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The student experience, with variations

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English 347 Poetry off the Page is an intimate, engaging undergraduate English course at the University of Auckland that weaves together three related areas of inquiry – live performance, digital poetics and the poetry archive – to provide an authentic learning experience for literature students exploring the role of poetry beyond the printed page. Our essay offers an unconventional case study filtered through the retrospective gaze of former students who responded to a detailed questionnaire. Structured as a series of non-sequential ‘learning spaces’, the paper concludes with an account of the authentic learning lessons that we, the teachers, have drawn from our former students’ experiences in and beyond the course.

Keywords: authentic learning, student-centered learning, experiential learning, student experience

When we first considered writing a paper for a conference titled ‘The Student Experience’, we figured our job would be easy. We co-convene an undergraduate literature course at the University of Auckland in which experiential learning takes centre stage. All student work is presented in the form of interactive webpages that are accessible to everyone else in the class, thereby creating a virtual learning community that parallels the physical community of the classroom. Students read, hear, chalk, touch, record, perform, analyse, digitise, animate and otherwise engage with a wide range of poetic and critical texts, experiencing firsthand the complex interactions of both material and digital artistic expression.

In our four years of teaching English 347 Poetry off the Page, we have received overwhelmingly enthusiastic feedback from our students (via standardised surveys as well as unsolicited testimonials) and kudos from our institution (in the form of a university-wide Teaching Excellence Award for Innovation in Teaching). We decided to write a detailed case study of Poetry off the Page so that others, including teachers working in other disciplines and subject areas, could learn from our experiments. But then we saw the flaw in our plan. We, the ‘experts’ (read ‘teachers’) proposed to enlighten you, our benighted colleagues (read ‘students’) by telling you about *our* experiences. Once again – in a pattern that occurs over and over again in academe – the lecturers would talk while everyone else listened.

Determined to place the student experience front and centre, we asked our former students to tell us about *their* experiences both in and beyond Poetry off the Page. Although we found it impossible to track them all down – many had left university and/or moved on to new email addresses – more than a third of our alumni (21 students) eventually completed a detailed questionnaire, which they emailed to us from as far afield as Boston, Oxford, Marburg,

Prague and Seoul. Their responses totaled nearly 10,000 words (well over twice the length of this paper) and provided us with a rich collection of insights, images and anecdotes.

Like the structure of our course, the structure of this paper supports and encourages varied routes through the student experience. Struck by the number of spatial metaphors that occurred in our former students' narratives, we have configured the paper as a series of **learning spaces**, both physical and metaphorical. In each of the six sections that follow, our students' *italicized comments* precede our own, while the **learning ideals** that underpin our course design appear as bolded keywords. In the spirit of experiential learning, we invite you to move through these spaces either sequentially or, if you prefer, in hypertextual mode, using the section headings and learning ideals to inspire associative leaps from place to place. (See Figure 1 for a visual map). We conclude with a brief account of the most crucial **learning lessons** we have drawn from our survey.

