

Making Connections in Challenging Times - The Transformative Potential of Poetry for Critical Global Education

Journal of Transformative Education
2022, Vol. 20(4) 396–413
© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/15413446211063834

journals.sagepub.com/home/jtd



Eilish Dillon 

Abstract

The transformative role of global education (GE) has come to the fore in recent years in the face of increasingly complex and challenging global development realities. At the heart of this is a call for learning which enables people to make connections beyond simplifications but which address divisions and inequalities. Despite the rhetoric, GE is not always as critical or transformative as it aspires to be. Here, I focus on how poetry can support educators to make connections with complexity, diversity and alternatives that, I argue, are needed to address contemporary global challenges. Inspired, in part, by the proliferation of interest in poetry since the COVID-19 pandemic, I draw on research conducted with global education facilitators in Ireland in 2016. Through the discussion of a few examples, I invite educators to reflect on how they might engage with poetry to enhance the transformative potential of GE in their own contexts.

Keywords

critical reflection, transformative, learning, social transformation

Head of Department, Department of International Development, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

Corresponding Author:

Eilish Dillon, Head of Department, Department of International Development, Maynooth University (North Campus), Co. Kildare, Maynooth, Ireland.

Email: eilish.dillon@mu.ie

Introduction

In the face of incredibly challenging times (Finnegan, 2019), with growing uncertainty and inequality (Oxfam, 2020), climate crises and COVID-19, the need to develop forms of transformative learning which are ‘up to the challenge’ becomes ever more urgent. Based on an ontology of relationality (Benjamin, 2015; Lange, 2016), we can see that connections have been broken between people, between people and the environment, and between systems and structures and the common good. This encourages ‘othering’, racism and dehumanisation. It also supports unequal distribution of resources and power as well as ongoing destruction of the planet, violence and trauma. Along with these enormous challenges, solidarity and hope are also evident in communities working together, in progressive social movements and in efforts to protect the most vulnerable in society.

A central claim for transformative learning is that it can help us to understand the complex challenges facing our world, supporting different forms of global solidarity. As one such approach, here, I explore the transformative role that critical global education (GE) can play in supporting learners to deal with and address these daunting challenges. I focus, in particular, on how poetry can be integrated into critical and transformative processes in GE enabling learners to struggle with complexity, to forge connections beyond division and inequality and to find hope in the face of despair and unpredictability.

The Transformative Potential of Global Education

Though there are many different understandings of GE, when influenced by critical pedagogy it is ‘constructed on the belief that education is inherently political’ (Kincheloe, 2008a, p. 8); it tries to understand causes and effects of oppression and inequality; it is ‘interested in the margins of society’ (Kincheloe, 2008a, p. 23); is ‘searching for new voices’ (Kincheloe, 2008a, p. 24); and is ‘dedicated to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power’ (Kincheloe, 2008a, p. 34). With such an approach, emphasis is placed on learning as praxis; the intersection of knowledge, understanding, reflection and action, and experiential and participatory processes. It is also closely associated with other ‘adjectival educations’ (Bourn, 2012) such as Global Citizenship Education, Education for Sustainable Development, Anti-Racism Education and Human Rights Education. In short, here, I am applying Krause’s understanding, which ‘focuses on local-global interdependence... promoting engagement and advocacy for global social justice and sustainability’ (Krause, 2010, p. 7).

Questions around the transformative potential of GE to support learners to make connections and to address interdependence have been highlighted in recent years (Andreotti, 2011a; Andreotti et al., 2018; Dillon, 2019). Through critical analyses of processes of globalization, colonisation and development, it is argued that learners can be supported to understand and challenge global injustice, inequality and oppression. Facilitating critical engagement and connection with ‘the messiness’ (Leggo, 2005) of

what's happening in the world, GE can enable learners to face and deal with these difficult and frightening realities. At the same time, transformative education (TE) and GE haven't always been critical or connecting or transformative enough to meet these challenges. Recent critiques suggest the need for GE to move beyond binaries – of the rational and the emotional, of structure and agency and of process and action – towards more integrated, relational and multidimensional forms of GE. Andreotti, for example argues that 'if the connections between power relations, knowledge production and inequalities are overlooked, the result is often educational practices that are ethno-centric (projecting one view as universal), ahistorical (forgetting historical/colonial relations), depoliticised (foreclosing their own ideological location), paternalistic (seeking affirmation of superiority through the provision of help to other people), and hegemonic (using and benefiting from unequal relations of power)' (Andreotti, 2011a, pp. 5–6).

