
**Learned Words: How
poetry can be used to
reflect on staff belonging in
higher education**

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More poetry
is needed.

Who Are We

At the California Institute of Technology

Richard Brautigan

I don't care how God-damn smart
these guys are: I'm bored.

It's been raining like hell all day long
and there's nothing to do.

Anna

Anne Michaels

Nothing moved except a green fern
pushing its way out of a jar

In our house, truths were told in the
kitchen,

Always in the hum of the fridge and in
half darkness

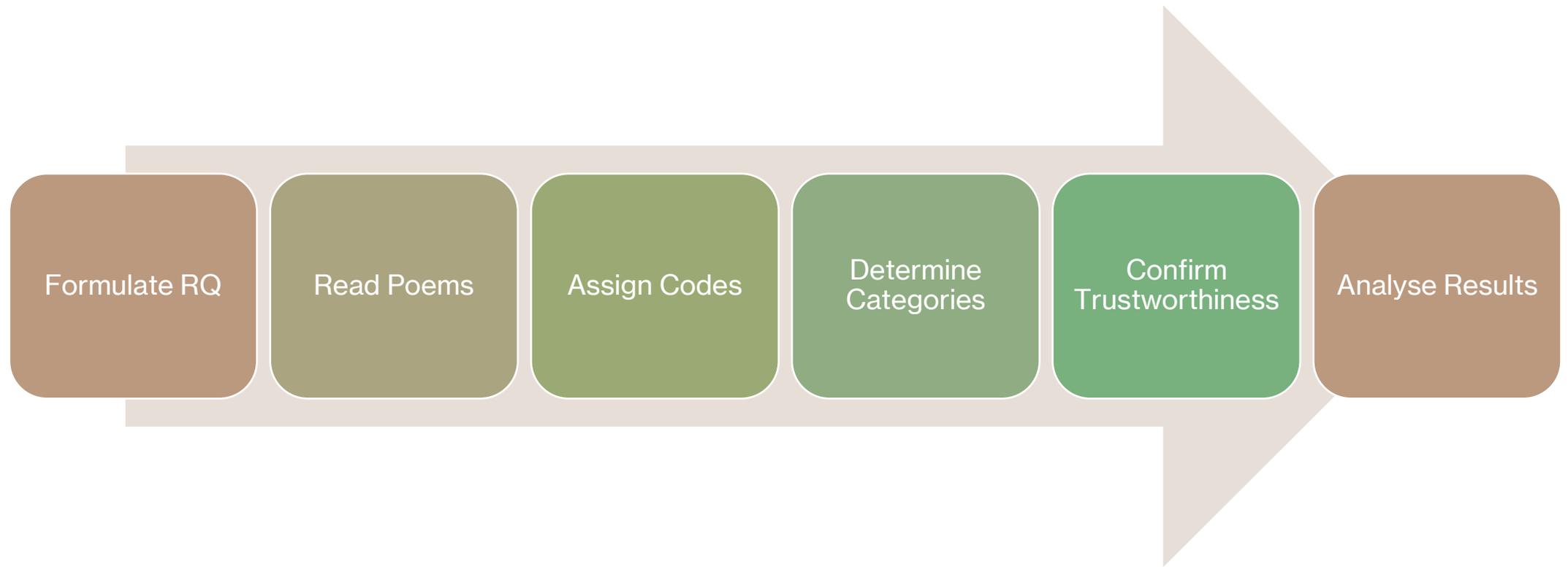
Intro

RQ: How can poetry help to explore a sense of 'belonging' for staff working in higher education?

A Position at the University *by Lydia Davis*

I think I know what sort of person I am. But then I think, But this stranger will imagine me quite otherwise when he or she hears this or that to my credit, for instance that I have a position at the university: the fact that I have a position at the university will appear to mean that I must be the sort of person who has a position at the university. But then I have to admit, with surprise, that, after all, it is true that I have a position at the university. And if it is true, then perhaps I really am the sort of person you imagine when you hear that a person has a position at the university. But, on the other hand, I know I am not the sort of person I imagine when I hear that a person has a position at the university. Then I see what the problem is: when others describe me this way, they appear to describe me completely, whereas in fact they do not describe me completely, and a complete description of me would include truths that seem quite incompatible with the fact that I have a position at the university.