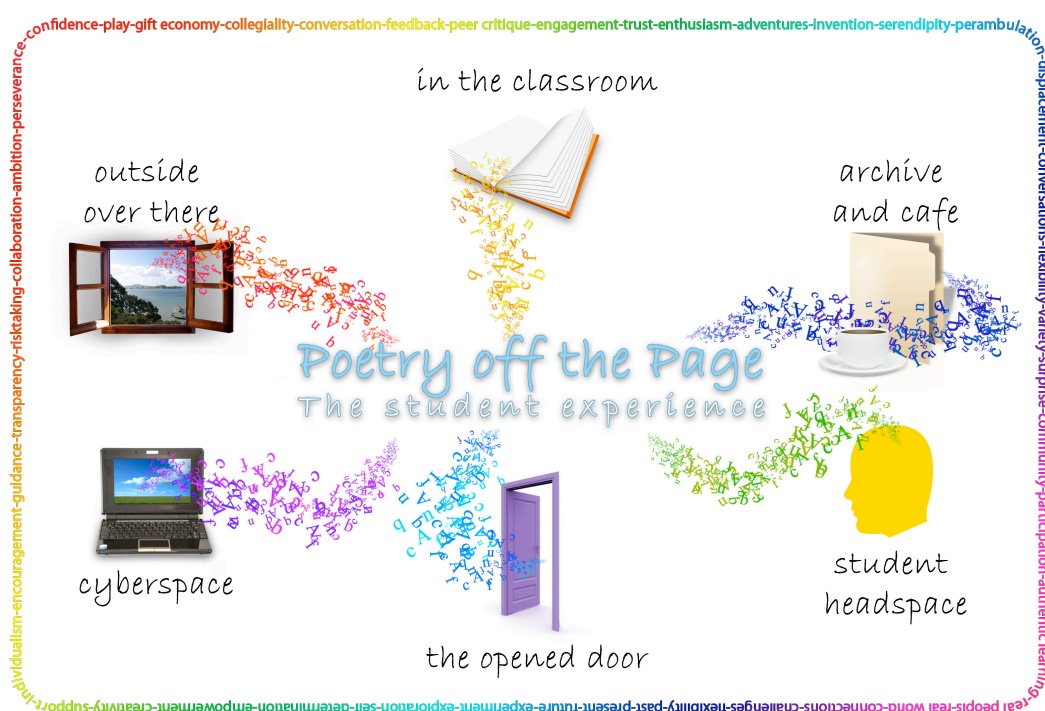


Figure 1: Visual map of Poetry off the Page

Learning spaces

In the classroom

POTP was one of my most positive undergraduate paper experiences because the work and requirements were stimulating and challenging and fresh.

The informal structure of the course created an atmosphere of creative discussion, as we were all encouraged to help each other out and bounce ideas off each other. Lectures were varied and always interesting, so that I actually wanted to come to class (for once), and the lecturers were always informal and passionate, so that I never felt as though I were being lectured to, but rather, discussing with.

POTP allowed us to interact with other students and with the lecturers on the same level and to get to know other people instead of the more separate and narrow experience I've had in most classes – sitting in front of a lecturer, listening, then leaving at the end of the hour.

A strong belief in the '**gift economy**' (Harrison, 2006) underpins our pedagogy. From the very first day of class, when we involve our students in the production of a collaborative performance piece called 'The poem of the contents of everybody's pockets,' we work hard to develop an atmosphere of **collegiality** and **conversation**. In keeping with Chickering and Gamson's 'seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education' (1986), we encourage the students to offer each other supportive **feedback** and constructive **peer critique**, which develops a culture of 'reciprocity and cooperation among students' (Chickering & Gamson, 1986) and requires them to actively **engage** not only with the course materials but with each other's ideas. By the end of the semester, when each student presents his or her draft final assignment to the class during an intensive 'live critique' session, we have established an atmosphere of **trust** in which students not only feel safe revealing their work to their peers but also genuinely welcome their suggestions for improvement.

Outside over there

Learning that takes place outside the classroom makes a very different impact on the student. Poetry discussed under a tree sounds different, poetry chalked on a pavement makes the student aware of other dimensions to the written word.

I particularly enjoyed the effort that was put into ensuring we did something new each week and in a different location. It kept things interesting.

Being able to move around was a blessing and it is such a rare opportunity. [T]he excitement of a new environment filled the air with endorphins. I felt the energy level escalate, not just in myself, but drawing from everyone as well. All in all, I have to say I enjoyed the whole of the course, perhaps because it is viewed in the light of a stagnant 4 years of an uninspiring degree spent in windowless lecture rooms and awkward, unsociable tutorials.

To create coherence and encourage attendance, we convene Poetry off the Page during a single three-hour time block once a week. In 2008, in response to students' complaints about the monotony of staying put for such a long stretch, we resolved to spend at least a portion of each class session somewhere other than in our designated classroom, a dark lecture theatre with fixed seating in tiered rows. As the weeks went by and our students' **enthusiasm** for our **adventures** grew, we became increasingly **inventive** about finding alternative meeting spaces: the park, a computer lab, the university archive, a biology classroom ringed with natural history displays, the circle of stones outside the Pacific Studies building. **Serendipity** established itself as a new buzzword for the course, and **perambulation** and **displacement** became unexpected learning tools: many of our most meaningful informal **conversations** with students took place while we were in transit from one venue to the next. We re-discovered a truth that poets and artists have always known: in the complex mappings of the human brain, space and memory are intimately interlinked. In their final course evaluations, nearly every student mentioned **flexibility**, **variety** and **surprise** amongst their favourite features of Poetry off the Page.