In this article, I explore how poetry can support a more critical, connected and transformative GE. Without wishing to overstate its potential and acknowledging the limitations of both a focus on poetry and on GE more broadly, I concentrate on the potential that poetry offers to transformative learning through making connections in GE. I draw together some insights on criticality and connectivity in GE from my research with GE facilitators in Ireland in 2016 (discussed below), along with recent literature. Underpinned by a relational ontology and an epistemology of connectivity, I explore how poetry can enable us to forge the kinds of unsentimental but emotional, complex and non-simplistic, multi-vocal and diverse connections that are needed to help us to struggle meaningfully and creatively and to make connections in this challenging global context. In short, I highlight three points. I argue that poetry can help us to connect with complex global realities that people struggle with everywhere, through supporting self-reflexivity which links the personal and the political, the emotional and the rational and the local and the global. Secondly, I indicate how poetry can support connections with diversity, helping us to live with uncertainty, ambiguity and flux and encouraging connections beyond divisions and inequalities. Finally, I explore how poetry might enable us to connect with alternative futures, supporting us to challenge, reframe and reimagine the taken-for-granted, whilst opening up new forms of solidarity and hope. I conclude with some examples of how poetry can help us to make connections in critical GE, especially in these challenging times. I present this discussion tentatively as an invitation to educators to engage critically with poetry in their own education contexts.

Understandings of the Transformative

The subject of much debate and contestation, understandings of the transformative tend to embrace notions of change, often with a radical tinge. Transformative education can imply the role of education in transforming injustice in society (Freire, 1970; Mayo, 2003), transformation of education institutions and cultures (Giroux, 2004), transformation in the person involved in learning processes (Mezirow, 1997), or in learning

processes themselves, and transformed ontologies and epistemologies (Andreotti, 2011b). Reflecting different, and sometimes overlapping, epistemological traditions including critical pedagogy, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and feminism, debates about the ‘transformative’ in TE often centre on questions about knowledge and power—how power works and what different forms and processes of knowledge and understanding are needed to create meaningful, transformative change and just societies. These also relate to different understandings of and emphasis around criticality in TE, which I discuss below with reference to GE, that is from the ‘critical’ and ‘radical’, which are usually associated with GE influenced by critical pedagogy, to the ‘post-critical’ in GE which is more influenced by post-structuralism and post-colonialism.

Among these many debates, of relevance here are questions about whether TE is often too focused on the individual to the detriment of the structural or vice versa. The urgency, global inter-relatedness and complexity of the challenges we experience suggests the need for transformative learning which is not in any way reductive or simplistic. Though often overwhelming, these challenges should not lead to ‘an un-problematized focus on the self’ in transformative learning (Brookfield, 2012, p. 131) nor an over-catastrophising which foments apathy.

Other debates focus on how, or whether, forms of education, which aspire to be transformative, are sometimes too focused on process to the exclusion of practices of ‘real change’, or overly-emphasise fixed, structural solutions to very complex challenges. A bigger question may be whether any of these can be constructed as binaries in the first place. It is important to explore the role of transformative learning in supporting critical engagement with connectivity.

Somehow, transformative learning needs to enable us to deal with the immensity of challenges whilst acknowledging the difficulties involved in creating change, and people’s diverse perspectives, interests, experiences and vulnerabilities. This is not learning for simple solutions but learning which enables us to question and challenge deeply held assumptions (Mezirow, 1997) whilst engaging multidimensionally—critically and post-critically (Dillon, 2018a), affectively (Bryan, 2020) and self-reflexively (Andreotti, 2014)—and which is ‘dedicated to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power’ (Kincheloe, 2008a, p. 34). As such, I see transformation as involving understanding of the ‘hegemonic mystifications of dominant power blocks in the contemporary world’ (Kincheloe, 2008b, p. 9), whilst supporting people to make connections for change—at personal, cultural, social and political levels. This leads to a multi-dimensional understanding of transformative learning, which approximates to Kincheloe’s ‘bricolage’ approach (Kincheloe, 2008a), one which is reflected in different streams of critical and post-critical GE, as discussed below.

Research with GE Facilitators

The ‘critical’, ‘post-critical’ and ‘connected’ dimensions of transformative GE. Many of these debates about and understandings of criticality and the transformative came to the fore

in my research with 30 GE facilitators and key actors involved in state and civil society promotion of GE in Ireland (Dillon, 2017). This in-depth, mixed-methods research involved participants in questionnaires, interviews and workshops over a nine-month period in 2016. The primary focus of the research was on facilitator talk—language, assumptions and the meanings associated with different aspects of GE. Influenced by Andreotti's (2011a) work, I analysed discourses facilitators drew upon by exploring their understandings of various aspects or dimensions of GE. These are knowledge and understanding, skills, learning processes, attitudes and values, politics and action. On that basis, and whilst acknowledging overlaps, I identified different discourses of GE including 'critical' and 'post-critical' discourses.

These discourses provided insight into some of the assumptions about transformative learning that GE facilitators held and their implications for practice, including what they saw as necessary for addressing contemporary global challenges (Dillon, 2017). Without wishing to be reductive, I discuss three of them here. The first of these, 'critical' GE, assumes that we cannot deal with or address what is going on in the world unless we critically understand it. It is transformative learning which draws on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy 'grounded on a social and educational vision of justice and equality' (Kincheloe, 2008a, p. 6). In supporting understanding of the causes and effects of oppression and inequality, it emphasises learning as praxis, the intersection of knowledge, understanding, reflection and action, and experiential and participatory learning processes. Though hesitant to prescribe, facilitators drawing on a critical discourse saw that GE is not neutral and that it has a role to play in social transformation, in terms of facilitating analysis of how power works at local and global levels and in interrogating the power of those involved in GE.