Methodology



Emergent Narratives

Category	Definition	Codes
Community	Explores self and identity in relation to others, positively or negatively.	Supported (SI), Care (MG), Community (SI, MG), Students (SI), Appreciation (MG), Validation (MG), Judgement (MG), Conformity (MG), Family (MG), Competition (MG)
Exclusion	Explores self as distanced and/or alienated from others.	Silos (SI), Uncertainty (SI), Competition (SI), Injustice (MG); Irreverence/alienation (MG); Cynicism (MG), Disability (MG), Exclusion (MG)
Transformation	Change within self, community, or relationship between the two.	Need for Change (SI), Imagined Futures (MG), Transformation (MG), Identities (MG),
Self	Questions of individual emotion and/or identity.	Despondent (SI), Failure (SI, MG), Stimulating (SI), Belief (SI), Self-belief (MG), Doubt (SI), Self-doubt (MG), Distress (MG), Gender (MG), Happiness (MG), Luck (MG),

Community

Call it a jungle, line-up at watering holes,
watch out for big beasts, the ones you
need to review papers and performance;
just remember you will need a hand-up

No academic is an island, knowing terms;
global challenges require work in teams;
just chose yours carefully, or draw on the
right straw, and watch your students grow

(Poem 1)

but I am behind this screen
those emails won't delete themselves
those students don't grade themselves
they grade us
they grade me
if I don't
answer emails

(Poem 9)

Exclusion

An invisible bubble
Popping
After five days
Leaving four hats behind:
Teaching Research Service Outreach

Just one head
To wear them

(Poem 8)

I seek opportunities where I see myself happy.
I seek opportunities where I see myself valued.
I seek opportunities where cishet white men
are not the sole decision-makers.
I seek opportunities where the foundational
roots are not inherently racist, sexist, classist.
Surely they exist. Surely I will be welcomed.
Surely I will feel safe.
I hope.

(Poem 10)

Transformation

I ran away from home to university,
It was an acceptable escape.

After being more terrified than I
thought was possible,
I found a new me and then I never
left.

(Poem 14)

25 years on and I'm still in Higher
Education... now a Doctor, Senior
Lecturer, Course leader
Sole Bread-winner, house-owner,
proud to be me - but still...
Higher Education is not for the likes
of me

(Poem 13)

Self

It makes me believe in myself
And provides validation for my
skills
So that stopping would leave me
on a shelf unhappy.

(Poem 6)

do I belong behind this screen?
They say I'm perfect for this job
I think I'm perfect
for the couch...
and a cup
of hot tea

(Poem 9)

Limitations

1. **Small sample size** limited to a single sample of poems (18).
2. **Subjective nature of poetry** analysis may limit generalizability of findings.
3. **Only English-language poems** potentially creates a bias towards certain attitudes or behaviours.

Strengths

1. **Rich poetic data** permits sharing complex, ambiguous and contradictory ideas in few words
2. **Fosters both openness and anonymity** through creative use of language, and poetic identities
3. **Poetry doesn't hide its own constructedness** encouraging rigorous critical understanding of the research process

Recommendations

1. Focus on nurturing a sense of community and with it the capacity to engender action.
2. If higher education institutes truly seek to be places of positive societal benefit that uphold inclusive values, then they should also seek to celebrate (and reward) these same values amongst their staff.
3. In addition to celebrating these values, institutes should also provide support in helping staff to effectively navigate the substantial number of different qualities that are needed to fulfil a role in higher education.
4. Meaningfully recognise and encourage the deep-rooted commitment that is shared by many staff to the potential of higher education for transformative impact.

Listing Education



List all the things in this (class) room.



List all the things out of this room.



List all the things that you associate with FE / HE.

More Info

[learned-words.com](https://www.learned-words.com)



Inner Monologue at a Conference

☰ 1 Minute

A Perspex monolith at the edge of town
Opens its doors to a wave of odious intellect;
Glossy signs and fat pamphlets tell me:
These are these finest minds in humanity.
A balding gentleman is bent over himself,
Struggling to tie his shoelace.

The fraying carpets of a previous administration
Hint at fleeting glories that have since passed;
Important looking notices tell me:
THIS IS THE MOST VITAL CONFERENCE IN HUMANITY.
Flyers in our welcome pack advertise
River cruises and nights at the opera.

Free wine and coffee combine to create
An atmosphere of compulsory enjoyment;
Conference assistants and helpers tell me:
This is the friendliest conference in humanity.
I see a former colleague and bow my head,
We pass like kidney stones in the night.

Early career researchers skirt the
Gravitational fields of the professoriate;
Coloured ribbons and rainbow badges implore us:
This is the most diverse conference in humanity.
At the plenary panel four white dinosaurs
Warn of their extinction.