Archive and café

This is the only paper I can say that gave me actual real life exposure to the wider community of poetry and writing and gave me practical experience with performing and analysing poetry

... This also gave me the opportunity to connect the academic world of poetry to the local contemporary scene of poetry.

My desire to learn and grow was fed and stimulated. I was given the key to the hidden sacred places: (Special Collections) the 'vault' of treasures where traces of greatness were put into my hands. I was invited into the story, the discussion, the discourse.

Some of my most valuable experiences, were going out into the community and speaking my own work. Being encouraged and shown how poetry can be made in many different environments, using a wide variety of media. Creating on-line webpages, digital versions of poems, searching the archives and exploring ways to bring poetry from the past into a different environment – namely digitally, webpages and on-line.

Community begins in the classroom but extends far beyond its walls. Although Poetry off the Page is not a creative writing paper, we organise several community poetry evenings each semester in a local café or on-campus venue, where established poets and first-timers read their work side by side in a format we call '10 x 5' (10 readers, 5 minutes each). Our students help out by performing their own poetry or, if they prefer, by distributing posters, shifting chairs or simply bringing along a few friends to enjoy the evening. Their **participation** in these performance events is reinforced both in the realm of cyberspace, where their virtual community parallels the physical community of the classroom, and in the poetry archive, where they don white gloves to handle manuscripts that they will eventually present and annotate on their webpages – an act of **authentic learning** (Lombardi, 2007) that connects them to the **real world** of scholarly editing. Thus archive and café serve not only as physical learning spaces in their own right but also as potent metaphors for the kinds of **connections** we encourage our students to make between their academic work and the world beyond the classroom.

Cyberspace

We were always in touch with each other through the POTP webpage and email. While we saw each other 'less', I don't think I've ever made so many deep friendships in one paper before.

I'm beginning to really enjoy being a viewer of this internet-poetic community and to appreciate the medium of the internet a lot more – which is a huge step forward for me. I'm beginning to view creativity as a field in which one also has to be resourceful and aware of the phases people/technology/issues/politics/etc are going through and how poetry can inhabit these changes as a way of keeping records of time.

I also loved the opportunity to foster stronger web design skills. These have been invaluable even after leaving New Zealand and really developed from the opportunity for welcomed experimentation.

The digital aspects of the course engender numerous **challenges** for teachers and students alike. When we asked our alumni to name their most frustrating experiences in Poetry off the Page, 76% of them cited technological issues (e.g., 'not having the tech skills to facilitate or produce my assignments in the way I would like'). On the positive side, computer technology has allowed us to create a poetic and intellectual **community of practice** (Lave & Wenger, 1991) unlimited by constraints of space or time. Students have the **flexibility** to work on their assignments, respond to each other's work and participate in the wider poetry community of

the internet at any hour of the day or night. Equally importantly, they develop the skills to ‘translate’ archival materials and poetic performances into public artefacts – that is, to explore the **past** and preserve the **present** in the hypertextual realm of the **future** (Sword & Leggott, 2007). At the beginning of the semester, younger and older students often eye each other suspiciously across the generational divide that pits ‘digital natives’ against ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky, 2001). By the end of the course, however, both groups have joined together in a shared quest for what cyber-visionary Marc Prensky calls ‘digital wisdom’, which he defines as the use of digital tools ‘to find practical, creative, contextually appropriate, and emotionally satisfying solutions to complicated human problems’ (Prensky, 2009).

Student headspace

In my experience, some BA courses are overly pedantic about every aspect of course structure, content and assessment. As a mature student, overly controlled and prescriptive teaching turns me off and I soon find myself disengaging. This was not an issue in POTP. I had a lot of control over how I interpreted and implemented assignments and this empowered me to push my learning in ways that were rewarding for me.

Perhaps most significant to me was the exploratory and ‘self-constructed’ nature of the learning, which to me epitomizes what learning is and should be... It was both refreshing and encouraging to be not baldly ‘expected’ to be operating at a certain level academically ‘you should be able to by now ... (slap)’ in a paternalistic way, but to have teachers and guides that would get alongside and scaffold the learning experience, while simultaneously giving explicit permission and encouragement/prodding to explore.