A post-critical construction of the transformative in GE, evident among a minority of facilitators, reflects on the importance but limitations of 'critical' GE, whilst embracing or emphasising post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonial influences (Kincheloe, 2008a). It tries to capture the tensions involved in regarding education as political whilst at the same time questioning its politics. Post-criticality also tries to hold in tension the transformative value placed on GE highlighted by 'critical' GE whilst highlighting the importance of critical deconstruction of this value, of the relationships it constructs (Andreotti, 2011b) and any questions of certainty or reductionism which might be promoted through it. For Sharon Todd it means 'disbanding our idealising tendencies in education' (Todd, 2015, p. 54).

In GE influenced by post-criticality or decoloniality (Andreotti, 2014), for example, there is a growing emphasis on processes which facilitate learners to acknowledge complexity and to face complex realities (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012). Here, processes which involve decolonising knowledge (Andreotti, 2011b), critical self-reflexivity (Alasuutari & Andreotti, 2015) and embracing the affective (Bryan, 2020) are emphasised, whilst there is a move beyond individualised notions of global citizenship (Khoo, 2006; Gaynor, 2015). In opening up diverse experiences, pluralities and emotional engagement with complex global challenges, post-critical GE seeks to support hope and alternative futures.

A third, and related, dimension of transformative learning, which emerged in my research, emphasises relationality (Lange, 2016) and interconnectivity, between the personal and the political, the emotional and the rational, humanity and the environment, politics and knowledge, and identity and economics. Kincheloe argues, for example, that we need to be able to create alternative educations ‘grounded on a critical theoretical commitment to social justice, anti-oppressive ways of being, and new forms of connectedness and radical love’ (Kincheloe, 2008a, p. 6). For Burns, this ‘is a process in which we are unlearning our unsustainability and relearning our entanglement with the world’ (Burns, 2018, p. 278).

For the global educators involved in my research (Dillon, 2017), GE supports people to make connections around their experience. For those drawing on a critical discourse of GE, these connections were about how a person relates to (experiences, understands, engages with and acts in relation to) the wider world, knowledge systems, power relations, political and economic realities. Those drawing on a post-critical discourse tended to highlight how these connections need to be scrutinised through post-critical self-reflexivity and questioning of assumptions. Whilst most global educators aspire to criticality or post-criticality, a number of gaps and contradictions also emerged in my research in relation to how critical GE is practised and the kinds of connections it makes.

Gaps and contradictions in criticality and making connections in GE. Drawing attention to silences, absences and disjunctures, the gaps and contradictions related to criticality and the transformative in GE, which emerged in my research, signal a range of ruptures and disconnections and they operate at a number of levels. From a critical discursive perspective they tend to reflect a mismatch between the idealised rhetoric of GE, which makes lofty claims for its transformative potential, and the constrained realities of power relations in the institutional contexts within which GE is practiced. These ‘elephants in the room’, as one participant called them, also reflect unquestioned or dominant epistemologies and assumptions that those drawing on a post-critical discourse of GE tended to mention.

One gap, which was addressed by facilitators in my research (Dillon, 2017), is that GE does not sufficiently connect learners to what is going on in the world at emotional as well as intellectual levels. At times, it was seen to be quite ‘safe’ in its focus on poverty rather than wealth or in its sanitised or absent treatment of controversial issues, especially at home. These included issues such as class, racism and privilege, as well as silence on structural violence and on inequalities associated with neoliberalism and the global economic system. Thus, the connections between the personal and the political are often not as connected or as critical as they need to be (Dillon, 2019).

Another criticality gap which emerged in my research relates to the paucity and types of links made between the local and the global (Dillon, 2018a). Lingering ethnocentric assumptions in GE (Bryan, 2011), for example, can lead to representations of the global South as ‘other’ without sufficiently embracing different perspectives, voices and experiences of the most marginalised or oppressed in Irish society and

around the world (Dillon, 2018b). This is, perhaps, buttressed by the fact that most global educators in Ireland are white, middle-class academically qualified, elite.

A third criticality gap is the tendency for GE to promote fixed, idealised notions of the future – and the processes involved in getting there – rather than taking account of the ‘inevitability of uncertainty’ (Kincheloe, 2008b, p. 15) and ambiguity. One person, for example argued that there are too many moral absolutes in GE, ‘you know, the conversations are over before they start’ (Dillon, 2017, p. 168).

Thus, despite the influence of criticality and post-criticality on GE, my research also indicates significant gaps and challenges, especially with regard to making critical and transformative connections in these challenging times. In the next section, I explore how poetry may help to address some of these.

Poetry

Poetry in challenging times. So many of us have been drawn to poetry at difficult times in our lives, to help us to cope and to make sense of things. No more so, it would seem, than as a response to harsh and sad realities of lives threatened and lost through COVID-19.