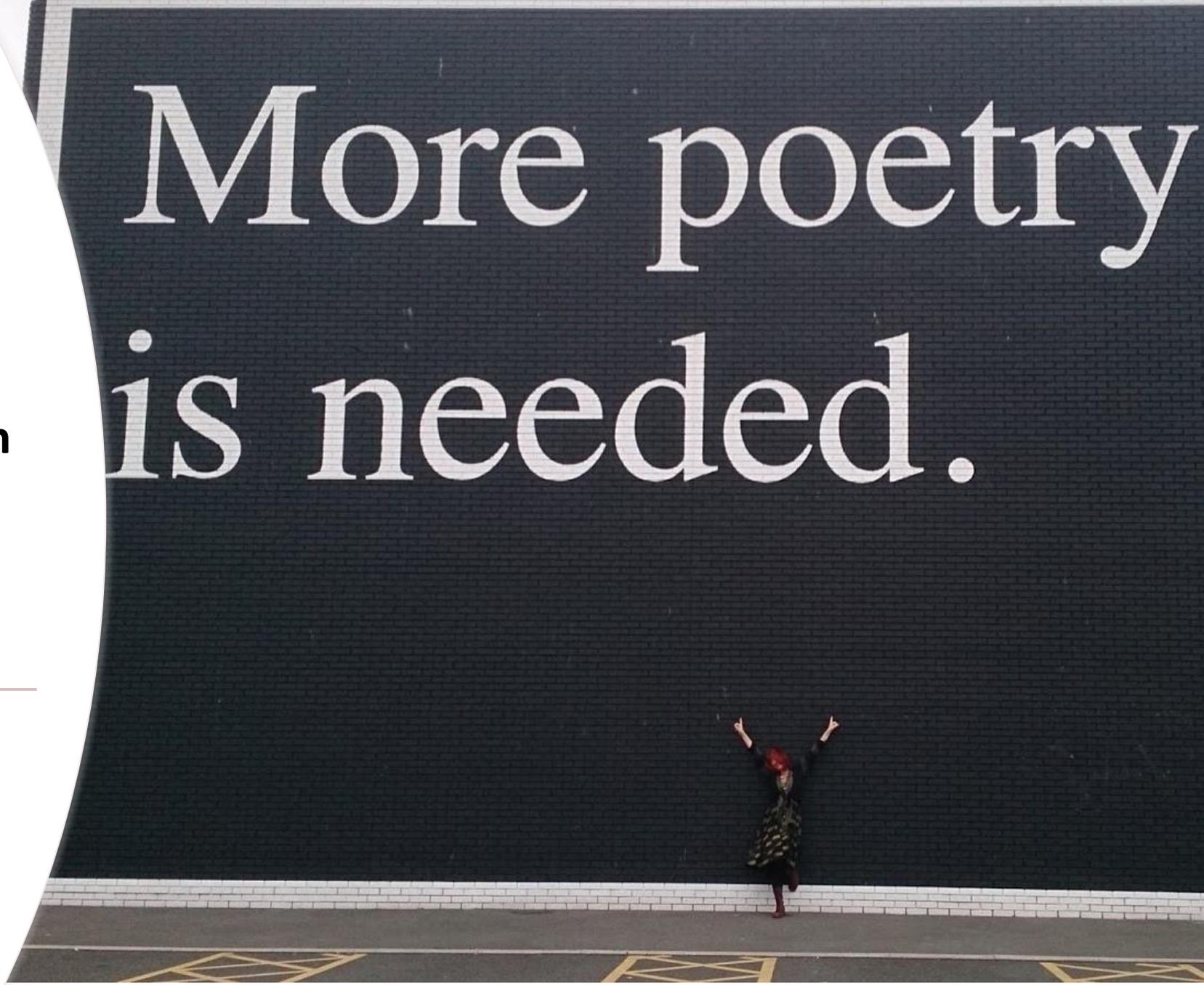
I walk across the cavernous lecture theatre,
Palms sweating with nervous excitement;
The introductory slide sets out my argument:
This is the most important topic in humanity.
My words trickle through the audience,
Lost amongst the emails and polite applause.

Selected references

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A woman in a red hat and black dress stands with her arms raised in front of a large black wall. The wall has white text that reads "More poetry is needed." The woman is standing on a paved area with yellow markings. The wall is part of a larger structure, possibly a building or a wall in a public space.

More poetry
is needed.