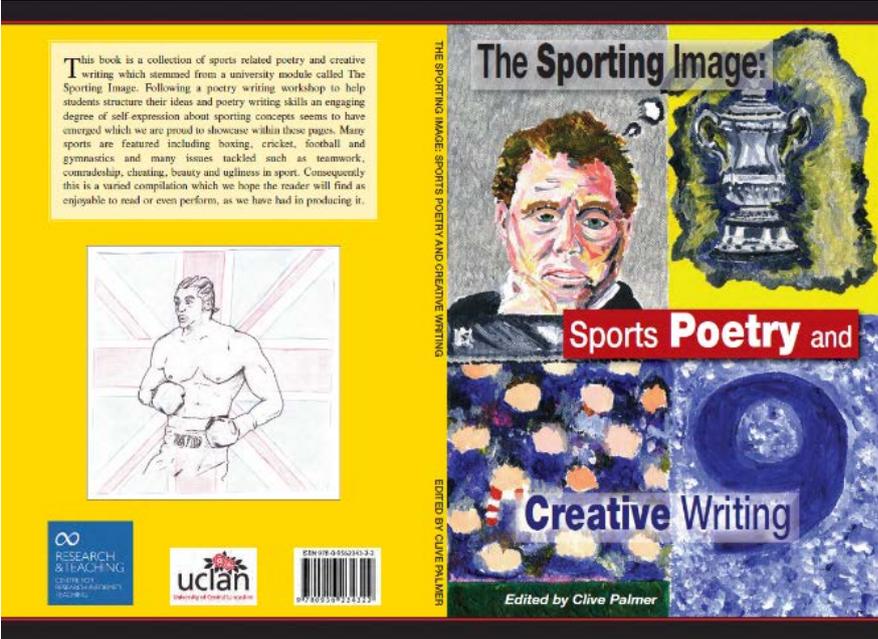


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Introduction

Pedagogical poetry: 'new' degrees of freedom to explore and express ideas about sporting life

The contents of this book have developed from an opportunity within a university module to write about sport in a creative way in the form of sport's poetry. The Sporting Image module at the University of Central Lancashire encourages students to consider some aesthetic dimensions of sport and focused upon poetry as a useful exercise in this direction. Through a process starting with a poetry writing workshop run for us by John Lindley, a professional poet based in Cheshire, and subsequent personal reflections on their creative work the students were asked to write their own poem as an appendix to their assignment. This publication is an attempt to showcase the creative work produced from this teaching initiative.

In making this request of students there were a number of 'constructive' questions from them along the lines of; will my poem be marked? how much is my poem worth? if I write a bad poem will it affect my mark for the assignment? do I really have to write a poem? These questions about the value of poetry as a percentage mark in their assignments spurred the teaching team on to consider what the *pedagogical value* of creative writing was in sport. We considered this to be great on a number of fronts, not least; the shared experience of writing, the shared experience of performance, new-found freedom in writing style (on a Sports Studies course), experimenting with language to communicate a message succinctly and, importantly, enjoying the writing experience. These seemed to be worthwhile outcomes from a learning experience at any level. However, in our endeavour to educate final year students we also wished to promote a sense of critical understanding about aesthetic representation in sport, a pride in writing that might be shared publically and some ability in students to start making their own informed judgements about the quality of aesthetic products, related to sport, which are in the public domain. How would a student know whether they had written a "good" poem or a "poor" one, unless we taught them sufficiently to at least begin to make their own critical decisions about content, structure, themes, forms and composition? From a position of knowledge one may be able to offer a sensible reasoned comment – i.e. not a guess. This became the pedagogical underpinning for our mission into poetry within the Sporting Image module.

As a result of creating this opportunity the boundaries of academic “correctness” as the students may have seen, it were momentarily relaxed or more appropriately, re-aligned; who could say their poem was wrong? how could it have value? who would judge it and how could it be ‘assessed’? It couldn’t be criticised for poor referencing and credit and praise appeared to be on offer from peers and staff alike for *just* “having a go” and sharing the work. Because of these considerations the concept of evaluation of this written task may have shifted positively to allow some self expression in writing about sporting life which may otherwise be constrained or denied in “normal” academic work from undergraduate students.

The student’s questions indicated that at the start there was a degree of self-consciousness about engaging with this kind of writing which they may not have done since they were at school and so, in some cases may have considered it to be a child-like task. The writing workshop from John Lindley gave direction and degrees of freedom to start writing poetry helping the students to develop structure and form in their creative work. From this relatively small beginning there was sufficient knowledge, writing practice and confidence for students to make some judgements about “how good” their or other’s poetry was. This book represents a more complete overview of their efforts shared amongst the student body of which I think they should be justly proud.

With my pedagogical hat on, I am aware that students can be their own harshest critics and I would remind them that “every criticism may be a form of autobiography”, that is, if a criticism is made it may be a reflection of the critic’s knowledge – wider reading and more writing may be the solution here! This premise provides an ideal opportunity to invite the reader to appreciate the contents as being the early works of novice poets and perhaps to direct attention to the references listed in the guided bibliography below. These selected references and accompanying notes and descriptions are intended to help students to further develop some basic reasoning for their comments about “quality” and to broaden the possibilities for creative writing in sport from them.

