

**Poetry in the Field**  
**IATL Pedagogic Intervention Fund: Final Report**  
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**Summary**

The project aims were three-fold: to increase my understanding of interdisciplinary activities; to expand my understanding of open space learning and to explore opportunities for teaching and learning poetry in innovative ways; and to further my research into ecopoetry (with the support of my WATE monies). The project produced some excellent ideas, opportunities and understanding on all three counts.

I established collaborative engagements with chemistry, physics, visual art, law, woodland ecology, martial arts and architecture, as well as a session involving birds of prey. Furthermore, I held discussions with colleagues in IATL (Dr. Nicholas Monk) and Accounting (Louise Gracia) to gain a wider understanding of interdisciplinary engagements. I gained some invaluable insights into how various disciplines operate, where their emphases lie and the potential for collaborations across faculties.

There were some limitations to the workshop series. The time of year meant examinations and coursework deadlines affected attendance. On average about twelve staff and students attended each of the eight sessions, although this ranged from approximately thirty students for sessions like the birds of prey workshop, to just a handful for the later workshops in the series, which took place after term had finished.

Also due to timing, certain ambitions had to be scaled back a little. The field trip to Stowe Landscape Gardens was replaced with an architectural walking tour of campus, led by a locally based RIBA architect. The tour of Engineering facilities was cancelled.

**1. Interdisciplinary Understanding**

*Stages of Disciplinary Practice*

I use a model for teaching creative writing that looks at writing through three stages: creative processes, or genesis; editing and refinement; and publication. These stages map very comfortably into other disciplines.

In teaching literature and writing, emphasis is generally placed upon the first two stages. Publication is visible in extracurricular activities, but generally the concern of the professional. Similarly, the scientific disciplines collaborated with on this project showed creativity in approaching aspects of the first two processes, of generating and refining data for research analysis.

In particular, the use of tools for generating data involved a clear degree of creativity. Yet the practitioners also came across as somewhat narrow-minded in finding applications for research, ignoring ethical and creative opportunities. In fact, the majority of research we encountered leaned towards commissioned projects, for good or ill; science research never seems to be embarked upon without an existing problem to solve and financing to support the

search for a solution.

This led me to think that creative techniques could be used more to explore the 'after-care' of scientific research, resulting in greater practical applications across disciplines, in socially impacting ways. Existing research could be used as an interdisciplinary focus. At the same time, this project only allowed me to scrape the surface of what is happening in Chemistry and Physics, so undoubtedly there's more happening than I'm aware of. I'd be interested in testing these ideas moving forwards.

### *Types of Interdisciplinarity*

My approach to examining opportunities for interdisciplinary practice is informed by Dr. Nicholas Monk's analysis of interdisciplinary pedagogy in Open Space Learning (Bloomsbury Education, 2010). In our discussion he outlined types of interdisciplinary engagements and, as the project emerged, I found myself thinking further on how the stages of project development and research in all disciplines can translate into stronger or weaker opportunities for interdisciplinary engagements.

Between sciences and engineering, strong collaborations already exist. It is a given that tools, from spectrometers to rapid manufacturing printers to NMRs, will translate from Chemistry to Physics to Engineering with immediate applications and research potential. Equally, between law, visual arts and poetry, language tools – such as Gary Watts' use of etymology – can be used to enhance understanding of each area. Valuable collaborations already exist in these areas. Crossing faculties is a far harder task.

One helpful example from outside of the workshops arose in conversation with Dr. Louise Gracia of the MSc in Accounting. She consulted with me about her use of poetry in teaching accounting to undergraduates and we discussed ways to improve the pedagogical applications of poetry in her lectures. Her initial approach was one that I encountered repeatedly in trying to establish the workshop series for this project: that poetry, and creative writing in general, was only relevant to other disciplines as a communication tool, illustrative analogy, or mnemonic. I took steps to avoid this level of interdisciplinary engagement, by briefing collaborators on my intention to go beyond this basic standpoint and emphasising an understanding of poetry as an imaginative tool for exploring stages in pedagogic and research practice, a way of looking afresh at each disciplines' habits, good and bad, to renew and improve approaches in each side.

However, talking with Dr. Gracia, I was surprised to learn that her department had a module called Critical Perspectives in Accounting. My own stereotypical understanding of Accountancy had me thinking that it was a 'hard' subject, with clear goalposts, but the subject has far more in common with literature studies. This led me to think that there are potential collaborations with similar subjects from the Business School that could be easier to achieve than across science and arts faculties. Grier Palmer's work so far has primarily been with Academic Writing, although we are discussing creative collaborations over the coming academic year, and the engagement looks fruitful.

From these discussions the risks of interdisciplinarity became clearer: in some of the workshops I created for the project I appeared to be reducing the some disciplines to mere metaphors for poetic practice, learning and subject matter. For example, the Martial Arts

session with Can Sonmez was a success as the class was taught by a practicing poet to (mostly) writing students. I did not have any martial arts students present to provide an alternative perspective on the session's value to the other discipline. Equally, the session with AL Kennedy and the birds of prey had no value beyond the illustration provided to the writing process.

Yet I realise that these analogies are invaluable to enhancing engagement with and understanding of a discipline. A well-equipped teacher will have a plethora of analogies ready to help students learn more about a particular discipline. Analogy, however, is not a particularly successful interdisciplinary approach, as Dr. Monk points out.

