disciplines would like students to build on: 'The best way to learn how to write... is to read.' (Dawson 2003: par. 6) Importantly though, Dawson delineates the kind of reading practice that can assist students in developing their compositional skills: 'Students are encouraged to read not merely for literary appreciation, but with the aim of discovering ways to improve their own writing. This is what we understand by the term *reading as a writer*' (Dawson 2003: par. 6).

When students transition from a belief that writing poetry is only an introspective and passive pastime and take up a position that requires active preparation and participation then they come closer to what Martin Harrison calls 'the most indispensable of writerly gifts— an obsessive pursuit of your skill' (Harrison: 1997). He carefully explains what this kind of pursuit involves:

Such obsession is not just about persistence in the sense that an athlete or an Olympic swimmer is obsessed with achievement even if it is true that, in regard of single-mindedness, physical skills are probably the closest allies of

poetic ones. Poetic obsession works in a slightly different manner since it is also an attractor, a force field, into which the most everyday of one's own experiences – including other people, anecdotes, theories, books, newspaper clippings, cataclysms going on in the world as well as footnotes to obscure lives – are dragged or insinuated. (Harrison 1997: par.5)

Building on to Harrison's notion of poetic obsession attracting and relying on everyday encounters, Beveridge notes: 'From my experience of teaching students how to write poetry, they are never short of ideas for poems, but they struggle most with finding the words that are going to transform their material into a memorable utterance' (Rickett et al 2014). Everyday speech is functional and practical, and its contents are dependent upon the specific intentions and occasions that induce a speaker to communicate. We believe a poem, however, exists in a more isolated context. A poem must work to reveal its context. The environment in which a poem is heard or read does not give access to its essential meanings. Because it has to carry so much on its back, we argue that language in poetry is most successful if it is used mimetically, if it suggests as vividly as possible its emotional and ideational context. We see this is one of the challenges of a student writing a good poem; to find the words that are precise, imagistic, rhythmical, patterned, and concentrated enough to embody and disclose the meanings in non-discursive ways. As practitioners, we believe the role of effective mentoring would actively involve students in thinking about language in ways they may not have considered before. In a way, this stage involves them in unlearning the idea that the input of time and effort in writing is correlational to the production of many words. Instead, the inverse can be true in poetry. To assist students in moving from a stuck place to effective poetry writing, the mentor helps them comprehend that it is not enough to have a strong idea for a poem, for without the transformative techniques of metaphor, sound, rhythm, and without an understanding of how form and content are an inter-related dynamic in the construction of a poem, the idea may fail to be moving or memorable. Coming to such a threshold understanding of this link between form and content may characterise a recognisable stage in a poet's growth.

In our classroom contexts, we have found that some student poets are writing from a position of disadvantage. They cannot be expected to come to poetry-writing

equipped with the techniques that will help them write well, though they need to commit to the activities that will bridge some of the knowledge gaps around these techniques. It takes time and effort to develop the critical skills necessary to recognise and apprehend how a poem is faring. Like many people who live in a consumerist, technological society where words are often purely functional, managerial, soiled by mass media, and in which public discourse relies heavily on slogans, clichés, catch phrases, a new poet's relationship to language is probably casual and complacent. Other than as a communicative tool, the novice poet may not feel ardent about words, or feel strongly about the potentialities of language, or about keeping language close to the bone of truth, because a large part of their language experience may come from a pop-culture context in which words, at times, have been degraded and used for the purposes of mass media entertainment. When reflecting on the currency, application and longevity of language Jorie Graham posits: 'The bedrock role of poetry, ultimately, is to restore for each generation anew, the mind to its word and the words to their world via accurate usage. Every generation of poets has that task, and it must – each time – do it essentially from scratch' (Graham 1990: XXVIII). Thus, it can be seen that the progress from a novice to a more experienced poet involves a close analysis, re-evaluation and deployment of innovative language to create new understandings and contexts.

The services of a travel guide

Mostly, students need guidance and direction to enable them to be at least following 'a right' track for their writing endeavours. We ask the question: are there any art forms for which tuition is not invaluable? As suggested earlier, if a student poet sets about reading poetry avidly, this can provide an advantageous entrance into the learning experience. But as Beveridge concludes: 'I have found most students are reluctant to read. Very often they simply do not know where to begin' (Rickett et al 2014). There is where a mentor can be of great assistance by providing students with a variety of published poems that will help them understand elements of craft and provide some insight into poetic tradition. In the spirit of cognitive apprenticeship, the mentor's role is to help guide a student through the wholistic process of recognising technical features in the work of others and developing their own skills and applied competencies.

The mentor can also isolate specific problems within a student's work and give them examples to read, showing how a poet has come to terms with problems inherent in their subjects. The mentor can also speak specifically about their own work and give students a sense of the painful labour that goes into writing poetry. For example, one way in which students can unlearn the idea that poems are produced quickly is to show them successive drafts of completed poems. Judith Beveridge outlines aspects of her own approach to teaching here:

When I show my class the many of the steps that I went through to produce the final poem, students are often amazed that a poem took so long to write, and that writing is often a long and arduous process involving many decisions and choices. I try to emphasise that learning to write well is like learning an instrument: you need to spend time learning and being an apprentice. I want them to understand this fundamental concept: failing and failing again, and only through failure can you learn.