Before exploring the transformative potential of poetry below, it is important to reflect on what we might understand poetry to be. Gold argues that poetry is ‘a way of making sense of lived experience, a conversation with one’s environment and a way to give voice to that which is not easy to articulate’ (Gold, 2012, p. 757). Though many are fearful of poetry, associating it with endless interpretation in school classrooms or with hours of memorising, poetry has changed. From formal structured verse to free flowing, loosely rhythmic cadence, it has embraced different oral traditions and resonances (Caronan, 2015). Thus, it has different forms and functions. From the written to the spoken word, rap and street poetry, it overlaps with music and drama, hip hop, performance and art, reflecting a blurring of the lines between narrative and song, creativity and activism. It is in these blurred spaces that we find hybrid forms of meaning-making and expression, many of which embrace something of the poetic.

Similarly, the role of the poet shifts as poetry comes into fashion or appears redundant, in some cultures revered and in others considered irrelevant. Heaney talks about the challenges of writing poetry in the context of conflict and his attempts to maintain the integrity of the poem whilst engaging in public poetry. This, he argues, ‘springs from the poet’s inner state and gives vent and voice to a predicament as well as addressing the state of the poet’s world’ (Heaney, 2008, p. 385). Poems, Heaney argues, should be ‘equidistant from rant and whimper’ (Heaney, 2008, p. 384). These COVID-19 months we have seen, in many countries, an opening up of the relevance of the poet and of poetry, along with a desire, by many, to not only engage with poetry written by others but to create, to become poet, exploring and engaging through the lens and the art of the poetic.

Poetry in transformative education. The case for poetry as a pedagogical tool or epistemological lens in TE is increasingly being made. In the face of burnout, despair and hopelessness, for example, Leggo finds in poetry ‘a location of wisdom, sustenance and hope’ (Leggo, 2005, p. 439). Though not representing the wealth of research or support that the creative arts and narrative have garnered, the role of poetry across various forms of education has been explored in recent years, with poetry sometimes regarded as a sub-set of arts learning and creative methodologies (Hall & Clover, 2006) or linked with the transformative potential of narrative (Gold, 2012; Caronan, 2015). From the use of poetry in teacher training (Leggo, 2005) and in social work education (Gold, 2012), to its application in geography, development education (Mullineaux, 2008) and global youth work (Brown & Nicklin, 2019), different types of poetry are seen to enable different forms of engagement. Heaney reminds us that when it comes to the role of poetry in politics, ‘the only real answers to the general problem are specific poems in specific situations’ (Heaney, 2008, p. 380), and Gold very insightfully draws on just one poem in her focus on ethical dilemmas and professionalism among social workers. Thus, it is hard to make any generalised statements about the role of poetry in education beyond reference to specific contexts and the use of examples.

Some of the literature specifically addressing poetry in transformative learning or GE, which is not yet that extensive, is based on personal experience, on critical reflection on teaching or research practice (for example Leggo, 2005; Gold, 2012), and it reflects on micro learning processes or contexts. Writers tend, therefore, to focus on how poetry ‘can’ or ‘might’ enhance transformative learning processes, as I do here, as they are mindful of the relative lack of systematic evidence for its broad application. They, like me, are careful not to overstate its significance or uniqueness and to invite educators to explore its potential.

Whilst its relationship with similar creative forms are acknowledged, more work is needed on specific contributions that poetry can make—what makes poetry different to narrative, for example? Though some of these issues are beyond the scope of this article, my own sense is that whilst sharing similarities with narrative in evoking responses, some poetry is more open to interpretation in its less fixed and more open style. It is important to reflect on how different forms of poetry can enable (or not) different types of transformative engagement. Similarly, we should remember that poetry cannot do everything, and that it can appear to be a mild or elitist tool in the face of complex global challenges. At the same time, its potential comes into relief when regarded as a companion to the myriad forms of creative writing, creative arts, music, hip hop, rap and spoken word poetry which have been the subject of much attention in recent years. Within that context, Leggo, for example claims that poetry ‘engages us with language, nurtures the inner life, acknowledges the particular and local, encourages us to listen to our hearts, fosters flexibility and trust, and invites creativity and creative living’ (Leggo, 2005, p. 439).

In addition to work based on experience of using poetry in education, research conducted with groups on their experience of engaging with poetry in different learning contexts has provided useful insight for TE. Though small in scale, this research

provides the basis for more detailed future work in this area and some critical insights into the transformative potential of poetry. Caronan, for example conducted research with Filipino and Puerto Rican performance poet activists. She argues that they ‘recognize education as an important tool for decolonizing minds’ (Caronan, 2015, p. 121). ‘In their poetry and teaching they model how to disidentify with hegemonic narratives of U.S. exceptionalism and encourage others to create and share their own stories’ (Caronan, 2015, p. 240). From quite a different experience of exploring poetic inquiry as a means of praxis in research with in-service teachers, Killingsworth Roberts et al. find that ‘poetry offers an additional emotional tone... new, unexpected answers and often metaphorical, “below the surface” associations that might otherwise be easily overlooked or untapped... the reflexive and yet thoughtful nature of poetry writing and poetry listening engages the mind and spirit and moves thinking toward reflection and action’ (Roberts et al., 2014, p. 179).

In addition to the practical and powerful methods it offers ‘for analysing social worlds’ (Threlfall, 2013, p. 362), a key contribution of poetry to critical and TE is that it helps to unsettle and to challenge what we take for granted. In their discussion of poetry as part of arts and crafts in development education in Canada, Hall and Clover argue that it can ‘stimulate oppositional imaginations, encourage people to have fun together but also risk-taking, an essential element of learning for change’ (Hall & Clover, 2006, p. 12).