Let’s say I have learnt A LOT about patience and taking time to experiment. Also perseverance.

The most vibrant communities are composed of creative individuals who feel motivated to **experiment, explore** and **play** with ideas. The various assignments and activities in Poetry off the Page provide opportunities for **self-determination, self-reflection** and intellectual **empowerment** within an atmosphere of **creativity** and scaffolded **support**. At first, our students often feel somewhat at sea when confronted with a webpage assignment that invites, indeed demands, an **individualistic** response: ‘I don’t really understand what you expect from us’ is a frequent refrain in the early weeks of the semester. By offering **encouragement** rather than control, **guidance** rather than prescriptions and **feedback** rather than judgment, we gradually build an atmosphere of **transparency** and **trust** in which students feel **empowered** to take **intellectual risks**. The **collaborative** experience of viewing and commenting on each other’s work encourages not competitiveness (as we initially feared) but a high level of individual **ambition** and **perseverance**. Because they know their own work will have an attentive audience, nearly every student strives to produce webpage assignments that synthesize course materials in unique and memorable ways.

The opened door

The dynamic balance between creative expression and academic demands made this paper stand out from other papers I have taken. It motivated me and other students to work hard and push beyond the requirements of the paper.

[The course] got me thinking about various ways in which I can present creative endeavors in the future. Reminded me that important lessons are generally the ones in which you make

enormous mistakes! I continue to write poetry, and am now more aware of the multitude of ways in which my poetry could be 'published'.

I'm more confident in other papers, as I'm aware of the wide range of things I can do, and don't have the previous hesitation of speaking with lecturers.

When we asked our former students what aspects of Poetry off the Page have stayed with them ('How has POTP impacted on your subsequent work/study/life, if at all?'), 67% mentioned **creative** pursuits of various kinds – a striking response given that POTP is a course in critical and cultural analysis, not a creative writing workshop. Our alumni also noted their improved content knowledge in the field of digital poetics (48%), increased **confidence** (43%) and changed perceptions of poetry (19%). Of those who have now completed their undergraduate degrees, 89% are currently studying in advanced degree courses or pursuing continuing education alongside full-time work. Their responses have reminded us once again of the vital importance of teaching to the future: that is, of equipping the students with transferable skills rather than filling them up with static facts. As educationalist Nancy Rutherford memorably puts it, 'Higher education is an aquifer, not a spigot' (quoted in Pratt, 2003, 3-4).

Learning lessons

Not surprisingly, given the self-selecting, non-anonymous nature of our survey, the responses we received from our alumni were overwhelmingly positive, affirming rather than challenging the way our course is taught and structured. Yet our former students' comments have proven well worth listening to, not only for their fervour and expressiveness but for their themes, variations and deeper resonances. We offer the following **learning lessons** – the fruits of our own authentic learning experiences as teachers – in a spirit of collaborative exchange, in the hope that our findings will inspire other teachers, whatever their class size, discipline or subject matter, to experiment with new ways of engaging and inspiring their students.

Against monotony

Most other undergrad papers seem leaden in comparison. Most tutorials I've been in are dead, and most lectures follow the same "two essays, exam, one novel a week" approach that is pretty stale. POTP felt like a vital experience, in which I was doing something worthwhile.

After 1 year at University, going to lectures quickly loses its charm. After 4 years it becomes a real struggle to find motivation to stay in a lecture room to listen to someone talk, especially when in my mind I am dreaming of more creative things to do, more important ways to spend my time.

Again and again throughout their survey responses, our alumni told us how much they valued our emphasis on **variety**, **displacement** and **change**. Not only was our course unlike any other university paper they had experienced, they told us, but they loved the fact that every week was unlike the one before. Words such as **refreshing** and **different** occurred frequently – reminding us that the most memorable student experiences, whether in small courses or large, involve surprises and challenges rather than fixed routines.

Giving and getting

[I especially valued the] student feedback (professional, stringent academically, empathetic).

Community means that everyone is 'on your side'. If there was any competition ..., it was only there to inspire more effort from oneself, so that you can do as well as everyone else in the class. Helping someone else was just as fun as achieving something yourself.