My initial ideas for this book were always more than it being ‘simply’ a collection of sports related poetry. It would have a significant purpose in teaching not only to underpin the Sporting Image module but would also have some relevance to qualitative researchers in sport. Consequently, this book may be an initial guide for some, or an inspiration for others to develop research ideas or serve as an example of possibilities through an extension of the sporting-poem towards that of sporting-biography. To

develop this concept there are two invited tales of sporting life included within the book that could be seen as a creative narrative in sport which is a useful technique of writing in some qualitative research. The first, *Financial Security* by Billy Wilson maintains an obvious poetic form with repetition of phrasing and short “stanzas”; it is clearly not a short story but more of a poetic account which summarises “developments” for Mr Mouse over a twenty five year period. The second, *Casualski* by Paul Hall, is a short story, another true account in sport which uses rich description and quotes from people at the scene to provide an insight to a tense and stressful situation which spanned only a few days. Each may serve as an inspiration at many different levels and I am pleased to be able to feature them here.

Equally, the majority of students’ poems are also biographical in nature telling of true experiences and feelings about sport. This may help to qualify the importance of poetry and creative writing in sport beyond that of being a brief task in the middle of a module at university. Rather, that the topics engaged with and the manner in which it has been written and performed and presented by the students and the invited authors, may actually be central to our efforts to teach about sport and philosophise about the sporting experience as a whole in Higher Education.

Guided Bibliography

Harper, G. (Ed.) (2006) *Teaching creative writing*. Continuum, London.

This is an edited book with an interesting selection of chapters which may be particularly relevant to developing writing skills across a range of study areas. For example, in addition to the chapter on Poetry there are chapters on Creative Non-fiction and Research in Creative Writing which would be useful reference for qualitative researchers who are describing “the lived experience”.

Hockey, J. and Collinson, J.A. (2005) Autoethnography – self indulgence or rigorous methodology? (pp. 187-202) In, McNamee, M. (Ed.) *Philosophy and the sciences of sport, critical perspectives on research methods*. Routledge, London.

An excellent chapter for the qualitative researcher. As a method, Autoethnography acknowledges the position of the researcher as being central to the research process and differs from biography because of its application of field research methods, data analysis and methodological standpoint. Its relation to poetry and creative writing may be that ethnographers researching their own experiences (autoethnographers) seek to communicate the immediacy, physicality and emotionality of an experience. An interesting debate is highlighted about assessment criteria of ethnographic writing within sports research (pp.195-7) promoting for example, the aesthetic, the authentic, the believable and the credible as qualitative criteria compared to that taken up by positivistic traditions such as reliability, provability and validity. An

interesting supplementary paper on the topic of poetry and ethnography which helps to establish further the importance of poetry as a medium for understanding sport's dialog. Tedlock's work (and others) may help to bolster the reasoning and justification for exploring/including creative writing as a valid avenue of socio-cultural research in sport. See: Tedlock, D. (2008) Poetry and ethnography, a dialogical approach. *Anthropology Humanism*, 24, 2 155-167.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative data analysis, an expanded sourcesbook*. Sage Publications, Thousand oaks, California.

An extensive book on qualitative data analysis which contains a brief and useful explanation (see page 110) on how extensive interview notes were reduced to a poem but without loss of richness that the notes described. This was achieved partly through the story-telling content of the poem but also through the poetic devices such as repetition, off-rhyme, meter and pauses to tell something of the narrative/life-situation. The use of pictograms (see Strachan, J. and Terry, R. (2000) below) might also be a useful technique in this regard – the shapes of words on the page could be structured to bring about an experience of reading or performing the poetry that may be a closer reflection of the real-life situation than perhaps might be experienced by reading a plain reductive note. Miles and Huberman claim that because the data was condensed into a poetic form it forbids superficial attention by the analyst (reader) and that the data set and the person it came from have to be treated seriously because a poem is something that may be “engaged with at a deeper level”.

Singleton, J. and Luckhurst, M. (Eds.) (2000) *The creative writing handbook, techniques for new writers* (second edition). Palgrave, Hampshire, UK.

An edited book with some excellent chapters to stimulate and guide the thoughts of writers. A chapter entitled Words Words Words explores meaning and interpretation of phrasing and provides some useful exercises to become more creative within our written language. The Writing Self focuses upon the experiences of the writer as being central to the writing process and adds useful dimensions to what could become aspects of ethnographic research. Their final chapter on Editing and Rewriting would also be helpful to those who wish to communicate clearly their ideas in a written form.

Skelton, R. (1971) *The practice of poetry*. Heinemann, Educational Books, Ltd., London.

A poetry writing text which explains structure in various forms of poetry. A large section on the re-working and editing of poems is particularly useful which graphically traces how the author has developed their work towards a finished product which they may be satisfied with. A very useful and practical insight.

Strachan, J. and Terry, R. (2000) *Poetry*. Edinburgh University Press.

An interesting book which complements the texts above by explaining some aesthetic forms of poetic verse as well as providing advice about the performance aspects of poetry reading. The Shape of Poetry explores various options for the poet to layout their printed text, e.g. pictograms as a dimension for the presentation of

poems on the page. A chapter on Comparisons and Associations including the use of metaphors and similes and The Words of Poetry helpfully guide the writer to construct a poem that is well balanced and coherent. Chapters on The Sound of Poetry, and Metre and Rhythm are also helpful for stylistic character of poetic verse which may help the writer towards a more confident verbal performance of their creative work.

Sparkes, A. (2002) *Telling Tales in Sport and Physical Activity: A Qualitative Journey*. Human Kinetics Europe Ltd, UK.

The aim of this book is to challenge the tried and tested writing styles employed by qualitative researchers of sport and physical activity. The author breaks disciplinary boundaries to move the field into new territory by encouraging qualitative researchers to think of themselves as storytellers, not just scientists. He uses traditional and contemporary styles of writing as examples to introduce the idea that storytelling in different genres will contribute to the understanding and acceptance of sport and physical activity (Amazon UK product description, 2009).