Gold highlights the role of poetry in supporting nuanced, emotional connections around ethical dilemmas and in complex professional relationships. In reflecting on the poem, ‘Professionalism’, by Elizabeth Anne Kinsella, which offers an account of her relationship with a client ‘Louise’, Gold highlights ‘the potential for poetry by practitioners to create space for exploration of ethical dilemmas’ (Gold, 2012, p. 758). She argues that it ‘asks us to think differently—and perhaps more deeply’ and ‘in this way the poem asks some unsettling questions about professional identity’ and about the messiness, ‘complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty’ in professional practice (Gold, 2012, p. 758). In her reflection on this poem and how it resonated with a relationship she had with one of her clients, Angela, Gold makes a strong argument for the potential for poetry to support transformative learning which is not closed off, which opens up feelings and experiences in a non-fixed, yet sometimes challenging way, and which allows for exploration and consideration of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Whilst some focus largely on engagement with poetry which already exists, others emphasise the power of creating or writing poetry. Being ‘coparticipants of material discursive practices in teaching and learning processes’, like writing poetry, is of central importance to transformative sustainability education (Lange, 2016, p. 374). Gold (2012) highlights that the experience of writing enables self-reflexivity and helps to make transparent ‘unspoken and marginalised moments’. Drawing on Kristeva’s notion of the ‘subject-in-change’ and her considerable experience of teaching creative writing, Hunt argues that freewriting and poetry ‘facilitate the suspension of tacit self-concepts and immersion in the bodily-felt sense of self’, providing ‘access to a more process-oriented sense of self’ (Hunt, 2013, p. 110). Through these processes, she argues,

creative writing, including poetry, support change. This view is supported by [Mullineaux \(2008\)](#), who highlights the importance of writing for learning to empathise and to channel anger at injustice in the world.

As such, from a variety of perspectives, the argument is made that reading and writing poetry enhances transformative learning. It would appear, at least in some instances, that its openness, lack of closure and disregard of boundaries, along with its diversity of form and its facilitation of creativity, makes it ideal as a vehicle of transformative learning and imagining alternatives. In the section below, I explore some of these issues in discussing its potential in GE.

Poetry and Making Connections in Global Education

Drawing together the discussions so far on transformative learning and GE and on the transformative potential of poetry, in this section, I discuss the role of poetry in making connections in GE. I focus on the criticality gaps in GE identified above and discuss three areas in which poetry can enable connectivity, i.e., with complexity, diversity and alternatives. As such, I explore how it helps to make sense of experience whilst holding onto complexity. At the same time, I highlight how it can help us to relate emotionally, opening up exploration of the types of feelings involved in confronting contemporary global challenges and supporting empathy ([Bryan, 2020](#)). Employing insights from decoloniality, including the importance of ‘unlearning’ ([Spivak, 2004](#); [Burns, 2018](#)) in ([Andreotti, 2014](#)), I show how poetry can help us to live with uncertainty and ambiguity ([Kincheloe, 2008b](#); [Gold, 2012](#)), and to engage, through different voices, with experiences of oppression, marginalisation or resistance. Drawing these influences together, I suggest that poetry can foster solidarity relationships of care and connection whilst supporting hope, new imaginings and the creation of alternatives.

I discuss some examples of how poetry can enable these self-reflexive, critical and transformative connections in GE. Though the possibilities are endless here, I limit my selection to some poems and poetry sources that I am familiar with, most of which were written in English. Though I have tried to include a variety of poems, the selection is still narrow. Despite these limitations, the discussion of the poems chosen is designed to encourage readers to reflect on poems which are relevant to global education in their own language or cultural context. The selection here is not specifically designed for any particular group or learning format, and it is important for educators to reflect on how they might engage with different poems, sources or experiences with different groups in diverse learning settings, and to consider the politics of knowledge around those choices.

Connecting with Complexity

I begin my brief discussion of examples with a focus on some poems and poetry sources which can support post-criticality in GE through self-reflexive understanding and connecting with global challenges that people struggle with everywhere—to connect

the personal and the political. Making connections requires us to see beneath superficiality and beyond binary thinking, encouraging us to understand layers and textures of the emotive and affective, whilst helping us to understand and engage with complexity (Kincheloe, 2008b).

There are a range of themes and topics which act as entry points for poetic engagement with current global challenges. As suggested above, for example, there are many poems which focus on different experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Arguing that we need poetry in times of change and world-grief, Carol Ann Duffy established the 'Write where we are now' initiative in 2020—#WWWAN—with the Manchester School of Writing, to encourage people to write poems about the pandemic or their situation in light of it. As such, the website has many poems which explore different experiences of lockdown, grief, shifting understandings of loss and coping with change.