In a fifteen-year synthesis of more than 600 meta-analyses relating to student achievement, educationalist John Hattie concludes that the single most effective strategy for improving student learning is to provide frequent assessment coupled with targeted constructive feedback (Hattie, 2009). What began in Poetry off the Page as an emphasis on the 'gift economy' has evolved over the years into a rigorous programme of peer commentary and critique. The feedback from our former students confirms the value of peer feedback, not only as a formative learning tool but as a way of reshaping education into an authentic community experience.

Keeping it real

The course has been a good grounding in learning about digital poetic practice and introduction to what's out there, so to speak.

Having the chance to intermix my internship at the Auckland Museum with the class was truly rewarding. Having the class up to the Museum to view the Maori and Pasifika collections to brainstorm how poets could possibly interact with the permanent exhibition to ultimately develop an event for the museum was not only the kind of thought the course aimed to engender but a practical activity for my goals at the museum, too.

Authentic learning activities are typically defined in the literature as 'life-like' tasks that mimic those performed by professionals in the field, as opposed to decontextualised or contrived activities (McKenzie et al, 2002). In Poetry off the Page, our students learn not by reading and discussing poetry within an enclosed academic space (the norm in most university literature courses) but by actively participating in its creation, dissemination and public interpretation – the same kind of work undertaken by practising poets, archivists and editors within and beyond academe. Colleagues in disciplines such as architecture, engineering, medicine or law might well scoff at the idea of a 'real world' poetry course. However, our students' comments highlight the importance of providing authentic learning experiences in liberal arts disciplines as well as in more explicitly pre-professional fields.

Capstones and cornerstones

[POTP] was a huge adventure, steep learning cliff and very rewarding experience.

This is a high-maintenance class, requiring a lot of student participation each scheduled time in order for the student both to get the most from the course, and for fellow students to benefit.

When asked, 'What one thing can we do to enhance student engagement and increase student success?' former National Survey of Student Engagement director George Kuh has a ready answer: 'I say make it possible for every student to participate in *at least two high impact activities* during their undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one later related to their major field'. Kuh characterises as 'unusually effective' any course in which students:

- (1) devote considerable amounts of time and effort to purposeful tasks;
- (2) interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters over extended periods of time;
- (3) experience diversity through contact with people who are different than themselves;

- (4) receive frequent feedback about their performance;
- (5) get to see how what they are learning works in different settings, on and off campus;
- (6) acquire the intellectual tools and ethical grounding to act with confidence for the betterment of the human condition. (Kuh, 2007, 7-8).

Poetry off the Page fits all six of these criteria, as our former students' testimony makes clear. We urge academic departments to cherish and support the continuing existence and development of such intimate, intensive, 'high impact' courses, even and especially in an era of ever-increasing class sizes and shrinking academic budgets. At the same time, however, teachers need to bear in mind that students struggling to cope with the multiple demands of jobs, family, relationships and other study cannot reasonably be expected to take on more than one or two such courses per year.

The importance of being human

I found I was able to overcome challenges faced in POTP because of the ongoing support of the teaching staff. Other lecturers are sometimes too 'time focused' to stop and elaborate on matters.

I think I am most inspired by the fact that courses like these exist, teachers [who] are willing to try to take things further, go the extra mile.

We have both been university teachers for more than twenty years and, like most of our colleagues, have developed a range of strategies for resisting students' seemingly endless demands on our time. During our first semester of teaching Poetry off the Page, however, we temporarily lowered our guard. Knowing that the course would place heavy technical and emotional demands on our students – most of whom had never even created a webpage before, much less designed and produced a complex digital archive – we went out of our way to provide them with extra sympathy, support and attention. Their effusive appreciation for this gesture took us by surprise – and sent us a powerful message about the depths and nuances of the student experience. Our most important 'learning lesson' from Poetry off the Page has thus been one acquired not via educational theory, collegial advice or administrative fiat but through our own authentic learning experience as teachers: never again, no matter how packed our lecture theatres or how stretched our resources, will we allow ourselves to forget the pedagogical value of being human.

A final note

This paper has been flattened to fit the printed page. Visit <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/misc/leggott-sword.asp> to view supplementary materials, including a statistical summary of the student data, an online photo gallery and an interactive hypertextual version of the paper.

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