### *Conclusion*

One barrier to interdisciplinary practice is the difficulty of overcoming attitudes towards other disciplines, particularly across faculties. These mild prejudices exist on both sides of the fences; departmentalisation has led to a low level tribalism in universities, but also methodologies and training, which restrict openness to collaborating. Most of the individuals I worked with were uniquely placed to engage in this way – a Schools Liaison Officer, an Emeritus Professor, and professionals from outside of the university.

These issues have helped me to think about the kind of planning and consultation needed in advance of future collaborations. Given the scale and scope of the project, it wasn't possible to do much beyond breaking down a few barriers and opening up the door for future collaborations or repeating the most successful sessions.

A valuable collaboration requires the equivalent of establishing a new discipline, or a space that feels as if it has its own defined boundaries as an area of research. Perhaps the most successful session, in terms of interdisciplinarity was the ecopoetry walk. Led by poet and former forest warden Peter Larkin, the session had equal parts information about woods, natural systems and language. The session had the feel of a sub-genre of both poetry and ecology, as a result.

In future, for a successful interdisciplinary workshop, I would want to ensure the session was led by someone with training in all areas involved, with pre-established outcomes that were distinct from outcomes familiar to the separate disciplines.

## **2. Opportunities for OSL**

### *'In the Field'*

The most successful sessions in this series were literally 'in the field'. For creative writing students, a session in a Chemistry lab was as inspiring as walking through Berkswell wood. Both involved more time than a traditional seminar allows for, as the field trip also requires a debrief – a more traditional round table discussion, in a closed environment, to feedback on what was experienced in the field.

In the other direction, I've found it's possible to try and bring the field into the classroom. The nuances of this can be difficult to manage, but the idea that came to me about 'field teaching' is the need to defamiliarise the space enough that students forget they are in a classroom.

Loosely speaking in terms of psychology and language research I've done in relation to psychogeography, I'd say that a person's senses become more alert when they are in an unfamiliar space and context. This in turn forces a heightened attention and understanding.

At the same time, the stronger the connection between the subject of a workshop and the environment, the more successful the learning. Can Sonmez's Martial Arts session took place in the Reinvention Centre, which, with a little bit of space management, has a similar effect to a gym. The session might have been even more effective in an actual gym, if I could have set up projection for the taught section. I also discovered that campus sports facilities are completely unprepared for pedagogical interventions without a few months' notice. Guerilla tactics might be more successful in future.

The poetry session in the woods and the architectural tour of campus were both excellent – encountering the subject of the talk in the subject's environment had a great impact. I hope to explore more of these ideas in future teaching. Even being able to get hold of original writing tools, desks, or diaries – the artefacts, props and scenery of creative writers – would have a positive impact in my teaching.

### **3. Ecopoetry Research**

The session with Peter Larkin fed into my future research, so I will only briefly mention the impact of being able to hold the Ecopoetry Day at the end of this project. The key outcomes of the whole day, funded both by IATL and the remaining money from my WATE commendation, were: a chance to network with Warwick academics and visiting academics and poets, on ecocritical themes and research; a chance to discuss a new anthology of ecopoetry, *The Ground Aslant*, with included poets, the editor, and interested academics; and a capture of the day's activities through recordings, which will hopefully make their way onto the Writers' Audio Archive at Warwick.

Peter's session was eye and ear-opening. The chance to learn in the landscape under discussion was inspirational. Hearing him read poems inspired by Berkswell Wood, alongside describing his personal engagement with woods, gave an insight that a classroom environment couldn't have achieved. Peter used to be a voluntary forest warden and had learned a great deal about flora and fauna through fellow wardens and ecological enthusiasts, so he is positioned between poetry and nature uniquely. He points to a sense of interdisciplinarity as needing combined expertise, either synthesised in an individual, or between people thoroughly integrated in their working practices.

Furthermore, the specifics of Peter's talks opened up an understanding of space that gave me a number of ideas about Open Space Learning. Encountering woods from the outside, one is struck by their 'verticality', the way they draw the eye upwards, as spires. The solidity of their edges gives way to sense of 'inside', enclosure. On our walk, we stopped to talk both in fields at a distance from the woods, on the edge of the woods, and inside the woods. The effect was different each time, the environmental factors modified by wind, weather, openness, different background noises and colour.

A classroom is a bounded space. Within its limits, certain expectations have been established about what should happen. By redefining the space, expectation and familiarity can, as outlined above, play to a student's sense of attention, creating disfluency (see 'Easy =

True', *Boston Globe*,

[http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/01/31/easy\\_true/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/01/31/easy_true/)). Yet the environment also needs to feel safe – the rain and wind, when the weather began to turn at the end of our walk, became a distraction. Equally, the boundaries of the classroom are a useful 'control' space (in the sense used in scientific experiments) , but they are so much embedded in teaching institutions as to be a cliché. Reacknowledging the advantages and disadvantages of a classroom environment can lead to more effective learning.

A woodland clearing is a natural classroom, yet also a permeable, vulnerable space. A classroom is more securely bounded and therefore easier to 'make safe' for experimentation and the sharing of ideas in order to refine and learn better. Yet when do we ever connect the classroom space with the subject of literature, or poetry learning? The space needs to be dressed by the imagination, in the same way as a stage.

My ideas are still in the laboratory, but I am considering various other spaces for teaching, before even thinking about the content of the sessions:

- on the deck of a boat, on the open sea. What effect would that boundless, landless horizon provide?
- on horseback (already discussed with colleagues in the WWP, proving logistically difficult at the moment)
- in the dark, or at night
- high up somewhere – perhaps in a viewing tower
- in a religious or similarly protected space, where behaviour is affected

And so on...