Aside from poetry which reflects on the experience of COVID-19, poetry invites us to address different globally, but locally and personally, experienced challenges, and to approach them self-reflexively, viewing them through different perspectives and positionalities. For GE, these include poems focused on climate change and interdependence as well on experiences of activism, migration, war or conflict. Paula Meehan's 'Death of a Field', for example is a challenging poem which addresses over-consumption and the loss of biodiversity (Meehan, 2009) whilst the 'Universe in Verse' (Universe in Verse, 2020) involves the work of poets across time and space as a celebration of the natural world through poetry. This includes, among many others, a reading of Maya Angelou's (1995) arresting 'A Brave and Startling Truth', which commemorated the founding of the United Nations in 1948. It offers potential to critically reflect on our entangled and interdependent connectivity at so many levels including in relation to the earth and the cosmos, and what living together on this planet has meant or could mean.

For the global educator, using poetry to support learners to connect with complexity involves identifying and introducing (or encouraging participants to identify and introduce) poems and voices which engage learners, which they can relate to and which enable them to reflect deeply and critically. As not all poems are suitable for supporting self-reflexive learning, this involves careful choice of examples which are evocative¹, and which do not close off or present fixed and final or over-simplistic renderings of the complex. On the contrary, Hunt (2013), they should enable learners to hold complexity, for example to hold struggle and despair with support and hope. Self-reflexive encounters with existing poems can be supported as part of individual reflection or in small groups, to introduce a theme or topic, or as part of a broader learning programme. These can be enhanced through various forms of writing, including writing poetry, which takes learners beyond the cognitive and emotional encounters with the expressions of others into their own creative 'making sense'. Hunt (2013) argues that these processes are enriched in collective, transformative reading and writing groups.

Connecting with diversity. The second area that I would like to highlight is how poetry can support us to make connections, through multi-vocality, beyond dominant world views and binary identities. For GE, this enables links between ‘the local and the global’, understanding our ‘own worlds’ in light of different perspectives on them, and in the context of being opened to many worlds. In forging these kinds of links and associations, poetry can play an important role in decolonising language and knowledge. In so doing, it can open us to different (and often otherwise unheard) experiences and voices and diverse ways of seeing the world. This encourages us to hold in tension ambiguity, contractions and multiplicity.

Since the 1970s, in particular, poets have begun to bring together intersectional experiences of gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality. Reflecting the lives of black women, unemployed young men, transgender activists, lone parents and many others, poems from a range of genres connect us to questions of power, wealth, privilege, identity and solidarity. Maya Angelou’s ‘Still I Rise’ and ‘Phenomenal Woman’ stand out as powerful feminist anthems which challenge stereotypes and give voice to black women’s agency and power, despite oppression. Stanzas, like the following (Angelou, 1994, p. 7), offer an opportunity to critically reflect on different experiences of exclusion and discrimination whilst tapping into deep feelings of power and empowerment:

Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise
I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Poems like these can be reflected on in terms of how they evoke feelings and understanding among learners of oppression, discrimination or agency or they can act as a springboard for the development of ideas and writing focused on issues of power and identity. In challenging constructed divisions, they support the ‘unlearning’ of certainties, helping us to begin to ‘decolonize our minds’. Poetry can also link personal experience to broader questions of structural power, addressing issues of complicity and responsibility. Benjamin Zephaniah’s (1996) ‘White Comedy’, for example deals with the taken-for-grantedness of the language of discrimination, whilst his poem ‘What Stephen Lawrence has Taught Us’ (1999) is a scathing critique of institutionalised racism associated with police brutality.

An example of a collection of poems which I have found helpful for exploring issues related to migration and human rights is ‘Correspondences’ (Traynor, 2019). It was written as a ‘call for an end to direct provision’, the Irish state system for housing those

awaiting decisions on their asylum applications. Though it focuses on experiences of asylum seekers in Ireland, it highlights diverse experiences and perspectives and draws the learner into issues around how government policy impacts on people's lives. Through it, Traynor writes, 'we hoped to create empathy, and connections, and understanding, between a misunderstood and sometimes demonised community, made up of diverse people with complex lives, and the people who have the privilege to live in the Irish state without fear, without suspicion, and without prejudice' (Traynor, 2019, p. x). Among the wide range of poems, reflections and art in the anthology, there is the poem 'Borders' (Yalcinkaya, 2019, p. 50) by Insaf Yalcinkaya, a Kurdish poet and political activist from Turkey. Her reflection on different aspects of refugees' experiences encountering various borders opens up questions about and considerations of human connection and inhumanity. 'Look! People draw borders', her poem opens, 'Some, in their own lands, Some in the mind and heart'. In 'A Worthless Life?' (Yalcinkaya, 2019, p. 53), she reflects on how asylum seekers and refugees are constructed as 'worthless', 'because of them, because of you', inviting the reader to question their own involvement in the inhumanity being experienced.

Connecting with alternatives. As illustrated by the examples from 'Correspondences' (above), poetry can help us to engage with different, complex realities, experiences and perspectives. It can also support us to create new solidarities through connecting with alternatives. This involves a critical deconstructive challenging of frames which reduce people to stereotypes, which divide and support fear and abuse. Rafeef Ziadah's powerful spoken word poetry, including her poem, 'We Teach Life Sir' (Ziadah, 2011), for example questions the violence of news reporting of experiences of violence in Gaza. With the following lines, she challenges how people's lives and relationships are reduced to the requirements of international news stories:

We just want to tell people about you and your people so give us a human story.