As practitioners and educators, we see the process of a poem's original 'failure' as a vital stage in students learning/appreciating critical standards because it is often difficult for novice poets to judge their own work successfully because they do not always have the language or tools to understand why a poem is failing or why one is working. To successfully complete this evaluative stage, students may need to learn to become critical readers with the assistance of an experienced mentor.

If students only ever see other poems as finished products, which by nature seem spontaneous and effortless, then they are more likely to come to the writing of poetry expecting it to be an easy process, unaware of the often difficult dynamic between inspiration and effort, or of how to bring about conditions favourable to inspiration by fuelling the imagination in a variety of ways, and about the essential role of mimetic language.

One of the important ways a mentor/lecturer can ultimately help students cross this writing threshold is to de-bunk the limiting myth that creative work, and poetry in particular, needs to be produced as a perfect whole the first time it is committed to the page. The poet Ted Hughes writes about the importance of writers managing 'to

outwit [their] own inner police system' (Hughes 1982 : 7), and this is often successfully achieved when students have a strong sense of process rather than only focusing on product. As Graeme Harper acknowledges: 'Creative Writing is, of course, both act/action and end result' (Harper 2008: 1). The creative practice lecturer is an instrumental ally when they help students to see that:

Critical understanding occurs before, during, and after the act of Creative Writing. The creative writer employs an active critical sense in order to be able to construct, review, and edit their work. They employ this primarily because it is a key part of their survival as creative writers – without a responsive critical understanding, an understanding that can inform and seek to improve an engagement with their own work, and with the work of other creative writers, they would not be able to develop individual projects or to compare good or bad approaches to the work at hand. (Harper 2008: 1)

Thus, the process of unlearning some of the typical misconceptions about the simplicity and speed of poetry writing, coupled with a deeper commitment and an extended understanding of the process can, in turn, encourage students to encounter and develop threshold concepts about how poems are written.

Are we there yet?

The value of socially constructing knowledge and artefacts, as espoused by Vygotsky (1978) in his theory of social constructivism, is also evident in the processes students engage in during the act of poetry writing. Shared understandings of learning processes and products are developed as poets act as mentors and guides to the beginning poets. As creative writing lecturers work with students in this space they '... can be seen to hold in creative tension poetry's need both for experiment and discipline' (Wilson 2013: 81). As students learn to write poetry, they typically reach, cross and emerge from threshold moments of learning. These processes are not always smooth; they may be viewed or experienced as 'troublesome' (Perkins 2006: 33) as they often involve uneasiness associated with unlearning or emptying previous knowledge and conceptions about poetry, creativity, language and communication.

Nevertheless, as novice poets forge their way through the processes of building and mastering a complex set of poetry writing skills and understandings, often mentored by established poets, they emerge at a point of learning readiness, sometimes emerging from stuck places. At this stage, we maintain that students are more able to engage in the kind of generous writing the poet Deb Westbury describes:

The best writing is generous. To show readers what you saw, felt, touched, tasted, smelled is to enable them to enter into your original experience. To simply ‘tell’ them leaves the reader on the outside of your experience. It is not generous or interesting. (Westbury: 150)

In a final reflection on the role the writing lecturer plays in mentoring students to the threshold stage that Westbury describes, it becomes increasingly obvious to us the role specific pedagogical approaches play as Ditta so clearly articulates:

One cannot stress enough the fact that no pedagogy in the poetry writing class can succeed if it is not grounded in an aesthetic that offers a vision of the whatness and whereforeness of the art. This vision will (and should) form the basis of everything one does in the classroom, from the fashioning of assignments to the criteria of success in assessing them. (Ditta 2010: 69)

While there may be continuing conversation and debate amongst practitioners on the most effective pedagogical approaches and critical ideologies informing teaching and assessing poetry practice in higher education contexts, the role of threshold concepts, processes of unlearning and states of stuckness remain areas of exploration that may have the potential to contribute to the ways poetry students are mentored. For those teaching undergraduate poetry writing who are conscious (and conscientious) about the ‘whatness’ and ‘whereforeness’ of the art, there is an unchallenged consensus that nothing is more satisfying than witnessing a student arrive at the end of the semester voicing the concerns and contemplations of a ‘practising’ poet:

... a poet’s main question is rarely “Is it good?” but is usually some form of: How to get the words to “do” something they do not normally do? how do you get language to see, to hear, to taste and to touch? such that the finished poem

is a kind of tactical leap where one's responsibilities in terms of representing the world are concerned. Does it say enough? Does it speak both to and for its reader? Do you "see" the world differently when you read it? Do you know what "seeing the world" actually is? The making of poetry, whether teachable or not, asks an engagement with these questions. You could not write unless these questions were important to you (Harrison 1997: par.15).

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Endnote:

ⁱ Although threshold concepts have been explored in a variety of disciplines to date, little research has been conducted on threshold concepts associated with the writing of poetry. This is a gap that we wish to explore further in future research projects.