Don't mention that word "apartheid" and "occupation."

This is not political.

You have to help me as a journalist to help you tell your story which is not a political story.

Today, my body was a TV'd massacre.

Such poems can lead us imaginatively, but meaningfully and politically into reflection on alternatives. For critical global educators, this can be most evocative and powerful when engaged with in a 'non-idealising' way (Todd, 2015). Seamus Heaney's 'From the Republic of Conscience' (Heaney, 1987), for example picks up the theme of immigration and offers deep insight into different ways of living where 'creeping privilege' disappears. Judith Viorst's (1981) 'If I were in Charge of the World', is a simpler invocation, from the perspective of a child, to consider what's important. In both cases, the ways in which the poets invite readers to reflect on alternative ways of

living or organising society offer important opportunities for ‘educated hope’ (Giroux, 2019) through engaging the imagination and opening up conversations around action for change. Using poems like these to explore transformations, especially in an open and exploratory manner, can deepen engagement with creating new forms of solidarity.

In trying to make sense of my experience of the global pandemic, I have also thought again about a poem that one person shared with me in my research (Dillon, 2017). The poem is ‘Before You Know What Kindness Really Is’ by Naomi Shihab Nye (Nye, 2008, p. 25). It includes the lines

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive .

Talking about the poem, the research participant highlighted the importance of approaches to global education that build relationships of solidarity, connecting people through empathy, kindness and respect. For him, this involves ‘a sense of connectedness ... It’s the shared humanity bit... the recognition of others as the same as me, I’m the same as them’. Through reflecting on poems like this, he suggested, we are brought into a space of shared human experience, the bedrock of solidarity.

Conclusion

This article was influenced by my interest in poetry, by research I conducted which highlighted the importance of making critical connections for understanding, compassion and activism in GE; and by the public interest in poetry since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In it, I invite educators to consider the transformative potential of poetry for GE in their own contexts, especially the many connections it can enable us to make. Though I try not to make exaggerated claims for what poetry can achieve, and it is clear that poetry sits with narrative and other creative and arts-based methodologies, I argue that it has considerable transformative potential. Engaging with different poems and genres of poetry can help us to connect to what’s going on in the world around us, to different experiences and perspectives, no matter how difficult or challenging. Bringing us below the surface, beyond binaries and certainty, and deep into complex realities and ambiguity, it can support empathy, solidarity and creative alternatives. There is no doubt that these are important aspects of critical global education, especially in these incredibly challenging times.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Eilish Dillon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0462-1210>

Notes

1. I am grateful to Frank Naughton for highlighting this point in discussions we had about the topic.

References

- Alasuutari, H., & Andreotti, V. (2015). Framing and contesting the dominant global imaginary of north-south relations: Identifying and challenging socio-cultural hierarchies. *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, 15, 64–92.
- Alhadeff-Jones, M. (2012). Transformative learning and the challenges of complexity. In E. W. Taylor, P. Cranton, & Associates (Eds.), *Handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 178–194). Jossey-Bass.
- Andreotti, V. (2011a). Foreword. In A. Bryan & M. Bracken (Eds.), *Learning to read the world? Teaching and learning about global citizenship and international development in post-primary schools*. <http://www.ubuntu.ie/media/bryan-learning-to-read-the-world.pdf>
- Andreotti, V. (2011b). *Actionable postcolonial theory in education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Andreotti, V. (2014). Critical literacy: Theories and practices in development education. *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, 14, 12–32.
- Andreotti, V., Stein, S., Sutherland, A., Pashby, K., Suša, R., & Amsler, S. (2018). Mobilising different conversations about global justice in education: Toward alternative futures in uncertain times. *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, 26, 9–41.
- Angelou, M. (1994). *Phenomenal woman: Four poems celebrating women*. Random House.
- Angelou, M. (1995). *A brave and startling truth*. Random House.
- Benjamin, A. (2015). *Towards a relational ontology: Philosophy's other possibility*. State University of New York Press.
- Bourn, D. (2012). Development education: From the margins to the mainstream. *The International Journal for Global and Development Education Research*, 1(1), 25–39. <https://doi.org/10.18546/IJDEGL.01.1.01>
- Brookfield, S. D. (2012). Critical theory and transformative learning. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *Handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 131–146). Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, E. J., & Nicklin, L. L. (2019). Splitting rhymes and changing minds: Global youth work through hip-hop. *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, 11(2), 159–174. <https://doi.org/10.18546/ijdegl.11.2.03>

- Bryan, A. (2011). Another cog in the anti-politics machine? The 'de-clawing' of development education. *Policy And Practice: A Development Education Review*, 12, 1–14.
- Bryan, A. (2020). 'Affective pedagogies: Foregrounding emotion in climate change education,' policy and practice. *A Development Education Review*, 30, 8–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2019.1701988>.
- Burns, H. (2018). Thematic analysis: Transformative sustainability education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 16(4), 277–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344618796996>
- Caronan, F. (2015). *Legitimizing empire: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultural critique*. University of Illinois Press.
- Dillon, E. (2017). *How critical is talk? Discourses of Development education among facilitators in Ireland*. <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9558/>
- Dillon, E. (2018a). Critical history matters: Understanding development education in Ireland today through the lens of the past,' policy & practice. *A Development Education Review*, 27, 14–36.
- Dillon, E. (2018b). How critical is the global? Discursive shifts in development education in Ireland. *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, 10(2), 163–176. <https://doi.org/10.18546/ijdegl.10.2.05>
- Dillon, E. (2019). Connecting the personal and the political: Feminist perspectives on development education,' policy and practice. *A Development Education Review*, 29, 11–30.
- Finnegan, F. T. (2019). Transformative learning in challenging times. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 17(2), 107–111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344619841124>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.
- Gaynor, N. (2015). Shopping to save the world? Reclaiming global citizenship within Irish universities. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 24(1), 78–101. <https://doi.org/10.7227/ij.s.0003>
- Giroux, H. A. (2004). Critical pedagogy and the postmodern/modern divide: Towards a pedagogy of democratization. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 31–47.
- Giroux, H. A. (2019). Toward a pedagogy of educated hope under casino capitalism. *Pedagogía Y Saberes*, 50, 147–151. <https://doi.org/10.17227/pys.num50-9507>.
- Gold, K. (2012). Poetic pedagogy: A reflection on narrative in social work practice and education. *Social Work Education*, 31(6), 756–763. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.695181>
- Hall, B., & Clover, D. (2006). Fabric crafts and poetry: The art of development education in Canada. *Policy and Practice a Development Education Review*, 2, 4–11.
- Heaney, S. (1987). *The hawk lantern*. Faber and Faber.
- Heaney, S. (2008). *Stepping stones: interviews with Seamus Heaney*. O'Driscoll (Ed.). Faber and Faber (pp. 375–413).
- Hunt, C. (2013). *Transformative learning through creative life writing: Exploring the self in the learning process*. Taylor & Francis.
- Khoo, S. (2006). Development education, citizenship and civic engagement at third level and beyond in the Republic of Ireland. *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, 3, 26–39.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2008a). *Critical pedagogy, primer* (2nd ed.). Peter Lang.

- Kincheloe, J. L. (2008b). Critical pedagogy and the knowledge wars of the twenty-first century. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 1(1), 679–692. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-397-6_29
- Krause, J. (2010). *European development education monitoring report. 'DE Watch,'* European multi-stakeholder steering group on development education. DEEEP. <https://library.concordeurope.org/record/241>
- Lange, E. (2016). Transforming transformative education through ontologies of relationality. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 16(4), 280–301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344618786452>
- Leggo, C. (2005). The heart of pedagogy: On poetic knowing and living. *Teachers and Teaching*, 11(5), 439–455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13450600500238436>
- Mayo, P. (2003). A rationale for a transformative approach to education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 38–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344602250400>
- Meehan, P. (2009). *Painting rain*. Carcanet Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1997(74), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401>
- Mullineaux, P. (2008). Education for sustainable development—feeling our way. *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, 6, 90–94.
- Nye, N. S. (2008). *Tender spot: Selected poems*. Bloodaxe Books.
- Oxfam. (2020). *Inequality*. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/tags/inequality>
- Roberts, S. K., Brasel, N. A., & Crawford, P. A. (2014). Poetry as praxis: An exploration of poetry discourse as qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 27(4), 167–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2014.948262>.
- Spivak, G. (2004). Righting Wrongs. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(2/3), 523–581.
- Threlfall, S. J. (2013). Poetry in action [research]. An innovative means to a reflective learner in higher education (HE). *Reflective Practice*, 14(3), 360–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2013.767232>
- Todd, S. (2015). Creating transformative spaces in education: Facing humanity, facing violence. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 23(1), 53–61. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070365ar>
- Traynor, J. (2019). Foreword. In S. Rae & J. Traynor (Eds.), *Correspondences* (pp. ix–x). Correspondences.
- Universe in Verse. (2020). *Brainpickings*. <https://www.brainpickings.org/tag/the-universe-in-verse/>
- Viorst, J. (1981). *If I were in charge of the world and other worries*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Yalcinkaya, I. (2019a). Borders. In S. Rae & J. Traynor (Eds.), *Correspondences* (pp. 50–52). Correspondences.
- Yalcinkaya, I. (2019b). A worthless life. In S. Rae & J. Traynor (Eds.), *Correspondences* (p. 53). Correspondences.
- Zephaniah, B. (1996). *Propa propaganda*. Bloodaxe Books.
- Zephaniah, B. (1999). *What Stephen Lawrence has taught us*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/feb/24/lawrence.ukcrime3>
- Ziadah, R. (2011). *We teach life, sir*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKucPh9xHtM>

Author Biography

Eilish Dillon, Doctor of Higher and Adult Education, is Assistant Professor and Head of Department at the Maynooth University Department of International Development, Ireland. Her research interests are in critical global and development education, in discourses of and in international development, and in ethical global development communications. She has designed and teaches courses on global development theory and practice, on development research and on media, activism and gender and development.